

The Iraqi-Syrian Unity Project in 1979

Mohammed Salem Amayreh¹, Khaled Hassan Al-Jabali², Khaled Suleiman Hamad Alshrieda³

Abstract

This study focused on the Syrian-Iraqi unity project, which was launched by the governments of Iraq and Syria in 1978. Thus, the research explored the reasons that caused the desire for Iraqi and Syrian unity. The research also cleared the Zionist, international, and Arab positions on the Syrian-Iraqi project. Furthermore, the study pointed out the position of the Soviet Union in the project which was positive for it. On the other side, the United States of America and the Zionist entity made a concerted effort to undermine this project. The idea was unsuccessful and remained a dead letter as a consequence of American and Zionist opposition.

Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century AD, efforts were made to consider and be conscious of the significance of Arab unity, when the Ottoman Empire governed the majority of the Arab world. Thus, if we consider the Arab unity projects, there have been over a hundred initiatives to bring the Arab world together since the turn of the century. However, a few of these initiatives came from individuals who have taken individual positions among Arab political thinkers, while other projects have been presented by organizations, political parties, and official and public entities. Additionally, other official efforts supported by the Arab government were taken up and other parties but were never implemented.

This research focused on the Syrian-Iraqi unity project in 1979, which is a unitary initiative adopted by the governments of Iraq and Syria. Thus, the study addressed the circumstances that prompted the desire for Iraqi and Syrian unification in 1978, which was reflected in the negotiations for peace between Egypt and Israel, as well as the agreement that was made between Israel and Egypt in line with the Camp David Accords. As a consequence, Egypt has broken away from the unity of Arab rank, and the resulting political vacuum by freezing its membership in the Arab League.

Additionally, it demonstrated the arrangements made by the two leaderships in Syria and Iraq for the establishment of the united state of unified against the Zionist entity. Thus, the efforts toward union began with a series of meetings between the two parties, which concluded in the creation of multiple committees to combine the two country's economic, social, political, and administrative systems.

After the signing of the Camp David Accords, the goal of the Iraqi-Syrian unitary project was to achieve comprehensive Arab unity, prosperity for Arab generations through the active participation of various popular groups, economic integration between the two countries, and the formation of an Arab force capable of deterring the Zionist enemy.

The study talked about the Zionist, international, and Arab positions on the Syrian-Iraqi project, and the Palestinian, Jordanian, and Libyan positions were in support of the idea of unity as a supportive force for the Palestinian resistance movement against the Zionist enemy. The Soviet Union promised at the time that the initiative was a step in the right direction toward establishing an Arab force capable of fighting the Zionist entity. On the other hand, the Zionist entity and the United States of America worked hard to destroy this initiative, while Iran's position was not clear.

Circumstances that Led to the Call for Unity between Iraq and Syria in 1978.

Camp David Accords: Following the end of the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973, the governments of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations invited the governments of the region to attend and participate in the Geneva Conference to discuss ways to resolve the Arab-Israeli

¹ Faculty of Arts, Department of History, Ajloun National University, Jordan. Email: dr.amyerh@yahoo.com

² Faculty of Arts, Department of History, Ajloun National University, Jordan. Jabali1966@yahoo.com

³ Faculty of Arts, Department of History, Ajloun National University, Jordan. dr. khaled1965@yahoo.com

conflict on December 21, 1973. Thus, Egypt and Jordan attended the conference in Geneva, but there were no tangible results.

Carter assumed the presidency of the American administration in early 1977, and his administration made significant efforts that led to holding secret Egyptian-Israeli discussions that resulted in the visit of Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem on October 19, 1977. Thereafter, Egypt and Israel held several meetings before it was announced that an agreement had been reached on Camp David agreement on September 17, 1978 (4).

As soon as the agreement was achieved, the Arab countries consisting of the steadfastness and confrontation front, namely Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Algeria, Libya, and democratic Yemen, held a meeting in Damascus from September 20 to 23, 1978, and declared their complete rejection of the Camp David Accords. However, Arab countries considered this agreement was not born, and it was a part of an American plan to dominate the region. Thus, they announced their support for Syria and the freezing of its diplomatic and economic relations with Egypt (5).

Syria announced that the Camp David Accords excluded Egypt from the Arab ranks and made it into an ally of Israel. It also claimed that the agreement violates all UN resolutions and is a contradiction to the terms of a just peace (6).

The Ninth Arab Summit Conference was held in Baghdad between October 2 and 10, 1978. The seriousness of the two Camp David agreements was highlighted by Iraqi President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr at the conference's opening. He emphasized that these agreements were far from the minimum that the Arab countries could accept and did not satisfy those Arab countries directly involved in the conflict with the Zionist enemy. Moreover, the Arab countries did not accept that any Arab ruler imposes his views and gives himself the right to solve the issue of the conflict with the Zionist enemy (7).

The two Camp David agreements were rejected by the Arab Summit Conference in Baghdad, which also took a particular stance on Camp David, the most significant of which was as the following:

1. Every Arab nation has to participate in this conflict and make a commitment to fighting for the Palestinian cause because it is a crucial problem and the conflict's central issue.
2. No Arab party involved in resolving the Palestinian problem or the Arab-Israeli conflict should be unilateral.
3. No solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict will be accepted unless it is accompanied by a decision of an Arab summit conference to be held for this purpose (8).
4. Emphasizing the rejection of the Camp David Accords, and not dealing with their implications.
5. Asking Sadat to renounce those agreements completely and refuse to sign the peace treaty with the Zionist enemy. The conference recommended in the event of signing the peace agreement between the Egyptian government and the Zionist enemy. In addition, the conference announced that the Arab League's headquarters transferred from Cairo to another Arab capital, suspending Egypt's membership in the Arab League, and imposing boycott laws on Egyptian businesses, institutions, and individuals who deal directly or indirectly with the Zionist enemy (9).

Most of the Arab countries rejected the Camp David Accords, except Oman and Sudan. They pointed out that this was not out of a rejection of negotiations with Israel; instead, they denied Sadat's renunciation of the Palestinian people's legitimate rights and his devotion to the principle of bilateral negotiations and individual agreements within the historical context of Israeli politics in a new advanced stage (10). Moreover,

(4)Thaer Mahmoud Muhammad Hdayb, Camp David Accords 1978 AD and their repercussions on the Palestinian cause until 1982, master's thesis, Al-Quds University, Palestine, 2010 AD, p.3.

(5) Hussein Ibrahim Al-Attar, Egypt and the Palestinian Cause at Camp David, Al-Ittihad House, 1st ed., Cairo, 2006, p. 137.

(6) Saeb Erekat, Peace upon Peace, A Study of Diplomatic Movements and Politics in the Middle East, 1967-1987, Al-Bayader Publications, Jerusalem, 1987, p. 65, Thaer Hdayb, Camp David Accords, p. 44.

(7) Hussein Ibrahim Al-Attar, Egypt and the Palestinian Cause, p. 137.

(8) Hayam Jaffal, Arab Initiatives for the Settlement of the Palestinian Issue, Master Thesis, Jerusalem, Palestine, 2008 AD, p. 62.

(9) Hussein Ibrahim Al-Attar, Egypt and the Palestinian Cause, p. 139.

(10) Saeb Erekat, Peace be Upon Peace, p. 67.

they considered that President Sadat presented to the Israelites what they were seeking to undermine the Palestinian cause: dividing the Arab position, engaging in negotiations with Israel, reaching a unilateral peace with every country, excluding Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict, isolating it from the Arab world, and maintaining Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza Strip ⁽¹¹⁾.

However, the Egyptian president ignored Arab calls not to sign agreements for peace with Israel, and on March 26, 1979, Sadat and Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of Israel, signed the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty at Camp David, in the presence of Jimmy Carter, President of the United States of America. Following Egypt's departure from the Arab consensus to conclude a unilateral peace treaty with Israel, the majority of Arab countries decided to sever diplomatic relations with Egypt, withdraw their ambassadors from Cairo, freeze Egypt's membership in the Arab League, and transfer the Arab League's headquarters from Cairo to Tunisia the following day ⁽¹²⁾. As a result of Egypt's withdrawal from the Arab ranks and the absence left by its departure, Iraq and Syria started offering a project for two-state unity.

Preparations for Unity:

After Egypt announced the conclusion of the Camp David Accords on September 17, 1978, the Iraqi leadership convened on October 1, 1978, and decided on rapprochement with Syria, considering the Iraqi and Syrian arenas as one arena for the purposes of Arab national action to confront the Zionist enemy ⁽¹³⁾.

Finally, the Iraqi and Syrian leaderships made contact and agreed to sign the National Action Charter in Baghdad on October 26, 1978. This led to the formation of the supreme political body, which was presided over by the presidents of the two nations and included prominent officials from both countries. The two parties agreed to hold a meeting of the supreme political body in one of the two capitals every three months ⁽¹⁴⁾. The two leaders also discussed the unity project between the two countries ⁽¹⁵⁾, and the ways to unify the two countries in all economic, political, and educational fields, and unify the party, media, culture, and the arts ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Unit Steps:

Early in January 1978, the leaders of Iraq and Syria met in Damascus to discuss how to start the unity project and the basic obstacles that would enable the project to be implemented ⁽¹⁷⁾. The meeting resulted in the formation of committees to unify educational curricula in the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education ⁽¹⁸⁾. Moreover, committees were established to unify systems of the economic, social, and administrative institutions ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The two sides discussed the possibility of establishing two people's councils, one in Iraq and the other in Syria, to follow up on the internal affairs of each country. The leaders of the two countries also discussed the establishment of an elected council representing the unification between the two countries to address public issues, particularly foreign policy challenges affecting the uniting state.

Furthermore, a partisan committee was constituted whose sole objective was to achieve the fusion unity of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in the two countries, in line with the United State constitution ⁽²⁰⁾. Another committee was assigned to unify laws and regulations for diplomats in Syria and Iraq. The essential

⁽¹¹⁾ Mahmoud Fawzi, *Camp David in the Mind of Egypt's Foreign Ministers*, Madbouly Bookshop, Cairo, 1990, p. 15.

⁽¹²⁾ Saeb Erekat, *Peace be Upon Peace*, p. 69.

⁽¹³⁾ The Center for Arab Unity Studies, *Diaries and Documents of Arab Unity*, 1979, p. 364. *Al-Anbaa Newspaper*, Al-Quds, November 7, 1978, p. 6, *Al-Ittihad Newspaper*, Haifa, October 12, 1978, p. 1.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 265, *Al-Anbaa Newspaper*, Jerusalem, October 25, 1978, p.1.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Al-Akhbar newspaper*, Amman, Issue 565, October 7, 1978, p. 1, Elias Farah, *Arab nationalism and Arab unity*, 1st ed, dated, p. 185-186.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 261, *Al-Rai newspaper*, Amman, November 16, 1978, Issue 3147, p. 1.

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Al-Dustour Newspaper*, Amman, Issue 4073, January 12, 1979, p. 1, *Al-Ittihad Newspaper*, Haifa, January 12, 1979, Issue 35/70, p. 1.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 256, *Al-Akhbar Newspaper*, Amman, Issue 623, *Al-Dustour Newspaper*, Amman, Issue 4102, p. 1, p. 17.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 212-214.

⁽²⁰⁾ Previous source, p. 565.

preparations to unite the army command were created by the Military Committee ⁽²¹⁾. The Economic Committee has made all the necessary procedures to stop oil pipelines passing through the Turkish lands and to pump oil back through Syrian lands ⁽²²⁾. It is a step that could bring significant economic benefits to the unified state.

On April 1, 1979, the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate and the Syrian Journalists Union signed a press cooperation agreement as part of continuing to advance toward unification. A similar agreement was also signed between the Radio and Television Corporations in the two countries, and it was agreed to exchange and unify information and documents related to the press and media ⁽²³⁾.

As part of a series of meetings between the two countries, the Supreme Political Commission met in Damascus on January 24, 1979⁽²⁴⁾, to follow up on the work of the sub-committees and their successes in completing the two countries' unification ⁽²⁵⁾. On January 30, 1979, the Supreme Political Commission announced that a meeting would be held soon in Baghdad to approve the final version of the constitution of the unified state ⁽²⁶⁾.

On May 18, 1979, the Syrian government proposed two projects to integrate the activities of the party and the state, while the Iraqi government proposed two further projects to unite the two countries ⁽²⁷⁾.

However, disagreements in opinions emerged early between them, which contributed to the failure of that project and fading hopes of establishing unity. Although the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is the ruling party in both countries, it appears that the two leaders' preoccupation with finding a suitable arrangement to unite the parties in the two countries in a manner consistent with the constitution of the unity state was one of the most significant obstacles to the unitary project ⁽²⁸⁾.

It was supposed to start unifying the two states in stages in mid-April 1979. In the first phase, the two sides decided to establish the Unity State's Presidency Council, which would be led by Hafez al-Assad and include Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as his deputy and Saddam Hussein as a member, and to form a Council of Ministers for the Unity State that includes ministers from the two countries. Additionally, the Councils of Ministers in the two countries would continue to work to manage internal affairs until the official announcement of the establishment of the unified state. At this stage, it was also decided to fully unify the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Information, as well as combine the other ministries and merge the two parties into one party in the second stage ⁽²⁹⁾.

The delay in the declaration of unity reveals the existence of serious disagreements between the leaderships of the two countries. It appears that certain politicians have contributed to the obstruction of unity's continuation. It eventually emerged that Iraqi Vice President 'Saddam Hussein' was not interested in the construction of a unity state at the time since he would become the third man in the unity state, which contradicted Saddam Hussein's political ambition to seize power in Iraq ⁽³⁰⁾.

Despite these challenges, efforts to unify the two countries continued between them ⁽³¹⁾. Thus, the presidents of Iraq and Syria met in Baghdad to discuss the issue of uniting the state and the party, as the unity of the party is a requirement for the unity of the state. However, because the Ba'ath Party rules the state and society in both countries, a project for party unity and another for state institution unity were developed ⁽³²⁾. As a result, the Baghdad meeting discussed the following major issues:

⁽²¹⁾ Previous source, p. 221.

⁽²²⁾ Previous source, p. 256.

⁽²³⁾ Al-Akhbar newspaper, Amman, January 5, 1979, Issue 620, p. 6, Al-Dustour Newspaper. Amman, January 5, 1979, Issue 4099, p. 16, Al-Anbaa Newspaper, Al-Quds, January 4, 1979, Issue 3112, p. 1.

⁽²⁴⁾ Al-Rai, Amman, Issue 3212, 22/1/1979, p. 1.

⁽²⁵⁾ Al-Dustour Newspaper, Amman, Issue 4122, 28/1/1979, p. 15.

⁽²⁶⁾ Al-Dustour Newspaper, Amman, January 31, 1979, Issue 4125, p. 1, Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 565.

⁽²⁷⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3328, 3/28/1979, p. 1.

⁽²⁸⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 565

⁽²⁹⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3327, 3/27/1979, p.1.

⁽³⁰⁾ (Saleh Ahmed Al-Ali, interview on Al-Jazeera TV, Witness to the Age Program, 3/28/2003 AD, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Newspaper, London, Issue 8945, May 26, 2003.

⁽³¹⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 565.

⁽³²⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3358, 6/17/1979, p. 1.

1. The unity of the parties between the two countries and the joint political unity of Syria and Iraq.
2. The form of the state, the president of the Council of Ministers, and state agencies, and rejected the concept of a confederation or any other formula that leads to political and military unity.
3. The subject of defense and national security and one military command ⁽³³⁾. At the end of the meetings, the Supreme Political Commission in Baghdad announced on June 19, 1979, the formation of political leadership as a first step on the road to unity, and the following decisions were taken:
 1. Formation of the political leadership from the Iraqi and Syrian presidents and senior officials in the two countries until the completion of the constitutional unity in the two countries.
 2. Establishing a partisan committee to work on the constitution-compliant unification of the two parties into a single party. The chairmanship of the committee was entrusted to the foreign ministers of Syria and Lebanon.
 3. Establishment of a constitutional committee to draft the final version of the constitution under the supervision of Tariq Aziz and Abdel Halim Khaddam.
 4. Formation of a single military command for the two nations' armed forces.
 5. The supreme political body is in charge of setting and approving the foreign policy of the two countries, in addition to approving issues of war and peace, and economic and cultural issues ⁽³⁴⁾.

Objectives of the Project

The overall objective of the project was to bring about comprehensive Arab unification in order to abolish regional, national, and sectarian allegiances and bring about prosperity for the Arab generations with the active participation of the various popular groups in organizing and constructing society and leading the Arab struggle movement ⁽³⁵⁾. Additionally, the project aimed at achieving economic integration between the two countries and providing Syria with the petroleum derivatives it requires ⁽³⁶⁾.

The project also attempted to fill the gap Egypt created in the Arab ranks after signing the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978 by creating an Arab army capable of deterring the Zionist enemy. Thus, unity leads to the formation of an Arab front capable of confronting the Zionist enemy and supporting the Palestinian jihad to liberate the Palestinian Arab lands from the Israeli occupation ⁽³⁷⁾.

Moreover, the two countries maintained the door open to any Arab countries interested to join the unitary project, and at the same time, the two leaders announced non-interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries. While if any Arab country is subjected to external aggression, Iraq and Syria will defend the Arabs based on their national duty towards the Arab nation ⁽³⁸⁾. However, this attempt failed, and the dream of unity ended in July 1979, because of the leadership differences in the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in Syria and Iraq ⁽³⁹⁾.

The Zionist, International and Arab Positions on the Unitary Project

The project was confronted with a multifaceted Zionist conspiracy ⁽⁴⁰⁾. For instance, Israel attempted to persuade the United States of America and other colonial countries to oppose the project ⁽⁴¹⁾. Yehu Shoa Tadmur, a Zionist journalist, confirmed in an article that the project's success will pose a threat to Israel, and the threat will grow if additional Arab countries join in ⁽⁴²⁾. The Israeli writer (Samuel Saif) published an article in the Maariv newspaper in which he highlighted the threat posed to Israeli security by the Syrian-

⁽³³⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3359, 6/18/1979, p. 1.

⁽³⁴⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 565.

⁽³⁵⁾ Elias Farah, previous source, p. 185.

⁽³⁶⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 323, February 10, 1979, p. 1

⁽³⁷⁾ Al-Akhbar Newspaper, Amman, Issue 646, p. 1, Al-Liwaa Newspaper, Amman, Issue 316, 31/1/1979, Al-Dustour Newspaper, Amman, Issue 4122, 1/28/1979, p.

⁽³⁸⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 261.

⁽³⁹⁾ Ali Mohafza, Projects, Arab Unionist Attempts, Al-Rai Newspaper, 7/10/2008, p.1.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 256.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 2226, 26/2/1979, p. 1, Al-Akhbar Newspaper, Amman, Issue 646, 31/1/1979

⁽⁴²⁾ Al-Akhbar Newspaper, Issue 572, p. 6.

Iraqi reconciliation, emphasizing that the threat would increase on the eastern front if Jordan joined the project ⁽⁴³⁾.

However, the United States of America sent twelve warplanes to Israel to ensure its security and to let it know that America would not forsake it in its backing of Israel's military action against the Arab countries as a reaction to the project ⁽⁴⁴⁾. Therefore, America questioned the two nations' unifying moves and raised many issues in order to generate uncertainty and influence the street in Syria and Iraq ⁽⁴⁵⁾. On the other hand, the Soviet Union considered the project as a positive step toward creating an Arab force that was ready to deal with political changes in the area, particularly following the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. So the Soviets confirmed that the success of the project would enhance Arab security and form an Arab force capable of confronting the Zionist enemy ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

The Palestinian position was wary of the project, and some Palestinian politicians expressed their disapproval of that step, even though the establishment of a unified state is seen as a supportive force for the Palestinian Arab resistance movement against the Zionist enemy ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Furthermore, Jordanian Prime Minister Mudar Badran stated his country's stance on the initiative, calling it a positive step toward achieving total Arab unity and establishing a real Arab army to assist maintains Arab security ⁽⁴⁸⁾. In contrast, Lebanon has not stated its position on the project, whereas Tariq Aziz has stated that the establishment of a state of unity between the two countries would help stability in the region, which would be reflected in the internal situation in Lebanon, and Lebanon would rise politically and economically ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Libya expressed its complete support for the project through the words of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and said that Libya is ready to invest all of its resources into making the plan a success, based on the unitary ideology that the Libyan leader was supporting ⁽⁵⁰⁾. Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Yemen supported the Iraqi-Syrian reconciliation, believing that it was important to shift the regional power balance and that the unity of the two countries would assist strengthen Palestinian morale in the face of the Zionist enemy⁽⁵¹⁾.

In contrast, the Iranian attitude was not clear, and Iranian politicians kept silent. They did not make any statement, and this indicates that Iran was looking with concern at the rapprochement between Syria and Iraq. Iranian-Iraqi relations are historical relations that are not devoid of periods of conflict and peace ⁽⁵²⁾.

Conclusion

This research concluded the significance of the unified attempt made by Iraqi and Syrian leaders to fill the political and military gap left by Egypt's exit from Arab unity following the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978. Thus, Arab unity is an Arab demand to achieve the aspiration of the Arab peoples to achieve a comprehensive Arab renaissance in all fields, military, political, economic, cultural, educational, and social, as well as opposition to the Zionist expansionist project in the Arab world. Furthermore, Arab unity serves as a defense against external threats, particularly Zionist and colonial ambitions. As a result of American and Zionist resistance, the initiative failed and remained a dead letter.

⁽⁴³⁾ Al-Akhbar Newspaper, Issue 572, p. 4.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 295.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3245, 25/2/1979 p.16.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3172, January 10, 1978, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, the previous source, p. 273.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Al Rai Newspaper, Amman, 17, Issue 3358, June 1979, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 258, Al-Rai Newspaper, November 16, 1978, text 16

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Al-Rai Newspaper, Amman, Issue 3365, June 24, 1979, p. 1.

⁽⁵¹⁾ Center for Arab Unity Studies, previous source, p. 273.

⁽⁵²⁾ Previous source, p. 280.