



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 6 November 2022

The Arab Summit in Algeria: Ordinary Outcomes in an Extraordinary Environment

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Pervasive Disagreements | 1 |
| Level of Representation | 2 |
| The Summit Agenda | 2 |
| The Outlook | 4 |

On 1 November, Algiers hosted the 31st regular session of the Arab Summit, for the fourth time (1973-1988-2005). The most recent Arab summit was held in Tunisia in March 2019, with the Algeria session initially scheduled the following year but postponed in light of the global pandemic. The Council of Arab Foreign Ministers approved Algeria's proposal to hold the summit instead on 1 November 2022, coinciding with the 68th anniversary of the launch of Algeria's struggle for independence from France in 1954. Topping the summit's agenda was the Palestinian issue and the crises in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq and Sudan, in addition to the war in Ukraine and its repercussions for the Arab region.

Pervasive Disagreements

Disputes between various Arab leaderships cast a dark shadow over the Algiers summit, the most prominent of which regarded Syria's return to the Arab League. Algeria, supported by several other states, including Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan, led the efforts to restore Syria's membership, while other countries, most prominently Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, opposed it given that the conditions that led to the suspension of Syria's membership in late 2011 have not changed. As a result of the disagreement on the issue, Algeria abandoned its restoration attempts in the lead up to the summit. The Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad, told his Algerian counterpart Ramtane Lamamra that Syria prefers not to raise the issue of resuming its Arab League seat during the Algeria summit, after failed efforts in that regard.¹ Differences had also emerged between Algeria and Morocco in the context of preparing for the summit; diplomatic relations were severed between the two countries in August 2021, as a result of differences related to Western Sahara and normalisation with Israel.²

The Palestinian issue, which has dominated discussions at successive Arab summits, has seen significant regression in Arab positions. Since the last summit in Tunisia in 2019, four Arab countries have normalised their relations with Israel in clear violation of the Arab peace initiative adopted by the Arab summit held in Lebanon in 2002, where the leaders of Arab countries affirmed "their commitment to suspending the maintenance of any relations with Israel and to reactivating the Office for the Arab Boycott of Israel until such time as Israel complies with the relevant United Nations resolutions and the terms of reference of the Madrid peace conference and withdraws fully from all the occupied Arab territories to the line of 4 June 1967."³

On the other hand, the Arab summit was held in Algeria after a new reconciliation agreement was reached between the Palestinian factions under Algerian auspices in October 2022, represented in the "Declaration of Algiers," for Palestinian unity. Although there are no indications that the new agreement will fare any better than the previous agreements, it has contributed to bringing

1 Amin Al-Assi and Othman Lahyani, "The Syrian Regime is Excluded from the Arab Summit: a Setback for the Supporters of Assad's Restoration," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 6/9/2022, accessed on 1/11/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3DT0oKO>.

2 "Algeria Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Morocco over 'Hostile Actions,'" *Al Jazeera*, 24/8/2021, accessed on 1/11/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Ugwia8>.

3 Final Communique, Arab Peace Initiative – LAS Summit – Letter from Lebanon (excerpts), United Nations website, 28/3/2022, accessed on 6/11/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3hdOG4C>.

the Palestinian issue back to the centre of Arab attention. The summit also followed the Gulf reconciliation agreement signed in Al-Ula, in Saudi Arabia, in January 2021, which ended the almost four-year blockade of Qatar.⁴

Internationally, the 2022 summit took place after the Covid-19 pandemic threw multilateral international cooperation into a crisis exacerbated by many states' unilateralist and self-serving policies. More recently the Russian-Ukrainian war has presented new global challenges, especially regarding energy and food supply. Furthermore, the increasing intensity of global polarisation in recent years looms over the entire region given the complexity of Arab relations with the competing major powers, and the way that growing clashes of interest have shaken old alliances.

Level of Representation

Algeria and the General Secretariat of the Arab League were looking forward to an Arab summit attended by most Arab leaders, especially after three years of postponement. Nonetheless, the level of representation at the summit, besides Saudi Arabia's particularly low attendance, differed little from previous Arab summits. The summit was attended by the leaders of nine countries, in addition to the Algerian president: the Emir of Qatar and the presidents of Egypt, Palestine, Mauritania, Iraq, Tunisia, Comoros, Somalia and Djibouti. The heads of the presidential councils in Sudan, Yemen and Libya participated, as well as the Vice President of the UAE, and the Crown Princes of Kuwait and Jordan. Lebanon was represented by its Prime Minister, while Bahrain and Oman sent their Deputy Prime Ministers, and Saudi Arabia and Morocco were represented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Summit Agenda

Palestine was at the top of the agenda at this year's summit, mostly due to the security and humanitarian developments since the last Arab summit in 2019, and the unprecedented aggression practiced by the Israeli occupation towards the Palestinians. Ever salient issues include the ongoing settlement policies, Judaisation policies, continued displacement, repeated violations of the sanctity of holy places, and the intensification of the siege on Gaza, in addition to the shift of some Arab countries towards normalisation with Israel, which has been detrimental for Palestine — losing its historical position as a symbol of Arab unity. On this basis, the summit's closing statement singled out “the centrality of the Palestinian cause, upholding the 2000 Arab peace initiative as a strategic choice to end the Israeli occupation of all Arab lands and achieve peace.”⁵ The statement also stressed its support for the State of Palestine's bid to obtain full membership in the United Nations, and the need to unify Arab efforts to achieve Palestinian unity within the framework of the 2022 “Algeria Declaration” resulting from the summit.

⁴ “Al-Ula GCC Summit Ends the Blockade of Qatar,” Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 7/1/2021, accessed on 1/11/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3UaXwii>.

⁵ Ali Bakir, “The Arab League Summit in Algeria: more of the same?,” *Doha News*, 2/11/2022 accessed on 6/11/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3Wxl7Lv>.

With regard to other Arab issues, the summit discussed Arab national security, focusing this time on economic security, in the context of energy and food shortages resulting from the Russian war on Ukraine. The statement includes a recommendation to “redouble efforts to realise the project of Arab economic integration in line with a comprehensive vision that ensures optimal exploitation of the components of Arab economies and the precious opportunities they offer. The aim of this would be to activate fully the Greater Arab Free Trade Area in preparation for the establishment of the Arab Customs Union.”⁶ The statement also called for the development of cooperation mechanisms to institutionalise Arab action on food, health, and energy security, and to confront climate change.

The summit also discussed Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Somalia, and renewed calls for a unified Arab position and coordinated efforts to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflicts tearing these countries apart, and to reject all forms of external interference in the domestic affairs of Arab states. Keeping tradition with previous summits, the issue of activating joint Arab action dominated a large part of the discussion, with particular focus on developing the working mechanisms of the Arab League and creating new bodies to tackle emergent issues.

The statement highlighted the proposals made by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, which aim to activate “the role of the Arab League in preventing and resolving conflicts, consolidating the popular dimension and enhancing the position of youth and innovation in joint Arab action.”⁷ The statement further made light of united Arab support for Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and their full confidence in its ability to organise an excellent tournament. In this context, the statement stressed its absolute rejection of the “defamation campaigns” against Qatar since winning the right to host the tournament.

With regard to relations between Arab and neighbouring countries, and Arab international relations, the participants stressed the need to build sound and balanced relations between the Arab states and the international community, including with its Islamic, African and Euro-Mediterranean communities, based on respect for neighbourliness, trust, fruitful cooperation, and mutual commitment — principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter, foremost of which is respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs.⁸ Notably, the statement did not refer here to specific regional or international powers, despite their implicit interference in Arab regional affairs. It seems that Algeria pressed for the clause included in the statement to be general, and not specific.

The summit represented an opportunity for the Arab countries to express a position regarding the crisis of the international system. Accordingly, the final statement called for addressing these imbalances in the structure of the international system within an approach that guarantees parity among all countries and puts an end to the marginalisation of developing countries, emphasising

⁶ “The Closing Statement of 31st Arab Summit,” Foreign Ministry of Oman, 2/11/2022, accessed on 6/11/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3h3ZhyW>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



the need for Arab countries to participate in formulating a new international system as harmonious and unified countries.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, the statement called on Arab countries to reject the use of force and to seek peace through the involvement of the Arab Ministerial Contact Group in international efforts to formulate a political solution to the crisis in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter and taking into account the security concerns of the concerned parties. The statement, in this regard, did not refer to the parties to the conflict, nor did it mention Russia or Ukraine's Western backers, apparently in an attempt to maintain its impartiality, and avoid splitting the Arab ranks. The statement expressed support for what it called the balanced policy pursued by the OPEC + alliance, in order to ensure the stability of global energy markets and the sustainability of investments in this sensitive sector within an economic approach that ensures the protection of the interests of oil-producing and oil-consuming countries alike.

The Outlook

The 2022 Algiers summit was not extraordinary in relation to previous sessions, whether in terms of attendance, or the recommendations of the final statement. Despite the efforts made by Algeria to make this summit a success, the extent of the divisions over contentious issues precluded the meeting's achievement of several goals. Moreover, the implementation of the statement's conclusions remains contingent on Algeria's ability to follow up as President of the League Council until the next Arab Summit is held, especially with regard to implementing the Palestinian reconciliation agreement, albeit a cause that Algeria seems enthusiastic to pursue, as well as resolving the protracted Arab crises from Syria and Iraq to Yemen and Libya. However, this alone will not be sufficient, unless Arab League member states can unite their wills and come together to heal the existing cracks within the Arab community itself. Only then can they embark on the path of strengthening joint action and achieving a unified status in the emerging international system.