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Background: The Arab Parliament

The idea of a body directly representing the will of the Arab people had been discussed by the Arab League since the mid-1950s. However, such an idea ran contrary to the League's founding Charter which scrupulously omitted any mention of direct representation of Arab citizens. Despite numerous efforts to modify the Charter, the best that could be managed was the creation of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU) in 1977 which fell outside of the Arab League and merely sought to act as a forum through which to coordinate policies between the various Arab Parliaments.

During the 1980s, both the AIPU and the General Secretariat of the Arab League worked towards a new legal formulation facilitating the establishment of an Arab Parliament within the framework of the Arab League. This served as a basis for a decision taken by the Council of the Arab League during the Arab Leagues' 17th General Conference in Algiers in March 2005 to amend its Charter to include an Arab Parliament (AP) as an official institution of the Arab League. Its main objective is to give the citizens of the Arab world a voice alongside that of Arab governments and, in doing so, strengthen the democratic decision making process.

Despite key amendments being ratified by a majority of member states in 2007, a final decision must still be taken by the Council of the Arab League. In the meantime, a transitional Arab Parliament has, since its first meeting on 27 December 2005, been tasked with laying the ground work for a permanent parliament by the end of its mandate in December 2012. At present, the AP seems caught in limbo somewhere between transition and permanence.

Currently, the Arab Parliament is headed by **Ali al-Salem al-Dekbas** (Kuwait) and based in Cairo, although it is expected to move to Damascus as soon as construction on its permanent headquarters finishes. However, it is unclear how the current crisis in Syria will affect this plan.

The AP revolves around two annual sessions (March and September), each of which lasts 2 months. It is structured as follows:

- The *Presidency* which represents the AP during external relations.
- The *Parliamentary Bureau* which is charged with administrative matters.
- 4 *Committees* comprising of no more than one member per country:
 - Committee on Foreign, Political and Security Affairs
 - Committee on Economic and Financial Affairs

- Committee on Legislative, Legal and Human Rights Affairs
- Committee on Social, Cultural, Gender and Youth Affairs
- The *General Secretariat* which provides technical expertise.

Currently, there exists no system of direct representation to elect Members of the Arab Parliament. Instead, the national parliaments of each of the 22 Arab League States nominate 4 Parliamentary Members to participate in the Arab Parliament, resulting in a combined total of 88 AP Members. In addition to this, Turkey was granted observer status in 2010.

Broadly speaking, the mandate of AP Members only ends with either the dissolution of their national parliament or their failure to win re-election at the national level. For his part, the President of the AP is elected from amongst the Parliamentary Members to serve a 3-year term.

AP Members are not considered representatives of their own national parliaments or governments; rather they represent the Arab Nation as a whole. In theory, this provides them with the freedom and independence necessary to voice their own opinions and participate in parliamentary discussions unhindered.

Until now, the AP has played a virtually non-existent role in Arab politics. However, there have been signs that this could be changing. Indeed, the AP is growing increasingly vocal in its criticism of the Yemeni and Syrian regimes, with AP President Ali al-Salem al-Dekbas leading calls to freeze the membership of both countries within the Arab League in response to their violent suppression of pro-democracy protesters.