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How Integrated Is The Afro-Arab Cooperation?

By Lisa Monaghan in Belfast for CAAGLOP (21/01/2008)

The African-Union/League of Arab States has been in existence since the 1977 Cairo Summit. Having seen the 30th Anniversary of the alliance pass by in 2007, the achievements of the alliance are open to evaluation. There have been some successes of the AU-LAS alliance but in reality it is more significantly noted for grand expectations with very limited delivery.

The adventure towards regional co-operation has been spurred on by strong historic and cultural links, as well as geographical proximity, in fact some countries straddle both African and Arab identities. The ending of colonialism in both regions stimulated a desire to develop international relations outside of traditional colonial diplomatic relations. Post-Colonialism afforded African and Arab states to conduct their own affairs, but also recognize that they had to co-operate in order to effectively participate in the international market economy. They established an optimistic target of creating a "brotherhood".

There have been periods of Afro-Arab solidarity, which included almost all African states breaking off diplomatic relations with Israel in the aftermath of the 6-Day . Several organizations have been created to generate greater Afro-Arab co-operation, including, The Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) was created to promote economic, fiscal and technical aid and cooperation between Arab and African states. In March 1975, BADEA began its activities, which included financing development projects in various African states and providing technical assistance for development. The Arab Fund for Technical Assistance to African States was established in 1974 to provide technical assistance to African states in the fields of economic and

scientific development, raising the level of technical and managerial skills, and providing specialized training courses, scholarships, advisory services and experts.

There have been degrees of success in the Afro-Arab relationship. On the economic and trade levels, this cooperation has brought about increased Arab support and funding of development projects in Africa. The total loans provided by BADEA to African states from 1975 to 2005 amounted to \$2.79m. The Arab Fund for Technical Assistance to African States, despite its own limited funds, has provided more than 40 African states with technical aid. On the cultural level, many Arab states provide scholarships for African citizens and have established schools and cultural centers in Africa. ALECSO has played a vital role in this respect, in particular with regard to disseminating the Arabic language and Arab culture in Africa.

It is noticeable that these all pre-date the creation of an official Afro-Arab forum. In reality relations since 1977 have varied between stalled and stagnant. Amongst these there have been the recurrent political and environmental problems in both regions. Of greater structural significance has been the lack of involvement of the private sector and civil society organizations in regional co-operation programs. This has resulted in a lack of economic or cultural integration which has stifled the entire objective of cooperation.

The levels of Afro-Arab coordination at an international level has been weak, and have proven reticent to support each other during UN meetings. Trade levels between the two regions are low, as is investment. Economic cooperation therefore exists in the realm of financial aid. As a result, to date, Afro-Arab relations have not transferred to the larger international political scene, nor is it adequately felt at the domestic level

As with the African Union's relationship with the European Union, new life appears to have been breathed into their relationship with the League of Arab States. There does appear to be a genuine will within the African Union to create strong ties with its regional counterparts. The problem that plagues the African Union is that it lacks coercive measures. In a large part cooperation remains an aspiration rather than functional. If we consider the

principles of the Afro-Arab development forum:

- (a) Respect principles and norms of the UN, AU, LAS and other international practices.
- (b) Pursue the interests and benefits of the African and Arab countries and peoples.
- (c) Be autonomous and free in its operations.
- (d) Concentrate on regional and global matters that have visible influences on the African and / or Arab regions and the cooperation between them and shall not be engaged with national problems in member countries, unless otherwise both the African Union and the League of Arab States regard such problems as "issues of common concern to the Afro-Arab region".
- (e) Encourage participation of governmental and non-governmental actors with special emphasis on Private Sectors, Civil societies, Academicians, Women and Youth Associations, Professional Organizations, etc.
- (f) Focus on inter-regional development cooperation issues in the areas of peace and security, poverty eradication, population, infrastructure and energy, water and environment, agriculture and food security, health, of education, culture and human resources development Etc.
- (g) Avoid any form of discrimination and conflict of interest.
- (h) Be gender sensitive.
- (I) Respect cultural diversity and civilization of both sides

Enormous question marks can be placed over the cross-regional support for several of these principles. Some of them can be accused of reflecting the beliefs and aspirations of the participants of the working groups and the AU-LAS itself, rather than reflect genuine policy for the signatory nations. If we consider policy here, many states have legislation

which actively discriminates against women, belittling its existence on the list, and belittling the principled cooperation as merely rhetorical.

The three main Afro-Arab cooperation programs to date suggest a symbolic rather than functional relations. They are

- The Afro-Arab Trade Fair
- The African and Arab Businessmen Week
- The Afro-Arab Cultural Institute

Two projects which may have provided more impetus into the project were proposed, the Afro-Arab institution for finance and investment and an Afro-Arab preferential trade zone. In the end these were rejected. The difficulty would have been that should they have been accepted, resulting in a move from rhetorical cooperation towards actual cooperation, who would enforce it? Do the AU and LAS represent the genuine will of their member states? And can they adequately enforce any decisions made?

The lack of coercive measures at the disposal of the Afro-Arab regional framework means that the role played by Non-Government Organizations in ensuring the realization of these values is critical. Organizations such as the Afro-Arab Institute for Culture and Strategic Studies play an integral monitoring and evaluating role in ensuring not only regional co-operation but also ensuring the implementation and adherence to these principles.

The difficulty for the AU and LAS lies in their structural problems. They account for a very high number of states without having the ability to adequately speak for all of its members, nor do they possess the ability to regulate the behavior of its member states. As a result they have weak enforcement mechanisms so their projects are victim to fancies of political will.

There remains a will for cooperation. The Arab Summit held in Riyadh 28-29 March 2007 directed its attention towards improving Arab-African relations. It adopted a resolution calling on member states to consider raising the level and increasing the scope of their diplomatic representation in African states, to ensure greater cooperation. Focus was placed on developing Arab assistance to the region, aimed at states that experienced natural disasters. It is important

for the AU and LAS to capitalize on this renewed determination for co-operation. They also must consider what kind of cooperation is envisaged. Is it goodwill or structural cooperation? If it is the latter then a new infrastructure must be created to realize and facilitate integrated cooperation.

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