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Aftermath of the Sirte Summit: Arab-African Cooperation on the Upswing?

Hanspeter Mattes

On October 10, 2010, in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte, the second Arab-African summit took place, more than 30 years after the first one. Numerous heads of state from the Arab League and the African Union took part in this joint conference.

Analysis

By the 1970s substantial Arab-African cooperation had already come into being and was institutionalized at the summit in Cairo in 1977. The goal was to bring about a balance of interests between Arab oil states that—thanks to OPEC’s petroleum revolution—acquired substantial foreign currency revenue, and capital-poor, but resource- and water-rich African states. With financial help from the Arab states, both the economic development of Africa and the supply of food (the “breadbasket strategy”) and raw materials from Africa to the Arab states would be effectuated.

- The cooperative efforts were strained from the beginning because the Arab states hinged their financial and economic cooperative willingness—although unspoken—on political factors (primarily on whether the African states supported their position on Israel).
- Although the Arab-African cooperation was institutionalized in a way that made voting rights equally distributed, in fact it was de facto hierarchically organized. The Arab states were less committed to communal cooperation per se than they were to bilateral cooperative relationships, which they could have more control over.
- The fresh start in Arab-African cooperation spurred by the conference in Sirte is in line with the old concept of “balance of interests” on an international level.
- The new strategic partnership will only last if the Arab states put an end to their political instrumentalization and cease pursuing goals of power politics.

Keywords: Arab League, African Union, development cooperation

In recent years, the efforts at cooperation between continents and regional organizations have greatly increased. The European-African cooperation since the first, “historical” Europe-Africa summit in Cairo in 2000, the Europe-Latin America summits since 1999, and the summits between Latin American and Arab states since May 2005 are all testaments to that. In the midst of all this, Arab and African states have also experienced a revival in their relationship, whereby the expansion of economic cooperation with the goal of obtaining an interregional balance of interests is central.

Arab-African Cooperation: A Historical Overview

In recognition of the emerging crisis in development politics, which began at the end of the first development decade and lasted until the beginning of the 1970s, the developing countries called for strengthened “collective self-reliance” and an expansion of horizontal cooperation on an equal basis, concepts which, taken together, were supposed to have abated the crisis. The OPEC countries’ 1973 petroleum revolution—which brought petroleum-producing countries a drastic surge in revenue, which in turn benefited the Arab League (AL) as well as the Organization of African Unity (OAU)—served to precipitate a successful cooperation between the two regions. Because of the differing prerequisite conditions of each region, a dynamic development in cooperation was predicted, not only because there were historical ties, but also because the complementarity of the economic factors (labor, fertile soil, and water in sub-Saharan Africa, and capital in the Arab oil-producing states) was seen as advantageous (Neitzel/Nötzel 1979; Haseeb 1985).

Furthermore, the collaboration benefited from a political factor: Starting after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Near East conflict had an increasing influence on Arab-African relations. With the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the related sporadic occupation of African territory by the Israeli army, the conflict got a new focus. The OAU council of ministers spoke out against Israel in 1973, following which many African states broke off their once-strong diplomatic ties with Israel. Oil played a central role in their decision; many African states had fears stemming from the petroleum revolution about whether their oil supply would be sufficient and affordable. The political considerations

of the African states necessitated their compliance—African states supported the Arab states regarding Israel as a *quid pro quo* for securing both petroleum delivery and further Arab economic and financial aid.

The framework for an institutionalization of Arab-African cooperation was outlined at various AL and OAU congresses. These endeavors sparked not only the 1974 founding of certain development agencies—such as the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA)—and Arab funds for technical and financial help for the African states, but also the creation of political consultation structures (cf. Table 1), the latter of which were agreed upon at the first Arab-African summit in Cairo.

The First Arab-African Summit (Cairo, March 1977)

Four declarations were adopted at the 1977 Cairo summit in the presence of numerous Arab and African heads of state:

- 1) a political declaration that detailed a cooperation based on the charters of both the OAU and the AL and that specified the reciprocal support for the liberation of Palestine and the abolition of Apartheid in Africa;
- 2) a program of action for Arab-African cooperation that established sectoral cooperation;
- 3) a resolution entitled “Organization and Method for the Realization of Afro-Arab Cooperation”: this important document stipulated that the foreign ministers (the so-called “Joint Ministerial Council”) hold a summit every 18 months and that the heads of state do so every three years; furthermore, the document outlined the framework for the so-called “Permanent Commission for Arab-African Cooperation” (PCAAC), a committee made up of 24 members (12 from the AL and 12 from the OAU), which was also supposed to convene every six months to supervise the implementation of the agreed-upon resolutions;
- 4) a resolution on economic and financial cooperation that de facto constituted a declaration of intent on the part of the Arabs to provide financial aid to the African states.

Table 1: Important Dates in Arab-African Cooperation History

1973	Petroleum revolution
2/18/1974	Founding of the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa
3/1974	Founding of the Arab Fund for Technical Assistance to African Countries (AFTAAC) and the Arab Fund for Financial Assistance to African Countries
4/19–22/1976	1 st Arab-African foreign minister conference (Dakar)
3/3–6/1977	2 nd Arab-African foreign minister conference (Cairo)
3/7–9/1977	1 st Arab-African summit (Cairo); institutionalization of cooperation specified summit conferences every 3 years, joint foreign minister meetings every 18 months, meetings of the permanent committee (PCAAC) every 6 months; de facto, however, only 12 meetings in over 30 years
5/31–6/1/1977	1 st PCAAC meeting; due to foreign policy differences, no regular meetings; for example: 11 th meeting 1991, 12 th meeting 2001, 13 th meeting 2009
1984	Institutionalization of Afro-Arab Parliamentary Dialogue; so far 12 parliament meetings, most recently in April 2009 (Abuja)
10/22–31/1993	1 st Arab-African trade fair (Tunis); 7 successive fairs had taken place as of 2010
2000–2009	Increasing demands of Arab and African states to revive the cooperation
9/24/2009	Arab-African minister meeting on Darfur
1/16/2010	Meeting of the joint AU/AL Secretariat; decision made to hold the 2 nd Arab-African summit
2/14–16/2010	1 st Arab-African minister meeting on agriculture development and food security
3/4/2010	14 th PCAAC meeting (Cairo)
7/6/2010	15 th PCAAC meeting (Cairo)
10/1/2010	Arab-African Forum on Trade and Investment (Tripoli)
10/5/2010	1 st Arab-African youth summit (Tripoli)
10/10/2010	2 nd Arab-African summit (Sirte); date chosen by Libya for its symbolic significance
2013	3 rd Arab-African summit planned for Kuwait

At the end of the summit conference, it initially appeared as if Arab-African cooperation—if nothing else, thanks to the generous financial help of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states—now had an effective incentive to work to avoid a relapse into the failures of earlier cooperation attempts. However, this optimism proved premature: various developments, starting at the latest in 1979 and mostly relating to the Arabs, sabotaged the cooperation. Subsequently, plans for the second summit, supposed to take place in Kuwait in 1980, collapsed, and the second Arab-African summit did not end up taking place until 2010.

The Failure of Cooperation

The cooperation failure of the 1970s can be ascribed to many different political and economic factors relating to both regional organizations. The most significant of those, however, was Egypt's initiation of the peace process with Israel, which brought about the Camp David Accords and the

subsequent suspension of Egypt from membership in the AL, which also shifted its chair from Cairo to Tunis. Egypt's conduct affected Arab-African cooperation in that the majority of states in the OAU in fact also welcomed the peace process with Israel. The controversial Libyan military engagement in Chad,¹ the debate about Western Sahara, and the Camp David Accords all served to in effect paralyze the OAU's work at the beginning of the 1980s. Moreover, for the African states, the amount of economic and financial help from the Arab states was especially disappointing.² Since 1986 (at the latest), due to the international financial crisis that had arisen in the meantime, the drastic decline in oil prices, and the financial situation of the Gulf states caused by the 1991 Gulf

1 Along those lines, there were also huge disagreements and much debate over Libya's attempts to militarily instrumentalize the Arab-African cooperation in its pursuit of the "destruction of imperialism, racism and Zionism."

2 Between 1975 and 1983 a total of 8.2 billion USD of Arab aid (subsidies and loans) flowed into African states; the amount was much lower than the African states had expected.

War, the needs of sub-Saharan African states had been left unattended to.

After the appeals by the African heads of state at the OAU summit conference in June 1981 in Nairobi for an “urgent intensification of Arab-African cooperation” fell mostly on deaf ears, the enthusiasm for cooperation was markedly subdued and the intervals between PCAAC congresses became increasingly longer.³

Causes of the Revival of Arab-African Cooperation

Many factors contributed to the attempts starting at the end of the 1990s/beginning of the 2000s to overcome the existing obstacles to Arab-African cooperation. For one thing, despite the problems in the cooperative committees, some Arab countries—particularly Egypt, Algeria and Libya⁴—continued to maintain close relationships with sub-Saharan countries and thus became familiar with their development problems. Poverty-induced migration, transborder criminality, counterterrorism, the conflict in Darfur, and the issues surrounding the use of Nile water were just a few topics that made the benefits of a resumption of cooperation and a coordination of political action clear to both African and Arab states.

Within the AU⁵ as well as the AL there were many calls for the aforementioned cooperation and coordination. The calls came from, among others, the PCAAC, which met again in April 2001 in Algiers for the first time in over ten years; the executive board of the AU (Maputo, July 2003);⁶ and the joint AU/AL Secretariat (Addis Ababa, May 2005 and December 2007). The cooperative endeavors became more intense particularly after 2003, when a situation similar to that of the 1970s occurred: On one hand, the Arab (and this time also African) oil exporters experienced drastically increased petroleum prices and, accordingly, recorded high foreign currency earnings. On the other hand, numerous African nations had huge

problems paying the ever more expensive energy import prices. Moreover, the Arab states demands for food imports increased greatly due to high population growth in Arab states, causing them to quickly and urgently reorient themselves towards “Breadbasket Africa,” which led to the first-ever “Africa-Arab Agro Investment Summit” in Zanzibar, May 2009.⁷

In the face of global challenges, many heads of state believed the revival of Arab-African cooperation to be vital,⁸ and as a result both regions agreed to the proposal approved in January 2010 by the joint AU/AL Secretariat to hold the long-overdue second summit in the fall of 2010 in Libya.⁹

The Second Arab-African Summit (Sirte, Libya: October 2010)

The decision to hold the second summit entailed a succession of preparatory meetings:

- The summit organization committee (with representatives from Egypt, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kuwait, Tanzania as well as host-nation Libya) held gatherings.
- The PCAAC also met twice in Cairo (March 4 and July 6, 2010).
- A meeting of the Joint Ministerial Council took place on October 8 in Sirte, during which Arab and African positions on Sudan and Israel, as well as economic programs of action, among other topics, were discussed and the “Sirte Declaration” was drafted.

The positions of both regional organizations were injected into the negotiations at different moments. While the AU had already formulated their objectives at the end of July 2010 at their meeting in Kampala, the Arab heads of state did not convene until October 9, 2010, in Sirte, at a special session of the AL. Though the special session was trig-

3 The African states’ financial crisis and debt problems were the reason that the cooperation with the AL was kept alive; cf. Chabar (1986).

4 Libya, in keeping with its attempts to persuade the UN to lift its sanctions, (which were based on its involvement in the Lockerbie plane crash), started in the 1990s to revise its formerly militant and expansionist policy on Africa.

5 The OAU was disbanded in 2002 and the AU (African Union) was established as its successor organization.

6 See: http://www.africa-union.org/Official_documents/council%20of%20ministers%20meetings/Maputo/EX_CL_Dec%2053.pdf.

7 Agenda at <www.fara-africa.org>; for more on the rent controversy vis-à-vis the buying of agricultural land in African states in order to supply food to Arab consumers, see: <<http://farmlandgrab.org>> (“Food Crisis and the Global Land Grab”).

8 An example would be Nigerian President Yar’Adua, who said as much in April 2009; cf. allafrica.com, accessed April 22, 2009 (“Yar’Adua Urges Afro-Arab Cooperation on Globalization Challenges”).

9 Prior to this, the PCAAC had proposed on the occasion of its 13th congress in October 2009 that there be a summit; Libya assured all parties that it would foot the total bill for the conference, thus winning the right to host.

gered by an Arab-specific cause, the summit also served as preparation for the Arab-African summit at which the Arab heads of state discussed the future of Sudan first and foremost.

These indispensable diplomatic-political preparations were accompanied by many Arab-African events; the goal of these events, which were organized and funded by Libya, was to strengthen Libya's position in the Arab-African relationship network. Among these events were the first-ever Arab-African youth summit¹⁰ in Tripoli on October 5, 2010, and an Arab-African cultural conference at the end of October in Benghazi.

Libya became heavily involved in economic topics as well. Following the first Arab-African minister meeting February 14–16, 2010, in Sharm-el-Sheikh, Egypt—which dealt with agricultural cooperation and food security (and during which the “Joint Plan of Action on Food Security for All” was passed)—Tripoli hosted an Arab-African trade forum at the end of September, and on October 2–3 a conference took place there on the expansion of Arab-African trade and the investment capability of Arab investors in sub-Saharan African states.

Results of the “10/10/10” Summit

Hosni Mubarak, the president of the first summit in Cairo in 1977, also opened the second summit, which was then led by revolutionary leader Qaddafi¹¹ under the motto “Afro-Arab Cooperation: Towards a Strategic Partnership” and followed the procedure agreed upon by the organization committees. After substantial debate, and after having listened to speeches from AL General Secretary Amr Musa, Chairman of the Commission of the AU Jean Ping, and host Qaddafi, among others, the summit's attendees, from approximately 60 countries (among them 30 heads of state), passed the documents drafted by the foreign ministers.

The need for Afro-Arab cooperation was emphasized in the addresses from members of both sides, though from different perspectives. Even during President Mubarak's opening remarks¹² was the acknowledgement of the importance of

Arab-African cooperation clear: Mubarak said that he welcomed the revitalization of partnership in the form of new long-term strategies, including a plan of action from 2011 to 2016, and he simultaneously highlighted the sustained commitment on the part of Egypt towards the rest of Africa. For their part, Amr Musa and Jean Ping voiced their appreciation of the positive steps made in the last three decades; they admitted to and acknowledged the difficulties and problems of the past and called for a new page to be turned in joint relations.

The changes in recent years would appear to have not only brought about an accelerated globalization but to have also shown that only strengthened cooperation on regional and interregional levels can secure the welfare of all peoples. In that sense, the summit could be seen as overdue in demonstrating and channeling the new vigor of the interregional relationship. Jean Ping put the spotlight on economic collaboration and announced that the AU/AL Secretariat had decided to found an African-Arab chamber of commerce as well as the African-Arab Development Forum (as a discussion platform for questions of development in regards to both regions).

In Qaddafi's greatly anticipated speech, he emphasized that two-thirds of Arabs are also Africans and that, therefore, cooperation with the oil-rich Arab states in West Asia has to be strengthened first and foremost. He spoke of the necessity not only for the Arab and African states to work together better within their own regional coalitions, but also for the AL and the AU to cooperate more intensively with one another in the areas of politics, economics and security. He opined that only through that cooperation can peace and security prevail. Along those lines, Qaddafi not only deplored the lack of involvement, particularly of the rich Arab states, but also apologized for the disgraceful behavior towards the Africans, saying that the Arabs enslaved and exploited their African brothers just as the Europeans did. “For that I am sorry and I regret these practices,” he said, after which he received a resounding round of applause from the audience.¹³

A second, much noted and commented-upon topic was the situation in Sudan; here, Qaddafi, in view of the imminent referendum, cautioned

10 For more on the central topic of discussion, employment, see Tripoli Post, October 13, 2010 “Afro-Arab Youth Council Demands Empowerment.”

11 For more on the schedule and details of the summit and various related documents, see www.afro-arabsummit.com. In the German press, the high-profile summit was almost completely ignored

12 Nile News, October 10, 2010, according to the BBC (“Egypt Leader Calls for Active Arab-African Partnership”).

13 Libyan TV, October 10, 2010, according to the BBC (“Text of Libyan Leader's Speech in Sirte During Arab-African Summit”).

against a partition of the country because this step “could be a contagious disease that could infect the whole of Africa” and lead to war. The African heads of state (from Nigeria, Chad, and elsewhere)—just like the Arab heads of state did at the AL special session two days prior—openly recognized this danger, and pleas for the preservation of territorial integrity in Sudan were thus incorporated into the official Sirte Declaration.¹⁴ The prerequisite for safeguarding territorial integrity is that the Arab states quickly fulfil their pledge to invest one billion USD into the economic development of South Sudan.

Aside from

- 1) Sudan,
- 2) the dedication to peaceful methods of conflict settlement (for instance, regarding the redistribution of Nile water and the conflict in Somalia)¹⁵ and
- 3) the combating of terrorism,¹⁶ the debate was dominated above all by development politics.

Predominantly, the development politics talk was more specifically about the concrete steps in cooperation regarding water, energy, raw materials, food production and the environment. This cooperation, according to Jean Ping, could only be made possible through the support of investors and trade; Ping clarified that African states should count on a substantial commitment (i.e. investments) from the richer Arab states. According to the finalized conference documents, while the Arab states did agree on the cooperative goals, the question of financing remains open.

Two central documents were passed; the first, the “Africa-Arab Partnership Strategy,” comprised four aspects:

- 1) peace and security,
- 2) investment incentive and commercial exchange,
- 3) agriculture and food security, and
- 4) social and cultural cooperation.

¹⁴ Tripoli Post, October 19, 2010 (“African-Arab Summit: No to Sudan Secession”); Sirte Declaration cf. Jananews, October 12, 2010.

¹⁵ Panapress, October 12, 2010 (“Sirte Summit Calls for Cooperation on Conflict Resolution”).

¹⁶ The coordination of counter-terrorism was endorsed by both sides and further steps were envisaged; in regards to the current virulent Islamic terrorism in the Sahel, Qaddafi and the heads of state from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Chad met and came to an agreement on a further plan of action. See: L’Essor (Bamako), October 13, 2010 (“Mini-Sommet sur la sécurité”).

The joint development goals are to be implemented through political dialogue in the form of high-ranking consultations and corresponding official talks conducted by a joint economic committee.

The crux of the strategy is clarified in the second document, the “Afro-Arab Joint Action Plan 2011–2016.” This document served as a replacement for the “Declaration and Program of Action on Afro-Arab Cooperation” from March 1977. The 30-page plan of action for 2011 through 2016 encompasses the specific measures that should be undertaken in the appropriate sectors—from the monitoring of investments, to the organizing of annual trade fairs, to the founding of the African-Arab Institute for Strategic and Cultural Studies.

Both the Arab and African sides reacted positively overall to the summit, and this—for instance in the case of Senegalese President Wade and Liberian President Sirleaf—was partly tied to an explicit appreciation for Qaddafi’s commitment. As representatives from Zambia phrased it, “Libya is a power that must be recognized in Africa.”

The revitalization of Arab-African cooperation was welcomed and deemed necessary by all, and the desire to consolidate—the South African representative went as far as to use the word “duty”—was expressed. All delegations emphasized the mutual benefits of cooperation, and the President of Congo-Brazzaville Denis Sassou Nguesso praised the summit for having “opened new doors” in the cooperation between Arab and African states.

A few critical remarks came from the ranks of the Libyan opposition (“Just another waste of time and money”); for them, the summit was nothing more than a show, especially considering that no historical decisions could be expected in general from weak Arab rulers.

The Future of Arab-African Cooperation

Arab-African cooperation has been strained by two factors from the beginning. First, the Arab states have routinely made financial and economic cooperation dependent on political factors. While the Arab states’ appeals for African support regarding Arab foreign interests were successful, it was not a genuine support and suggested more a conciliatory, opportunistic attitude on the part of the African states. In light of such an Arab-centric starting point for cooperation, from time to time and under certain circumstances, the will of the

Arab states to cooperate strongly waned when the support of the African states didn't seem absolutely necessary anymore.

Second, the Arab-African cooperation and relationship in general lacked balance (read: equality). De facto hierarchically organized, the monetary flow from Arab states into Africa was supervised by the AL and AU, but only moderately, and there was no way of really controlling the destiny of the funding through the institutions of Arab-African cooperation; bilateral help became the preferred choice of the Arab states because it is and was easier to supervise.

Arab-African cooperation, which in the 1970s set a precedent in South-South collaboration, has developed over time into a sort of Third World variety of a North-South divide. Direct implications for the future of Arab-African cooperation can be observed. The future does look promising, provided the errors of the past can be avoided; i.e. the Arab states must stop politicizing and strive towards a real balance of interests. The signs of progress on that front were definitely apparent in the declarations passed at the 2010 summit, but the Arab politicization was already a point of contention at the first summit in 1977. The 2010 conference participants still supported the founding of a Palestinian state, but the Near East conflict overall played a much more subordinate role than it did in 1977. In at least this way, Arab-African cooperation was depoliticized. The benchmark for the new strategic partnership remains the *actions* that, despite all intentions, will in all likelihood continue to lag behind verbalized goals.

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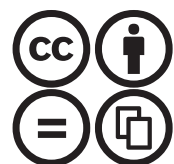
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