FOSTERING A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Khaled ALMEZAINI
Abdullah K. AL-SAUD
Meliha Benli ALTUNIŞIK
László ANDOR
Silvia COLOMBO
Andrea DESSÌ
Ehud EIRAN
Flavia FUSCO
JIN Liangxiang
Joseph A. KÉCHICHIAN
Saeed KHATIBZADEH
Daniel KURTZER
Ekaterina STEPANOVA
Nathalie TOCCI

FOSTERING A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

EDITED BY

SILVIA COLOMBO AND ANDREA DESSÌ

The present study does not represent the collective views of FEPS and IAI but only of the authors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR AND NATHALIE TOCCI

Recognised as one of the least integrated regions in the world, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is in dire need of new and agreed mechanisms for de-escalation.

Ten years since the outbreak of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the region has experienced further fragmentation, conflict and rivalry, with multiple overlapping instability drivers emanating from within and beyond the Middle East itself. Weak institutions, fraying social contracts and mounting socio-economic pressure have mixed with resurgent foreign interventionism and a significant deepening of geopolitical faultlines and militarisation, creating a volatile mix of state and societal grievances that may well erupt into new conflicts or popular mobilisations in the not too distant future.

The dire state of the regional system is perhaps best reflected by the significant weakening of traditional forums for regional or sub-regional cooperation in the MENA. The League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council or the Arab Maghreb Union are all suffering from internal divisions and shortcomings, proving unable to tackle the growing challenges that face all states and societies in the MENA. Meanwhile, the deepening crisis of multilateralism at the global level has fragmented international efforts to foster dialogue and deconfliction in the Middle East, adding to the complexity of launching new diplomatic efforts aimed at overcoming zero-sum logics of competition and moving the region towards a more cooperative and progressive plane.

From the standpoint of the European Union and its member states, the current regional (dis)order in the Middle East represents both a threat and wakeup call pointing to the need

for more proactive engagement before the next crisis erupts. While acknowledging the EU's limited capacity to carry forth such ambitious goals of de-escalation and security networking in the Middle East, the EU's unique history and institutional setup do provide Europe with important tools and legitimacy to engage in such efforts, particularly in light of the EU's emphasis on multilateralism, inclusivity and international law as fundamental principles that should inform such efforts.

Against the backdrop of mounting concern regarding future trajectories of the region, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the Istituto Affari Internazionali, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, launched a year-long research and outreach project examining new and old efforts to foster security cooperation in the region. Entitled "Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East: Challenges and Prospects", the project set out to map the fundamental viewpoints, interests and threat perceptions of various state actors active in the Middle East as a preliminary exercise to inform more concrete discussions on possible models, principles and mechanisms to foster deconfliction and security cooperation in the region.

The results of the year-long project are contained in the present volume. This is composed of nine country-case studies drafted by leading scholars from these respective countries (the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and the European Union) and a tenth chapter containing the results of a high-level expert survey targeting disparate experts and practitioners from these regions. The diversity of opinions and viewpoints contained in this volume provide important insights as to the challenges that lie ahead but also the benefits that may flow from a more concerted effort to foster security networking and cooperation in the Middle East.

Guided by a conviction that progressive policies offer the best chance for developing positive agendas for cooperation, the research advocates for new models of inclusivity and multi-

lateral dialogue on the Middle East and calls for a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers of instability which are defining the region today.

It is our hope that this volume may contribute to and inform ongoing debates on these important themes, and ultimately help to create a critical mass of experts and practitioners from Europe and beyond who are committed to promoting a more sustainable, cooperative and progressive future for the Middle East, its inhabitants and neighbouring regions alike.

Brussels – Rome, November 2020

1
THE MIDDLE EAST'S EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE: PROSPECTS FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION AND US ENGAGEMENT

DANIEL KURTZER

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is one of the most conflict-ridden regions globally. Civil wars and internal upheavals have riven Libya, Syria and Yemen, causing massive casualties, severe internal dislocations of populations, refugee flows and humanitarian crises. Serious conflicts continue to fester in the Western Sahara, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Palestine–Israel, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Region-wide challenges go unaddressed, whether related to the environment, water, health, corruption, economic stress and inequality, or authoritarianism, all of which impact regional security.

Attempts at creating collective security arrangements in the MENA region have historically been stymied by enduring mistrust between states; fears of encroachment on their sovereignty; differences in perceptions of the nature and scope of threats; and the absence of shared interests and values. Historical efforts to forge a regional security system – ranging from the 1955 Baghdad Pact, an uneasy anti-Soviet alliance between Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom, to the post-Gulf war initiative involving the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) plus Egypt and Syria (the GCC+2) – have failed, even as threats to regional security have increased.

Recently, Russia, Iran and the United States have proposed alternative mechanisms for Gulf security cooperation, but none of the proposals has generated much interest among Arab Gulf countries. As a result, the United States continues to bear a prominent security role in the Gulf.

Given the mistrust and animosity between Iran and most of the Arab Gulf states, longer-term progress towards effective Gulf security will require easing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, drawing on their shared interests of opposing violent extremism and terrorism and avoiding direct military confrontation. However, a prerequisite for any move toward collective Gulf security will depend primarily on stronger cooperative relationships and trust among GCC states themselves.

To promote greater cooperation on regional security, the United States should focus on: (1) strengthening intra-GCC professional security relationships and cooperation; (2) establishing trust required for any future joint command and control relationships, including through confidence-building measures; (3) resolving the ongoing rift among Qatar on the one hand and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on the other; and (4) coordinating acquisitions, training and doctrine so as to improve the interoperability of GCC defence systems. To foster regional security cooperation, the United States will also have to dispel the perception that it is withdrawing from the region, and to rebuild its reliability as a strategic ally.

1. US interests and policy

From the end of World War II until recently, the United States adhered to a remarkably unchanging definition of its interests in the Middle East. America sought to safeguard the availability of relatively cheap energy supplies for itself and its allies; to ensure the security of Israel through the provision of military and diplomatic assistance; to keep hostile powers, especially the Soviet Union, out of the region; to counter the threat from states that support terrorism or seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction; and to maintain positive relations with moderate Arab states, primarily to strengthen their capacity to act in support of their own and US interests.

Despite fundamental changes in the international and regional environment, these interests have remained the same, albeit with some consequential differences.[1] Energy security is now defined as much by the price of oil as by its supply. Although the United States has become increasingly self-sufficient with respect to energy, it has remained intensely interested in providing security for the export of fossil fuels from the Gulf and elsewhere. Israel's security challenges are different from those of two or three decades ago, yet the United States remains committed to providing assistance and diplomatic support.

Similarly, although the Soviet Union no longer exists, the United States maintains a watchful eye on the involvement of Russia and China in the region. To date, Russian activities have not elicited a US response, at least for the time being. China also has not figured as a primary US competitor, largely because China has focused intensively on procuring its own oil and gas requirements, rather than extending influence through involvement in regional conflicts or diplomacy.

The two constants in US policy have been the threat of terrorism and the efforts to curb the development of weapons of mass destruction, especially by states it considers "rogue". Continued engagement by the United States to counter terrorism and procurement or development of such weapons give lie to the notion bandied about loosely by political commentators that the United States is disengaging or withdrawing from the region. To be sure, both the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations have sought ways to diminish US troop presence in active conflict zones, such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, there is no evidence to date to suggest the United States is diminishing its counterterrorism and counter-proliferation efforts, or even its Gulf presence designed to ensure the security of fossil fuel exports.

---

1. See, for example, Adam Garfinkle, "Redefining U.S. Interests in the Middle East", in *Middle East Papers*, No. 4 (9 October 2008), http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/files/2008/10/interests_garfinkle.pdf.

In pursuit of these interests, the United States has never shown much interest in broad region-wide security mechanisms. After a flirtation with such mechanisms in the 1950s, Washington clearly decided that the threat or extension of unilateral US power was a better way to deal with regional security challenges. Indeed, even a cursory examination of US military engagements in the Middle East indicates the extent to which the United States has acted alone – with one notable exception – when its interests were affected.[2] That exceptional case, when the United States constructed an international military, diplomatic and financial coalition to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait in 1990–1991, is instructive in several important ways.

First, the 1991 Gulf war exemplified the benefits of security cooperation in protecting US interests. The United States clearly had the military might to defeat Iraq on its own, but the administration of President George H.W. Bush understood the added value and legitimacy of international and regional involvement. Iraq found itself with few allies to whom to turn; and the involvement of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia in the coalition meant that Iraq could not claim that the war was the "imperialists" against the Arabs.

Second, the United States refined the notion of burden sharing by insisting that those countries that did not contribute troops would be expected to finance the war. This form of security cooperation, while a longstanding element of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), had not figured previously in dealing with regional conflicts.

Third, although the United States attempted to build a region-wide security structure after the war – the so-called GCC+2, involving Egypt and Syria – this failed to materialise in any meaningful way, and it put to rest any idea of a broader regional security architecture. From that point on, the focus of the United States was on Gulf security, including establishing

---

2.   Robert E. Hunter, "US Interests and the Use of Force in the Middle East", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (October-December 1986), p. 14-23.

bases in Qatar and Bahrain, administering "facilities" in Saudi Arabia, arms sales to regional states, and the effort to create interoperability among the Gulf countries. Those outside the Gulf, most prominently Egypt, were kept in the loop in broad strategic terms and the United States maintained the use of facilities there as well. However, there was no expectation of direct Egyptian involvement in Gulf security arrangements.

Notwithstanding its focus on the Gulf, the United States has bolstered its bilateral security ties with other countries in the region, primarily through assistance, training and exercises. For example, since 1978, US assistance to Egypt has amounted to 51 billion US dollars in military aid and 32 billion in economic aid (1946–2019). Between 1946 and 2017, Jordan received 12.7 billion US dollars in economic assistance and 7.7 billion in military aid.[3] The United States has also conducted large-scale military exercises in the region to try to upgrade the military capacities of allies and to build interoperability, such as the "Bright Star" exercise every two years. However, this aid and these exercises have not been intended to create a regional security architecture beyond the Gulf.

2. Security mechanisms in the Gulf

Attempts to create mechanisms of security cooperation in the Gulf have historically been stymied by significant roadblocks. These include enduring mistrust between states, fears of encroachment on their sovereignty, differences in definitions of security and threat perceptions, and the absence of enduring shared interests. Some forms of cooperation, such as the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, have worsened regional security.[4]

---

3. Jeremy Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations", in *CRS Reports*, No. 33003 (21 November 2019), p. 31, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003. pdf; Jeremy Sharp, "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations", in *CRS Reports*, No. 33546 (4 December 2019), p. 15, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33546.pdf.

4. Brian Katulis, "Too Important to Give Up: Challenges and Opportunities for Middle East Regional Security Integration", in Michael Wahid Hanna and

The US security role in the Gulf in recent decades has kept security costs low for GCC countries and has diminished the urgency of security cooperation, defined as "mutual collaboration of a group of states to mitigate threats caused by a common set of identified concerns".[5]

There has been increased interest recently among Gulf countries and the international community in fostering cooperation, albeit with contrasting objectives and definitions of security. Three major proposals for security cooperation in the Gulf have emerged in recent years. The US Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) proposal – sometimes called the Arab NATO initiative – first advanced in 2017, has struggled to secure the cooperation of Oman, Qatar and Kuwait to establish a unified military force, and has yet to overcome divisions and differences in security perceptions within the GCC. These countries also differ with respect to perceptions of risk associated with close military ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia after the disastrous campaign in Yemen.[6] The assassination by US forces in January 2020 of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, the main architect of Iran's policy of support for armed militias in the region, may increase the difficulty of facilitating GCC states' cooperation in an alliance viewed principally as a means of isolating Iran and excluding Russian and Chinese influence. Perceptions of flagging US interest in defending Gulf monarchies from Iranian (or Iranian-supported) threats appear to have prompted Saudi and Emirati officials to adopt more conciliatory attitudes to-

Thanassis Cambanis (eds), *Order from Ashes. New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2018, p. 118-142, https://tcf.org/content/report/too-important-to-give-up.

5. Nasser bin Nasser and Jasmine Auda, "Cooperation, Contestation, and Historical Context: A Survey of the Middle East's Security Architecture", in Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis (eds), *Order from Ashes. New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2018, p. 46-47.

6. See Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", in *Carnegie Articles*, February 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/78317; Clayton Thomas, "Cooperative Security in the Middle East: History and Prospects", in *CRS In Focus*, No. 11173 (11 April 2019), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IF11173.pdf.

wards Iran, while both states also pursue new forms of cooperation with Russia.

Russia and Iran have also proposed alternative mechanisms for Gulf security cooperation. Neither country possesses adequate influence to generate consensus among Gulf countries, notwithstanding some efforts by Gulf states to diversify their strategic relationships. Russia's 2019 proposal for an international conference to create a regional security organisation has not garnered significant support beyond Iran, Syria and China. GCC states have been dubious of Russian neutrality as a facilitator and conscious of their longstanding security relationships with the United States. US policy makers have largely ignored the proposal and its demands that military actions by signatories should require UN Security Council approval or the invitation of the regional state in question.[7] Russian strategy is focused on reducing the US presence in the Gulf, undermining US relations with regional allies, creating opportunities to portray US actions as those of an aggressor, and maintaining relationships with both GCC countries and Iran while enhancing Russia's role as regional power broker.

Iran's 2019 proposal – the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) – lacks support from GCC countries as an alternative to US security guarantees. Any prospect for coordinated and productive GCC dialogue with Iran will likely remain remote absent Saudi Arabia's willingness to engage Iran directly.[8] Iran's proposal is motivated by its interest in excluding US forces from the Per-

---

7. Tom O'Connor, "China 'Welcomes' Russia's Call for Persian Gulf Coalition as U.S. and Iran Back Rival Plans", in *Newsweek*, 8 October 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/1463957; Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", in *Valdai Club Expert Opinions*, 6 August 2019, http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/security-in-the-gulf-area-russia-s-new-initiative; Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", in *Al-Monitor*, 11 October 2019, http://almon.co/39nk; Maxim A. Suchkov, "Intel: Why Russia Is Calling for Rethinking Gulf Security", in *Al-Monitor*, 24 July 2019, http://almon.co/38ix.
8. Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?", in *IranSource*, 3 October 2019, https://atlanticcouncil.org/?p=186210.

sian Gulf, minimising US influence with Iran's neighbours, and building better (and more formalised) relations with those neighbours to decrease its own vulnerabilities.

As the history of these and previous proposals for regional security cooperation indicates, prospects for success are low as long as regional states continue to advance their own interests from a zero-sum perspective and, in the case of GCC countries, continue to rely on the United States for their basic security; as long as trust among regional states is lacking; and as long as intra-regional rivalries persist.

3. Security cooperation in the MENA region: Historical context (1945–1980)

Security cooperation initiatives specific to Gulf states and those including the broader MENA region have been proposed since the Arab League's founding in 1945; but few of these initiatives have generated long-term impacts on the region's security landscape.[9] Divisions between monarchies and other states, weaker states' fears of the potential hegemony of regional heavyweights, broad differences in threat perceptions, competing visions of security, and divergent aims and strategies of engagement with powers outside the region have all represented major obstacles in achieving effective security cooperation.

The Treaty of Joint Defence and Economic Cooperation created by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen in the wake of their military defeat by Israel in 1948 sought to establish a system of collective defence to deal with "armed aggression" against any of the signatories; this

---

9. The MENA region is defined as including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. US Department of State website: *Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs*, https://www.state.gov/bureaus-of-fices/under-secretary-for-political-affairs/bureau-of-near-eastern-affairs.

treaty led to the creation of the Arab League's Joint Defence Council.[10] The Treaty remains in force, although internal politics and divisions between monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and initially Yemen) and nationalist republics (Egypt, Syria and Iraq) throughout the Cold War largely prevented effective cooperation.

The 1955 Baghdad Pact or Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), established by pre-revolutionary Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the UK to counter the Soviet Union in the MENA region, was ineffective and suffered from limited regional participation, particularly after Iraq's withdrawal in 1958 following the overthrow of its monarchy in a nationalist coup. British- and Turkish-led attempts to establish the Middle East Defence Organisation similarly failed to gain buy-in from Arab states, which remained hesitant to bind their own security arrangements to Western Cold War priorities.[11]

The short-lived United Arab Republic (1958–1961) sought to unite Syria and Egypt under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, but also proved unsuccessful, as Syrian military and intelligence personnel became increasingly dissatisfied with Egypt's leading role and staged a coup in Damascus in 1961.[12] The Arab League established the United Arab Command in 1964 as a means of mitigating the perceived threat of Israeli military action, but the combination of Jordanian, Iraqi and Egyptian forces deployed against Israel under Egyptian leadership proved ineffective during the 1967 war.

---

10. Nasser bin Nasser and Jasmine Auda, "Cooperation, Contestation, and Historical Context", cit.; Brian Katulis, "Too Important to Give Up", cit., p. 123.

11. George McGhee, *The US-Turkish-NATO Middle East Connection. How the Truman Doctrine Contained the Soviets in the Middle East*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1990, p. 143-160; Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East", in Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis (eds), *Order from Ashes. New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2018, p. 11-30, https://tcf.org/content/report/can-it-happen-here.

12. Brian Katulis, "Too Important to Give Up", cit.

In 1976, an Arab Deterrent Force of 30,000 troops was established under the auspices of the Arab League to preserve a ceasefire during Lebanon's civil war. While the Force shaped the security landscape in Syria and Lebanon between 1976 and 2005, it did not succeed in reducing violence in Lebanon or ending hostilities during the civil war.[13] Although this force included troops from the Emirates, Libya, Saudi Arabia and South Yemen, the vast majority were Syrian, and the establishment of the Force led to a Syrian military presence in Lebanon until 2005.[14] The Force successfully protected Syrian security interests in Lebanon, but hardly represented effective security cooperation.

4. GCC security cooperation (1981–present)

In the 1980s, a new focus on security cooperation emerged among Arab monarchies in the Gulf in response to the Iranian Revolution, the ouster of the US-backed shah in 1979 and the beginning of the Iran–Iraq war in 1980.[15] The six Gulf Arab countries formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 with member countries viewing Iran as a common threat. The Council subsequently established the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) in 1984 to provide joint defence, following proposals by Oman and Kuwait.[16] This emphasis on regional security integration arose in the context of concerns that a military alliance with the United States would lead Iran and Iraq to perceive the GCC as too closely aligned with Western powers.[17] By 1986, the PSF included 7,000 permanent troops commanded by a Saudi gen-

---

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.; Carla E. Humud, "Lebanon", in *CRS Reports*, No. 44759 (5 October 2018), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44759.pdf; Robert Rabil, "From Beirut to Algiers: The Arab League's Role in the Lebanon Crisis", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 976 (21 March 2005), https://washin.st/3elcec8.
15. Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here?", cit.
16. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force: A Case Study of a Small State's Search for Security", in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2014), p. 355-367; Nasser bin Nasser and Jasmine Auda, "Cooperation, Contestation, and Historical Context", cit.
17. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 360.

eral, but it was unable to prevent the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.[18] The PSF also proved incapable of assuring the security of oil and gas exports from the Gulf; Kuwait turned to the United States which "reflagged" oil tankers so as to provide a legal justification for the deployment of additional US naval forces to protect energy exports.

Oman proposed the creation of a standing GCC army of 100,000 troops as a deterrent to incursions, but other small Gulf states resisted increased security integration. They feared domination by Saudi Arabia due to its leading role in commanding and basing the PSF, and they had concerns that the insecurities and weaknesses of smaller states would be revealed in the process of integration.[19]

GCC states did not commit to collective security until the establishment of the Joint Defence Agreement in 2000, which stated that "member states consider any attack against any one of its members to be an attack against all".[20] While the GCC states had also sought enhanced military cooperation with Egypt and Syria through the 1991 Damascus Declaration, building on joint efforts during the Gulf War aimed at countering the threat of Iraqi expansionism, this was largely stimulated by the United States after the international coalition's success in driving Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991.

The Damascus Declaration, abandoned by 1992, represented an attempt to create a framework specifically to protect Arab states' sovereignty through joint military action.[21] The Decla-

---

18. Brian Katulis, "Too Important to Give Up", cit.
19. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 357; Brahim Saidy, "GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity", in *FPRI E-Notes*, 15 October 2014, https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/10/gccs-defense-cooperation-moving-towards-unity.
20. Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2016, p. 6, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1429; Brahim Saidy, "GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity", cit.
21. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit.; "The GCC: Alliance Politics", in *Whitehall Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1993), p. 35-50.

ration explicitly envisioned an "Arab peace force" that would "guarantee the security and safety of the Arab states in the Gulf region, and an example that would guarantee the effectiveness of the comprehensive Arab defence order".[22] Signatories also hoped to limit weapons of mass destruction in the region. The overwhelming majority of troops in the Declaration's initial plan were to be Syrian (19,000), Egyptian (36,000) and Saudi (40,000), while the smaller GCC states would collectively contribute 15,000.[23] GCC states' concerns about hosting large foreign forces for an indefinite period, as well as Iran's view that such a large Arab joint force would be seen as a threat, led to a second, more limited proposal in which the joint force would include 10,000 Saudis, 10,000 troops from other GCC countries, 3,000 Egyptians and 3,000 Syrians.[24] However, this draft too was rejected, and no joint security arrangement emerged.

GCC states also participated in the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group (1991–1995) established following the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, alongside Jordan, Israel, Palestinians, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The United States and Russia co-chaired ACRS, and the group included a large number of international participants.[25] ACRS provided a forum for discussion of pressing regional security issues, as well as arms control ideas. However, while ACRS oversaw a limited number of security exercises, it did not lead to any lasting region-wide arms control or security agreements.[26]

---

22. "The GCC: Alliance Politics", cit., p. 36.
23. Ibid., p. 36.
24. Ibid., p. 38.
25. Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks: Progress, Problems, and Prospects", in *IGCC Policy Papers*, No. 26 (1996), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97z9g13f; US Department of State, *Fact Sheet: Middle East Peace Process Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, 1 July 2001, https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/4271.htm.
26. Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks", cit.; Ariel E. Levite and Emily B. Landau, "Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Middle East", in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1997), p. 143-171.

Active cooperation between GCC militaries, meanwhile, developed and expanded somewhat. The PSF saw its first real military activity in Kuwait in 2003 during preparations for the US invasion of Iraq, with 10,000 troops contributed by all six GCC states stationed at the Kuwait–Iraq border to support Kuwaiti troops.[27] The GCC also created a Supreme Military Committee to facilitate security planning and instated an intelligence sharing agreement in 2004. The GCC did not, however, implement force integration, and PSF troops were based largely in their home countries after 2006, with fragmentation among GCC states hindering growth of the PSF.[28] At the 2008 IISS Manama Dialogue, an annual security summit, GCC states focused on interoperability and joint planning rather than formal collective security arrangements.[29]

The beginning of popular unrest in GCC countries in 2011 prompted greater cooperation and higher PSF troop levels, with the Force (including Saudi Arabia National Guard units) responding to and quashing a popular uprising in Bahrain according to the GCC's mutual defence agreement.[30] This cooperation was prompted by concern over a disenfranchised Bahraini Shiite majority challenging the Sunni monarchy's control.[31]

By 2013, amidst US engagement with Iran and the ongoing challenge of "Arab Spring" movements in the region, Saudi

---

27. David Josar, "Troops from Six Arab Nations Guard Kuwait's Border with Iraq", in *Stars and Stripes*, 27 March 2003, https://www.stripes.com/news/1.3474.
28. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 364-365; Shamlan Y. Al-Essa, "Security Imperatives from the Perspective of the GCC States: Priorities and Approaches", in Christian Koch and Felix Neugart (eds), *A Window of Opportunity. Europe, Gulf Security and the Aftermath of the Iraq War*, Dubai, Gulf Research Center, 2005.
29. Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 365.
30. Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union", in *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2013, http://almon.co/1xdh; Shenaz Kermali, "The GCC Is Expanding Its Army, But for What?", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/06/2011626112649845386.html.
31. Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here?", cit.

Arabia proposed creating a force of 100,000 troops and even taking steps towards unifying the GCC into a single state with a common currency, a move emphatically opposed by Oman.[32] In 2018, the Saudi proposal morphed into a functional GCC Unified Military Command of 100,000 troops, half of which are Saudi, headed by a Saudi commander.[33] The GCC has also seen a joint Saudi–Qatari–Emirati military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and a Saudi–Emirati campaign against Yemen's Houthis, with cooperation and a unified command structure emerging in the context of an immediate shared threat.[34]

GCC states' relationship with the United States as a security guarantor and as the major source of military equipment has resulted in relative interoperability across militaries, with Gulf states obtaining some common platforms including F-16 multi-role fighter aircraft and Patriot air defence systems. Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman rely primarily on two US-made tank types and utility vehicles; and naval surface combatants are also relatively standardised.[35] Nonetheless, some significant obstacles to interoperability remain.[36] Within the GCC, as of 2017, militaries used more than 16 types of armoured personnel carriers sourced from 12 different countries, more than 25 artillery types, 32 aircraft types from six countries, and

32. Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union", cit.
33. Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit.
34. Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit.; Eleonora Ardemagni, "The Gulf Monarchies' Complex Fight against Daesh", in *NATO Review*, 28 September 2016, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/09/28/the-gulf-monarchies-complex-fight-against-daesh/index.html.
35. Haroon Sheikh, Bob Mark and Bassem Fayek, "The Emerging GCC Defence Market: The $30 Billion Opportunity", in *PwC Strategy& Reports*, 2017, https://pwc.to/2WQPDUb.
36. Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit. "Interoperability" between allies is defined as "operational concepts, modular force elements, communications, information sharing, and equipment that accelerate foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces". See Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit., p. 2.

53 types of patrol boats from nine countries. Air and missile defence systems particularly lack integration.[37] Paradoxically, despite encouraging cooperation through efforts at interoperability, US security guarantees have also historically reduced incentives for GCC states to establish stronger collective security mechanisms.

Recent doubts about the reliability of US security guarantees have prompted limited steps towards cooperation between regional opponents. For example, Saudi Arabia's recent turn towards talks with both Houthi and Iranian opponents followed what the Saudis assessed as a limited US response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019. To the extent that Gulf states perceive the United States as less than willing to react strongly to perceived threats, this could lead to more conciliatory Saudi and Qatari attitudes toward each other.[38] UAE officials likewise discussed maritime security issues and other topics directly with Iran during two delegation visits in 2019.[39]

Previously, major divisions within the GCC regarding relations with Iran, the role of political Islam in the region, and fears of Saudi hegemony have historically represented obstacles to effective security cooperation. Today, concerns about US reliability could lead to gradual changes in Saudi and Emirati

---

37. Haroon Sheikh, Bob Mark and Bassem Fayek, "The Emerging GCC Defence Market", cit., p. 8. See also Anthony Cordesman with Bryan Gold and Garrett Berntsen, *The Gulf Military Balance. Volume I: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, https://www.csis.org/node/25228.

38. Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War", in *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html; Stephen Kalin, Alexander Cornwell and Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Qatar Foreign Minister Says Early Talks with Saudi Arabia Have Broken Stalemate", in *Reuters*, 16 December 2019, https://reut.rs/34qEkCt; Declan Walsh and Ben Hubbard, "With U.S. Help No Longer Assured, Saudis Try New Strategy: Talks", in *The New York Times*, 26 December 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/26/world/middleeast/saudi-iran-qatar-talks.html.

39. Giorgio Cafiero, "The UAE and Iran's Maritime Talks", in *Lobe Log*, 2019, https://lobelog.com/?p=49694.

approaches to mitigating Iranian threats and prompt greater security cooperation within the GCC.[40]

The establishment of a much larger standing PSF and force integration will require a much greater level of trust between Saudi Arabia and smaller GCC states, particularly Oman and Kuwait.[41] Neil Partrick has described the GCC as a "cooperative alliance of states whose agreements have not fundamentally compromised their sovereignty, nor were ever intended to".[42] In the longer term, effective talks and security negotiations with Iran will require stronger coordination and trust within the GCC, particularly between Saudi Arabia and states such as Oman, Qatar and Kuwait which have maintained relationships with Iran and have opposed Saudi calls for economic and military integration within the GCC.[43]

5. US, Russian and Iranian security cooperation proposals, 2017–2019

5.1 US Middle East Strategic Alliance (2017–present)

The 2017 proposal to create MESA, first publicised during the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh in 2017, envisioned a Riyadh-based alliance including the United States, GCC states,

40. Emirati relations with Iran vary by emirate, with Dubai and Sharjah historically maintaining more positive relations and economic links as a re-export market, while Abu Dhabi has remained hostile and has worked to enforce US sanctions. However, Dubai and Sharjah have moved closer to Abu Dhabi's stance since 2009, and Iranian financial and trading activities have increasingly shifted to Oman and Qatar. See Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC. Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, September 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/37521.

41. Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit.

42. Neil Partrick, "The GCC: Gulf State Integration or Leadership Cooperation?", in *LSE Kuwait Programme Research Papers*, No. 19 (November 2011), p. 3, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/55660.

43. Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 112-122, https://mepc.org/node/2730.

Jordan and Egypt to counter Iran and other regional security threats.[44] The proposed arrangement, from which Egypt later withdrew, has been referred to as the "Arab NATO", despite the absence of mutual security guarantees similar to NATO's Article 5. The Trump administration has described it as a potential dispute discussion and adjudication forum and as a means to "boost trade and foreign direct investment".[45] While the exact degree and nature of US support and involvement remain unclear, MESA appears motivated by US interest in limiting the growing regional influence of China and Russia (including through arms sales) and particularly their support for Iran. The United States also seeks to reduce its defence commitments in the region. Member countries began talks on the proposed alliance in 2017 and have participated in MESA summits and conferences in 2018 and 2019, but the alliance's formal establishment has reportedly been delayed by the unwillingness of some member states to deepen cooperation beyond security.[46]

A key aspect of MESA is improving the interoperability of member countries' defence capabilities. The initiative would likely limit the ability of members to purchase arms from non-US suppliers. This would also facilitate US assessment of potential violations of end-use agreements.[47] By providing space for member states to resolve disputes and facilitate security cooperation during crises, MESA would theoretically also reduce opportunities for Russia and China to expand their roles and influence in the region. The arrangement also seeks to "plan and coordinate regional economic development and energy sector integration" with US assistance, in response to

44. "Middle East Strategic Alliance Unveiled", in *Saudi Gazette*, 22 May 2017, http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/179009; Clayton Thomas, "Cooperative Security in the Middle East", cit.; Thomas Frank, "Riyadh Says US-Gulf Talks over Anti-Iran Alliance 'Continuing'", in *The Arab Weekly*, 10 December 2018, https://thearabweekly.com/node/41761.

45. Clayton Thomas, "Cooperative Security in the Middle East", cit.

46. Kirsten Fontenrose, "A Crisis of Commitment in the Middle East. But Whose?", in *New Atlanticist*, 15 November 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=199162.

47. Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit.

Russian and Chinese direct investment and involvement in the development of the oil, gas and nuclear sectors.[48]

The response of some potential member states to the proposed alliance has been tepid, while public reactions reflect popular suspicion of the motivations for such an establishment.[49] US threat perceptions do not necessarily align with those of the proposed member states. For example, Egypt withdrew in April 2019 in part due to concerns about raising tensions in its relations with Iran. The prospect of increased defence integration and joint command and control represents a security concern for states that remain mistrustful of their GCC peers.[50] More broadly, MESA has generated perceptions that the United States views Gulf states not as true allies but as mere "tools" to counter Iran.[51] MESA's proposed increased US control of the end use of weapons systems would also clash with Saudi and Emirati aims to build their strategic independence and autonomy to counter threats on their own terms.[52]

The assassination of Iranian general Soleimani in Iraq on 3 January 2020 will likely complicate US efforts to implement MESA with support from Qatar, Kuwait and particularly Oman. These countries seek to maintain a long-term posture of balancing cooperative relationships with both the United States and Iran. Immediately after the attack, Qatari foreign minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani visited Tehran to discuss ap-

48. Ibid., p. 3.
49. Ibid.; Sadeq Al Ta'i, "Arab NATO: For Whom and Against Whom?" (in Arabic), in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6 November 2018, https://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=1814050; Mohamed al-Minshawi, "The Arab NATO Project… What Does It Foresee in 2019?" (in Arabic), in *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2019, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/1/20/عربي-وتان-وتان-بمارت-أمريكي-عرب; "Mixed Reactions to the Proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance", in *Middle East In Focus*, 9 October 2018, https://mepc.org/node/5103.
50. Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Egypt Withdraws from U.S.-Led Anti-Iran Security Initiative – Sources", in *Reuters*, 11 April 2019, https://reut.rs/2GgqQjO.
51. Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit., p. 4.
52. Ibid.

proaches to regional "collective security" with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif, signalling Doha's commitment to hedging amidst escalating US–Iranian confrontation.[53] Saudi officials publicly called for "restraint" and urged de-escalation.[54] Oman's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the crisis with a public statement calling on both the United States and Iran to "apply a spirit of dialogue and consider diplomatic means" to address their conflict.[55] Oman will likely continue to avoid actions suggesting close alignment with either country under the newly crowned Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, unless Oman's economic woes ultimately force it to accept a GCC fiscal bailout at the cost of its neutrality.[56]

Perceptions of broader US retrenchment in the Middle East will also likely continue to contribute to the challenges in realising MESA's aims. Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain especially vulnerable to Iranian attacks, including on oil infrastructure. While the United States maintains a robust footprint and material power in the Gulf, the lack of clarity regarding US policy and difficulties in achieving outcomes amidst the aftermath of the Arab Spring and rising Iranian influence fuel uncertainty among allies regarding the long-term intentions of the United States.[57]

53. "Qatar Foreign Minister Meets Iranian Counterpart in Tehran", in *The Peninsula*, 4 January 2020, https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/04/01/2020/Qatar-Foreign-Minister-meets-Iranian-counterpart-in-Tehran.

54. Ilan Goldenberg, "Will Iran's Response to the Soleimani Strike Lead to War?", in *Foreign Affairs*, 3 January 2020; AFP, "Saudi 'Not Consulted' over US Strike to Kill Iran General", in *France 24*, 5 January 2020, http://f24.my/60iK.T.

55. "The Sultanate Urges US, Iran to Apply Spirit of Dialogue", in *Oman News Agency*, 5 January 2020, https://omannews.gov.om/NewsDescription/ArtMID/392/ArticleID/6059.

56. Aya Batrawi, "Oman Names Culture Minister as Successor to Sultan Qaboos", in *AP News*, 11 January 2020, https://apnews.com/9ca4a9910ede3e11b2f-bf085189e628b; Nikita Lalwani, Josh Rubin and Sam Winter-Levy, "Can Oman's New Leader Uphold Qaboos' Peaceful Legacy?", in *Foreign Affairs*, 14 January 2020.

57. Bruce Jones (ed.), "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region", in *Brookings Reports*, January 2019, https://brook.gs/2FdR330; Marc Lynch, "Does the Decline of U.S. Foreign Power Matter for the Middle East?", in *Monkey Cage*, 19 March 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/19/does-decline-us-power-matter-middle-east. Factors contributing to a decreased focus on the MENA region prior to

The recent rollback in foreign aid to the region has also reduced the means available to US policy makers to exert influence and achieve policy objectives, even as reliance on local partners and allies to counter Iran and ISIS has increased.[58] In contrast, some recent military scale-backs have been reversed since May 2019 in response to heightened tensions with Iran: a carrier strike group has returned to the Gulf, a Patriot missile battery has been installed in Saudi Arabia after the removal of batteries from Kuwait, Jordan and Bahrain in 2018, and an additional 2,000 troops were deployed to the region in July 2019.[59] In January 2020, the Department of Defence announced its desire to place Patriot missiles in Iraq following an Iranian missile attack on US troops.[60]

Despite these recent moves to shore up the US presence in the region, concern over a long-term decline in US interest in the Gulf will likely continue to prompt allies such as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates to hedge bets by strengthening relations with Russia and China while avoiding confrontation with Iran. In October and December 2019, statements from Iranian Foreign

May 2019 include a diminished appetite for direct involvement in the region among the US public, less immediate reliance on oil from the Persian Gulf due to the expansion of the domestic energy industry, increased interest in Asia, and the predominance of sub-state conflicts that prove difficult to address through existing capacities. See Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January/February 2019), p. 88-100.

58. Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Enduring American Presence in the Middle East: The U.S. Military Footprint Has Hardly Changed under Trump", in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 August 2019; Bruce Jones (ed.), "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East", cit.

59. Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Enduring American Presence in the Middle East", cit.; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. to Send About 500 More Troops to Saudi Arabia", in *The New York Times*, 18 July 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/us/politics/troops-saudi-arabia-iran.html; see also Dan Lamothe, "U.S. to Send 1,800 Additional Troops to Saudi Arabia to Boost Defenses against Iran", in *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2019, https://wapo.st/2MBvxqa.

60. Nicole Gaouette, Ryan Browne and Jennifer Hansler, "US Wants to Put Patriot Missiles in Iraq to Counter Iran as It Announces Humanitarian Aid Channel", in *CNN*, 30 January 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/30/politics/iran-us-patriots-humanitarian-sanctions.

Minister Zarif, President Hassan Rouhani and Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir suggested both sides' openness to de-escalation, and Iranian interest in resuming diplomatic relations.[61] The need of Gulf allies to balance hedging actions with continued reliance on US security guarantees will increase the difficulty of formalising MESA, due to perceptions of the mechanism as primarily a means to counter and isolate Iran, and to serve US interests.

5.2 Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf area

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov announced Russia's security concept for the Gulf area in July 2019.[62] This concept echoed similar but unsuccessful proposals in the 1990s and 2000s aimed at reducing the "threat of war in the region". The 2019 proposal seeks to establish an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf and envisions the use of track-two diplomacy and both bilateral and multilateral tracks, involving influential states outside the region as well as the United Nations and regional organisations, with Russia providing a platform for dialogue between regional states.[63] The proposal also calls for cooperation among the GCC, Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, India and other stakeholders to address regional conflicts and the departure of troops from states outside the region.[64]

---

61. Mohammad S. Alzoubi, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Imagining a Path Towards Rapprochement", in *Fikra Forum*, 13 December 2019, https://www.washington-institute.org/fikraforum/view/iran-and-saudi-arabia-imagining-a-path-towards-rapprochement.
62. Marianna Belankaya, "Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?", in *Carnegie.ru Commentaries*, 21 October 2019, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80130.
63. Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", cit.
64. James M. Dorsey, "Will There Be a New Russian-Chinese Security Architecture in the Gulf?", in *BESA Center Perspectives Papers*, No. 1287 (13 September 2019), https://besacenter.org/?p=27044; "Putin's Gulf Security Plan Depends on Trump", in *Al-Monitor*, 16 August 2019, http://almon.co/38v7.

China's Foreign Ministry and the Syrian government have endorsed Russia's initiative.[65] The Trump administration has provided no official response to the proposal, likely because the Russians want to be involved in security mechanisms in the Gulf and because the proposal would require that "peace-making operations can only be conducted on the basis of relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council or upon request of the legitimate authorities of the attacked state", effectively giving Russia, China, the UK and France veto power over US actions.[66] US policy makers clearly have little desire to see Russia bring about security cooperation in the Gulf and reduce the US effort to isolate and contain Iran. Russia is not seen as possessing the necessary clout to resolve differences between Iran and the GCC, or create a single cooperative security organisation.[67]

It remains unclear how the Russian proposal would overcome divisions within the GCC, gain necessary US participation, or bring about GCC endorsement without even minimal US buy-in. Overall, Russia's proposal suggests less of a regional security mechanism and more of an attempt to enhance its regional stature as a power broker and challenge US leadership in the region.[68]

There are conditions under which the Russian proposal could gain support. If the US disengagement in the Gulf continues, or if the United States is perceived as reacting tepidly to Iranian actions targeting US forces and allied countries, GCC states may come to believe that their security is no longer guaranteed by the US presence and accelerate their outreach to Rus-

65. Sabahat Khan, "China Backs Russian Proposal for Gulf Security", in *The Arab Weekly*, 3 August 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/china-backs-russian-proposal-gulf-security; Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", cit.
66. Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", cit.
67. Ibid.
68. Maxim A. Suchkov, "Intel: Why Russia Is Calling for Rethinking Gulf Security", cit.

sia and Iran.[69] On the other hand, if GCC members interpret the January 2020 killing of Soleimani as indicating renewed US commitment to countering Iranian actions in the Gulf, they may delay efforts to strengthen ties with Russia.

5.3 Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour

Iran's cooperative security proposal, the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), represents the latest in a series of plans floated since 2007 and particularly after President Rouhani's election in 2013.[70] Rouhani proposed at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 the creation of a regional platform for dialogue among the eight countries of the "Hormuz Strait Community", including Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as potentially Yemen in the future.[71] Topics for discussion would include "energy security, arms control and confidence-building measures, military contacts, the possible establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, and the conclusion of a Hormuz Strait community non-aggression pact", as well as creation of joint task forces to facilitate cooperation on issues such as conflict resolution and prevention, cybersecurity and human trafficking.[72] Rouhani also referenced UN Security Council resolution 598 (1987), adopted to bring about the ceasefire that ended the Iran–Iraq war, as the basis for UN support to implement HOPE. Addressing the GCC, Rouhani encouraged states to recognise Iran as a "neighbour" with whom they would

---

69. Adam Taylor, "U.S. Allies in the Mideast Consider Their Options as Russia's Putin Visits the Gulf", in *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2019, https://wapo.st/32fH1Xe; Marianna Belankaya, "Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?", cit.

70. Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?", in *Lobe Log*, 30 July 2019, https://lobelog.com/?p=49584; Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE", cit.; Dina Esfandiary, "No Country for Oversimplifications: Understanding Iran's Views on the Future of Regional Security Dialogue and Architecture", in Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis (eds), *Order from Ashes. New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2018, p. 197-214, https://tcf.org/content/report/no-country-oversimplifications.

71. UN Security Council, *8625th Security Council Meeting: Situation in Middle East*, 25 September 2019, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.8626.

72. Ibid., p. 31.

continue to live after US forces left the region, and called for an end to reliance on US "weapons and intervention" and states' participation in alliances against one another.[73]

Iran's approach rejects bilateral engagement and the involvement of external powers in favour of local security cooperation – even though the Iranian navy conducted joint exercises with Russian and Chinese forces in December 2019.[74]

In the absence of trust-building with and within the GCC, especially direct engagement with Saudi Arabia; respect for Gulf states' autonomous foreign policies; and an agreed means of addressing Iran's use of regional proxy forces, it remains unlikely that HOPE will prove more successful than Iran's previous cooperative security proposals.[75] However, the plan does emphasise Iran's desire to engage GCC counterparts at a time when these states increasingly seek to diversify their relations, hedging against the possible departure of US forces.[76]

Iran has not had much success in garnering support for its HOPE initiative. Saudi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf has advocated applying "utmost pressure" on Iran, despite recent Saudi moves to establish talks with Iran. In addition, Gulf states are unlikely to relinquish US security guarantees as long as these remain viable.[77] There is thus little indication that HOPE can acquire much international support.

6. Conclusion: Is there a way forward?

Recent proposals for new forms of security cooperation sponsored by the United States, Russia and Iran represent attempts

---

73. Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE", cit.
74. Andrew Osborn, John Stonestreet and Hugh Lawson, "Russia, China, Iran Start Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean", in *Reuters*, 27 December 2019, https://reut.rs/2Q2fUv3.
75. Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?", cit.
76. Sanam Vakil, "Iran and the GCC. Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism", cit.
77. Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE", cit.

by all three countries to establish a cooperation mechanism in the Gulf that effectively promotes their conception of security while preventing proposals that undermine their interests. None of the proposals has met with significant success to date. The US-led MESA initiative has stimulated some interest among regional allies, but their perception of a potential US retrenchment in the MENA region increases the difficulty of establishing an effective cooperation mechanism on the basis of MESA. Divergences between US and allies' definitions of security are wide, especially related to the Gulf states' need for at least minimal reconciliation and non-confrontation with Tehran.

To deal with these issues, US efforts need to focus even more on fostering stronger intra-GCC personal, professional and economic relationships and cooperation. The United States needs to build the trust necessary for future joint command and control relationships, as well as supporting coordinated acquisitions to improve interoperability. Also needed is progress towards Saudi–Qatari rapprochement. In this context, confidence-building measures could support a balance between military and political aspects of intra-GCC relationships, fostering conditions for greater flexibility and broader cooperation, as well as decreased Saudi–Qatari tensions.[78]

Russia's proposed Collective Security Concept has elicited no positive responses from Western powers whose participation it requires. The Concept lacks clarity on how to overcome di-

---

78. See Robert E. Hunter, *Building Security in the Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2010, ch. 10, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG944.html. Examples of such measures could include joint training in non-military areas of shared concern, such as provision of emergency services and disaster response; joint cultural activities emphasising shared identity and cultural commonalities, perhaps building on existing shared heritage claims formalised through UNESCO; or mechanisms to share the cost of high insurance premiums during times of increased shipping risks. See Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *OSCE Guide on Non-Military Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)*, Vienna, OSCE, 2012, https://www.osce.org/secretariat/91082. See also UNESCO website: *Majlis, a Cultural and Social Space*, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/01076.

visions among GCC members or facilitate their participation while they continue to seek US security guarantees.

Iran's HOPE initiative faces similar obstacles, in addition to the challenge of securing the cooperation of a largely hostile Saudi Arabia. The proposal clashes with Saudi and Emirati objectives of increasing their relative autonomy in matters of security and foreign policy while maintaining a significant degree of reliance on US security guarantees.

Notwithstanding these problems, significant interest remains in building Gulf security cooperation. The trend line points to a higher level of intra-GCC force integration and increased commitments to collective security, particularly as US retrenchment remains a possibility. This concern will push the Gulf monarchies towards some level of rapprochement with Iran, and could foster limited steps towards ending the Saudi–Qatar rift. In the medium to long term, however, the fears that smaller monarchies harbour regarding Saudi domination within the GCC (and particularly within the PSF) and differences in threat perceptions will likely continue to prevent the emergence of full intra-GCC defence integration.

2
RUSSIA'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ENTERING THE 2020s

EKATERINA STEPANOVA

Russia has become a major player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, largely as a result of its 2015 intervention in Syria, by invitation of the Syrian government. On the one hand, this action demonstrated Russia's ability to act resolutely in defence of a regional partner, prevent forced regime change and preserve Syrian statehood, while fighting terrorism. It also showed Russia's readiness and capacity to act unilaterally as an external power, withstanding strong US and Western pressure. On the other hand, in stark departure from any Soviet- or empire-style "grand strategy", Russia no longer aims at hegemony, nor at full parity, strategic balance or confrontation vis-à-vis key Western stakeholders in the Middle East, even in view of the gradual decline of their role in the region.

Instead, Moscow made a fundamental choice to regionalise its Middle East policy by adjusting to the region's inherent pluralism and multipolarity, and supporting an emerging and still largely ad hoc regional multilateralism. In practice, this has shaped three main directions for Russia's strategy in the Middle East: (a) diversification of Russia's regional contacts, through a multi-vector approach and "playing on all fields"; (b) a distinct, qualitative shift from a primarily US-centric to more region-centric approach; and (c) identification and pursuit of Russia's own interests in regional (political, economic, security) partnerships in the MENA. The latter task requires having a certain weight in the region – something that Russia has only acquired since the mid-2010s, as a result of its engagement in Syria.[1]

---

1. For background on the evolution of Russia's Middle East policies, see Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or

Since then, Russia has served as a security guarantor for the Syrian state and pursued the role of balancer and mediator in several other regional controversies. Practical dividends for Russia include a moderately expanded economic presence and military-technical cooperation with some MENA countries. The upgrade of Moscow's role in the Middle East has also sharpened its international profile in other regions, at the United Nations and vis-à-vis the West, contributing to further diversifying Russian foreign policy. More recently, however, Russia's stepped-up engagement in the MENA has also faced growing risks, complicating Moscow's plans.

Growing volatility and instability in the MENA that prevent resolution of old conflicts and crises and threaten new ones are not, however, the sole reason why an update of Russia's role in the region is needed. The issue is not related to any visible shift in Russia's MENA-related goals and interests, nor to a major upgrade of its capabilities and resources in the region. The critical factor has been the rise of regional powers and regionalisation of Middle Eastern politics and security.

Growing assertiveness of regional actors has added fuel to old regional controversies, e.g., between most Arab Gulf states and Iran, and generated new crises initiated by or involving Middle Eastern powers. One case in point has been Turkey's new regional activism in Syria, Libya and beyond. At times, the new assertiveness by regional powers has been provoked or aggravated by external players, as illustrated by Iran directly targeting the US military in Iraq in January 2020, following Washington's assassination of Iran's top commander Qasem Soleimani (and remarkably, with no apocalyptic consequences for Iran's retaliation).

Enforcing Multilateralism?", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 23-35, https://www.ifri.org/en/node/11686; and Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and Implications for the West", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2018), p. 35-57.

Turbulent developments in the MENA at the turn of the decade also show, and contribute to, growing *interconnectedness* and *interdependence* of this diverse and segmented macro-region. Various crises, conflicts and controversies in different parts of the Middle East, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, have become increasingly interlinked and often overlapped. Should any external actor decide (as Russia did) to be a "player" rather than an "extra" in the region, it could no longer limit itself to an exclusive focus on one or two hotpots or a certain part of the region – even if it wanted to. For Russia, the MENA region is no longer just about Syria and ad hoc, opportunistic diplomacy on select hotspots (Libya) or long-time crises (the Israeli-Palestinian problem). No serious external player can afford to ignore the broader regional vision, failing to account for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent region as a whole.

This applies to all outside players who want to be seen as honest brokers or, at least, responsible actors in the MENA. Of them, Russia is definitely not the worst case. Russia is very familiar with the region, in part and as a whole. Having learnt the lessons from its Soviet experience in the MENA, Moscow now takes a markedly non-ideological approach, is mindful of regional specificities and dynamics and treats regional powers as equal, sovereign actors. Russia had become particularly sensitive to "all-regional" initiatives for the MENA even before it became a meaningful player in the region. In fact, Russia's long-time emphasis on the need for an all-regional political and security dialogue system in the MENA could partly be a way to make up for its extreme frustration with the total failure of its main foreign policy aspiration of the early post-Soviet period – the hope for an all-inclusive collective regional security architecture in Europe.

Russia also poses an increasingly positive contrast to the lead extra-regional actor – the United States – due to the erratic activism of the Donald Trump administration, especially on Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian dossier. While EU states, individually and collectively, are more balanced players, they are still inadequate, overly moralising and insufficiently active and united in their actions, as vital European interests in the MENA would warrant.

1. Russia's balancing act in Syria

In 2015, the main drivers of Russia's military engagement in Syria had little to do with the region itself. Syria was largely instrumentalised to serve broader Russian foreign policy goals. These included using Russia's growing role in Syria as a trump card in its troubled relations with the West, which had suffered a breakdown after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, and as a showcase of prevention of regime change by force, especially through potential Western intervention (in the post-Libya context), as well as antiterrorism concerns. In practice, however, Russia's engagement in Syria, by helping prevent further fragmentation and collapse of the country and shifting the balance in favour of the central government, not only upgraded Russia's standing, but also stimulated its growing interest in the Middle East *per se* and the regionalisation of its MENA policies.

In the Syria case, the most evident product of such regionalisation was the Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran since 2017 and involving both the government and opposition actors, including non-jihadist armed groups. The Astana process was initially meant to improve basic security conditions and prepare technical grounds for peace talks, not to address the key substantive issues of the Syrian political settlement – a role reserved for the UN-sponsored Geneva process. On the one hand, Russia's Astana partners were hardly helpful in linking Astana to Geneva (on issues ranging from the formation of the Constitutional Committee to the Kurdish problem). On the other, Russia could not afford to spoil relations with its two main regional partners, Iran and Turkey, by radically intensifying political pressure on either of them regarding Syria. In sum, turning to regional powers as Russia's main partners in conflict management in Syria required Moscow to learn the art of compromise, flexibility and resilience to all shocks and tests to the Astana format. Of those, the most critical one came in early 2020.

By 2020, the main area out of central government control, dominated by Islamist opposition forces, remained the Idlib de-escalation zone.[2] The latest stage of the crisis around Idlib catalysed key security issues for Russia in Syria. Russia's relations with one of its two key regional partners – Turkey – faced the hardest challenge since the start of the civil war in Syria.

The Russia–Turkey marriage of convenience on Idlib started as part of the Astana process. On 4 May 2017, Syria's northwestern province of Idlib with surrounding areas was declared one of four de-escalation zones (temporary areas for negotiating local ceasefires where military operations were allowed only against terrorists, to be separated from the moderate opposition). Between October 2017 and May 2018, Turkish checkpoints were deployed around the Idlib zone. The start of the Syrian military offensive in Idlib led Ankara, terrified by the prospect of new refugee flows, to sign an additional memorandum with Russia on 17 September 2018 in Sochi.[3] The memorandum created a demilitarised area inside the de-escalation zone along its perimeter, where Ankara pledged to separate moderate anti-government elements from radicals and ensure the removal of jihadists. Turkish and Russian security forces were to carry out coordinated monitoring of the demilitarisation zone. The memorandum called to open the Aleppo–Hama–Damascus (M5) and Aleppo–Latakia (M4) national highways, blocked by Idlib-based militants, for traffic by 2019. The Sochi deal helped stop the government's military offensive on Idlib, for the time being, while Russia pledged to "take all necessary measures to prevent military operations in Idlib and ensure the status-quo", provided that other memorandum requirements were met. As for months none of these conditions were fulfilled by Turkey, the government offensive (Operation "Dawn of Idlib", April–August 2019) followed.

---

2.   Composed of the Idlib province and the surrounding areas of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama provinces.

3.   Russia and Turkey, *Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area*, Sochi, 17 September 2018, https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/852; https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/1.771953.

Gradual advances by Syrian forces to opposition-held areas in deescalation zones, coupled with local ceasefires and corridors for evacuation of militants to remaining areas out of government control, were usually followed by new Astana deals that fixed the changes on the ground. Idlib, however, has been a special case. It is located on the border with Turkey which backed the opposition in the Syrian civil war, suffered from mass refugee flows and saw Idlib as a bargaining chip and a leverage to influence the situation inside Syria. Idlib was also the last de-escalation zone beyond government control, with the highest concentration of militants, mostly Islamist radicals, who were evacuated from other deescalation zones or fled from elsewhere in Syria. In fact, the problem of the first three de-escalation zones was solved at the expense of Idlib. As the last mainstay of armed opposition, Idlib also retained special significance for prospects of the intra-Syrian settlement.

In practice, the Idlib de-escalation zone was hijacked by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – a radical Islamist umbrella movement that integrated, inter alia, the al-Qaeda-linked group Jabhat al Nusrah and gained control over Idlib's local government structures. The Russian Ministry of Defence pointed to "the Turkish colleagues' failure to deliver on their commitment to separate militants of the moderate opposition from terrorists who flooded these areas" as the main reason for the Idlib crisis of late 2019 and early 2020.[4] Idlib-based militants also periodically mounted drone attacks against Russia's Hmeimim air base near Latakia.

It is not that Turkey did nothing to address the issue of violent Islamists in Idlib. The Islamist-leaning government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) for years backed Islamists, in and out of government, across the region. For Turkey, the main concern in Syria remained the Kurdish issue, while disarming the Islamists was never a priority. Prior to January 2020, Ankara had no sufficient military force

---

4. "Russian Ministry of Defense Comments on the Situation in Idlib" [in Russian], in *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* [Independent Military Review], 13 February 2020, http://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2020-02-13/100_200213news2.html.

in Idlib to fight terrorism in earnest. Also, any radical escalation in Idlib guaranteed refugee flows – not as massive as Erdoğan's claims of a million newly displaced persons, but still a major humanitarian challenge. Some of Ankara's own actions had the intentional or unintentional effect of slightly reducing the number of Idlib-based militants, through integration of some fighters into Turkish security structures and grinding down fighters, mostly from the Turkish-backed alliance of factions, in operations against the Syrian Kurds and in clashes with (pro-) government forces in the de-escalation zone. Moreover, since late 2019 Turkey has relocated a number of militants from Idlib to Libya, to fight on behalf of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). According to the opposing side in the conflict, the Libyan National Army (LNA), by February 2020 Ankara had transported 2,900 Syrian militants to Libya and was training another 2,000.[5]

Syria's "Dawn of Idlib" operation backed by the Russian air force had limited success, but ended in August 2019 with an advance into the southern part of the Idlib zone. In the meantime, Turkey was diverted by another intervention against the Syrian Kurds, following the announced withdrawal of US forces from northwestern areas in October 2019. In December, Damascus launched another Russia-backed offensive (Operation "Dawn of Idlib-2"), supported from the north by pro-Iranian militias from western Aleppo, and made sizeable gains in the southeast of Idlib.[6] Although interrupted by a brief ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey, the fighting resumed, provoking direct Turkish intervention in Idlib in January 2020. While the deployment of 9,000 soldiers became Ankara's largest military build-up in Syria since the start of the conflict, it also left some "windows" for the Syrian army to strike at militants.

---

5.   Al-Hadath TV channel, quoted in: "Libyan National Army Says Dozens of Syrian Mercenaries Killed in Tripoli", in *TASS*, 2 February 2020, https://tass.com/world/1115463.

6.   Metin Gurkan, "Turkish Troops in Syria Threatened at Idlib Outposts", in *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2019, http://almon.co/3as3.

In February 2020 government forces took control of the entire M5 highway, stopped close to the provincial capital Idlib and were posed to clear the uncontrolled part of the M4. However, resulting clashes between Turkish and Syrian military raised confrontation to a new level and threatened direct conflict between Russian and Turkish forces. This provoked the harshest militant rhetoric from Turkish president Erdoğan in years, against both Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia. Erdoğan's warning to Moscow ("Do not stand in our way!")[7] amounted to a de facto ultimatum to withdraw from Idlib. However, the emotional appeal of Ankara's bellicose rhetoric, largely addressed to the AKP's domestic constituencies and regional audiences, hardly impressed Russian diplomats, fully aware of Erdoğan's domestic pressures, or the Russian military, which gives priority to capacities and actions over declarations. Perhaps unexpectedly for Ankara, Russia also played tough and used its control of air space in Idlib to support Syrian troops even in their direct clashes with Turkish forces. That included strikes against Turkish tank columns and even, in the deadliest day for Ankara in Idlib, a strike, possibly on a Turkish command centre, on 27 February 2020.

While Turkey responded with counter-offensives and intensifying drone strikes, it chose to blame the Syrian, rather than Russian, air force for attacks on the Turkish military. Correspondingly, in case of an attack on a Russian target in Syria involving the Turkish military, Moscow would still blame radical Islamists. This Turkish–Russian game on the ground in Idlib (see everything, deny direct confrontation, blame your counterpart's client) evolved in parallel to mutual contacts, including at the level of top diplomatic, military and intelligence officials up to a direct Putin–Erdoğan meeting and regular phone calls between the two. As the crisis escalated, these contacts became more, not less, intense.

---

7. Quoted in: "Erdogan to Russia: We Are Addressing the Assad Regime Not You in Syria", in *Middle East Monitor*, 3 February 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200203-erdogan-to-russia-we-are-addressing-the-assad-regime-not-you-in-syria; "Erdogan Promised to Respond to Syrian Army Attacks in Idlib" [in Russian], in *RIA-Novosti*, 3 February 2020, https://ria.ru/20200203/1564179191.html.

New realities on the ground included both the Syrian government and allied forces' control over the strategic M5 highway and all of the Aleppo suburbs as well as a more explicit area under direct control of the Turkish forces. A new buffer zone along contested parts of the M4 highway, under joint Russian–Turkish patrol, was required. This led to a new top-level Russia–Turkey deal. Erdoğan would have preferred to reach this deal in a broader framework (such as the Turkey–Russia–Germany–France format), to reinforce Turkey's image as part of a "great power concert" and use the refugee flow problem for his political purposes. However, Russia insisted on a bilateral deal first, signed in Moscow on 5 March 2020. European powers, meanwhile, demonstrated unwillingness to be blackmailed by Erdoğan's instrumentalisation of the refugee issue.

In sum, typically for the Astana powers' deliberations on Syria, a compromise was achieved. As an endgame, Russia would have preferred for the Turkish presence in Idlib to be confined to a buffer zone along the border, with Syrian control gradually restored over the rest of Idlib. However, Turkey's intervention made it clear that Assad's forces would not soon return the entire Idlib area;[8] nor did Russia take upon itself a formal obligation to ensure Assad's control of every inch of the Syrian territory. While the March 2020 deal is likely to be temporary, it might last longer than the previous ones, if only due to major direct deployment of Turkish forces in Idlib.

Whatever the setup on the ground, the composition of key external actors and main stakeholders – the three Astana process co-brokers (Russia, Turkey and Iran) – remained unaltered. Their interests on Syria may diverge significantly, but they have remained in an active dialogue that has not stopped even on the most contested issues, such as the confrontation in Idlib. Despite everything, the parties have kept talking to each other and coordinating their actions, explicitly or tacitly. The Idlib

---

8. The March 2020 deal called for the fight against terrorists in Idlib but, for the first time, stressed that this should not be done at the cost of humanitarian concerns.

crisis has not only ended with a new compromise, but has also added to the solid experience gained by Russia and Turkey in continuing dialogue and cooperation, despite divergent goals on Syria. As always, their pragmatic, no-love-lost bargaining has led to a trade-off.

On the one hand, the parties have exploited and manipulated each other's vulnerabilities. Turkey has been particularly vulnerable to refugee flows from Syria, as well as to accusations of foreign occupation of the Syrian territory and of alleged links to Islamist militants, including jihadists, in Idlib. In turn, Russia's heavy reliance on air strikes in support of the Syrian regime has by default made it subject to claims of lack of, or insufficient, discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, between jihadists and moderate militants. Another vulnerability is Moscow's implication, if only by association, in some of the more questionable practices of the use of force by (pro-)government forces.

On the other hand, the parties have demonstrated a capacity to separate fervent rhetoric, in Turkey's case primarily addressed to domestic audiences, from each other's real foreign policy interests, related and unrelated to Syria. Even when the regional parties' goals have stretched beyond their capacities and conflict with regional realities (e.g., Erdoğan's soft spot for a rebranded version of neo-Ottomanism or some of Iran's far-reaching regional ambitions), Russia has not allowed them to hamper pragmatic cooperation. This has been facilitated by Moscow's firm view that any hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East, including by regional actors, are doomed to fail.

The Astana co-brokers dynamically balance one another as a trio, but also as each of the pairs of actors. For Russia, Turkey and Iran effectively balance one another on Syria, giving Moscow some space for a balancing act between them.[9] The early

---

9.   The other regional balancer to Iran's role in Syria is Israel, with which Moscow developed a tacit special relationship, resilient to the Russian military's periodic blaming of Israel in military incidents in Syria also involving Russian targets.

2020 round of military escalation in Idlib posed a tough test to the Astana model. It showed that any regional member of the Astana trio may try to remodel or transform the process to better accommodate its interests (including by trying to reach out to other powers). However, one of the main lessons to be learnt from that test is that the Astana powers' stake in Syria remains higher than that of other external actors, re-affirming their roles as key brokers and the need to ensure mutual balance.

The balancing act is essential not only for Russia's relations with Turkey and Iran on Syria, and between Ankara and Tehran. Moscow has also tried to balance between the Syrian government and Turkey. It is a mistake to fully associate Russia with the Assad regime, especially with the part of the Syrian ruling group that is unwilling and incapable to compromise, convinced as it is that it has "won the war", and is hardly interested in refugee return. Russia's support to Assad does not mean it can always effectively constrain the regime's intransigence. Informally, Moscow may not even mind some additional constraints to somewhat rein in Damascus and make it listen more attentively to its allies (as long as this does not challenge the mainstream course of events on the ground, which favours the government side). It does no harm to remind Assad and his generals that, without Russia's help, Turkey could effectively challenge them militarily.

The Idlib crisis also has a bearing on any political/negotiation process on Syria in at least two ways. First, the lack of serious balancing against Damascus, coupled with the government forces' step-by-step military advances, will continue to question the viability of the Syrian opposition on the ground, as a party to intra-Syrian talks. This brings closer the prospect of the end of the civil war on Assad's terms. While Russia would not mind such an outcome, for Moscow this option is a Plan B only. Plan A has been a UN-supervised negotiated political settlement based on real intra-Syrian dialogue. If the main source of pressure on Damascus and major areas outside government control are the Turkish- or US-held pieces of Syrian territory, this

could even strengthen the Syrian government's political stance against "foreign occupation" and "breaches of Syria's national unity and territorial integrity", at the UN and elsewhere. This may provide the rationale for inter-state (inter-government) regional compacts on Syria, but would further reduce the limited prospects for intra-Syrian political settlement.

2. Libya: Does the Astana model apply?

The specifics of the Syria case notwithstanding, the Astana format has become a diplomatic meme and has been cited as a "model" for dealing with other regional conflicts in the MENA. While "model" may be too strong a term, the case in point is management of heavily regionalised and internationalised civil wars by a conglomerate of regional and select extra-regional powers (not necessarily the same ones as the Astana co-brokers), playing as equals and balancing each other. The issue of whether or not this model is more effective than increasingly outdated super/great- power-led solutions is certainly worth exploring.

Since 2019, the possibility of replicating the Astana model in Libya has been discussed.[10] In a way, Russia has become hostage to its new reputation in the MENA as a power on the rise, one that talks to everyone, from secular nationalist dictators to Islamists of various degrees of moderation/radicalism, and that brings different players together. Moscow is expected to get more actively involved in managing hotspots in the broader region, notably Libya.

The conflict in Libya has lasted for a decade, following the collapse of the central state in 2011, as a result of NATO's intervention in support of the Libyan opposition. Russia has been

---

10. Selin Caglayan, "A New Astana Model for Libya?", in *InsideOver*, 28 December 2019, https://www.insideover.com/?p=250139; Kirill Semenov, "Will Russia, Turkey Launch 'Syria Scenario' for Libya?", in *Al-Monitor*, 3 January 2020, http://almon.co/3au6.

the strongest critic of the intervention and regime change. It did not show particular interest in Libya after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, but formally supported the UN-brokered 2015 Skhirat agreement. As that non-inclusive process stumbled and the country descended into chaos, Russia started to modestly activate its policy, but developed no major stakes in Libya. Moscow's approach has been driven by a mix of broader foreign policy interests (posing both as a champion of antiterrorism and as an honest broker, mindful of regional interests) with opportunistic considerations. For instance, its initial contacts with the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar were partly a progression of its upgraded relations with Egypt and a way to offset disagreements with the United Arab Emirates on Syria. Moscow also partook in the international peace process on Libya[11] as a player, secondary to the more visible European and MENA stakeholders.

The conflict escalated in April 2019, due to an advance on Tripoli by forces aligned to the LNA led by Haftar and backed by the Tobrukbased parliament. The growing transnationalisation of the civil war on all sides was aggravated in early 2020 with the formal deployment of the Turkish military on behalf of the weak UN-backed Government of National Accord based in Tripoli. In January 2020, the LNA blockaded oil terminals to deprive the GNA of oil revenues supplied to the Libyan Central Bank.

Escalation on the ground in Libya, coupled with regional dynamics, including elsewhere in the MENA (notably in Syria), prompted some upgrade of Russia's involvement by 2020. The 19 January 2020 summit in Berlin was the first of the international conferences on Libya where Russia was represented by President Vladimir Putin. Moscow also insisted that the organ-

---

11.   Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE", in Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco (eds), *The Search for Stability in Libya. OSCE's Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2018, p. 89-111, https://www.iai.it/en/node/9331.

isers abandon the idea to meet without the Libyan parties and that they invite a broader range of Libya's neighbours.[12] Russia and Turkey also set a short-lived precedent by brokering a ceasefire on Libya in January,[13] to prepare for the Berlin conference. The conference was preceded by the Moscow round of talks on Libya, including direct dialogue between the Head of the GNA Fayez alSarraj and General Haftar. While Haftar, in view of the LNA's advances on the ground, refused to sign a joint document in Moscow, he later agreed to send representatives to the UN-supervised confidence-building "military committee" in Geneva. The upgrade of Russian diplomatic activity did not, however, close Moscow's eyes to the reality that "a serious and sustainable dialogue between the Libyan parties is so far impossible because of the vast differences between them".[14]

The LNA advances on Tripoli since 2019 have complicated Russia's balancing act on Libya, seen by Moscow as a way to facilitate dialogue between the main parties. While often perceived as Haftar-biased, Russia has tried to keep equidistance from various Libyan parties, also working with the UN-backed GNA. This has involved a certain division of labour between the Russian Ministry of Defence, which is in more frequent contact with Haftar's LNA, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which engages more heavily with the GNA. Russia has also continued to quietly pursue its own negotiation strategy focused on promoting direct contacts between two veto players on the ground – the LNA and a conglomerate of Islamist militias known as the "Misrata rebels" that back the GNA in Tripoli (using the Contact Group on Libya and Chechen officials as go-betweens with the latter).

---

12. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Acting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Statement for the Media on the Outcome of the Berlin Conference on Libya*, Berlin, 19 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4001846.

13. Russian Presidency, *Joint Statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation*, Istanbul, 8 January 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5470.

14. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Acting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Statement for the Media…*, cit.

Moscow has tried to balance not only between Libya's parties (LNA, GNA and the Misrata rebels), but also vis-à-vis Russia's two regional partners – Turkey and Egypt – which back opposite sides in the Libyan conflict. At least in that respect, the transnationalised civil war in Libya resembles the situation in Syria before the Astana arrangement. As noted by Erdoğan's adviser, "Anyone who sees a strategic gap enters there".[15]

Turkey's upgraded role on Libya has also prompted Moscow and Ankara to try to replicate some of their coordination experience in Syria. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has increasingly posed as a patron of moderate Islamists across the MENA. Most such forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, failed to succeed in the course of the Arab Spring uprisings. Libya, however, stands out as a case where, following violent regime change, a weak government, the GNA, which domestically relied mainly on Islamist militias from Tripoli and Misrata,[16] survived. This has made Libya a perfect case for Turkey to justify and expand its regional ambitions by stepping up its support to the GNA. For Russia, this is an acceptable regional ambition for Ankara, that comes at a relatively minor price as Moscow's own interest in Libya remains limited. Also, in contrast to Erdoğan's sustained dislike of the Assad regime in Syria, in Libya Moscow talks to all parties, including the GNA (whereas Ankara rejects Haftar's LNA).

For both Russia and Turkey, the mini trade-off on Libya (a ceasefire they co-brokered in preparation for the Moscow and Berlin negotiations) was also a by-product of the larger trade-off on Syria. This fell far short of the Moscow–Ankara interaction

---

15.   Murat Paksoy, "Turkey Proved Power on Table, Ground, Says Top Official", in *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2019, http://v.aa.com.tr/1687029.

16.   The GNA relied on certain Islamist militias, including the so-called Big Four factions in Tripoli, but has been opposed by some other Islamists. For relationship between GNA and Islamist militias, see, for instance, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Russia's Position on the Situation in Libya* [in Russian], https://www.mid.ru/pozicia-rossii-po-situacii-v-livii; Kirill Semenov, "To Whom Does Libya Belong?" [in Russian], in *RIAC Articles*, 9 November 2018, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/komu-prinadlezhit-liviya.

on Syria, critically important for both but especially for Turkey which shares cross-border refugee flows, militancy and terrorism with Syria in Idlib and the Kurdish areas. Lower importance attached by Turkey to Libya is also demonstrated by Ankara's decision to rely as much (or more) for its military deployment to Tripoli on "proxy" mercenaries transported from Syria as on its military personnel. In January 2020, Putin also admitted limited presence of Russian mercenaries on the LNA side, but publicly distanced the Kremlin from them, claiming they neither represent Russia's interests, nor get state funding.[17] Regardless of the accuracy of that claim, speculations about a major role of Russians in the LNA operations are an exaggeration. Had they been true, the course and outcome of the LNA's advances on Tripoli would have been different: so either Russian mercenaries were poor fighters or they were not present in the LNA ranks in the inflated numbers mentioned by the media.

The Astana model hardly applies to Libya, if only due to the more limited engagement of regional actors. However, if any lesson could be gleaned from the Russia–Turkey deliberations on Libya, it is that Russia keeps experimenting with more active cooperation with regional actors in conflict management in the MENA. Russia also tends to distrust initiatives on Libya pushed forward by those Western states that were complicit in violent regime change. This has been reinforced by Moscow's growing lack of confidence in non-regionally-based peace processes, and its scepticism about the LNA's propensity to succumb to foreign pressure and about the viability of the GNA. This combination explains Russia's abstention from supporting the UK-sponsored UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Libya on 12 February 2020.

17. Russian Presidency, *News Conference Following Russian-German Talks*, Moscow, 11 January 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62565. On the Russian private military companies (PMCs), see Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies. The Implications for European and Norwegian Security", in *FFI-Reports*, No. 18/01300, 11 September 2018, https://www.ffi.no/en/publications-archive/russian-use-of-private-military-and-security-companies-the-implications-for-european-and-norwegian-security.

3. Israel–Palestine: The peace process is dead, what role for Russia?

At the turn of the decade, the main development related to the Israeli-Palestinian dossier – the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century" – unfolded against the background of an already near total deadlock: the heads of states of Israel and Palestine[18] had not met since 2014.

From the start, the Trump administration was determined to prioritise relations with Israel over all other US interests in the Middle East and displayed intensifying anti-Palestinian tendencies. In violation of a key condition for the UN-approved two-state solution, in June 2017 Washington recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and in May 2018 moved the US embassy there. In September 2018, Washington stopped US funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency supporting Palestinian refugees and in March 2019 unilaterally recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights. The combination of these steps has further weakened, perhaps irreparably, the US's professed mediator role in the conflict.

The economic part of the "Trump deal", announced in June 2019 at a conference in Bahrein, leaves open the issue of economic investment in the Palestinian Territories and neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, suggesting funds should come from Arab Gulf monarchies, Europe and Asia (and, to an extent, the United States). On 28 January 2020 the rest of the "deal"[19] was announced by Trump at a joint press conference with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In this paper, the term "peace plan" is not used, as it is inapplicable to the US–Israeli (or Trump–Netanyahu) bilateral deal, which is the most pro-Israeli plan in decades. Much like the US recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, this new initiative

---

18.   "The State of Palestine" is the official wording used in Russia.
19.   White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperity.

was also timed for the Israeli elections scheduled for 2 March 2020, to prop up embattled Netanyahu. For the Trump administration, the plan was also meant to serve as a domestic boost in light of the 2020 presidential campaign, appealing to pro-Israeli constituencies.

The substance of the plan envisaged a patchwork Palestinian state that would abandon claims to Jerusalem, that would be demilitarised and deprived of the right to control its borders, territorial waters and air space. Instead of East Jerusalem as a national capital, the Palestinians were to reconcile for a couple of cross-the-wall outskirts, where a refugee camp is based, while Israel would get control over contested areas of the West Bank, with its sovereignty extended to the entire Jordan River Valley. The Palestinian refugee problem was left aside, to be sorted out outside the "peace" negotiations framework. Should the Palestinians agree to this plan (in the course of a four-year period), they were promised access to 50 billion US dollar investments. The plan was vehemently rejected by the Palestinians, as summed up by President Mahmoud Abbas who reiterated that "Jerusalem is not for sale".[20]

Russia's formal response to Trump's plan was negative, but restrained. Russia officially recognises East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state – a status confirmed by General Assembly Resolution 58/292 (2004). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed that "the establishment of settlements by Israel in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal force, and is a violation of international law".[21] Russia's representative at the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, also pointed out that the Trump plan's map showed the Golan Heights as Israeli territory, whereas neither the UN nor Rus-

---

20. "State of Palestine: 'Jerusalem Is Not for Sale'. Abbas Reacts to Trump's 'Peace Plan'" (video), in *Ruptly*, 28 January 2020, https://youtu.be/p8l-fuZ4y5X4.

21. Briefing by the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, on 6 March 2020. See Elena Teslova, "Russia Condemns Israel's Plan for West Bank Settlements", in *Anadolu Agency*, 6 March 2020, http://v.aa.com.tr/1757202.

sia recognise Israel's sovereignty over that area.[22] Russian academic experts were more outspoken in their criticism: some referred to an "apartheid"-style solution and suggested the death of the existing peace process and even "of any genuine hopes for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples for peace".[23]

The Trump deal has had two main implications for the peace process. First, it means that, for the foreseeable future, Washington has lost its long-time position of mediator. Second, it has drawn a line on the long-established diplomatic framework for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Even in case of a change of administration in Washington, the US-led Quartet framework involving the US, the EU, Russia and the UN may be hard to revive. This, however, also means that sooner or later a new format will need to be built, with the range of mediators no longer confined to the two former superpowers of Cold War times, the EU[24] and the UN. This format should have broader regional representation and leave space for direct, unmediated dialogue between Israel and Palestine. It will also require a new generation of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

There are three ways this could help Russia advance its reputation as an honest broker in the region. First, Russia could facilitate and host direct Israeli-Palestinian talks in Track 2 or Track 1 format, or both. Moscow's 12 February 2020 proposal to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to come to Moscow for direct talks without preconditions is the first in a series to come. Second, in any new international format on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict replacing the existing discredited mechanisms, Russia will by default play a larger role than that of almost an "extra" which it played in previous decades. Russia would also support a larger

---

22. "Russia's UN Envoy Blasts 'Deal of the Century' Map Which Shows Golan Heights as Part of Israel", in *Sputnik News*, 30 January 2020, https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/202001301078180047.

23. Vitali Naumkin's interview for the programme "International Review" (video in Russian), in *Russia-24*, 31 January 2020, https://youtu.be/FkiHy21Ke4k.

24. The EU could not agree on a joint reaction to Trump's plan and deferred it until Israel's March 2020 elections, while some member states pushed for recognition of the State of Palestine.

representation of regional, both Arab and non-Arab, actors in such formats. Third, Russia will continue its own efforts to facilitate intra-Palestinian dialogue and support parallel efforts undertaken by Egypt. The latest such round in Moscow took place in February 2019 at the Institute of Oriental Studies, with participation of 12 Palestinian groups and movements.

4. In lieu of conclusion: Russia's Gulf security initiatives and the 2020 US–Iran crisis

Since the mid-2010s, when Russia became an increasingly active player in the Middle East, its main proposal for a broader regional security initiative has been the Security Concept for the Gulf.[25] The Concept was introduced at the UN in July 2019 at the time of spiralling escalation between the United States and Iran, each backed by its regional allies.

Moscow's previous regional initiatives of the late 1990s, 2004 and 2007 were vague, boiled down to well-intentioned lip service, and hardly went beyond an abstract idea of a collective security architecture for the MENA, modelled upon the all-inclusive but weak Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Not only had the OSCE been created in a totally different era and context, when Cold War Europe was strictly divided between two opposite, well-structured political-military blocs, but it was also scarcely effective as a conflict management institution.

In 2019, Russia came up with a more down-to-earth proposal that promoted direct dialogue between the region's main antagonists as the first step to more inclusive multilateralism. Russia's initiative focused on the acute regional controversy involving Iran and the Arab Gulf states, grossly aggravated

---

25. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

by the US and Israeli angles, as the line of tension that could escalate to a regional war and easily become further internationalised.

The catalyst for Russia's new regional security concept was growing escalation of the crisis in the Gulf, mainly due to the progressively more bellicose approach to Iran taken by the US administration after it pulled out from the Iran nuclear deal – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – in May 2018 regardless of Iran's abiding by the agreement. In the summer of 2019, in the context of the "strait for a strait"[26] escalation involving the capturing of an Iranian tanker in the Strait of Gibraltar and a British one in the Strait of Hormuz, Washington further emphasised "restoring deterrence", "protecting freedom of navigation" and "increas[ing...] force posture".[27] The only form of multilateralism admissible for Washington seems to be exclusive, confrontational blocs or coalitions, formed with the main purpose of opposing Iran, such as a bid to create a US security alliance with six Arab Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan ("the Middle East Strategic Alliance", commonly known as the "Arab NATO"), or an explicitly anti-Iranian International Maritime Security Initiative (a US-led group of close allies, such as the UK and Australia, and Arab Gulf powers created in September 2019 to patrol the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman).

Against this backdrop, Moscow has tried to capitalise on its acquired weight in the MENA, its long-time, solid relations with Iran (in contrast to the US's Iran policy), but also on its multi-vector approach, ideological relativism and contacts with all regional actors in or beyond the Gulf.

---

26. President Hassan Rouhani's remark: "A strait for a strait. It can't be that the Strait of Hormuz is free for you and the Strait of Gibraltar is not free for us", quoted in: Babak Dehghanpisheh, "War with Iran Is the Mother of All Wars: Iran President", in *Reuters*, 6 August 2019, https://reut.rs/2Ys6FKl.

27. US State Department, *Middle East Peace and Security*, Briefing by US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook at the UN Foreign Press Center, New York, 20 August 2019, https://www.state.gov/middle-east-peace-and-security.

Russia needed some symbolic, notable boost of its previously relatively low-key image in the Gulf region. The first leaks about Russia's potential role in exercises in the Persian Gulf came in August 2019, during the Iranian navy commander's visit to Moscow. However, it took three months, following the US announcement of its anti-Iranian naval coalition in September 2019, and the involvement of China, for a joint Iran–Russia–China exercise ("Naval Security Belt") to be held in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman in December 2019, officially to promote antiterrorism, antipiracy and regional security. For Moscow and Beijing, this became the first-time exercise of that scale in the area,[28] whose symbolic and political effects were meant to exceed the military ones. This was a practical step to warn against the US-led "military solution" on Iran, but in a measured form that fell short of any formal "coalition". Moscow also observed limitations on arms trade with Iran imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231 for five years following the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal.[29]

In early 2020, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign vis-à-vis Iran catalysed in a "surgical", but nightmare scenario. The administration's decision to assassinate the commander of the special Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, General Soleimani, in a drone strike on Baghdad airport on 3 January 2020, led to the worst escalation since 1979. The United States publicly assassinated the top official of a sovereign regional power, a power that took the five nuclear-armed permanent members of the UN Security Council (plus Germany and the EU) years of negotiations to convince to limit its nuclear programme. Long-term implications of that arbitrary punitive action against Tehran for the global nuclear non-proliferation regime are still to be fully

28. Prior to that, Russia's naval cooperation with Iran was confined to the Caspian Sea.
29. The US unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 deal makes it hard for Washington to further block military-technical cooperation between Iran and third countries after the five-year period expires in 2020. Following years of strict sanctions, Iran needs new weapons, especially air defence systems and combat aircraft. Any deals, however, require long preparation.

comprehended. Among other things, it shows that if there is a major external destabilising force in the Middle East, it is definitely not Russia.

Washington's "maximum pressure" has met with Tehran's "maximum resistance". Iran responded with unprecedented direct missile strikes on US military targets in Iraq on 8 January 2020 that resulted in 109 injuries.[30] In return, Trump threatened to target 52 sites of political and cultural significance for the Iranians; dispatched several thousand more troops to the region; and implemented new sanctions against Iran's top security officials, metal exports and mining companies. While, in the short run, a further military escalation was avoided, prospects for meaningful US–Iran negotiations were also finished for the foreseeable future, leaving the region in a precarious limbo. The new escalation also killed European "mid-way" mediating initiatives (such as French President Emmanuel Macron's "oil plan"),[31] while the EU fell short of having its own consolidated and clear say on the US–Iran crisis.

Ultimately, the main implications of the 2020 crisis for the broader region are likely to be long term. The crisis might well symbolise the beginning of the end of the US strategic dominance in the Persian Gulf as proclaimed by the 1980 Carter doctrine (Washington's commitment to repel any "assault on the vital interests of the United States of America" in the Persian Gulf "by any means necessary, including military force").[32]

---

30. Idrees Ali, "109 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack: Pentagon", in *Reuters*, 11 February 2020, https://reut.rs/31J88ur.
31. France's Fall 2019 plan to revive the nuclear deal, by temporarily allowing Iran to sell oil for a limited time by lifting US sanctions in exchange for Tehran's return to talks and compliance with the agreement.
32. Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union before a Joint Session of Congress, Washington, January 23, 1980", in Kristin L. Ahlberg (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980. Vol. I: Foundations of Foreign Policy*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 2014, p. 695, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d138.

Mid-term repercussions may affect Iraq the most, due to its position as a junior partner to both Washington and Tehran, a host to US forces and home to local pro-Iranian militias. Following the early 2020 escalation, Baghdad's instinctive drive to reconsider residual US military presence, while futile at first, brought the problem to the centre of the political and security agenda, as an issue for potential national consolidation. On the Afghan track, the long-prepared US–Taliban deal struck on 29 February 2020 might have been partly sped up by mounting risks along the US–Iran track. Iran can cause much trouble for the United States in Afghanistan; if Tehran did not derail the deal, it was only because the envisaged US military disengagement is in line with Iran's long-term interests. The situation in Syria, despite presence of both (pro-)Iranian and residual US forces, remains remarkably unaltered by the new round of the US–Iran controversy (partly due to the US's declining role in Syria). The Arab Gulf states have reacted to the US–Iran crisis with restraint, acutely aware that further escalation puts them on the frontline. Remarkably, there were leaks about Iraq-brokered indirect Iranian-Saudi dialogue on easing mutual tensions on the verge of Soleimani's killing, and about the Saudis' reaching out to the Iranians in the immediate follow-up to the assassination, even if such discreet contacts were not systematic.[33]

Russia's immediate reaction to the US–Iran crisis has been a mix of harsh criticism, prioritising de-escalation and quietly preparing for mediation. The Russian Ministry of Defence, which had been in regular contact with Soleimani, especially on antiterrorism in Syria, has been straightforward in its condemnation.[34] Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called the assassination unac-

33. Laura Rozen, "Pompeo Mocks Claim Soleimani Was Part of Iraq-brokered Iran-Saudi Indirect Talks", in *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2020, http://almon.co/3axb; John Irish, "No Dialogue for Now as Saudis, Iranians Camp on Positions", in *Reuters*, 15 February 2020, https://reut.rs/2PcoXsH.

34. "Russian Defense Ministry Highlights Solemaini's Contribution to Combating IS in Syria", in *TASS*, 3 January 2020, https://tass.com/defense/1105511; "Russian Ministry of Defence on the Assassination of General Q. Soleimani" [in Russian], in *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red Star], 3 January 2020, http://redstar.ru/?p=50163.

ceptable, a gross violation of international law, in his conversation with US Secretary of State Mark Pompeo,[35] but the Foreign Affairs Ministry's overall reaction has been calmer and linked the incident to the domestic imperatives of the US presidential campaign.[36] Apart from regional actors such as Oman and Qatar, three out of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – Russia, China and France – all pose as potential intermediaries, partly building on their earlier efforts to rescue the Iran nuclear deal. Analysts have also mentioned practical steps that Russia, specifically, could undertake on Iran, ranging from actively implementing and encouraging civilian nuclear cooperation with Tehran, covered by the 2015 deal, to backing a greater role for Iran in the political settlement of Syria.[37]

However, as the region came to a dangerous edge in early 2020, none of the reactive, piecemeal measures by any responsible stakeholders, nor mediation and temporary deescalation, sufficed any longer. Instead, a systemic regional solution becomes even more necessary, at least in the form of a crisis management mechanism for the Gulf, involving Iran and key Arab Gulf states. This brings us back to how Russia's 2019 concept contributes to the discussions about regional security plans that have gained further momentum in the context of the new US–Iran escalation.[38] As noted by Lavrov, the Russian "idea is still on the table".[39]

35. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Telephone Conversation with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo*, 3 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3989636.

36. MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova quoted in: Bob Frederiks, "How the World Reacted to US Airstrike That Killed Iran General Qassem Soleimani", in *New York Post*, 3 January 2020, https://wp.me/p3Q98d-10yOE.

37. Michel Duclos and Andrey Kortunov, "Helping Iran to Make the Right Choice", in *Institut Montaigne Blog*, 13 May 2019, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/helping-iran-make-right-choice.

38. Patrick Wintour, "Nervous Saudis Try to Ease Middle East Tensions", in *The Guardian*, 9 January 2020, https://gu.com/p/d42ph.

39. Russian Foreign Ministry, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Plenary Session of the Raisina Dialogue International Conference*, New Delhi, 15 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3994885.

The substantive input of the Russian concept rests on inclusive multilateralism as the founding principle for a regional security mechanism. The concept suggests that inclusive multilateralism is more likely to result from a long process. At the earlier stages, the need to establish direct contacts between the main players – and keep those going no matter what – is underscored, as well as a special role for confidence-building measures including military-to-military hotlines. Initial dialogue could later lead to agreements on select issues of mutual interest (demilitarised areas, arms control and limitations, mutual security guarantees). In a sign of realism – and in a bow to Arab Gulf states that depend on the US military role for their security – the concept suggests to consider reducing foreign military presence in the Gulf only when tangible progress towards more inclusive multilateralism in regional security matters is achieved. As with any concept that pretends to offer a strategic vision, the most ambitious goal is a long-term one: the ultimate endgame is the formation of a regional organisation on security and cooperation in the Gulf where the world powers (China, the EU, India, Russia and the United States) would only play the role of observers.

Russia's concept is broader, more process-oriented and more strategic than two other main lines of thought on regional "collective security". One of these suggested the Gulf Cooperation Council as a core of any "collective security" system.[40] While unacceptable for Iran, this idea also assumes a fully consolidated approach on the part of the Arab Gulf states (which was put in question by the 2017 Saudi-Qatari rift). The other was Iran's initiative to strike a "non-aggression" and "non-interference in domestic affairs" pact among regional actors, known as "Coalition for HOPE" (Hormuz Peace Endeavour) and introduced by President Hassan Rouhani at the United Nations in September 2019.[41] It declared a trans-regional, trans-Gulf approach, but

---

40. Ray Takeyh and Steven A. Cook, "America Has a Golden Chance to Tame Iran", in *Financial Times*, 14 October 2004.
41. United Nations, "At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'", in *UN News*, 25 September 2019, https://news.

seemed unlikely to reverse the deep distrust between the main regional parties.

Whether or not regional security plans should come from within the region itself is a legitimate question. In any case, a plan coming from just one of the main regional antagonists hardly stands a chance of success. In theory, the only way this could work is if such a plan, from the start, comes as a joint initiative by the main opponents, such as a jointly proposed non-aggression pact. Informal contacts between Saudi and Iranian officials have been going on for some time, not to mention indirect talks through mediators.[42] However, these on-and-off contacts will not automatically self-upgrade into a regional security dialogue. Regional mediators (Iraq, Oman, Pakistan) are useful as go-betweens, but do not have enough interest or capacity to offer a strategic vision for the region.

In sum, an initial impulse to unlock the trans-Gulf impasse might need to come from outside the region. If the US–Iran military exchange in early 2020 teaches us something, it is that no security plan for the Gulf that is initiated by the United States or its unconditional (the UK) or conditional allies (other Western states) is feasible, nor perhaps desirable.

Washington has completely ignored Russia's concept of regional security for the Gulf. So far any interest in and discussion of Moscow's proposal has been modest and has come mainly

un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472. Iran proposed a collective security framework for the Persian Gulf in 2007 and again in 2015.

42. On contacts between the Saudi Minister of Gulf Affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, and Husein Jaberi Ansari, Senior Adviser to the Iranian Foreign Minister, see Igor Subbotin, "Saudi Arabia Caught in Secret Contacts with Iran" [in Russian], in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 March 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-03-20/2_7535_saud.html. On indirect talks, see Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War", in *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html. On Riyadh's informal ceasefire talks in Jordan with the Iran-backed Yemeni Houthis, see Aziz El Yaakoubi and Michelle Nichols, "Saudi Arabia Discussing Yemen Truce in Informal Talks with Houthis: Sources", in *Reuters*, 14 November 2019, https://reut.rs/371K2gy.

from the region itself. While regional experts see the end-result envisaged by Russia's plan as "at best a distant dream", some also deem it "a useful tool to navigate beyond the limitations of the alternative security discourses on Persian Gulf".[43] The plan has also received quiet support from China.

If proposed by Moscow alone, Russia's concept is unlikely to be publicly accepted by Arab Gulf states (as US strategic partners in the region). However, a joint Russia–EU–China proposal built around the same ideas could fare better, both regionally and internationally. While it will not get support from the Trump administration, it is likely to gain endorsement from the United Nations, regional powers and new great powers like India. Most importantly, it would be a multilateral, cross-cultural and trans-continental way to provide a vision for the Gulf alternative to the mix of impasse and escalation that has haunted it for decades.

A blueprint for inclusive, multilateral regional security in the Gulf is fully in line with Russia's strategy in the Middle East and its broader foreign policy goals and preferences. In the long term, this is the only way to fundamentally stabilise the region neighbouring Eurasia and make it more self-reliant in security matters. For Russia, this would be the ultimate product of regionalisation – a global trend that goes well beyond the Middle East and is to become one of the mainstays of the emerging multipolar world. This is seen as a goal *in its own merit*, rather than some derivative from Russia's relations with non-regional actors, including the United States and Europe. What still escapes most Western observers looking for "grand games" or "schemes" between the West and "rising powers" such as Russia is that Moscow no longer prioritises or sees the role of the West as that of indisputable lead power in and beyond the MENA.

Ironically, while not part of the Middle East, Russia feels itself more comfortable and more "an equal among equals" in its

---

43. Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?", in *LobeLog*, 30 July 2019, https://lobelog.com/?p=49584.

engagement with regional MENA powers than in the exclusive, Western-centric, EU/NATO-dominated postmodern European order that claims political, economic, cultural and moral superiority, while also lacking self-reliance in security terms. Posing as a peacemaker in the Middle East is also of major importance for Russia's overall relations with the Muslim world, as a macro-regional power that is not outside, but on the periphery of that world. Finally, the possibility to contribute constructively, as a responsible "honest broker", to launching and sustaining inclusive regional security dialogues in the MENA is of particular value for Russia from the point of view of boosting its global profile.

3
CHINA AND MIDDLE EAST SECURITY ISSUES: CHALLENGES, PERCEPTIONS AND POSITIONS

JIN LIANGXIANG

A worsening security environment has for many years been the defining feature of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Most recently, the Gulf region has represented the crux of regional instability. These developments have presented China with challenges in the region, particularly in light of Beijing's growing economic interests, which have led to calls on China to play more direct and proactive roles in the Middle East and in the Gulf, including in the security domain.

As the world's second largest economy, China mainly regards the Middle East as a source of energy supplies, a market for Chinese products and investments and an important arena for infrastructure connectivity and construction. China sees peace and stability in the Middle East as a necessary condition for Beijing to reap the expected benefits of engagement, particularly in economic terms. As seen from China, the region's security deficit can be attributed to a variety of factors, but a primary reason relates to the increasingly erratic, unilateral and irresponsible policies conducted by the US and particularly the Donald Trump administration. Growing rivalry and competition for geopolitical influence among regional powers represents another source of regional instability.

Beijing believes that any regional security framework should be constructed and supported by regional players, with major external actors playing mediating and supportive roles. By embracing the principle of non-interference, China has long supported political approaches to regional disputes and

provided a large amount of security resources by means of UN-mandated peace-keeping and anti-piracy missions. China also believes that its economic cooperation with the region is conducive to maintaining social and political stability, since a functioning economy represents the foundation of stability and prosperity.

1. The Middle East's worsening security environment

There have always been expectations for a better Middle East security environment, but the outlook for the region remains bleak. Three main drivers of tension can be highlighted across the region, each of which enhances the others, contributing to dangerous escalations and competition among regional and extra-regional actors that have further accentuated pre-existing regional criticalities. These instability drivers can be summarised with reference to a) the role of extra-regional actors, and primarily the United States, b) the existence of deep economic vulnerabilities in multiple locations of the region and c) the prevalence of zero-sum rivalry and competition among regional actors.

This poor security environment has greatly restricted China's efforts to increase its economic relations with the region. Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and re-adoption of "secondary" sanctions with extra-territorial reach on Iran is one specific example, as these policies have seriously undermined China's strategy to diversify its energy supply, hampering legitimate economic relations with Iran. More broadly, social and political instability in the MENA region is understood in China as being closely related to economic vulnerabilities, and this has long been a factor discouraging China's business community from further engagement.

Finally, rising hostilities among major regional actors and their extra-regional backers have increased pressure to back one or another side in these disputes, an eventuality which is certainly

not appealing to China and ultimately runs counter to its interests and traditional approaches in the region.

1.1   Tensions caused by external actors

The first category of instability drivers should be framed as tensions caused by the policies of external actors in the region, first and foremost the United States. Washington's Middle East policy, particularly under the Trump administration, has contributed to the abysmal state of regional affairs. US policy towards Palestine and Iran, in particular, highlights these as two important arenas where Washington's embrace of unilateralist moves has caused much concern across the Middle East, as well as in Europe and even China.

On Palestine and Arab-Israeli tensions, critical issues for regional stability, the US has long promoted a biased, pro-Israel policy. The Trump administration, however, has brought this policy to the extreme, embracing Israel in a far more uncritical manner than his predecessors while coordinating closely with the government of Benjamin Netanyahu in the development of Trump's so-called "deal of the century", ultimately released to the public in early January 2020.[1] In the last three years since taking office, Trump has issued further unilateral measures, including the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in late 2017, the moving of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in March 2018 and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights in March 2019.

Finally, following the unveiling of the so-called Trump deal, the US and Israel have set up a joint committee to map out areas of Palestinian land in the West Bank to be annexed to Israel, thus effectively green-lighting Israel's expansionist tendencies. These blatant recognitions openly violate broadly accepted international rules and norms, including successive UN Security Council resolutions and international parameters for a two-

---

1.   Ian Black, "This 'Deal of the Century' for the Middle East Will Be Just Another Bleak Milestone", in *The Guardian*, 30 January 2020, https://gu.com/p/d75vd.

state solution, which China has long supported. As a result, US policy has seriously undermined the legal rights and legitimate demands of Palestinians and Syrians, causing significant tensions across the region. Overall, such measures will produce long-term obstacles to stabilisation, also hampering the minimal normalisation process underway between Israel and certain Arab states, particularly in the Gulf.

Trump's Iran policy is another source of concern for China and has resulted in a significant increase in regional tensions. Washington's May 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, followed by the reissuing of sanctions and a series of other unilateral measures, including the designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation, has put Iran in a difficult situation, leading it to retaliate. China, which participated in the JCPOA negotiations together with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany and the European Union (EU), and has remained supportive of the agreement since the US withdrawal, reacted with concern to the US's escalating policy and rhetoric towards Iran.

Between 2019 and early 2020, US–Iran tensions skyrocketed. In June 2019, Iran shot down a US drone in the Strait of Hormuz, while repeated attacks and seizures of oil tankers in the Gulf signalled the volatility of regional developments. The targeted killing in early January 2020 of Qasem Soleimani, major general of the IRGC and a highly respected individual among Iranians, sent further shockwaves throughout the international community, again pushing the region to the brink of conflict.

Notwithstanding increased concern and dissatisfaction from international actors vis-à-vis the Trump administration's policies towards the Middle East, it does not seem likely that Washington will change its approach to the region, thus adding further uncertainty as to the future evolution of regional developments and tensions.

1.2 Instability due to economic factors

A second set of risks and instability drivers relate to the socio-economic sphere, ranging from underdevelopment to weak economic outlook and serious unemployment and corruption concerns. These drivers also have security dimensions, demonstrating the overlapping and complementary nature of recent developments in the region, which taken together have contributed to the present dire condition affecting the Middle Eastern region.

Middle Eastern countries face different challenges regarding economic development. Countries like Egypt failed to effectively develop an industrial base due to weak financial resources, while oil-producing countries in the Gulf were rich enough but have failed to develop industrial capacity beyond the hydrocarbons sector, while increasingly relying on the United States for outside military support and defence. Countries like Iran have struggled to build productive industries due to US sanctions and containment policies, while Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen have all been marred by conflict and civil wars for at least a decade now.[2]

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic could create even more serious challenges to the socio-economic environment in the MENA. The region has been particularly hard hit due to the almost simultaneous impact of COVID-19 and the collapse of oil prices, adding to the already volatile economic environment. According to estimates published by the International Monetary Fund in April 2020, the GDP of the Middle East and Central Asia as a whole will stand at -2.8 per cent in 2020, decreasing from 1.2 per cent growth in 2019. Iran's GDP is expected to contract by -6 per cent in 2020, further compounding the -7.6 per cent GDP growth registered in 2019, while Saudi Arabia's GDP is expected to shrink by 2.3 per cent in 2020

---

2.   Jin Liangxiang, "Why Has the Middle East Become the Sources of International Terrorism" [in Chinese], in *Arab World Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (September 2016), p. 66-68, http://en.mideast.shisu.edu.cn/7c/bc/c5650a97468/page.psp.

(compared to a positive growth of 0.3 per cent in 2019).[3] These were statistics published in April 2020, and judging by the seriousness of the pandemic, the actual prospects are far more severe.[4]

Unemployment due to poor economic performance has always been a serious problem in the Middle East. If young people are not employed, lacking opportunities for individual and collective improvement, they will either go to the streets demanding bread and jobs or be attracted to extremist, even violent ideologies, potentially joining jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In both of these instances, links between socio-economic challenges and potential security concerns are clear.

The rise of ISIS can be attributed to a large variety of drivers, including the domestic turmoil caused by the Arab Spring. Yet, again, the economy and socio-economic opportunities also played a role. According a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the unrest that followed the Arab Spring protests, mixed with declining oil prices in 2014, cost the region's economies an estimated 614 billion US dollars in growth between 2011 and 2015, a figure that is roughly equivalent to 6 per cent of the region's GDP.[5] It was amidst this worsened economic situation that significant numbers of individuals from a variety of states in the MENA and beyond moved to join ISIS's ranks.

Indeed, instability and lack of jobs are mutually reinforcing trends, feeding a vicious circle in many states of the region.

3. International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, April 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/04/15/regional-economic-outlook-middle-east-central-asia-report.
4. See IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook Update: Middle East and Central Asia*, July 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/07/13/regional-economic-outlook-update-menap-cca.
5. Lisa Barrington, "Arab Spring Has Cost Region 6 Percent of GDP: U.N. Agency", in *Reuters*, 10 November 2016, http://reut.rs/2eFlDjt.

More instability adds uncertainties and challenges to economic development, which in turn leads to more unemployment and thereby more potential for instability. During 2019–2020, the Middle East has witnessed episodes of serious domestic violence, as the conflicts in Libya, Yemen and Syria demonstrate, as well as renewed waves of popular demonstrations in such locations as Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria.

1.3 Tensions due to regional competition

Geopolitical competition among regional powers has added further trends of instability to an already volatile regional environment. The US's declining resolve in the region has left a vacuum, which regional and certain extra-regional powers have filled.[6] Some regional powers like Iran see the US's relative retrenchment from the region as an opportunity to expand their geopolitical influence, while others like Saudi Arabia feel pressed to protect themselves by building an alliance among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Arab Sunni countries and even Sunni countries beyond the region in an effort to counter and contain Iran.

The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has become one of the primary features of regional power struggle, which is visible across the whole region from Yemen to Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.[7] Meanwhile, a further trend of regional competition is manifested in the growing competition between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt on the other. This rivalry has deepened as Turkey was able to establish a foothold in Qatar in 2017, following the outbreak of the intra-GCC crisis when

---

6.   Vali Nasr, "Trump's Big Test in the Middle East", in *The Atlantic*, 25 November 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/trump-isis-iran-russia-syria-middle-east/508553.

7.   W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future Middle East Security*, Carlisle, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, December 2011, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=694332; and Ribale Sleiman Haidar (ed.), "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Beyond Conflict and Coexistence", in *LSE Middle East Centre Reports*, August 2018, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89829.

Qatar's neighbours blockaded the small Gulf kingdom due to divergences over Iran and Doha's support for Muslim Brotherhood–linked parties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Turkey has expanded its security cooperation with Qatar, increasing the number of Turkish personnel stationed at Turkey's military base there, thus recreating a military presence in the Arabian Peninsula close to 100 years after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Ankara has also consolidated its influence in Kurdish-dominated regions beyond its border, particularly in Syria, but also to an extent in Iraqi Kurdistan.[8] Meanwhile, adding a further dimension of instability and uncertainty to the regional environment, Israel, which backs Saudi Arabia and the Emirates[9] in their competition with Iran, has considerably expanded its use of military tools to target Iranian-backed targets in Syria, Lebanon and even in Iraq with frequent bombing raids coordinated with the United States.

This resurgence of regional competition and rivalry has considerably complicated the task of de-escalation, adding new tensions to old rivalries, which together are likely to create long-term challenges for the region.

Ultimately, while many have hoped that the region could be placed on a more stable and peaceful path through forms of increased cooperation, the prevalence of deep regional and international fragmentation and zero-sum rivalries have unfortunately made the situation worse. As things stand today, it seems unlikely that trends will improve for the better in the near future.

As Washington's international primacy becomes more contested than before and the US comes to terms with its gradual

---

8. About Turkey's role in the region, see W. Robert Pearson et al., "Turkey's Emerging Role in the Middle East", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 2018), p. 5-26, https://mepc.org/node/5033.
9. Jonathan H. Ferziger and Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel's Growing Ties with the Gulf Arab States", in *Atlantic Council Issue Briefs*, July 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=274201.

decline both internationally and in the Middle East, US policy could become more unilateral and unreasonable, possibly spelling further trouble for the Middle East. Few signs indicate that the region will be stepping on the path of economic development and integration. Regional actors have not realised the limits of their power outreach, and will continue their competition for geopolitical influence. All of this will thereby continue to undermine the security environment in the region, leading to some challenges and reticence on the side of China to expand its engagement or more direct involvement in regional affairs.

2. Challenges to China

Instability in the Middle East represents a serious challenge for all states due to the region's global importance for energy geopolitics and geostrategic location between East and West. China, as one of the major economic partners of the region, has been seriously affected by turbulence there. Aside from economic losses, China is presently facing another important challenge: mounting requests originating from both within and outside the region for China to play a bigger role in regional developments, including in the security domain.

China's economic interests and involvement in the Middle East cover a large variety of sectors.[10] As the second largest economy in the world, China has also become the largest importer of oil, surpassing the US in terms of energy purchases from the Middle East by a large margin.[11] Hence, Beijing has become particularly sensitive to the stability of energy supplies at reasonable prices as well as issues related to freedom of naviga-

---

10. About China's economic interests, see Jon B. Alterman, "The Other Side of the World: China, the United States and the Struggle for the Middle East Security", in *CSIS Reports*, March 2017, p. 6-8, https://www.csis.org/node/40290.
11. See BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, June 2019, p. 28, https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html.

tion in strategic passageways such as the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. In general terms, Chinese companies, like those of other countries, tend to approach the Middle East as major commodity market or as an important destination for investment and business opportunities, including in the realm of infrastructure construction. Yet, turmoil and conflict in the region have significantly impacted these Chinese interests.

Stability and prosperity in the region have always been regarded as being in China's best interest. Unfortunately, both aspects have been in short supply in the region and China has watched with concern as the policies of regional and international actors continued to undermine the prospects for a stable Middle East. The US's unilateral imposition of sanctions on Iran, and in particular on Iran's ability to export energy, are of particular concern to China, as they have undermined Beijing's efforts to diversify supplies and promote its energy security.

In 2011, China's crude oil imports from Iran stood at about 600,000 barrels per day, but the number had dropped to 400,000 by mid-2013, as international sanctions were imposed on Iran in the context of the efforts to pressure Tehran to negotiate with world powers on its nuclear programme.[12] China's participation in the negotiations that ultimately led to the signing of the JCPOA agreement in 2015 demonstrated China's interest in stabilisation. Following the signing of the agreement, China imported about 15.46 billion US dollar worth of goods, mainly crude oil, from Iran during the first 10 months of 2017, 29 per cent more than the previous year's 12 billion US dollars.[13] After Trump restored sanctions on Iran, Washington provided waivers for a number of countries to continue importing oil from Iran, including China. Once the US refused to extend these waivers in May 2019, Chinese imports declined

12. "China Imports 390,000bpd of Iranian Oil in June", in *Gulf Oil and Gas*, 15 July 2013, https://www.gulfoilandgas.com/webpro1/MAIN/Mainnews.asp?id=29295.
13. "Iran-China Trade Up 22 Per Cent in Jan.-Oct"., in *Tehran Times*, 30 November 2017, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/418903.

significantly, although no official number is available for more recent exchanges.[14]

US unilateral sanctions on Iran's financial system have weakened China–Iran trade relations, making Chinese investment in Iran extremely difficult since only small and medium size enterprises that have no business relations with the US can risk investing in Iran due to the extra-territorial reach of US secondary sanctions.[15] This has greatly limited China's normal investment relations with Iran.

Domestic turmoil, and especially civil wars, have severely disrupted China's business relations with relevant countries. Due to these tensions, China evacuated tens of thousands of its nationals from Libya in 2011, and many others from Yemen in 2015. As a result, some of the projects were left unfinished, and the facilities and equipment went to waste. To a lesser extent, Chinese business dealings have also been harmed in Syria, Iraq and other conflict-affected countries.

Given circumstances in the region, China is also encountering difficulties in pushing its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forward in the region. The BRI is basically about infrastructure and trade connections among regional partners and with China, which requires only minimal coordination and cooperation but a high level of trust. Given the general lack of both coordination and trust in the region, China is forced to handle some of the projects at a bilateral level, increasing costs and extending original timeframes. As a result, tensions in the region not only have caused direct loss of business profits, but have also disrupted China's business interests, even restricting the potential of further economic cooperation.

---

14. "Have Iranian Oil Exports Really Fallen under 10,000 bpd?" in *Tehran Times*, 4 August 2019, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/438909.
15. Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 120 (2019), p. 984-994.

Turning to the second central challenge, calls for China to play a greater role in the Middle East in the more sensitive political and security domains have indeed increased in recent years. As a matter of fact, these demands are somewhat unreasonable given that China has already been playing important and responsible roles in the region, as demonstrated for instance by its participation in negotiations with Iran over the JCPOA. Independently from this reality, different parties, both within the region and beyond, are calling on China to assume greater responsibilities,[16] creating some pressure on Beijing to react.

Even when understandable, such requests need to be carefully assessed in terms of Chinese capabilities in certain contexts. Calls by Palestinians, and those Arab countries sympathising with the Palestinian cause, for China to play a balancing role against the United States is one example. This request might be reasonable, but is not realistic. In a way, it is more an expression of frustration about the US-biased policy rather than real expectations of China assuming such a role. Indeed, China does not possess enough political and strategic resources to change the course laid down by the US on Palestine–Israel issues, notwithstanding Beijing's support for the two-state framework and UN parameters on the conflict.

China has also been faced with opposing requests from conflicting parties surrounding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.[17] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran want China to import more oil from them, but China's consumption capacity, however large, still has its limits. More import from Iran could mean less from Saudi Arabia. While Iran hopes that China can deliver more support for its position on the nuclear issue, Saudi Arabia is not satisfied

16. Jin Liangxiang, "China's Role in the Middle East: Current Debates and Future Trends", in *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3., No. 1 (2017), p. 40-44, https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500014.

17. For China's challenge in this regard, see Jon B. Alterman, "China's Balancing Act in the Gulf", in *Gulf Analysis Papers*, August 2013, https://www.csis.org/node/24378; and Shannon Tiezzi, "China's Stake in the Saudi Arabia-Iran Clash", in *The Diplomat*, 8 January 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-stake-in-the-saudi-arabia-iran-clash.

with China's stance. These requests pose serious dilemma for China. China believes that it can be a friend of both sides, and would be willing to promote reconciliation between the conflicting parties instead of getting involved in the conflict or choosing one side over the other.

The US has asked China to play amplified roles in the region, but such calls have proven to be little more than a tactical ploy to then place increased blame on China. On the one hand, the US has long blamed China for not sufficiently contributing to regional security. Not only US scholars[18] but also politicians have spread this twisted argument. US scholars argue that Chinese companies are profiting in the Middle East while US troops are being killed in various regional conflict zones. Indeed, in 2014 former president Barack Obama called China a free-rider in the Middle East.[19] On the other hand, however, when China has acted in the security domain, the US has reacted with concern, citing China's expanding geopolitical influence in the region as a competitor to the US.

Significantly, it was following requests by the international community, including US and European countries and with the authorisation of the UN Security Council, that China's navy dispatched vessels to patrol the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations, later establishing a logistical support base in Djibouti in 2017. Despite the full legitimacy of these operations, questions were raised, particularly in the West, about China's growing geopolitical weight in the region. This demonstrates the tactical nature of these calls on China to assume increased roles while explaining Beijing's hesitance to get further involved in the political and/or military domain in the Middle East.

---

18. Paul Haenle, "China Misses a Golden Opportunity in Syria", in *Carnegie Articles*, 8 October 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/53241; and Brian Spegele and Matt Bradley, "Middle East Oil Fuels Fresh China-U.S. Tensions", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 October 2013, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324755104579073283948517714.

19. Thomas Friedman, "Exclusive Interview: Obama on the World", in *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003048414/obama-on-the-world.html.

All in all, requests for China to play a greater role in the region have become a game that everybody can play, but such calls are either unrealistic as they are beyond China's capability or principles, or have turned out to be an instrument to tarnish China's image in the region, pressuring China to deliver explanations.

3. China's role in regional security

Contrary to widespread belief, China has greatly contributed to regional security over the last decades. China's contribution should be understood in comprehensive terms as security issues should be assessed through a wide prism, covering a variety of sectors, each of which has a bearing on security and insecurity drivers in the region.

In the first instance, China has greatly contributed to economic development in the region. China–Middle East economic relations have increased considerably despite the challenging security situation, which is a natural extension of China's domestic economic growth and Chinese efforts to promote development internationally.

China's increasing economic involvement within the BRI framework is especially worth mentioning. Chinese companies have won bids to construct ports in a number of Middle East countries including Qatar, the UAE and Israel, both independently and via joint ventures. China has also made progress in cooperation with Egypt, the UAE, Oman and Morocco in the construction of industrial zones. Chinese companies in the Suez Canal Zone have already created tens of thousands of job opportunities for Egyptians.[20] Chinese banks have established branches in Dubai and Doha for clearance in Chinese currency transac-

---

20. Ma Xia and Song Caicen, "China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone: New Oasis on 'The Belt and Road'" [in Chinese], in *West Asia and Africa*, No. 2 (2016), p. 109-126, https://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTotal-XYFZ201602009.htm.

tions so as to enhance economic cooperation between China and the region.[21]

Chinese companies have also shown responsibility by maintaining cooperation during difficult circumstances. The Chinese company Huawei stayed in Libya, Yemen and Iraq to maintain communication facilities even when other companies left due to security concerns. A Chinese power plant in Iraq, which provides 70 per cent of the electricity for Baghdad, remained in operation in the middle of 2014, when ISIS was approaching the Iraqi capital.

Through these economic relations, China secures its business interests, but it is also China's belief that such relations will improve the foundations for economy and welfare in the region, helping promote peace and security. Without economic foundations, security will remain fragile.

Secondly, China has also proven it can act as an important supporter of political solutions in major Middle East disputes. It is true that China is far from being a decisive player in the region since in many ways China will remain a mere economic power in the future, but Beijing's achievements should not be underestimated. China has appointed five special envoys on Middle East issues, and one special envoy on the Syrian file. These senior diplomats and ambassadors have travelled extensively in the region and are always available for high-level conferences on major Middle Eastern issues, where China has generally sought to promote détente. On the Arab-Israeli dispute, for instance, China has long voiced its clear support for a two-state solution and Palestinian nationhood.

China was party to the EU-led nuclear negotiations with Iran, and has long promoted diplomatic solutions to the dispute. In

---

21. See China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), *Declaration of Action on China-Arab States Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative* [in Chinese], 10 July 2018, http://www.chinaarabcf.org/chn/lthyjwx/bzjhy/dbjbzjhy/t1577010.htm.

this context, China has actively proposed solutions on some key issues, for instance the modification of the Arak reactor. It was China that ultimately proposed a bridging solution on Arak – which the US wanted totally dismantled and the Iranians wanted to keep in place –, modifying the functionality of the reactor to minimise risks, a compromise that was ultimately accepted by the two parties. Partly due to this proposal, China was recognised by both Iran and the US, as well as Europe and Russia, as a key actor to actually carry out this modification of the reactor.[22]

On Syria, China, together with Russia, has vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions from 2012 through 2019, which might have otherwise led to a military intervention by the US. As seen from China, such an eventuality would have furthered the conflict, including its regional and international spillovers, contributing to increased regional instability and volatility and thereby damaging Chinese interests.

These positions might not have been decisive, but have prevented the US, and sometimes certain European states, from doing more harm to regional stability. China's political support, together with Russia, France, Germany and the EU, for the JCPOA with Iran has greatly contributed to reducing the risk of war, and has served to prevent further escalation. China, together with the EU and Russia, is committed to supporting Palestinian nationhood, opposing Israel's creeping annexation of the Palestinian territories. Most recently, as the new Israeli government announced plans to go ahead with annexation of certain territories, China has voiced its opposition to the move,[23] thus depriving Israel of a long-sought veneer of international legitimacy for the move.

---

22. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi: China Will Play Important Role in Modification of Heavy Water Reactor in Arak of Iran*, 15 July 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/xybfs_663590/xwlb_663592/t1282134.shtml.
23. "Chinese Envoy Warns Against Israeli Planned Annexation of Palestinian Territory", in *Xinhua*, 24 April 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/24/c_139004009.htm.

China also plays a role in providing security resources to the region. Beijing began to provide peace-keeping troops to UN missions forty years ago, and has now become the largest contributor among the permanent members of the Security Council.[24] A significant number of such missions have been stationed across the MENA and adjacent areas, from Lebanon to South Sudan. The Middle East has also witnessed the evolution of the mission of Chinese blue helmets. China used to only send in non-combatant troops, but is now contributing combatant troops in South Sudan. China has established preparatory centres for the training of peace-keeping troops for the UN, and will be providing more troops for peace-keeping missions in the region.

It was in late 2008 that China began participating in efforts to safeguard freedom of navigation and conduct anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Since then, China has dispatched more than thirty rounds of patrol vessels for the mission. China also participated in the UN mission to escort the ships carrying Syrian chemical weapons to be demolished in the Mediterranean in the context of the joint UN–Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons mission in 2014.[25]

China also attaches great importance to joint military cooperation with major regional actors for combatting piracy and maritime terrorism as well as conducting rescue operations. China's navy engaged in a three-week naval exercise named Blue Sword 2019 alongside Saudi Arabia's Royal Navy in November 2019 at the King Faisal Naval Base.[26] China also conducted a four-day naval drill with Russia and Iran in the northern part of the Indian Ocean between 27 and 30 December 2019. The drills included training and cooperation on search and rescue

---

24. Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), "China's Role in UN Peacekeeping", in *ISDP Backgrounders*, March 2018, https://isdp.eu/?p=31157.
25. Xinhua, "Chinese Frigate Starts Escort Mission for Chemical Weapons: FM", in *China Daily*, 8 January 2014, http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-01/08/content_17221816.htm.
26. "Saudi Arabia, China Conduct Drill to Improve Combat Readiness", in *Arab News*, 17 November 2019, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1585431.

operations and anti-piracy operations as well as purely military exercises and live fire coordination.[27]

Therefore, it is not right to describe China as a "free rider" on regional security issues in the Middle East. China, with the above-mentioned missions, has demonstrated its willingness to provide security resources. The difference is that China is largely willing to do so within the UN framework, as Beijing regards UN authorisation as the source of legitimacy of military missions in the region. Unfortunately, most of the missions in the region conducted by the US are not authorised by the UN.

4. Framework proposals for Gulf security: A Chinese view

Recent years have witnessed increased debates about Middle East security arrangements, particularly in the Gulf. As a major global power and stakeholder with increasing interests in the Middle East, China certainly has an interest in being part of these discussions and possibly to develop supportive actions as well.

Regional tensions have given rise to mounting concerns about the maritime security in the Gulf and the strategic passageway of the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for one-third of global seaborne oil transportation. A number of states and stakeholders have consequently proposed competing initiatives to foster new forms of security cooperation and de-escalation in the region.

The US, shortly after Iran downed its spy drone, proposed the launch of a global naval coalition to patrol the Gulf on 9 July

---

27. "China, Russia, Iran to Hold Joint Naval Exercise", in *Xinhua*, 26 December 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019/12/26/c_138659848.htm; "China, Russia and Iran Begin Joint Naval Drills", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 December 2019, https://aje.io/38dzg.

2019.[28] The EU, also a major stakeholder in energy geopolitics, later proposed a second naval mission, separate from the US one and led by France, which maintains a naval base in Abu Dhabi, to patrol the same waters.[29] Russia, meanwhile, advanced a proposal calling for the hosting of a conference on Gulf security, with participation open to both regional and international actors involved in the Gulf.[30]

Regional players have also advanced certain proposals. These have come from Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, which have organised ad hoc military coalitions among likeminded states, both within the GCC and among other Arab and Muslim countries, with important support from the US and certain European states, mostly to combat terrorism and ISIS as well as to contain their regional rival Iran. Conversely, Iran has recently advanced a proposal for security cooperation in the Gulf, the Hormuz Peace initiative (HOPE), unveiled by Iran during the UN General Assembly in September 2019.[31]

China cannot avoid having a position on the development of a security framework for the Gulf and in reaction to these above initiatives. Indeed, given expectations from regional and international actors for China to play a bigger role in regional security issues, these efforts to develop new security arrangements may add to the momentum of China's growing security engagement in the region. China's positions and eventual response, however, will be based on Beijing's perceptions of the root causes of the tensions and in line with its long-held principle of non-interference. China's State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered remarks

28. Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. Gulf Maritime Proposal Not Military Coalition against Iran-Pentagon Official", in *Reuters*, 18 July 2019, https://reut.rs/2Sp9xkV.
29. Sabahat Khan, "Europe to Operate Gulf Maritime Security Mission out of French Base in Abu Dhabi", in *The Arab Weekly*, 1 December 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/node/46728.
30. Sabahat Khan, "China Backs Russian Proposal for Gulf Security", in *The Arab Weekly*, 3 August 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/node/45042.
31. See Hassan Rouhani's speech in UN General Assembly, *Official Records, 74th Session, 5th Plenary Meeting* (A/74/PV.5), New York, 25 September 2019, p. 18, https://undocs.org/en/A/74/PV.5.

in this regard during the 2019 UN General Assembly[32] and a Middle East security forum in Beijing in November 2019.[33]

As Wang Yi stated, China stands for building common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in the region. Common security means ensuring the security of all countries, rather than building the security of one country on the turbulence of others, or seeking the absolute security of one side. Comprehensive security means not only seeking military security but also political as well as social stability. Cooperative security means pursuing security through political dialogue and multilateral cooperation instead of having blind faith in interfering with force or unilateral actions. Sustainable security requires an equal emphasis on security and development. All countries should support economic and social development to provide security with internal dynamism, increasing the chances that lasting security can take root.[34]

These are general statements, but are also very clear positions about the roles of regional and external actors. China stands for non-interference in regional affairs, and maintains that security can only be achieved by regional actors through political dialogue. External actors can play a role in regional security issues, but this role should centre on helping regional actors achieve consensus via dialogue, promoting peace and political compromises to achieve results. In this context, the United Nations should play a pivotal role in fostering multilateral dialogue.

China explicitly welcomed Russia's proposal of building collective security in the Gulf, which also calls for a gradual mechanism to permit the withdrawal of the now permanent

32. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi: The Chinese Side Puts forward Three Proposals on the Situation in the Middle East and the Gulf Region*, 28 September 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1704154. shtml.

33. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi Expounds on the Chinese Solutions to the Middle East Security*, 27 November 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov. cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1724790.shtml.

34. Ibid.

deployment of foreign troops in the region.[35] This not only is in accordance with the commitments of the two countries to construct a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era"[36] but also because the concept is in tune with China's views on regional security frameworks. China believes regional countries should play the decisive role in any such mechanism, while external powers should assist countries in the region to do so.

With regard to the root causes of the present tensions in the region, China views the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and restoration of sanctions on Iran as directly responsible for the present escalation. If Iran's rights secured via the nuclear deal are not guaranteed, it will be difficult to ease tensions. Suffice it to point out that Iranians sit on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz and have watched as neighbouring states export oil through these waters while its own oil cannot be exported due to US sanctions. If there is anything to be learnt from developments over recent years, is that no security proposal can be considered sustainable without also accounting for Iran's legitimate rights and interests.

It was also in this context that Iranian authorities have advanced their own vision of Gulf security, the HOPE initiative. On the one hand, the initiative proposed that countries in the region should decide regional security issues via dialogue; but on the other hand, the initiative is rather vague about the role of external actors. While external powers like the US share much of the blame for current regional instability, it is not realistic to expect such actors to be completely excluded from any such security mechanism for the Gulf or the Middle East. External actors, not only China but also the EU, the US and Russia should also be part of the mechanism or arrangements.

35. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on July 25, 2019*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1683397.shtml.
36. "China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for New Era", in *Xinhua*, 6 June 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/06/c_138119879.htm.

5. Conclusion

Tensions in the Middle East as a whole and the Gulf region in particular are the result of complex developments, both regional and international. The primary reason, however, relates to the relative retrenchment of US influence in the region, what many have termed as the end of Pax Americana[37] in the Middle East and the collapse of the security order dominated by the US, which in some ways was accelerated by the unreasonable and erratic policy decisions taken by the Trump administration over the last four years.

In the long term, security-building will depend not only on the restoration of some form of balance of power within the region and among external actors, but also and perhaps fundamentally on economic development and welfare improvement. It is hard to say if these efforts to foster new forms of security cooperation will succeed in the coming years, but success or failure will primarily depend on whether regional and external actors form a relatively stable power configuration in the region, accommodating their respective interests while balancing their threat perceptions.

Looking to the future, the US will remain the most important player, but it will be neither willing nor capable of investing strategic resources in the region. Russia might be willing to increase involvement, but its domestic economy is not sufficient to support this level of ambition. The EU sees the Middle East as its neighbourhood, but does not have sufficient resources to make changes in the region and is deeply divided internally on what course of action to pursue. China is concerned about its interests in the region, but will likely follow its own gradual and cautious pace of engagement.

---

37. For America's declining role in the region, see Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 6 (November/December 2015), p. 2-10; Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, "Bringing the United States Back into the Middle East", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 2013), p. 95-105, https://www.csis.org/node/24108.

Regional powers including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel will be major players in regional issues. Their competition for geopolitical influence has become the main source of regional tensions. Yet, none of them is powerful enough to dominate any security mechanism or arrangements, and each will thus require assistance from major external powers to maintain its standing in the region. Resulting from these dynamics, the future regional security order will have regional players at its core but with continued participation and influence by external actors.

China has been very clear that countries in the region will have to decide policies – including on security issues – for themselves through dialogue. External actors should mediate among regional actors and promote such dialogue, particularly through support for UN frameworks, but should avoid deepening the fragmentation or rivalry among these actors by picking sides or supporting one against the other.

As a major external actor with growing interests and influence over the region and regional players, China will continue working to bring parties together politically, promote economic development and provide security resources within the UN framework, as these broad principles are understood in Beijing as holding the best potential to provide increased security and stability across the MENA and thereby also help advance Chinese economic interests in the region and further afield.

4
THE NEW TURN IN TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC INSECURITIES

MELIHA BENLI ALTUNIŞIK

Turkey has conducted four military operations in Syria in the last four years and two in northern Iraq since May 2019, signed a maritime delimitation and military cooperation agreement with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, engaged in intense competition with both the Iran-led axis and the Saudi–United Arab Emirates (UAE) bloc and engaged in a balancing game between its traditional US ally and Russia in Syria. All of this points to a significant shift in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East.

While in the first decade of the 2000s Turkey focused on opportunities in the region rather than threats and engaged the Middle East through the use of soft power, economic interdependence, third party roles and soft balancing, in the post-2011 era Turkey began identifying more threats, and consequently demonstrated a greater propensity to use military means to deal with them, becoming part of the regional polarisation, both material and ideational.

The analysis will address the changing nature of Turkey's engagement in the Middle East since the Arab uprisings and especially after 2016, within an evolving geostrategic and domestic context. It focuses on the viewpoints of the political elite in Turkey about the changing security environment in the region, their perceptions of threats and opportunities, and how they have responded to them. Finally, there is a discussion on how to account for Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East.

The 2010–2011 Arab uprisings have been a major turning point for the whole region. In geostrategic terms, Turkey finds itself in a region rife with civil wars, intensification of violence as well as military interventions by regional and international actors, multi-layered and complex conflicts where states and non-state actors engage in a myriad of shifting alliances. Furthermore, this coincides with a period where Turkey's traditional alliances with the US and the EU have weakened. On the other hand, domestically, the Middle East policy pursued by the governing Justice and Development party (AKP) has been haunted by the collapse of the Kurdish peace process (2014–2015) and the increased concerns over regime security especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Against this strategic backdrop, the analysis argues that the frequent use of military power, risk-taking and an inclination for "standing alone"[1] – the constitutive elements of Turkey's "new foreign policy" – have become the preferred means for protecting Turkey's interests in the Middle East, redefining Turkey's role vis-à-vis partners and adversaries alike while maintaining regime security and alliances domestically. Thus, the AKP's new foreign policy doctrine is a product of shifts occurring both in Turkey's geostrategic neighbourhood and parallel changes at the domestic level. Yet it also reflects the way the AKP political elite has read and understood this new environment, which in turn has reflected its ideological inclinations as well as its transformation.

1. Turkey's perceptions of its evolving neighbourhood

The Arab uprisings initially increased hopes in Ankara for the possibilities of extending Turkey's influence in the region. After all, Turkey, and particularly then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had been popular in the "Arab Street" for some time[2] and

---

1. Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire. Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2019, p. xvii.
2. Several opinion polls conducted during that period showed this popularity. See, for instance, Turkish think tank TESEV's opinion polls conducted in the

the AKP itself had links and affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood movements that were well organised in the opposition in many post–Arab uprising countries. Therefore, it was hoped that expansion of participation and more democratic governance in the Arab world would mean the coming to power of governments that would establish closer ties with Turkey. The government was quick to support the uprisings in general and then the transition in Tunisia and Egypt through economic aid, transfer of expertise and political support. After the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammed Morsi as the president of Egypt, Turkey began to talk about establishing a "strategic partnership" with that country,[3] something that had never been possible before and if realised could have changed the balance of power in the region in important ways. Thus, Turkey's expectations about its future active role in a transforming region were quite high.

It soon became clear however that rather than leading to a transformation towards more democratic and participatory governance, the uprisings, with the exception of Tunisia, would lead to either re-imposition of authoritarian rule or worse still to civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, while triggering external interventions and intensifying competition among regional powers. These post-uprising developments exposed Turkey's limitations in its quest for regional leadership and its ability to influence events to its liking. Especially after the 2013 toppling of President Morsi in Egypt and the rapid evolution of the Syrian uprising into a prolonged civil war involving regional and extra-regional powers, Turkish political elites started to perceive developments in the Middle East as largely presenting new threats to Turkey's national security and regional aspirations. Turkey also suffered from instability along its borders with Syria and Iraq, including large-scale terrorist attacks and massive

Middle East: Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2013*, Istanbul, TESEV, January 2014, https://www.tesev.org.tr/?p=14492.

3. Anthony Shadid, "Turkey Predicts Alliance with Egypt as Regional Anchors", in *The New York Times*, 18 September 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/world/middleeast/turkey-predicts-partnership-with-egypt-as-regional-anchors.html.

refugee flows. In the process, Turkey became directly involved, including militarily, in ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya.

As a result, Turkey's new Middle East policy began to show the following characteristics: (i) increased threat perceptions and a securitisation of issues, elevated to national security threats; (ii) embedding in the geopolitical polarisation of the region and engagement in zero-sum competition with other regional powers; (iii) increased use of military power, engagement in risky behaviour and brinkmanship; and (iv) a preference for unilateral actions, reluctance to rely on traditional alliances, balancing policy between major powers while seeking autonomy.

1.1   Increasing threat perceptions and securitisation

Developments in Syria, which shares with Turkey a border more than 800 km in length, were considered of paramount interest. In the early years of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's main objective was the toppling of the Bashar al-Assad regime and thus Ankara engaged to organise and support an opposition force, politically and militarily. However, especially after 2016, Turkey's strategic priorities in Syria changed. The declaration of a "federal democratic system" called Rojava by the Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its allies in northern Syria in March 2016[4] led to a shift in Turkish policy. Turkey was already concerned about the consolidation of the PYD's control over the Kurdish population and the elimination of its rival Kurdish groups in Syria as early as 2012. AKP officials were publicly complaining about the PYD and its ties with the outlawed Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) of Turkey, threatening to use force if necessary. At that time the government's aim was mainly to convince its NATO allies, particularly the US, to support Turkey's idea of creating a buffer zone along the border.[5]

---

4.   "Syria Conflict: Kurds Declare a Federal System", in *BBC News*, 17 March 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35830375.
5.   Özlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria: The AKP's Construction of a Great Power Identity and the Politics of Grandeur", in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2014), p. 142.

What made matters more complicated for Turkey was that the PYD and its armed group, the People's Protection Units (YPG), had become the main US and European ally in the war against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), fighting on the ground as part of US President Barack Obama's "surrogate war doctrine".[6] As a result of this cooperation, the PYD/YPG had been able to expand its control beyond the three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria bordering Turkey, namely Afrin and Kobane in the Aleppo province and Jazira in the Hassakeh province, all of which the PYD/YPG had already declared "autonomous administrations". Yet the newly declared "Rojava region" announced in March 2016 extended even further, including also those newly acquired, mainly Arab and Turkmen areas that the YPG had captured from ISIS.

Erdoğan's government, perceiving these developments as a direct threat to Turkey's national security, made thwarting the PYD's aspirations in northern Syria the number one priority of its Syria policy.[7] Turkey was also disturbed by the independence referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq in September 2017. These developments, which seemed to indicate increased movement on the Kurdish quest for political autonomy/independence, took place against the backdrop of the breakdown in Turkey–PKK peace talks in 2015 and the consequent re-securitisation of the Kurdish issue domestically in Turkey. Since then, and similar to the 1990s, Turkey's policy in its immediate neighbourhood has been primarily driven by the Kurdish issue.

1.2 Zero-sum regional competition

Before the Arab uprisings, the AKP government was careful to cultivate relationships with all regional actors and especially

6. Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: the Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (January 2016), p. 103-107, https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/19627.

7. Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s", in *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 143-164.

reluctant to be part of the main rivalry in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Assertive strategies of all regional powers after the Arab uprisings, however, led to intense competition among them for power and influence and this time Turkey also became a party to this regional polarisation. Turkey's sponsorship of Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region and its quest for a regional hegemonic role led to a deterioration of relations with the Saudi-led axis,[8] which includes mainly the UAE and Egypt. The competition between the Saudi-Emirati axis and Turkey has been playing out in different parts of the region but particularly in the civil wars in Libya and Syria, with regard to Turkey–Qatari cooperation in the Gulf and polarisation in the domestic politics in Tunisia. The two sides also engaged in a competition to increase their presence in the Horn of Africa, through a policy of economic aid and political support in return for basing rights.[9]

While Turkey's competition with the Saudi-Emirati axis has expanded to the whole region, its struggle with Iran, the leader of another pole, has been limited to Syria and to some extent Iraq. In Syria, Ankara and Tehran respectively backed the opposition and the regime. Yet, they did not let competition in Syria result in a total breakdown of existing ties. However, in the post-2016 period, new areas of contention emerged. Iran became uncomfortable with Turkey's military operations in Syria, whereas Turkey was disturbed by the increasing activism of Iran and its militias in support of the regime in areas close to Turkey. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the two countries became part of the process initiated by Russia in December 2016, the Astana process, and the related mechanism of leadership summits, the Sochi process, that aimed to coordinate relations between the three powers in Syria. In Iraq as well, despite the existence of divergent interests and competition

8.   Nuri Yeşiltaş, "Whither Inter-Sunni Relations in the Middle East? Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council", in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 2018), p. 19-35.
9.   Zach Vertin, "Turkey and the New Scramble for Africa: Ottoman Designs or Unfounded Fears?", in *Brookings Reports*, 19 May 2019, https://brook.gs/2HzNSSc.

for influence, the two countries managed to avoid direct and open confrontation. Turkey considered the Trump administration's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or Iran nuclear deal, as an "unfortunate step" and continued its dialogue with Iran even though the two countries came face-to-face militarily on the ground in Idlib in Syria in 2020. Ultimately, Turkey's relations with Iran continued along the old path of competition and cooperation, and thus did not turn into a zero-sum game as was the case regarding Turkey's relations with the Saudi-Emirati axis. However, parallel to the developments on the ground in Syria, tensions with Iran recently mounted again around Idlib in 2020.

Overall therefore, Turkey has engaged in competition with two power blocs in the region. The only country with which Turkey developed closer ties during this period has been Qatar. The two countries supported Muslim Brotherhood movements across the region following the Arab uprisings. Turkey's military base in Qatar, established in 2015 more as a highly symbolic gesture than anything else, expanded considerably after the so-called Qatar crisis of 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf States placed Qatar under a political and commercial embargo due to its support for Muslim Brotherhood parties and relations with Iran. This crisis led to an overall improvement in military relations between Qatar and Turkey, including "official visits, expanding defense industry bonds, and joint training and military exercises".[10] Intensifying relations between Turkey and Qatar have in return contributed to increased threat perceptions in Saudi Arabia and the UAE with regard to Turkish regional policies. Thus, Turkey and other regional powers have been locked into a security dilemma during this period.

1.3 Increasing use of military power

Up until 2011 Turkey prioritised soft power and economic and political engagements in the region. However, more recently

---

10. Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, Ankara, SETA, 2020, p. 26, https://www.setav.org/en/?p=12667.

and especially since 2016 Ankara has increasingly begun to use military power to pursue its objectives. This has particularly been the case in Syria, where the Turkish military launched several military operations as Ankara started to perceive direct threats to its national security. Developing Turkish-Russian relations allowed Turkey to launch its first military operation, Operation Euphrates Shield, in August 2016, with the aim "to push back Kurdish and ISIS forces from the border" and thus "form a wedge between Syria's Kurds to prevent any territorial connection between the cantons of Afrin and Kobane, thus ensuring the territorial continuity of Rojava".[11]

This was followed by another military operation, the January 2018 Operation Olive Branch, this time against Afrin, which the government claimed had become a source of more than 700 attacks against Turkey.[12] Finally, in October 2019 after negotiations with Washington Turkey launched another military operation, Operation Peace Spring, in north-eastern Syria. All these military operations aimed to pre-empt the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. While Turkey's military operations were able to prevent a PYD-controlled contiguous area across its border, they could not achieve the full extent of Turkey's planned buffer zone. Indeed, it became clear that "neither the U.S. nor Russia seem to be willing and capable of answering Turkey's demands for a full withdrawal of the YPG".[13]

In parallel, also in October 2019, the government started a military operation in northern Iraq in pursuit of the PKK, where airstrikes targeted areas in the Hakurk region. This was made possible when Ankara and Erbil started a rapprochement after a period of cooling of relations due to the KRG independence referendum in September 2017.[14] In mid-June 2020, Turkey also

---

11. Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention...", cit., p. 157, 156.
12. Ibid., p. 157.
13. Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 15.
14. The referendum led to the cooling of relations between Turkey and the KRG for about two years, although recently there has been a thaw which led to

launched an extensive air and ground military campaign, the Claw Eagle and the Claw Tiger operations, in northern Iraq, particularly in the Qandil Mountains, the Sinjar District and Makhmur, against the PKK.

Turkey has recently become involved in the civil war in Libya. As part of its competition with the Saudi-Emirati axis, Turkey was already supporting the UN-recognised GNA against forces aligned with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's so-called Libyan National Army, which is backed by the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia and France. But Turkey's interest in the Libyan civil war increased in parallel to the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as an important focus for Turkey's foreign and security policy, where the interlocking of energy politics and maritime sovereignty rights with old problems like the Cyprus issue have combined to make this area a new geopolitical hotspot. Over the last few years, Ankara was disturbed by energy and security developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is perceived as challenging Turkey's and Turkish Cypriots' rights, as well as by efforts to contain Turkey particularly by Israel, Greek Cypriots, Greece and Egypt.[15] Deciding to adopt a proactive policy against these developments, rather than a reactive one as it had pursued before, the AKP government signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean between Turkey and the GNA government led by Fayez al-Sarraj in Tripoli. This was followed by a security agreement that made "possible [the] deployment of Turkish Army personnel to Libya".[16] Turkey's military support has shifted the balance of power in Libya and helped the GNA government push back the advances of General Haftar's forces. In the meantime, Turkey began exploring for natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean with its newly ac-

a revitalisation of economic relations and possibly cooperation against the PKK. Ali Mohamed, "Ties with Turkey Important, Strategic: Iraq's KRG", in *Anadolu Agency*, 29 April 2019, http://v.aa.com.tr/1465481.

15. Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean Quagmire", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 18 February 2020, https://www.mei.edu/node/80885.

16. Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 10.

MELIHA BENLI ALTUNIŞIK

quired vessels, including in contested waters off the coast of Cyprus with the support of its navy, which has increased the possibility of military escalation in the region. Furthermore, due to its policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and its participation in the Libyan conflict, Turkey has also come in opposition with the US and the EU – especially France – as well as Russia. The whole saga thus aptly demonstrates many elements of Turkey's new foreign policy in the Middle East: readily opting for military solutions, engagement in risky behaviour as well as unilateralism.

Another example of risky behaviour and brinkmanship occurred more recently, in early 2020, in Syria's Idlib, where a de-escalation zone had been created a result of a 17 September 2018 agreement between Russia and Turkey in Sochi which established twelve Turkish observation outposts in the area. For Turkey, Idlib is important for two main reasons. First, as part of its aspirations to be a regional power and more recently due to its threat perceptions vis-à-vis Syria and the Syrian Kurds, the AKP government wants to have a say on Syria's future when the time comes for a political solution and perceives itself as the only power supporting the Syrian opposition. By late 2019, Idlib had become the last safe haven in Syria for the myriad of opposition forces battling the Assad regime and its allies, many of which had been relocated to the Idlib zone from other parts of Syria following the re-capturing of most of Syrian territory by Damascus. The AKP government wanted Idlib to remain as such until the time comes for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Secondly, Ankara wanted to prevent another wave of refugees that would cross the border if the attacks of the Syrian regime continued. Such developments would put the government in a difficult position due to mounting domestic pressure to limit new arrivals and ensure the return of at least some of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees presently in Turkey. These objectives put a wedge between Turkey and its Astana partners, Russia and Iran, and exposed how Turkey's understanding of the Sochi agreements differed from those of the key external backers of the Assad regime in Syria. While Turkey perceived the agreement as a status quo until a politi-

100   FOSTERING A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

cal solution to the Syrian crisis is reached, Russia saw it as an interim solution until the Assad regime eventually consolidates its control over the province.

After re-establishing control over much of Syria, the Assad regime with the help of its Russian and Iranian allies began to advance in the north-west in the second half of 2019. The developing situation in Idlib led to a dramatic escalation when on 27 February 2020 airstrikes killed 33 Turkish soldiers. In response, Turkey immediately launched a military incursion in Idlib, Operation Spring Shield. This offensive ended with a ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow between Turkey and Russia in a set of deals called "additional protocols" to the Sochi agreement on 5 March 2020. Central to the additional protocols is the redefinition of the battle lines per its current standing and the creation of a 6 km buffer zone on either side of the much-contested M4 highway, which would be jointly patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces. The agreement put a temporary end to the escalation.

Parallel to this military activism, Turkey's investment in its defence sector has also increased significantly in recent years. The Turkish defence industry, in terms of both research & development and production, has been supported by the government. This was presented by the AKP political elite as part of their efforts to achieve autonomy.[17] Further, according to the Presidency of Defence Industries, which came directly under the President's office in the new presidential system, Turkey has started to export about one-third of its production.[18]

---

17. Turkish Presidency, *Our Goal Is to Entirely End Our Foreign Dependency in Defense Industry by 2023*, 29 September 2019, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/109882/-our-goal-is-to-entirely-end-our-foreign-dependency-in-defense-industry-by-2023-.

18. "Defense Industry Focuses on Quality and Quantity to Step-up Turkey's Exports", in *Defence Turkey*, Vol. 10, No. 70 (September 2016), https://www.defenceturkey.com/en/content/defense-industry-focuses-on-quality-and-quantity-to-step-up-turkey-s-exports-2424. According to SIPRI, between 2009–13 and 2014–18 Turkish arms exports increased by 170 per cent making Turkey the 14th largest arms exporter in the world. Between 2014 and 2018, the UAE (30 per cent), Turkmenistan (23 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (10 per cent) con-

1.4 Turkey's newfound unilateralism: The search for autonomy and balancing efforts with major powers

Turkey's new Middle East policy has developed in the context of an increasingly problematic relationship with its traditional allies. Turkey–EU relations had already been at a standstill for some time and were taking place mostly within the context of the refugee deal of 2016 and continuing economic ties. The EU continued to criticise Turkey for slipping towards authoritarianism, whereas the AKP government increasingly chose to ignore the EU and focused on its relations with individual EU states that fluctuated based on the realpolitik considerations of the time. More significantly for Turkey's Middle East policy, Ankara's policies have also become increasingly divergent with Washington's. Turkey failed to convince the US to cut its support for and cooperation with the PYD,[19] and thus faced the reality of a US-supported Kurdish entity with links to the PKK along its southern border. The AKP political elite was already upset by what they saw as US indifference to Turkey's fight against the Gülenist network, which they accused of staging the coup attempt in July 2016. From their perspective, the US was slow to come out in support of the Turkish government

stituted Turkey's first three clients. Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, March 2019, https://www.sipri.org/node/4766. It is reported that after the Qatar crisis in 2017 both the UAE and Saudi Arabia cancelled some contracts. Yet, it is still interesting to note that in the first 9 months of 2019, the UAE still appeared on the list, this time as the 5th exporter behind the United States, Germany, Oman and Qatar. The numbers for 2019 include defence and aerospace exports. "Turkey's Defense, Aerospace Exports See 37.7% Rise in 9 Months", in Daily Sabah, 8 October 2019, https://www.dailysabah.com/defense/2019/10/08/turkeys-defense-aerospace-exports-see-377-rise-in-9-months; "Savunma Sanayi İhracat Rekoru Kırdı" [The Defence Industry Broke the Export Record], in *Sözcü*, 5 October 2019, https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/savunma-sanayi-ihracati-rekor-kirdi-5371940. Between 2015 and 2019, Turkey's first three clients were Turkmenistan (25 per cent), Oman (12 per cent) and Pakistan (12 per cent). See Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, March 2020, https://www.sipri.org/node/5075.

19. "USA has been reluctant to accept any connection between the YPG/PYD and PKK and has regarded the YPG as a reliable partner against ISIS". Ayşegül Sever, "Regional Power Role and Intervention…", cit., p. 156.

and failed to extradite Fethullah Gülen, a cleric with extensive ties in Turkey's military, judiciary and bureaucracy and who resides in Pennsylvania.[20] This contributed further to the lack of trust on the part of the AKP political elite vis-à-vis the US.

Yet, the AKP government was aware of the necessity to continue cooperation with the US as far as (and when) possible. Thus, Turkey hoped that by more actively joining the US-led coalition against ISIS and by allowing the US's use of Turkey's İncirlik airbase, it could not only deal with the increasing ISIS threat on its border and in Turkey but also increase its room for manoeuvre in Syria. Similarly, AKP circles continued to refer to a special rapport between US President Donald Trump and President Erdoğan, which they hoped could help deal with some of the problems they were facing, particularly in Syria.[21]

In the meantime, after 2016 the AKP political elite moved to develop closer relations with Russia. This was seen as crucial after Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015, which for the first time gave the upper hand in the civil war to the regime. Immediately after the Russian military intervention in Syria, however, relations between Moscow and Ankara deteriorated significantly. Russian bombing soon began to also target Turkey-supported Syrian opposition close to border areas, which eventually led to the downing of a Russian bomber jet by a Turkish F-16 on 24 November 2015. As a result, Turkey–Russia relations hit rock bottom. In addition to the cutting of economic and tourist ties, Moscow started a policy of engaging with Kurdish groups in Syria as well as in Turkey, which further contributed to Turkey's threat perception.[22]

20. Kemal İnat and Mustafa Caner, "Türk-Amerikan İlişkilerinde 'Eksen' Sorunu" [The 'Axis' Issue in Turkish-American Relations], in Kemal İnat, Ali Aslan and Burhanettin Duran (eds), *AK Parti'nin 15 Yılı: Dış Politika* [15 Years of the AK Party: Foreign Policy], Ankara, SETA, 2017, p. 109-134.

21. Hakan Copur, "Ups, Downs in Turkish-American Relations in 2019", in *Anadolu Agency*, 31 December 2019, http://v.aa.com.tr/1688926.

22. İnan Rüma and Mitat Çelikpala, "Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater", in *Uluslararasi Iliskiler*, Vol. 16, No. 62 (2019), p. 78, https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.588930.

Aware of Russia's crucial role in Syria and eager to balance against the US, the AKP political elite responded to the emerging geostrategic environment by trying to develop better relations with Moscow despite all odds. The downing of the Russian jet was blamed on the Gülenists who were accused of trying to create a rift between Turkey and Russia, a claim which seemed to convince Moscow. Also, for Russia, this provided an opportunity to drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies, mainly the US, as well as to balance its alliance with Iran in Syria. It also provided Turkey with an opportunity to use Russia "as a balancer to realize Turkey's interests in Syria".[23] The result was the creation of the Astana process between Russia, Turkey and Iran as well as the Sochi leaders' summit, where these countries aimed to coordinate their policies in Syria and ultimately to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The process was strengthened by frequent meetings and phone calls at the leadership level between Turkey and Russia. Yet, ultimately the AKP political elite has always been aware of the limitations of this partnership as the relations between the two countries continued to be characterised by divergent interests and underlying mutual mistrust.[24]

Thus, particularly in the attempt to achieve its objectives in Syria, Turkey has become part of a difficult balancing game between two major powers, namely the US and Russia. This allowed Turkey to engage in military operations in northern Syria to establish a "safe zone", yet at the same time has put Turkey in the dangerous position of being used by both parties in their struggle against each other. Especially with the escalation of competition between the US and Russia in the Mediterranean, Turkey's policy of balancing becomes even more difficult.

---

23. Ibid., p. 80.
24. Murat Yeşiltaş (ed.), *SETA Security Radar. Turkey's Geopolitical Landscape 2020*, cit., p. 16.

2. Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine

Turkey's new Middle East policy was accompanied by a doctrinal change. The doctrine behind the earlier policy was provided by Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had served in AKP governments in different capacities, initially as the chief foreign policy advisor to the prime minister from 2002 to 2009, then as foreign minister from 2009 to 2014, and finally as prime minister from 2014 to 2016. Yet after a group of anonymous party supporters published a harsh criticism of Davutoğlu and his policies online under the title "The Pelican File",[25] Davutoğlu resigned in May 2016.

The removal of Davutoğlu opened the way for those around Erdoğan to blame the foreign policy failures on him and to reset Turkey's foreign policy doctrine, now in the context of changing global and regional realities as well as rising populist nationalism at home. This new doctrine not only became the reason for shifts in Turkey's Middle East policy but also its justification.

Based on the writings of those political figures who work in the President's office as well as academics close to the AKP, the new doctrine starts with the argument that a new, multipolar global order is emerging and this requires Turkey not only to redefine its place in it but also to act independently. The AKP elite perceives the transformations in the global and regional structure as providing Turkey with both opportunities and constraints. They believe that in a context where the old world order is disappearing and a new one is in the making, Turkey cannot just rely on traditional alliances to pursue its national interest. As Ibrahim Kalın, one of Erdoğan's chief advisors and government spokesperson, states, "The world is bigger than the US and Europe. Thus, trying to only remain in the Europe-centred global order is a concept we should avoid".[26]

---

25. Mustafa Akyol, "How Mysterious New Turkish Blog Exposed Erdoğan-Davutoğlu Rift", in *Al-Monitor*, 3 May 2016, http://almon.co/2nhi.

26. Zeynep Rakipoğlu, "Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü Kalın: Dünya, Avrupa'dan ve ABD'den daha büyüktür" [Presidential Spokesperson Kalin: The World Is Big-

After all, Turkey's alliance with NATO did not provide Ankara with the Patriot missiles it requested, nor did it convince the US or France not to cooperate with the PYD/YPG in Syria.[27] These arguments meant that Turkey should not try to harmonise its policies in the Middle East with the US or the EU, as it attempted to do in the early 2000s, with the notable exception of Ankara refusing to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Similarly, Burhaneddin Duran, an academic who heads the pro-government think tank SETA and sits on the Security and Foreign Policy Council of the Presidency, has argued that although Turkey has recently aligned itself with Russia on many issues, this does not prevent Turkey from criticising Russia on Syria, or Idlib specifically.[28] It is interesting to note here that although the AKP government officially did not blame Russia for military strikes against Turkish soldiers in Idlib, opinion makers close to the government have not been shy in criticising Russian policy in Syria in general and Idlib in particular. Despite close cooperation with Russia on some issues and Moscow's and Ankara's success in managing their differences and thus compartmentalising their Syria-related competition, mutual distrust remains and, in a way that is similar to Turkey–US relations, crises frequently erupt (although each time they are somehow resolved). Thus, balancing between the United States and Russia has become one of the most important aspects of Turkey's Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean policy. This reality has become a constant theme in the writings of those close to the AKP government. More specifically, they argue that in this evolving global order, Turkey can cooperate with any of these global actors based on its interests, but none of these relations should be considered as fixed. Turkey, according to this view, cannot rely on international institutions, one bloc of states or even its traditional allies. Instead, there are shifting alliances.

ger than Europe and the USA], in *Anadolu Agency*, 3 March 2019, http://v.aa.com.tr/1407898.

27.   Burhanettin Duran, "The Sole Axis of Turkey's Foreign Policy", in *Daily Sabah*, 11 February 2020, https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2020/02/11/the-sole-axis-of-turkeys-foreign-policy.

28.   Ibid.

In addition to the uncertain global environment, the AKP stresses that the regional context also presents new threats where more and more countries are now eager to use military means to resolve rivalries, which easily trigger new conflicts and exacerbate old ones.[29] In such an environment, Turkey should adopt robust strategies to deal with threats. Duran, for instance, has argued that those politicians who call for Turkey to return to its old soft power policies are in fact operating according to faulty understandings that date back to the pre-Arab uprising era, calling on Turkey to be "dependent and passive"[30] in its foreign policy decisions.

Thus, AKP political elites argue that only now, with the implementation of a new foreign policy doctrine, has Turkey become more autonomous and independent. To quote President Erdoğan: "Turkey is independent in its foreign policy and does not seek permission from others (to launch) operations for its own security".[31] The title of the winter 2019 special issue of the foreign policy journal *Insight Turkey*, which is published by the pro-government think tank SETA, is in this sense quite telling: "Turkey's New Foreign Policy: A Quest for Autonomy".[32]

The AKP political elite thus explains the shift in Turkey's policy in the Middle East as mainly a response to structural shifts, both regional and global. Middle East politics since the Arab uprisings has indeed significantly transformed, presenting important challenges to all actors. However, explanations based solely on such structural factors, while ignoring individual and

---

29. Burhaneddin Duran, "Why Is Turkish Foreign Policy Under Attack?", in *Daily Sabah*, 22 February 2020, https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/duran-burhanettin/2020/02/24/why-is-turkish-foreign-policy-under-attack.

30. Ibid.

31. "Turkey Is Independent in Its Foreign Policy, President Erdoğan Says", in *Daily Sabah*, 5 December 2019, https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/12/05/turkey-is-independent-in-its-foreign-policy-president-erdogan-says; Yıldız Aktaş et al., "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Bugün dış politikası bağımsız bir Türkiye var" [President Erdogan: Today we have an independent foreign policy of Turkey], in *Anadolu Agency*, 4 December 2019, http://v.aa.com.tr/1664159.

32. *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 2019), https://www.insightturkey.com/issues/2019/21/4.

collective agency, would be inadequate. These choices have been largely influenced by worldviews as well as domestic political considerations. As Michael Barnett wrote when analysing Israeli foreign policy, "a cultural basis exists for a foreign policy that is quintessentially realist".[33] The way the AKP political elite has responded to geopolitical shifts in the region has been highly influenced by how they have interpreted the opportunities and challenges these developments presented. These choices have been clear in three instances: supporting the Muslim Brotherhood movements everywhere, including places like Syria where they were particularly weak; continuing to have problematic relations with Egypt after the 2013 coup; and involving Turkey in the so-called Qatar crisis. When seen from this angle, Turkey's new Middle East policy reflects some degree of continuity in terms of the worldview of the AKP government, yet it also includes changes in how this is implemented in a shifting geopolitical context in Turkey's neighbourhood.

As to domestic factors, there have been clear shifts in AKP alliances and domestic politics. This is not the place to engage with debates as to whether there has been a change in the AKP itself,[34] or if the AKP's true colours and ambitions simply emerged once the party consolidated power vis-à-vis the traditional power centres, mainly the military and the bureaucracy.[35] Suffice it here to say that the AKP in the last decade has left its former alliances first with the liberals and then with the Kurdish political movement. After the failed military coup in 2016, it formed the so-called People's Alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and changed the politi-

---

33. Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Re/creating the Un/thinkable", in Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett (eds), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 64.

34. See, for instance, Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2014), p. 203-219.

35. See, for instance, Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Nebahat Tanriverdi Yaşar, "Populism and Foreign Policy in Turkey under the AKP Rule", in *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2018), p. 198-216.

cal system to a presidential one with extensive powers. These developments have not only made Turkey's more militaristic, securitised and zero-sum foreign policy possible, but also helped to consolidate the new nationalist alliance between the AKP and the MHP. Overall, the discourse of an isolated Turkey surrounded by enemies and unreliable traditional allies, mixed with the claim that there is an international campaign specifically targeting President Erdoğan, emerged as the main pillar of Turkey's new foreign policy. This narrative resembles that of the 1990s and rests at least in part on a resurrection of old fears and animosities dating back even further, and specifically the discourse that Turkey's "enemies" are seeking to revive the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which had mandated the partition of modern-day Turkey into different protectorates, including a never-established Kurdish state, in the wake of World War I. It is also in this context that President Erdoğan has recently framed Turkey's Eastern Mediterranean policy as the "reversal of the Sèvres".[36]

3. The Iran-Saudi rivalry and Gulf security: A view from Turkey

In line with the shifts in Turkey's general Middle East policy, Turkey's relations with the Gulf have also been transformed in recent years. In the first decade of the 2000s, as part of its activism in the Middle East, the AKP government developed close economic, strategic and political relations with individual Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, as well as with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a whole. After the Arab uprisings, divergences began to emerge between the positions of Turkey

---

36. "Erdogan: Security MOU with GNA Will Enter Into Force Upon Approval of Turkish Parliament", in *Al Marsad*, 16 December 2019, https://almarsad.co/en/2019/12/16/erdogan-security-mou-with-gna-will-enter-into-force-up-on-approval-of-turkish-parliament; "Başkan Erdoğan: Sevr'in ters yüz edilmesi var" [President Erdoğan: Sevres has to be inverted], in *Sabah*, 15 December 2019, https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2019/12/15/baskan-erdogan-sevrin-tersyuz-edilmesi-var.

and Saudi Arabia, yet this did not initially lead to the deterioration of bilateral relations.[37] Erdoğan cut a trip to Africa short to attend King Abdullah's funeral in January 2015. Then, the AKP government extended its support to the Saudi intervention in Yemen a few days after the start of the operation. Erdoğan also seemed to openly take sides in the Saudi-Iran rivalry and criticised what he described as Iran's expanding role in the region. For instance, in March 2015 Erdoğan said, "Iran is trying to dominate the region. Could this be allowed? This has begun annoying us, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries. This is really not tolerable and Iran has to see this".[38] Especially in 2016, contacts between Turkey and Saudi Arabia intensified. In addition to mutual visits at the leadership level, the two countries established a Strategic Cooperation Council and emphasised cooperation and coordination on Syria, particularly against Iran and ISIS. In September, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef visited Turkey, his second visit in six months. In October 2016, the GCC designated the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation. In November 2016, the Security Dialogue with the GCC convened in Riyadh and approved a 38-point statement advocating stronger economic and military ties and expressing support for the current Turkish regime, a shared commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq and a determination to join in the fight against terrorism.[39] This was followed by Erdoğan's Gulf tour in February 2017, when he visited Saudi Arabia as well as Qatar and Bahrain. During this visit, which was touted by the AKP government as yet another example of "intra-regional

---

37. For Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia, see Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia: From Hopes of Cooperation to the Reality of Conflict", in Gönül Tol and David Dumke (eds), *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals. Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, New York, The Middle East Institute, 2019, p. 17-39, https://www.mei.edu/publications/aspiring-powers-regional-rivals-turkey-egypt-saudi-arabia-and-new-middle-east.

38. Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey's Erdogan Says Can't Tolerate Iran Bid to Dominate Middle East", in *Reuters*, 26 March 2015, http://reut.rs/1HMytJJ.

39. Hussein Ibish, "GCC-Turkish Relations: Gulf Arab Perspectives", in Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish, *Turkey and the GCC: Cooperation Amid Divergent Interests*, Washington, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), 28 February 2017, p. 7-8, https://agsiw.org/cooperation-amid-diverging-interests.

solidarity",[40] the two sides focused on developments in Syria and on further developing economic relations.

However, after the visit relations between Ankara and Riyadh began to deteriorate rapidly due to the Qatar crisis erupting in June 2017. Saudi Arabia and the UAE presented a 13-point list of demands to Qatar, one of which was closing the Turkish military base and halting joint military operations inside Qatar. Turkey's response to the crisis was to upgrade its ties with Qatar by expanding military and economic relations. Since then Saudi Arabia and the UAE have started to publicly criticise the AKP government's ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and portray Turkey as a destructive force in the region.[41] The brutal killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul led to a further deterioration of relations as Turkey claimed that the murder was planned at the highest levels in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in the current context the Gulf has also become part of the geostrategic competition between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other.

Within this context, the Trump administration's close relations with the Saudi-UAE axis was seen with concern in Ankara. The US proposal for a Middle East Strategic Alliance, the so-called Arab NATO, was perceived within this light. The AKP government also has been objecting to such alliances that aimed to target Iran, due to its complex relationship with this country that combines highly competitive but also cooperative elements. Recently both Iran and Russia have advanced their own proposals for regional security in the Gulf. Iran's Coalition for HOPE initiative, aiming to exclude all extra-regional powers and achieve normalisation between Iran and the Arab Gulf states through respect for Westphalian principles, aimed di-

---

40. Ibrahim Kalın, "Turkey, the Gulf and Regional Ownership", in *Daily Sabah*, 2 February 2017, https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2017/02/18/turkey-the-gulf-and-regional-ownership.

41. "Saudi Prince Says Turkey Part of 'Triangle of Evil': Egyptian Media", in *Reuters*, 7 March 2018, https://reut.rs/2FnziuK.

rectly at ending the rivalry between Iran and the Saudi-led bloc and thus was a response to the US proposal. The Russian Security Concept for the Gulf, on the other hand, could build on this normalisation but aimed for a far-reaching regional security framework with the external actors playing the guarantor role. Interestingly, there were no official responses from the AKP government to these proposals. This is probably not because the government was not interested, but rather because Turkey was never to be found in these frameworks, which instead mainly focused on tackling the Saudi-Iran rivalry that is seen by the United States, Russia and Iran as one of the main sources of instability in the region. Yet, from Turkey's perspective all the conflicts and rivalries in the region have become interrelated and a "comprehensive approach" to regional security tackling only the Saudi-Iran rivalry not only would not bring stability to the region but would also not solve the problems Turkey perceives to be related to its national security or its own rivalry with the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis.

4. Conclusion

Since the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, but especially after 2016, there have been important shifts in Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, in terms of both discourse and practice. These shifts have occurred in the context of global, regional and domestic transformations that have reinforced each other. In some ways Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East has come full circle as the discourses and policies of the 1990s, focusing on threats, zero-sum mentality and mistrust, have returned. What is different is the ideology behind these policies. This largely explains different sets of policies pursued by the AKP government. Whereas Turkey's military operations in northern Syria or the Eastern Mediterranean reflect some continuity with the 1990s, Turkey's developing relationships with its Arab partners, and particularly with Qatar and Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, as well as its policies vis-à-vis Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Israel reflect the new ideological bent. Another

continuity is related to Turkey's relations to Iran. Although the nature of competition between the two countries has shifted mainly to Syria, the existence of mutual interests for cooperation in some issue areas continues to mean that both sides are still being successful in compartmentalising issues on which they are at loggerheads, thereby avoiding direct confrontation.

A new element in Turkey's Middle East policy is a constant game of balancing between the United States and Russia, which the AKP government uses to increase its room for manoeuvre. Finally, the EU has become less relevant for Turkey's regional policy during this period, whereas individual EU member states have begun to factor more in Ankara's policies vis-à-vis the Middle East. In that context, while Turkey's relations with France have deteriorated amid the latter's increasingly strategic partnership with the UAE, Ankara has found opportunities to work with Germany in the context of Syria and the refugee crisis as well as in Libya or with Italy in the case of Libya. Overall, Turkey has become a more assertive player in the Middle East and more sceptical about regional cooperation schemes.

5
STRUCTURAL SHIFTS AND REGIONAL SECURITY: A VIEW FROM ISRAEL

EHUD EIRAN

1. Introduction: Israel's traditional security maxims

Israel is arguably the most powerful state in the Middle East militarily. At the heart of its concept of national security is the perception that the region as a whole rejects Israel's legitimacy and that only military might can protect against these threats.[1] Peace accords, such as the ones Israel has with its former foes Egypt and Jordan, are understood to have been achieved and secured by Israeli deterrence. Israel's long-term hope is that constant Arab failure to breach the "Iron Wall" will lead to a fundamental change in the Arab world which will allow true acceptance of a largely Jewish state in the Middle East.[2] Israel sees its general strategy as defensive and intended to provide security, deter its foes and delay confrontation.[3] Therefore, the changes that have occurred in Israeli strategy over the years – including the ones analysed in this paper – usually reflect a response to global and regional changes, rather than a new agenda developed internally.

---

1. Charles D. Freilich, *Israeli National Security. A New Strategy for an Era of Change*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018; Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land. A Critical Analysis of Israel's Security & Foreign Policy*, Ann Arbour, Michigan University Press, 2006.
2. These ideas were articulated in a 1923 piece by the founding father of Zionism's right wing, Ze'ev Jabutinsky, but were adopted by his foe and the founding father of Israel, David Ben Gurion. They continue to guide Israeli thinking on the matter. Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall", in *The Jewish Herald*, 26 November 1937 (first published in *Rassviet*, 4 November 1923), http://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=158379.
3. Israel Defense Force, *The Strategy of the Israel Defense Force* (in Hebrew), April 2018, p. 11-12, https://www.idf.il/media/34416/strategy.pdf.

In achieving the defensive/responsive strategic goal, Israel professed to adopt an offensive military approach. Historically, the offensive proclivity was a result of the country's natural constraints: small territory and limited manpower. Under these conditions, military operations should be short (as much of the military force is based on reservists) and conducted on enemy territory. Supported by an effective early warning system, this approach was translated to a preference for taking the initiative, including pre-emptive strikes.[4] Another traditional pillar of Israel's strategy (and indeed, of the Zionist movement before it) is the securing of an alliance with a great power. Since the late 1960s the United States has been Israel's ally. Though these maxims remain in force, recent changes in the international, regional and internal arenas are leading to some adjustments in Israeli foreign and security strategy.

Despite Israel's strength, it has by and large refrained from participating in any significant effort to shape the region's security architecture. This was, at least to some extent, the result of the fact that many of the regional alliances and political arrangements were actually directed against it.[5] Alliances that were directed at other parties – such as the 1955 Baghdad Pact, an uneasy anti-Soviet alliance between Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom (UK)[6] – deliberately shunned Israel.[7] For a long time, keeping Israel at arm's length from any regional alliance was also the approach followed by the United States (US). During the 1991 Gulf war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the George H.W. Bush administration deliberately kept Israel out of the international coalition it assembled to reverse

---

4. Charles D. Freilich, *Israeli National Security*, cit.; Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land*, cit.
5. J S F. Parker, "The United Arab Republic", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 1962), p. 16.
6. The alliance floundered after the 1958 revolution in Iraq and formally folded after the 1979 revolution in Iran.
7. "Israel Issue Raised at Baghdad Pact Conference; Iraq Voices Threat", in *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 225 (22 November 1955), https://www.jta.org/?p=761061.

Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.[8] The US also made sure that Israel did not fall under the area of operations of its US Central Command Middle East (CENTCOM), since the organisation is entrusted with developing and directing coalitional operation with regional allies. Israel, on its part, avoided joining regional security initiatives that it deemed contrary to its security interests, such as the establishment of a Middle East nuclear weapons free zone.[9] Israel's "otherness" in the region is arguably part of the explanation. A mostly Jewish state, embedded within a large Arab and Muslim space and deemed by many in the region a colonial implant that should be removed, Israel had long struggled with regional isolation and military threats.

Regional alliances were not part of Israel's foundational security maxims. In the rare cases when Israel did create some long-standing "quasi-alliances" with regional actors – such as the close relationship with Iran and Turkey in the late 1950s (the periphery doctrine) – relationships were mostly clandestine and limited in nature.[10] Even at its peak, however, the doctrine was not a central pillar of Israeli strategy.

2. Israel in a changing regional reality: immediate threats and responses

2.1 Traditional threats are gone

Although Israel still holds to its basic security maxims, the conditions in the region have changed. First, the traditional threat

---

8. The US tried to keep Israel away from any participation in the alliance with Arab states against Iraq. Aware of this, Iraq tried to provoke Israel by shelling it with ballistic missiles. The Iraqis were hoping that an Israeli response would force Washington's Arab allies to leave the anti-Iraqi coalition.

9. Reuters, "Netanyahu Thanks US for Blocking Push for Middle East Nuclear Arms Ban", in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2015, https://gu.com/p/49724; Arms Control Association, "WMD-Free Middle East Proposal at a Glance", in *ACA Fact Sheets*, last reviewed: December 2018, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/4705.

10. Yossi Alpher, *Periphery. Israel's Search for Middle East Allies*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

from neighbouring states was replaced by concerns about Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. Until the late 1980s, Israel's immediate neighbours – Egypt, Syria and Jordan – were perceived to pose the most significant threat, supported by the "second circle" Arab nations, such as Iraq and Libya.[11] Starting in the late 1970s, major neighbouring Arab states began to abandon their hostility. First Egypt (1979) and then Jordan (1994) signed a peace accord with Israel. Syria, Lebanon and Israel were engaged in (fruitless) peace talks during the 1990s and 2000s. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the latter as a threat, and the collapse of the Syrian state in the civil war solidified Israel's sense that conventional threats posed by neighbouring states are largely gone.

2.2 Current threats and responses: Iran, Hezbollah and the Palestinians

With the state threat largely gone, Israel – as reflected in public discourse[12] and leadership statements – has come to view Iran and Hezbollah, the Shiite Lebanese armed group that Iran helped create and sustain after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, as the main threats. The Iranian threat is a sub-category of the broader Israeli fear that a regional actor will acquire a nuclear weapon.[13] With the shadow of the holocaust, many Israelis (though probably not the security elite) believe that once Iran has the bomb, it will use it against them.[14] Others fear a cascading effect that will destabilise the region, by pushing such actors as Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Egypt to seek nucle-

---

11. Over the years, numerous Arab states that do not share a border with Israel, such as Iraq, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Kuwait have deployed elements of their armed forces to support combat operations against Israel.

12. "Iran Top of Mind as Israelis Head to the Polls … Again", in *BRINK*, 28 February 2020, http://www.brinknews.com/Y8I.

13. Hence the "Begin Doctrine" which led to Israeli attack on reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007).

14. In a 2012 poll, 61 per cent of Israelis believed that if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon it will use it against Israel, and 77 per cent believed that Iran is an existential threat to Israel. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), "Poll: 77 Percent of Israelis See Iran Nukes as Existential Threat", in *Jerusalem Issue Briefs*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (27 March 2012), https://jcpa.org/?p=30624.

ar weapons. A third concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran and its allies, such as Hezbollah, will be emboldened to challenge Israel.[15] Beyond the bomb, Israel does not want Iran to gain a foothold close to its borders, particularly in Syria, where Israel and Iran have engaged in multiple military exchanges, both directly and involving Iran's proxies in both Syria and Lebanon. This latter concern ties back to the fear that Iran will acquire nuclear capability. Seen from Israel, such capability would increase Iran's regional influence and power, and could limit that of Israel and its global and regional partners.

Israel encouraged the US to withdraw, in May 2018, from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal signed in July 2015 by Iran, the US and a group of other powers (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the European Union). Israel also continued with a clandestine effort to curb the Iranian nuclear project, such as the 2018 operation to bring to Israel the archive of the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme.[16] For now, Israeli efforts have not achieved the desired results of curbing Iran's nuclear activities to a greater extent than the JCPOA had foreseen. Teheran is slowly relaunching parts of its nuclear programme and may thus gradually move closer to acquiring nuclear weapons capability.[17]

Israel is further trying to curtail Iran's regional influence, especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Israel's response, includ-

15. Ehud Eiran and Martin B. Malin, "The Sum of all Fears: Israel's Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 2013), p. 77-89, https://www.csis.org/node/27293.

16. David E. Sanger and Ronen Bergman, "How Israel, in Dark of Night, Torched Its Way to Iran's Nuclear Secrets", in *The New York Times*, 15 July 2020, https://nyti.ms/2NP3JOW.

17. A March 2020 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed that Teheran has by now a stockpile of over 1,000 kg of uranium, which would bring it closer to developing a nuclear weapon. Iran is also refusing access to international inspectors to some sites that are suspected of being part of the nuclear programme. See IAEA, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, 3 March 2020, p. 6, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf; Nicole Jawerth, "IAEA Director General Calls on Iran to Cooperate Immediately and Fully", in *IAEA News*, 9 March 2020, https://www.iaea.org/node/81079.

ing military actions, has escalated over time. Initially, Israel conducted attacks against Iranian agents and proxies only in Syria, and kept them secret. By 2019, however, Israeli leaders began talking openly about its activities, made assertive public statements[18] and expanded the reach of Israeli military operations to Lebanon and Iraq. Iran's decision to restart nuclear activities suspended under the JCPOA following the US withdrawal from the agreement, alongside Israel's willingness to forcefully confront Iran in the region, suggests further instability may soon come about, including possibly a more open Israeli–Iranian clash. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in December 2019 that "Iran's aggression is growing, but its empire is tottering. And I say let's make it totter even further".[19] Later that month, Israel might have been involved in a cyber-attack[20] on Iranian financial institutions.[21] The severity of the tension will be affected, to some extent, by internal Israeli political developments. In particular, it will depend on the space that is allotted to the issue by Prime Minister Netanyahu, who made it a central part of his claim for internal legitimacy. If he vacates the political stage, following his legal complications (or for any other reasons), there is a greater chance that Israeli leaders will at least make less of a public effort to keep the tension with Iran on the agenda. The coronavirus crisis may also mitigate the risk of such a clash, as both parties are focusing their attention on the internal public health challenge. Moreover, Israel has made clear over

---

18. Or Heller, "IDF MID Recommends Increased Attacks Against Iran in Syria", in *Israel Defense*, 15 January 2020, https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/41630.

19. US Department of State, *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Before Their Meeting*, 4 December 2019, https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-before-their-meeting.

20. Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Iran Says It Was Hit with 'Very Big' Cyberattack", in *The New York Times*, 12 December 2019, https://nyti.ms/2PJ4N-WF.

21. "Iran's Banks Were Hacked, Minister Admits, But Experts Doubt His Claimed Culprit", in *The Times of Israel*, 11 December 2019, https://www.timesofisrael.com/irans-banks-were-hacked-minister-admits-but-experts-doubt-his-claimed-culprit.

the years that its conflict is with the regime, not the Iranian people, and so it is likely to avoid public messages and acts that might be interpreted as threatening the public in Iran in its moment of crisis.

Hezbollah is seen by Israel as a threat very much related to the Iran one. While the organisation supported the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, it also continued its build-up of capabilities against Israel. While Israeli security leadership assumes that Hezbollah has no plans for a confrontation with Israel in the short term, it is taking measures to limit the group's capabilities by attacking weapons supplies, mostly in Syria, and by buttressing defences on its northern borders.[22]

The second major challenge facing Israel is the Palestinian issue. Israel controls the West Bank, although it shares power over parts of it with the Palestinian Authority (PA). The two cooperate, to some extent, on security matters. The Gaza Strip, by contrast, is controlled by Hamas, an Islamist armed group that emerged in the 1980s and takes a much harder line towards Israel, clashing militarily with it a number of times over the last 12 years (2008–09, 2012, 2014). Many Israelis see the Palestinian goal – both the public's goal and that of its political elite – as intending to destroy Israel, while others understand it to be directed against the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and its control of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's current strategy towards the Palestinians is to move slowly towards the incorporation of portions of the West Bank into Israel proper while keeping Palestinian armed groups, most notably Hamas, at bay. The internal split in the Palestinian national movement between Hamas and the PA, which is controlled by the secular nationalist Fatah party, makes the task easier. Israel's relations with the PA are fraught with tensions. Israeli officials blame the PA, on occasion, for

---

22. Interview with Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen: "Hezbollah's Commando Might Occupy Villages in the Galilee" (in Hebrew), in *Maariv*, 27 August 2019, https://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-715808.

incitement to violence against Israeli settlers.[23] Conversely, the PA criticises Israel for settlement expansion and other actions. Israel is also concerned by some of the efforts the PA is mounting against it in the international arena, such as a possible investigation by the International Criminal Court of Israeli actions in the West Bank.[24] It remains to be seen if Israel will indeed move forward with these plans, as the government coalition's Prime Minister, Netanyahu is negotiating for at the time of writing will probably include the more moderate Blue and White party.

The European Union has tried to balance against Israel's designs on the West Bank, remaining steadfast in its support for a two-state framework and the illegality of Israeli settlements, refusing to endorse the Trump administration's policies vis-à-vis Israel and the Palestinians. Meanwhile, the EU has continued to pursue other initiatives, and in line with its differentiation policy, has sought to ensure that EU states and institutions as well as Israel abide by EU rules and regulations, including the exclusion of Israeli settlements and goods produced in settlements from the EU–Israel Association Agreement and preferential tax treatments allotted to Israeli goods imported to the EU. This has entailed EU efforts to enforce stricter labelling of products made in Israeli settlements and the inclusion of differentiation clauses that exclude the Palestinian territories from the remit of EU-Israel bilateral agreements.[25] Being mostly legal and institutional in nature, these steps have had no no-

23. For example: "Israeli Minister: Abbas 'Inciting Murder of Jews'", in *BBC News*, 16 October 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-34549221; "Israeli Leaders Accuse Abbas of Inciting Violence; PM Says: 'It Won't Help You'", in *The Times of Israel*, 6 February 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-leaders-accuse-abbas-of-inciting-violence-pm-says-it-wont-help-you.

24. The ICC investigation is also expected to include a review of Hamas' attacks on Israeli civilians.

25. See for instance, Hugh Lovatt, "EU Differentiation and the Push for Peace in Israel-Palestine", in ECFR Policy Briefs, 31 October 2016, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/eu_differentiation_and_the_push_for_peace_in_israel_palestine7163. Also see, AP, "Products from Israeli Settlements Must Be Labelled, EU Court Rules", in *The Guardian*, 12 November 2019, https://gu.com/p/cya73.

ticeable effect on Israeli policy, however. Either way, seen from Israel, the EU is occupied with its own internal challenges, and its diplomatic power projection was weakening even before the coronavirus crisis.

The Palestinian question is tied to regional power questions. The confrontation with Iran has opened previously non-existent avenues for engaging Arab states that also see Iran as a threat to their interests, especially Saudi Arabia. However, it is uncertain whether the Palestinian issue could be overshadowed by this broader geopolitical logic as Arabs states do not want to be seen as too close to Israel unless the Palestine issue is settled.

3. Israel and major structural regional security issues

Israel's approach to the region is further driven by larger structural issues: US retrenchment, Russia's newish involvement or "return" to the Middle East, the Sunni–Shia competition and the significance of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

3.1 American retrenchment

Since the late 1960s, Israel and the United States have been close allies.[26] Even though no formal treaty of alliance has been signed between the two, there are dozens of agreements[27] that have formalised significate aspects of the relationship, such as Memorandums of Understanding signed in 1975,[28] 1981[29] and

---

26. Uri Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy. A People Shall Not Dwell Alone*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, p. 254-281.

27. Jewish Virtual Library, *U.S.-Israel Relations: Formal Agreements (1950 - Present)*, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/formal-agreements-between-us-and-israel.

28. US and Israel, *Memorandum of Agreement Between the Governments of Israel and the United States*, 1 September 1975, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553991.pdf.

29. Bernard Gwertzman, "U.S. and Israel Sign Strategic Accord to Counter Soviet", in *The New York Times*, 1 December 1981, https://nyti.ms/29LfbZ4.

2016.[30] Since 1988 Israel has been designated by the US as a major non-NATO ally.[31] The US offers diplomatic support for Israel in many international fora and provides security assistance in the form of funds and weapons.[32] The 2016 MoU ensured generous support of 3.8 billion US dollars for a decade.[33]

Starting with the Barack Obama administration, however, the United States has signalled its intention to decrease its involvement in the Middle East. This approach reflects weariness in Washington regarding long and unsuccessful military engagements in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Declines in reliance on energy sources from the Middle East, and the diminished perception of a terrorist threat, as well as the rise of China and President Donald Trump's isolationist instincts, have further contributed to the attempt to limit exposure and refocus away from the region. Despite this aspiration, however, for now the US is still very much involved. It supports its Arab allies, mostly in the Gulf, and maintains bases in the region. There are some 60,000 troops in the region as of early 2020.[34] Washington's prior commitments to its allies, new security risks that have emerged over time (such as the Islamic State) and maybe path dependency all mean that the US has not disengaged and may well not disengage any time soon.

---

30. White House, *Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel*, 14 September 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/14/fact-sheet-memorandum-understanding-reached-israel.
31. US and Israel, *Memorandum of Agreement between the United States of America and the State of Israel Regarding Joint Political, Security, and Economic Cooperation*, 21 April 1988, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/u-s-israel-memorandum-of-agreement-on-security-cooperation-april-1988.
32. Israel is the biggest recipient of US financial support in history (mostly, in funds appropriated for buying US-made arms). By 2019, the United States had provided Israel 142.3 billion US dollars (current, or non-inflation-adjusted, dollars). See: Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel", in *CRS Reports*, No. RL33222 (7 August 2019), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf.
33. White House, *Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel*, cit.
34. Rashaan Ayesh, "Where U.S. Troops and Military Assets Are Deployed in the Middle East", in *Axios*, updated 8 January 2020, https://www.axios.com/where-us-troops-deployed-middle-east-5e96fdb2-c7ba-4f26-90b4-7bf452f83847.html.

For the time being, any signalling of US retrenchment has had only marginal effect on Israel. There was some concern about shifting US policies during the Obama era, as the then US president was critical of Israeli settlement activity, while his Secretary of State John Kerry was trying to mediate a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. Jerusalem was further concerned that the 2015 JCPOA deal with Iran reflected American naiveté and would strengthen Tehran in the region. President Trump, on the other hand, offered public support to a number of Israeli positions about territorial questions that were generally unacceptable to the international community. In December 2017, the US recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital,[35] and moved its embassy there in May 2018.[36] In March 2019, Washington recognised Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a region Israel occupied from Syria in 1967.[37] The US further changed its position regarding Israeli settlements in the West Bank by stating that they were "not per se illegal under international law".[38] Finally, in January 2020, the US offered a blueprint to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict, called a "vision for peace" (or in its popular name: the deal of the century) under which Israel will retain some 30 per cent of the occupied West Bank, including all of its settlements.[39]

US support for Israeli territorial expansion is expected to lead to a change in Israeli designs for the West Bank. Israel holds this occupied region under a separate temporary military re-

35. White House, *Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem*, 6 December 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem.
36. Amir Tibon and Noa Landau, "U.S. Embassy Move to Jerusalem: Everything You Need to Know", in *Haaretz*, 14 May 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.6062554.
37. White House, *Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel*, 25 March 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-part-state-israel.
38. US Department of State, *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press*, 18 November 2019, https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press.
39. White House, *Peace to Prosperity. A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, 28 January 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperity.

gime. Although most of Israel's right-wing parties and many of their supporters wanted to extend Israeli sovereignty there, the political leadership was concerned over the years that this blatant breach of international norms[40] would lead the international community to penalise it. Moreover, Israel's centre-left parties and many of their supporters oppose the move. However, the dramatic change in the US position has made it easier for a right-wing Israeli government to proceed with annexing parts of the West Bank to Israel. Such a move will not be immanent. In the immediate aftermath of the presentation of the US peace plan, close aides to President Trump, such as Jared Kushner, urged Israel not to move forward with annexation.[41] Prime Minister Netanyahu suggested in early 2020 that Israel would annex the Jordan Valley, while the then Minister of Defence, Naftali Bennett, has been proposing for a few years now that Israel should annex about 60 per cent of the West Bank (equivalent to the so-called "Area C" designated by the Oslo Accords).

US support for Israeli territorial designs holds the seeds of future instability. Should Israel entrench formally into the West Bank, it will most likely institutionalise inequality between its citizens and the 2.9 million Palestinians in the West Bank.[42] Under these circumstances of structured inequality, "Greater Israel" – the vision held by many on Israel's right to create a Jewish state extending from the Jordan to the Mediterranean – is most likely to face external and internal challenges. Regional and international actors – the Arab World, Russia, China and the EU – are expected to object. However, seen from Israel, the Arab

40. Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors. Border Fixity and International Conflict*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

41. Steve Hendrix, Ruth Eglash and Anne Gearan, "Jared Kushner Put a Knife 'in Netanyahu's Back' Over Annexation Delay, Says Israeli Settler Leader", in *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/reports-jared-kushner-angers-netanyahu-camp-by-slowing-annexation-moves/2020/02/04/82376ac6-4719-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1_story.html.

42. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics website: *Indicators*, http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/881/default.aspx.

world is busy with its own massive internal strife, and corners of it – mostly in the Gulf – would continue to cooperate with Israel anyway, as their fear of Iran is greater than their commitment to the Palestinians. Russia and China are perceived in Israel as pragmatic actors who respect Israeli power. They are therefore not expected to levy heavy costs on Israel, should it annex the West Bank. The EU – perhaps the most effective and vocal opponent of Israeli expansion (in part, as it is a major trade partner) – is perceived, as noted, as weaker and less effective in the era of Brexit, and the rise of right-wing populism. Indeed, although the EU is trying to balance against US policies regarding Iran and Israeli annexation, this does not seem to affect Israel's approach.

The Trump administration is close to Israel also on account of its unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA with Iran in May 2018.[43] Prime Minister Netanyahu opposed the deal even before it was signed, believing it would allow Iran to eventually develop a military nuclear capability under the cover of a civilian one (which the agreement consented to, although phasing it over the course over two decades at least). The US withdrawal from the accord was in line with the Prime Minister's position, but for now has led to an adverse result for Israelis, as Iran has resumed, as noted, elements of its nuclear programme in response to the re-adoption of sanctions by the US and the inability of the other members of the agreement to provide any financial compensation.[44] US behaviour towards Iran in the last year sent mixed strategic messages, leading to interchanging periods of concern and elation among Israeli strategists. Israel was deeply concerned by the lack of any substantial support or response for a key regional ally following the Iranian attack on Saudi Arabian oil installations in September 2019. In January 2020, however, Israelis were elated (although they tried

43. White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, 8 May 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/re-marks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action.

44. IAEA, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)*, 3 March 2020, cit.

to distance themselves) when the US assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Al-Quds force and the main strategist behind Iran's policy of building proxies around the region as "deterrence" assets against the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

In general, therefore, Israel does not seem to be concerned about US retrenchment. First, it is not clear that the US is indeed leaving – there are actually more US soldiers in the Middle East now than there were at the start of the Trump presidency. Second, Israelis are rather confident that the alliance with the US is deeply rooted in the US as a domestic agenda item. In any event, ideas of US offshore balancing – i.e., physical withdrawal from the region supplanted by support from afar, in part by way of arms supplies – are very similar to the current US–Israeli structure. Israel has never wanted the deployment of US forces to defend it (nor a formal alliance), among other reasons, for fear that they might constrain its actions.

On the other hand, in the fall of 2019 Israelis were somewhat anxious in face of the surprise announcement by President Trump that the US would withdraw its forces from Syria. Concerns were raised by the mercurial decision-making style of the US president, but perhaps more importantly because of the precedent of the abandonment of the Syrian Kurds, who controlled the area of Syria where US forces operated and who have been the US's main allies against the Islamic State. Israel, which is also a close supporter of Kurdish aspirations, is concerned that elements hostile to Israel, mostly Iran and to a lesser degree Turkey, will replace the US in areas Washington leaves. To some extent, the future of the Israeli–US alliance is affected by internal politics. By early 2021 there might be new leaders in Jerusalem and Washington.

The alliance might also be affected by the trajectory of Israeli–Chinese relations. China – seen in Israel until recently as a faraway (re)emerging giant – has entered Israeli strategic calculations. During the last decade, Israel has been experiencing a wave of Chinese investments and involvement both in Isra-

el's high-tech industries, as well as in infrastructure projects. For example, Chinese investors participated in 12.5 per cent of funding rounds of high-tech companies in Israel in 2018, up from 7.5 per cent in 2015.[45] Chinese companies are also involved in developing Israel's two large ports in the Mediterranean, Ashdod and Haifa.

The US has begun raising concerns about China's involvement in the port of Haifa and the high-tech scene. Israel, for now, is balancing these competing pressures well. Israel has made no changes to the plans for port development. It did, however, create in October 2019 a committee to vet Chinese investments in high-tech and infrastructure[46] – although it remains to be seen how effective this body will be.

3.2 Enter Russia

Russia's forceful re-entry into the Middle-East, starting with the 2015 military intervention in support of Syria's President Assad, has limited, to a certain degree, Israel's freedom of action in the region. Russian military capabilities curb Israeli air dominance. Russian military aerial activity in Syrian skies has forced Israel to be more careful in attacking in Syria. For example, in September 2018, Russia blamed an Israeli air-force operation near Syria for having led Syrian forces to accidently shoot down a Russian spy plane.[47] Israel had been managing the issue rather well up until then. The Israeli air force and the Russian forces in Syria communicate on a regular basis in an effort to avoid clashes. Following the September 2018 incident, both coun-

---

45. Yasmin Yablonko, "Chinese Take Growing Slice of Israeli Tech Investment", in *Globes*, 30 October 2018, https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-take-grow-ing-slice-of-israeli-tech-investment-1001258499.

46. Herb Keinon, "Under U.S. Pressure, Israel Okays Mechanism to Oversee Chinese Investments", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 October 2018, https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Under-US-pressure-Israel-okays-mechanism-to-over-see-Chinese-investments-606326.

47. Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, "Syria Accidentally Shot Down a Russian Military Plane", in *CNN*, 18 September 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/17/politics/syrian-regime-shoots-down-russian-plane/index.html.

tries further developed the coordination mechanism.[48] Russia's involvement in Syria offers, from an Israeli perspective, a possible future check on Iranian activities there. However, despite Russian commitments (as they were understood in Israel) to keep Iranian presence at least 80 kilometres away from Israel's borders, various reports indicate that Iranian presence – mostly through proxies under its command[49] – is indeed nearer to Israel. Moscow is well placed to become the mediator and possible enforcer of any future security arrangement on Israel's northern front. This reality has forced Israel to invest considerable diplomatic resources into maintaining relations with the Kremlin. Since 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu has visited Russia seven times. Although the Syria issue has been at the heart of the meetings, the interactions have led to the development of a somewhat broader agenda.

3.3 The Sunni–Shia competition

The third important trend that has affected Israeli regional policies is the Sunni–Shia competition. Israel hardly comments in public about this divide, or the implications it has for the Israeli state. However, there is an overlap in interests between the anti-Iran Sunni camp and Israel. Moreover, some Gulf states follow with concern US proclamations about retrenchment and are seeking alternative support. The result is a growing exchange between Israel and Gulf states. There have been a number of meetings between former senior officials in public fora,[50] and also a small number of public visits by Saudi delegations to Israel. In January 2020, it emerged that the Israeli minister of the interior had removed some restrictions on travel by Israeli citizens to Saudi Arabia.[51] Saudi Arabia has also made minor

---

48. Dan Williams, "Israel to Improve Coordination with Moscow Over Syria After Plane Crash", in *Reuters*, 20 September 2018, https://reut.rs/2xEbK2e.

49. Or Heller, "IDF MID Recommends Increased Attacks Against Iran in Syria", cit.

50. J.J. Goldberg, "Top Israeli-Saudi Ex-Spy Chief in Rare Dialogue", in *Forward*, 26 May 2014, https://forward.com/opinion/198909.

51. Noa Landau and Jack Khoury, "Israel Officially Allows Israelis to Travel to Saudi Arabia", in *Haaretz*, 26 January 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.8445492.

public gestures towards Israel, such as allowing, since 2018, non-Israeli airlines to use its airspace on their way to Israel, an activity that was banned for decades.[52] There are also reports of Israeli software exports to Saudi Arabia, mostly in the defence realm including possibly surveillance equipment.[53] Some experts believe, for example, that the alleged Saudi hacking into the phone of Jeff Bezos in 2019, was conducted using Israeli-made spyware.[54]

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are also drawn to the Israeli technology sector as part of their efforts to diversify their economies. For example, Saudi officials and Israeli companies have explored (and are possibly already cooperating) in other high-tech projects, including the construction of the Saudi high-tech city of Neom.[55]

Israel has also strengthened its relations with other Sunni states such as Egypt, Sudan and Morocco. While not confirmed by either party, Israel is apparently helping Egypt combat Islamic State affiliates in the Sinai. According to some reports, between 2015 and January 2018 the Israeli air force intervened more than 100 times in the Egyptian Sinai upon request of the Egyptian government.[56]

For the time being, the scope of these semi-clandestine relationships is limited. Arab governments want to wait for some

---

52. Alexander Cornwell and Ari Rabinovitch, "Indian Airliner Makes History by Flying to Israel Via Saudi Airspace", in *Reuters*, 22 March 2018, https://reut.rs/2Ge9ODU.

53. Steven Scheer, "Israeli Surveillance Software Lawsuit Goes Behind Closed Doors", in *Reuters*, 16 January 2020, https://reut.rs/2QZhcY1.

54. Economist, "Alexa, Define Chutzpah. Hacking Jeff Bezos", in *The Economist*, Vol. 434, No. 9178 (25 January 2020), p. 40.

55. Max Schindler, "Israeli Companies Talking to Saudi Arabia about $500b. 'Smart City'", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 October 2017, https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/israeli-companies-likely-talking-to-saudi-arabia-about-500-bil-smart-city-508429.

56. David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, with Cairo's O.K"., in *The New York Times*, 3 February 2018, https://nyti.ms/2FH2j4a.

public display of progress on the Israeli–Palestinian front before they can move to make their relations with Israel more public and formal. Besides, it is far from clear that Sunni (especially Gulf) concerns about Iranian designs, coupled with fear of abandonment by the US, will necessarily be translated into an alliance with Israel. They might bandwagon, i.e., try to appease Iran, rather than confront it. The United Arab Emirates' decision to withdraw from Yemen – where it was conducting a war against Iranian-supported Houthi rebels – in the summer of 2019,[57] and a less confrontational rhetoric by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman towards Iran,[58] are indications that such a policy shift is indeed possible.

Both Iran[59] and Russia[60] have publicly offered Gulf security arrangements. At least the Iranian offer is – unsurprisingly – accommodating for Iran as it rejects a US presence in the region. These designs may not come to be, but Israel is in no real position to offer any serious support to the Gulf states to oppose these designs. However, Iran's role in this context should be of some interest to Israel as it affects Iranian behaviour near Israel's borders. Israeli analysts are expected to debate whether Iran is an inherently revisionist actor that would use a more accommodating Gulf environment to enhance its assertive activities in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, or whether a satisfaction of Iran's security needs in the Gulf could diminish the Iranian incentive to support its security through regional activism. Either way, security arrangements for the Gulf do not gain much attention in Israel. Similarly, little attention was paid in Israel, at least in public, to the US vision, floated in 2017, to launch

---

57. Declan Walsh and David D. Kirkpatrick, "U.A.E. Pulls Most Forces from Yemen in Blow to Saudi War Effort", in *The New York Times*, 11 July 2019, https://nyti.ms/32o8UN1.

58. "The Saudi Crown Prince's Shifting Rhetoric on Iran", in *TRT World*, 1 October 2019, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-saudi-crown-prince-s-shifting-rhetoric-on-iran-30263.

59. United Nations, "At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'", in *UN News*, 25 September 2019, https://news.un-.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472.

60. "Russia Presents to UN Its Concept of Collective Security in Persian Gulf", in *TASS*, 30 July 2019, https://tass.com/world/1070933.

an Arab NATO. This effort may seem to be aligned with Israel's own interest to contain Iran. However, one can assume that the limited interest in Israel reflects caution about the possibility that such an alliance would actually emerge. And even if it did, it is unclear what military use it would be. Moreover, Israel traditionally prefers bilateral contacts with Arab nations rather than dealing with a wider forum that might get engaged in a "race to the bottom" regarding the relationship with Israel. Israel is always also concerned that such an alliance might become a more effective framework to challenge it, should regimes in Cairo and Riyadh change.

3.4 Energy: Israel and the Hellenic alliance

Beginning in the mid-2010s Israel developed a "quasi-alliance" with Greece and Cyprus.[61] These close relationships include regular meetings of the three heads of state and government: between 2016 and 2020 the leaders have held seven formal meetings.[62] Similar regular meetings are conducted on the ministerial level and between parliamentarians.[63] Israel has signed agreements with Greece (2015) and Cyprus (2016) that have set the legal framework for joint military exercises. In 2017 these agreements were incorporated into Israeli law.[64] Within this framework, the three countries conduct joint military exercises in each other's territory. For example, in 2017 Israeli forces participated in joint exercises with Cypriot forces in Cyprus and Greece.[65]

---

61. Zenonas Tziarras, "Israel-Cyprus-Greece: A 'Comfortable' Quasi-Alliance", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2016), p. 407-427.

62. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *EastMed Gas Pipeline Agreement Signed at Trilateral Summit between PM Benjamin Netanyahu, Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Cypriot Pres. Nicos Anastasiades*, 2 January 2020, https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2020/Pages/EastMed-Gas-pipeline-agreement-signed-at-trilateral-summit-2-January-2019.aspx.

63. *Cyprus-Greece-Israel 4th Trilateral Summit Declaration*, 8 May 2018, https://www.pio.gov.cy/en/press-releases-article.html?id=1656.

64. The laws for the implementation of the status of forces agreements with Cyprus and Greece were published in the Official Gazette No. 2671 of 23 November 2017 (in Hebrew): https://www.nevo.co.il/law_word/Law14/law-2671.pdf.

65. Judah Ari Gross, "500 Israeli Soldiers Fight Mock War in Cyprus Mountains", in *The Times of Israel*, 15 June 2017, https://www.timesofisrael.com/500-israeli-soldiers-fight-mock-war-in-cyprus-mountains; "Cyprus and Israel Hold

The alliance is driven by the centrality of Mediterranean gas to Israel's economy. Beginning in 1999, significant natural gas discoveries were made in the Levantine basin in both Israeli and Cypriot exclusive economic zones.[66] By 2018, Israel was producing more than half of its electricity by using gas. Israel, Greece and Cyprus have agreed in principle to export the gas through Greece to Europe,[67] and are in the early phases of connecting their electricity infrastructure.[68] There is also commercial cooperation in the energy field.[69] The gas issue may serve as a basis for the development of a broader regional grouping. In early 2020, Cyprus, Greece and Israel joined an originally Egyptian initiative to create an East Mediterranean Gas Initiative, which also includes Italy, Jordan and the PA.[70] While focused on a narrow economic issue, the platform can create over time closer relations on other issues. Most notably, possible security cooperation around the gas (and beyond) may evolve. The platform enjoys EU and US support.

The three countries have also grown closer as they share – to different degrees – the assessment of Turkey as a threat. Israel, once a close ally of Turkey, saw its relations with Ankara cool following a new approach in Turkish foreign policy that was seen as hostile to Israel.[71] A 2010 incident in which Israeli forc-

Joint Military Exercises", in *Cyprus Mail*, 3 December 2017, https://cyprus-mail.com/?p=158517; Gabriel Siboni and Gal Perl-Finkel, "The IDF Exercises in Crete and Cyprus", in *INSS Insights*, No. 945 (28 June 2017), https://www.inss.org.il/publication/idf-exercises-cyprus-crete.

66. Brenda Shaffer, "Israel–New Natural Gas Producer in the Mediterranean", in *Energy Policy*, Vol. 39, No. 9 (September 2011), p. 5379-5387.

67. Menelaos Hadjicostis, "Cyprus, Israel, Greece Push for Gas Pipeline to Europe", in *AP News*, 8 May 2018, https://apnews.com/c3efcfc905594688bc-1f40aa98e47799.

68. EuroAsia Interconnector, *A Trans-European Energy Infrastructure Project. The EuroAsia Interconnector* (Project and Progress), October 2017, http://www.euroasia-interconnector.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/EuroAsia_Interconnector_Project_and_Progress_English.pdf.

69. Yaacov Benmeleh, "Greece's Energean Signs First Deal to Supply Gas to Israel", in *Bloomberg*, 28 May 2017.

70. Kostis Geropoulos, "East Med Gas Forum Makes Cairo HQ", in *New Europe*, 17 January 2020, https://www.neweurope.eu/?p=543060.

71. Efraim Inbar, "The Deterioration in Israeli-Turkish Relations and Its International Ramifications", in *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 89 (Febru-

es killed ten Turkish activists who tried to break the maritime blockade on Gaza further strained relations.[72] Turkey remains close to Hamas in Gaza. According to some reports, Turkey even allows Hamas' military planners to operate on its territory.[73] Greece and Cyprus have long had tense relations with Turkey, mostly concerning Northern Cyprus. The gas issue has added another source of conflict, as Ankara is trying to discourage Cyprus from exploring gas in the waters off the island, as it fears that Northern Cyprus will not benefit from the discoveries. In February 2018, the Turkish navy blocked a drilling ship operated by Italian oil giant Eni, as it was trying to operate in waters south-east of Cyprus.[74] In November 2019, Turkey signed an agreement with the UN-recognised government in Libya that paves the way for the deployment of Turkish forces in Libya and sets a maritime boundary between the two nations. Coupled with Turkish assertiveness in Cypriot waters, it seems that Ankara is trying to counter the Israeli–Hellenic (and possibly broader) alliance. Until now, Israel has mostly benefited from its Mediterranean quasi-alliance: it offers a regional framework in which it is welcomed and that may be expanded, as well as strategic depth of sorts. Moreover, some in Jerusalem were hoping that the new allies will be able to foster better understanding of Israel's positions (mostly regarding the Palestinian and Iranian issues) within the institutions of the European Union.[75] However, the growing tensions with Turkey might put the alliance to a test. Greece and Cyprus might expect an Israeli show of force

ary 2001), https://besacenter.org/?p=2107; Eran Lerman, "Israel's Emerging Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean", in *BESA Center Perspectives Papers*, No. 321 (8 December 2015), https://besacenter.org/?p=9508.

72. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Israeli Forces Were Met with Pre-Planned Violence When Attempting to Board Flotilla*, 31 May 2010, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2010/Pages/Israel_Navy_warns_flotilla_31-May-2010.aspx.

73. Bel Trew, "Israel Urges Turkey to Cut Ties with Hamas Over Allegations It Uses Country as Base to Launch Attacks", in *Independent*, 18 December 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-hamas-turkey-palestinian-militants-attack-erdogan-a9252016.html.

74. Stephen Jewkes, "Turkish Blockade of Ship Off Cyprus Is Out of Eni's Control: CEO", in *Reuters*, 16 February 2018, https://reut.rs/2EHMwFH.

75. Yaacov Maor, "The Israeli-Hellenic Forum Is Launched" (in Hebrew), in *Jewish Traveler*, 13 November 2019, https://www.jewishtraveler.co.il/forum-helvetic-1119.

towards Turkey. Israel has never committed forces to any significant task in support of an ally before, and such a move is not excepted to be popular nor wise politically.

4. Conclusion

Israel has not traditionally participated in regional power structure and alliances. Yet, the current competition in the Middle East between pro-Iran and anti-Iran camps is leading to some cooperation with the Arab Gulf states. The cooperation has limits though. It may not satisfy the Gulf states, which may reason that Israel cannot really help them balance against Iran. Israel is also probably aware of the limited ability of the Gulf states to fully balance against Iran, though it values their role. Moreover, with no progress on the Palestinian issue, Arab countries will be hesitant to make dramatic public moves towards Israel. Israel is not expected to play a significant role in opposing a more inclusive regional arrangement if it emerges in the Gulf, although it will monitor the effect on Iran's ability to operate near Israel.

Contrary to a decades-old approach, Israel has entered into an alliance of sorts with Greece and Cyprus. Focused on energy issues, the alliance includes also security cooperation. A more assertive Turkey in the East Mediterranean may put the alliance to a severe test. At least in part, this alliance reflects another Israeli adjustment to changing reality: the state's reliance on its gas depots in its exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean. The alliance may also lead to the development of a broader axis around the newly formed East Mediterranean Gas Forum that includes also Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Italy, a founding member of the East Med Gas Forum, might also join the economic aspects of the axis, but is not expected to take part in the strategic-political side.

The close alliance with the United States is not affected, to date, by the US intention to decrease involvement in the region. Indeed, under President Trump Washington has offered unprecedented support for Israeli territorial designs in the

West Bank and the Golan Heights and has become much more confrontational against Iran.

The entry of new global actors – Russia and China – into the Middle East forces Israel to invest in managing its relations with Russia, while trying to appease US pressures to limit Chinese economic activities in Israel. Israel is expected to face, to a growing degree, the need to balance its close alliance with the United States, and immediate economic and military pressures generated by China and Russia in the region. Thus far, Israel has been able to manage the tension effectively, in part due to the close relations between US President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The mercurial policies of President Trump, coupled with possible changes in power in Jerusalem and Washington, might make the balancing act far more challenging in the future.

The ongoing weakening of the states around it – Syria, Lebanon and Egypt – have created both challenges and opportunities for Israel. In this context, Israel sees stemming the influence of Iran as an immediate security challenge. Israel has grown more assertive in its efforts to confront Iran in the region, and is slowly heading towards a direct confrontation with it. Teheran's slow relaunch of its nuclear programme, probably including its military aspects, is further adding to the possibility that the two countries will clash militarily. However, the public health challenge posed by the coronavirus has mitigated this tension in the short term as both countries are focusing inwards.

Israel continues to contain the conflict with the Palestinians through effective security control over the West Bank (partly in partnership with the Palestinian Authority), and a partial siege and naval blockade of Gaza. There are however constant concerns that a humanitarian disaster in Gaza – such as an extreme outbreak of the Coronavirus disease – will require Israeli mitigating actions.[76] The geographical and political split in the

---

76. Hagar Shezaf, "As Israel Prepares for Coronavirus in the Palestinian Territories, Gaza Raises Dilemmas", in *Haaretz*, 14 March 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/premium-1.8673036.

Palestinian national movement makes Israel's task easier. As noted, the Palestine question is also related to broader regional security arrangements.

The overall outcome of these changes, and Israel's response to them, is a stronger Israel. It is not under immediate threat; its formerly hostile neighbours are either declining or committed to other conflicts. Moreover, Israel is more engaged in the region – both to the East and the West – in ways that enhance its power and influence. Israel enjoys close relations with world powers. Its most powerful ally, the US, is even supportive of Israeli territorial expansion generally rejected by the rest of the international community.

However, the current reality holds the seeds of significant instability in the medium and long term. In the medium term, there is a growing possibility of a direct Israeli–Iranian armed conflict. Israel's increasingly aggressive approach towards Iranian aspirations in Israel's near abroad, and a renewed Iranian nuclear programme, create the conditions for a larger conflict. Such a clash will most likely include Hezbollah and will occur on at least three fronts: Israel's border with Lebanon, the Syrian Golan front and Israel's home front.

The second source of future instability is Israeli designs to formally annex the West Bank or parts of it. Such a move will fundamentally alter Israel's demographic makeup with Palestinians and Jews almost equal in numbers. It is further bound to weaken Israel's democracy – already under strain. Israel is unlikely to offer equal legal status to its newly acquired population. Such a move is expected to create significant internal tensions between Jews who oppose the move and those who support it. It will also create the setting for future violent eruption, as the Palestinians are expected to resist such an arrangement.

6
THE EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE AROUND THE ARABIAN PENINSULA: A SAUDI PERSPECTIVE

ABDULLAH K. AL-SAUD AND JOSEPH A. KÉCHICHIAN

Foreign policy decisions are seldom taken in a political vacuum, as governments operate within the boundaries of an evolving international system as well as dynamic regional environments. It is within this wider regional and global context, which has been in constant flux over the past decade, that the decision makers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have had to adapt and re-evaluate their foreign policy options with two overriding objectives in mind: how to preserve the state's security and safeguard its national interests; and how to bring into fruition its vision of a stable regional order, one that will limit rivalries, encourage the creation of wealth, and ensure security and stability through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and beyond.

Currently, there are two main competing visions or models of the regional order in the Middle East, each supported and pursued by one of the region's main rivals, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Saudi vision of a regional order is based on the Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states "in which governments have strong centralized authorities, regardless of the type of government in each country (democratic or autocratic; monarchy or republic)".[1] The Iranian vision of the region, by contrast, rests on "nation-states with weak sovereignty, in which centralized authority is fragile and non-state actors play a prominent role".[2] As seen from Saudi Arabia, Iran, in order

---

1. Abdulmajeed Saud Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran", in *KFCRIS Special Reports*, 22 July 2019, p. 5, http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/220.

2. Ibid.

to achieve its regional order vision and expand its influence, pursues a strategy that relies, at its core, on the cultivation of a network of armed non-state actors and militias across the region, and the promotion of sub-identities at the expense of the national one. Many of the region's conflicts and developments in previous decades can best be understood through the prism of these two competing visions on the regional order rather than the old prisms of sectarianism or opposing types of political systems – with the Saudi perspective that upholds the nation-state system and seeks to strengthen centralised states and the capacity of their institutions, and the Iranian one that cultivates sub-state revolutionary movements and identities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere. However, in order to better apprehend the rationales and calculations behind Saudi foreign policy choices in recent years, it might be useful to shed light on the massive changes that occurred over the past decade in both the international and regional environments in which the Kingdom operated and continues to evolve.

Long before its precious petroleum resources transformed the Arabian Peninsula into one of the world's most attractive geopolitical prizes, leading global powers engaged in classic swashbuckling that, inter alia, ignored indigenous interests and regional stability. Over the centuries, Western states practiced piracy to subdue local opposition, as they secured "routes" and controlled substantial landmasses. For most of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom exercised immense power through much of the Middle East and Gulf regions, only to be succeeded by the United States, whose post–World War II defence umbrella gained momentum in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter clarified his doctrine, which was quickly followed by President Ronald Reagan's corollary. Carter's missive, uttered in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the 25 December 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, which placed Moscow's troops close to the strategic Strait of Hormuz, was crystal clear: Washington would use force to defend the Gulf and, towards that end, would deploy its newly created Rapid Deployment Force, which evolved into the US Central Command (CENTCOM) on 1 January 1983. Reagan went a step

further, ensuring that the United States backed the Arab Gulf monarchies, led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Both of these significant engagements defined the US security vision which was transformed into a more or less permanent security architecture.[3]

It was a grand affair, and one that endured periodic disagreements, especially when London and Washington played divide and rule policies. Still, leading Western powers were the Gulf region's ultimate security guarantors, often with the full approval of emerging independent nation-states, too weak to defend themselves and that sought stability through international reassurance. This occurred even as several states on the Arabian Peninsula were disappointed that very limited progress was achieved on the question of Palestine, which preoccupied conservative Arab monarchs and their subjects.[4] Although overlooked by leading Western authorities, linkages between ongoing Arab–Israeli conflicts and security in the Gulf, and the broader Middle East, were too obvious to be ignored, even as the so-called peace process took on a life of its own.

Starting in the early 2010s, growing strategic concerns were displayed by China, Japan and South Korea, among several Asian countries, to protect long-term economic relationships with the Gulf states, largely to secure access to petroleum resources at reasonable prices.[5] As several powers repositioned themselves on the global checkerboard, with many

---

3. Joshua M. Epstein, *Strategy and Force Planning. The Case of the Persian Gulf*, Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1987. See also Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, especially p. 19-73.

4. For a sample of the rich literature on the subject see Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military*, cit.; Robert E. Hunter, *Building Security in the Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2010, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG944.html; Matteo Legrenzi, *Security in the Gulf: Historical Legacies and Future Prospects*, London/New York, Routledge, 2011.

5. Muhamad S. Olimat, *China and the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries. Strategic Partnership in a Changing World*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016; Tim Niblock and Yang Guang (eds), *Security Dynamics of East Asia in the Gulf Region*, Berlin, Gerlach Press, 2014.

looking after their own long-term energy interests, a noticeable shift from West to East meant that the established Arab Gulf dependence on Western states was on the wane, while the post–Cold War era awakened indigenous security efforts.[6] Saudi Arabia, as well as other Arab Gulf monarchies, nurtured long-lasting ties with key Western powers while simultaneously forging new relationships with Russia, China, Japan and South Korea. Remarkably, tangible economic agreements, as well as fresh regional and international political developments, encouraged the establishment of new spheres of influence, the strengthening of existing alliances and the creation of new ones.

1. Saudi relations with leading global powers

Gone are the days of post–Cold War unipolarity and, as Graham Allison has written recently, "The tectonic shift in the [international] balance of power that occurred in the first two decades of the twenty-first century was as dramatic as any shift the United States has witnessed over an equivalent period in its 244 years".[7] China is a rising economic giant with increasing military spending and capabilities, while Russia has demonstrated repeatedly in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and recently in Syria that it can flex its military muscle and score wins with few objections. For US partners and allies in the Middle East, which have long benefited from a security architecture maintained by the US, these changes in the international balance of power have not gone unnoticed.

Undeniably, the growing Russian role in the Arab World necessitates careful attention and, as stated above, Moscow was

---

6. Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers. The Rise of the Arab Gulf*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2016. See also Joseph A. Kéchichian, *From Alliance to Union. Challenges Facing Gulf Cooperation Council States in the Twenty-First Century*, Brighton/Chicago/Toronto, Sussex Academic Press, 2016.

7. Graham Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), p. 32.

on a concerted campaign to regain its lost influence through-out the Arab World, particularly in the oil-rich Gulf region, for unabashedly strategic reasons. Although ties between Saudi Arabia and Russia began in 1926, what marked contacts for most of the twentieth century was hesitancy. A breakthrough occurred in 2007 when Russian President Vladimir Putin led a high-level delegation to Riyadh, even if this was reciprocated by King Salman only a decade later, when he became the first Saudi monarch to formally visit Russia in 2017.[8]

King Salman and President Putin opened a new chapter in relations, signing several accords on economic, military and petroleum projects. A three billion dollar military package was finalised in October 2017, as Saudi Arabia started to manufacture Russian anti-tank missiles, rocket launchers and automatic grenade launchers.[9] An equally important invest-ment was Riyadh's readiness to invest a billion dollars in sev-eral energy projects, while the Russian gas processing and petrochemicals company Sibur committed to building a plant in Saudi Arabia in a separate billion dollar agreement.[10] The two governments engaged in full-scale coordination on oil production, which has continued since the two historic vis-its, although Moscow and Riyadh contended with sharp po-litical differences over Syria after Russia sided with Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria's civil war, something that Riyadh was loathed to mimic pending full accountability for the atrocities committed against the majority of the Syrian population in that war-torn country.

Notwithstanding this drawback, the two governments agreed to cooperate in the glutted world oil markets in late 2016, as Putin and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman pledged to re-

8.   King 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz visited Russia in 2003, though he was then the Crown Prince.

9.   Catherine Hardy, "Saudi Arabia and Russia Sign Arms Deal", in *Euronews*, 10 June 2017, https://www.euronews.com/2017/10/06/saudi-arabia-and-russia-sign-arms-deal.

10. "Saudi King Signs Lucrative Deals on Landmark Russia Visit", in *BBC News*, 5 October 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41512759.

duce oil output for six months starting from 1 January 2017. The Saudi rationale, revealed by the Heir Apparent in a *Washington Post* interview, was to coordinate oil policies with Moscow in order to convince Russia that Riyadh was a better bet than Tehran and to encourage Russia "not to […] place all its cards in the region behind Iran".[11]

When President Putin returned to Riyadh in late 2019, he and his delegation inked valuable contracts that allowed Saudi Aramco to acquire a 30 per cent share in Novomet, a Russian oil equipment supplier, along with future cooperation with Russia's Gazprom on natural gas projects. Whether this rapprochement was due to a growing Saudi mistrust of the West in general and the United States in particular is difficult to determine. However, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia embraced Moscow to spite Washington, though the US's lukewarm commitments troubled some in the Saudi court. What it certainly meant was that Riyadh correctly evaluated global developments – which emphasised far narrower interests than advertised in the name of globalisation – and concluded that it could not afford perpetual ideological enmities.

Trouble brewed on the horizon, however, as the two governments eventually broke their 2016 agreement to cooperate in managing the price of oil and thereby create an informal alliance dubbed "OPEC+". The 8 March 2020 Saudi-Russian breakup triggered a major drop in oil prices after Russia rejected a Saudi offer to cut production. Riyadh wished to decrease global production at a time when world consumers were suffering the consequences of a massive downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Russian refusal may have been a retaliation against US sanctions on the Russian energy giant Rosneft, imposed in February 2020, critics blamed Saudi Arabia for flooding the market and further depressing prices, while some analysts opined that the moves were meant

---

11. David Ignatius, "A Young Prince Is Reimagining Saudi Arabia: Can He Make His Vision Come True?", in *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2017, http://wapo.st/2oVEjn2.

to weaken the US shale oil industry even if the more likely intention was to fight for and regain lost markets.[12]

Nonetheless, in the second week of April 2020, Saudi Arabia coordinated and led a huge effort of global oil diplomacy, calling for two consecutive OPEC+ meetings in less than a week, as well as an emergency G20 energy ministers meeting, in order to stabilise energy markets in the aftermath of the global economic meltdown ushered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Russia felt compelled to once again cooperate in order to minimise a severe economic depression. The result was an agreement by the OPEC+ group for a record cut in output of 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd) for the first two months starting on 1 May 2020, followed by a 7.7 million bpd cut for the subsequent six months, and 5.8 million bpd for another period of 16 months until the end of April 2022. Moreover, there was a pledge by G20 nations outside the OPEC+ alliance to cut about 3.7 million bpd of oil supply.[13]

Another country with which Saudi Arabia has had close cooperation in recent years is China. Saudi-Chinese relations date back to 1939 when the Kingdom was the first Arab country to establish political ties with Beijing. However, relations faltered due to ideological differences and being on opposite sides during the Cold War. It was only in 1990 that official diplomatic relations were re-established, which means that 2020 marked

---

12. See, for example, "Oil Plunges 10% after OPEC Deal Collapses", in *BBC News*, 6 March 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51774622; Benoit Faucon, Georgi Kantchev and Summer Said, "Russia Takes Aim at U.S. Shale Oil Producers", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 March 2020.

13. In the OPEC+ meeting on 6 June 2020, Saudi Arabia and Russia were able to secure an agreement to extend the record cuts of 9.7 million bpd for another month until the end of July 2020. See, Grant Smith et al., "OPEC+ Extends Oil Cuts in Win for Saudi-Russian Alliance", in *Bloomberg*, 6 June 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-06/opec-agrees-to-extend-output-cuts-as-quota-cheats-offer-penance. Also see, Rania El Gamal, "Saudi Energy Minister Says Effective Global Oil Cuts Above 19 Million bpd", in *Reuters*, 13 April 2020, https://reut.rs/34xuVKP; Grant Smith, Javier Blas and Salma El Wardany, "Oil Price War Ends With Historic OPEC+ Deal to Slash Output", in *Bloomberg*, 12 April 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-12/oil-price-war-ends-with-historic-opec-deal-to-cut-production.

the 30th anniversary of Sino-Saudi relations. When President Xi Jinping embarked on an overseas trip in 2016, he chose the Middle East and stopped in Saudi Arabia first, where both countries signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership", the highest kind in China's hierarchy of partnerships.[14] Cooperation between the two countries intensified following Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit to China in 2019, after which it was announced that the Chinese language would soon be taught in Saudi public schools, indicating the long-term strategic importance Riyadh placed on the relationship.[15]

Saudi Arabia's close relationship with China, which is part of a broader cooperation and pivot to Asia, makes sense economically as well as politically. With the strategic aims of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and China's Belt and Road Initiative, both countries stand to benefit from close economic cooperation and partnerships. Moreover, having close coordination with an international heavyweight like China in platforms such as the UN Security Council can be hugely beneficial, especially as differences over Syria and Iran still linger and as Saudi Arabia assumes the presidency of the G20 in 2020.[16] This was eminently in evidence on 26 March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic mobilised G20 leaders under the chairmanship of King Salman in the first virtual summit held by the organisation, and where Beijing offered various initiatives, which were unanimously approved.[17] What is important to underscore is that the intensification of Sino-Saudi cooperation in the past decade "is not about the United States and Saudi Arabia. It is about the ongoing structural shift in geopolitics, as the global

14. Jonathan Fulton, "China's Changing Role in the Middle East", in *Atlantic Council Reports*, June 2019, p. 3, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=130732.
15. Ruba Obaid, "Students Begin Studying Chinese in Public Schools in Saudi Arabia", in *Arab News*, 19 January 2020, https://arab.news/bdynm.
16. Sinem Cengiz, "Saudi Foreign Policy Towards China in the Post-Arab Uprisings Era: A Neo-classical Realist Approach", in *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020), p. 51-67.
17. "Xi Jinping's Remarks at G20 Virtual Summit", in *CGTN*, 27 March 2020, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-26/Full-text-Xi-Jinping-s-remarks-at-G20-virtual-summit--Pbmq2YLJnO/index.html.

economic center of gravity moves east and Asia and the Middle East draw closer together".[18]

Aware of the Kingdom's strategic value, US President Donald J. Trump has made it a point to work with Saudi Arabia despite the slew of criticisms that *preceded* the tragic Jamal Khashoggi assassination in late 2018. The US president placed the Kingdom at the centre of his foreign policy in the Middle East, sharing Riyadh's concerns over Iran, even if his colourful declarations on vital security questions upset the proverbial apple cart.[19] Whether Trump's preferences were authentic or whether he adopted various policies to correct the course set by his predecessor will long be debated. Nevertheless, what was clear was his desire to end the diplomatic overtures towards Iran, which Saudi Arabia and its Arab partners spurned. To his credit, Trump declared that Saudis "have been a great ally in our very important fight against Iran", at a time when it was very easy to bash the Kingdom.[20]

Critics, including staunch Republican supporters like Senators Lindsey Graham (South Carolina), Jim Risch (Idaho) and Ted Cruz (Texas), among others, objected to what they perceived as a red-carpet treatment of Saudi Arabia. Congressional criticism and scepticism toward Saudi Arabia, while not new, has increased in recent years, partly as a result of domestic political polarisation within the United States as well as "the articulation and championing of progressive and isolationist foreign

18. Jonathan Fulton, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Turning to Asia", in *Monkey Cage*, 6 March 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/06/why-saudi-arabia-is-turning-asia.
19. Tom Batchelor, "Trump Says Saudi Arabia's King Salman 'Would Not Last Two Weeks' Without US Support", in *The Independent*, 3 October 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-saudi-arabia-king-us-military-support-mbs-salman-yemen-a8566556.html. See also "Trump: We Are Losing Our A** Defending You, Saudi Arabia" (video), in *Middle East Monitor*, 29 April 2019, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190429-trump-we-are-losing-our-a-defending-you-saudi-arabia.
20. White House, *Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia*, 20 November 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia.

policy stances by factions within the Democratic and Republican congressional delegations".[21]

In any event, Saudi Arabia remained a staunch ally of the United States, which Washington acknowledged as it celebrated the 75th anniversary of the famous 14 February 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King 'Abdul 'Aziz bin 'Abdul Rahman, on board the USS Quincy.[22] Beyond the strategic petroleum imperative that had defined US global dominance since WWII, and despite doubts raised about the reliability of the United States by those who concluded that the demise of the superpower was imminent, Saudi Arabia professed genuine support to its ally, which Washington habitually reciprocated.

In short, Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states increased their ties with Russia, China and other Asian states, and notwithstanding fresh "strategic partnerships" with Beijing and Moscow, it was hasty to conclude that the Russian proposal for a multilateral approach was far more attractive in the long run than the current US security umbrella. What Riyadh foresaw was the need to strengthen existing security alliances, build new ones and empower a regional order that rested on resilient and sovereign nation-states that were ready to assume a larger share of the security burden. How Saudi Arabia proposed to achieve these goals deserves special attention.

2. Adjusting to a new regional landscape

One of the most consequential events to strike the Middle East in recent decades was the protests and uprisings that, starting

---

21. Andrew Leber, "Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Congress: Cooperation and Opposition since 9/11", in *Dirasat*, No. 44 (April 2019), p. 27, https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/214. See also Paul Musgrave, "Between Two Poles: The Kingdom and the U.S. Foreign Policy in an Age of Political Polarization", in *Dirasat*, No. 47 (July 2019), https://kfcris.com/en/view/post/225.

22. "KSA, US Celebrate 75th Anniversary of FDR Meet on Board USS Farragut in Jeddah Islamic Port", in *Arab News*, 16 February 2020, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1628671.

in late 2010, swept across many Arab countries in a regional convulsion that was initially dubbed the "Arab Spring". Much hope for long-sought reforms had accompanied the onset of the revolutions, and some even contended that this entrepreneurial generation of young Arabs rising up together against their rulers would spell the end, or at least diminish the appeal of, radical movements and ideologies. That hope was short-lived and the reality that transpired thereafter was that the uprisings and reactions to them spread chaos and war across the region, and radical groups and movements were in fact revived and became more invigorated.[23]

The most detrimental consequence of the Arab uprisings, however, was the weakening and failure of state institutions and the ensuing challenges to the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of many afflicted states. This has contributed to an ongoing structural shift in regional geopolitics and power balance. Traditional centres of power in the Arab world such as Egypt and Iraq have been weakened and, in the midst of this volatile regional environment and the ensuing vacuum, the Gulf, and in particular Saudi Arabia, emerged as the new centre of gravity.[24]

Turkey, post 2011, presented another problematic dilemma as it too failed to put its own house in order before embarking on regional adventurisms that, more often than not, drew the ire of global as well as regional powers. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who perceived the Middle East as his own sphere of influence, Ankara adopted unhealthy Ottoman methodologies that failed once and were bound to fail again. Erdoğan behaved as a "sultan" – a reference to Ottoman days, when Turkey dominated the region – and clearly feels much more comfortable than his predecessors in operating across

23. Emma Graham-Harrisn, "Beyond Syria: The Arab Spring's Aftermath", in *The Guardian*, 30 December 2018, https://gu.com/p/ab4nx. See also Jon B. Alterman, "Radicalism Four Years into the 'Arab Spring'", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 15 December 2014, https://www.csis.org/node/24898.

24. 'Abd al-Khaliq 'Abdallah, *Lahzat al-Khalij fi al-Tarikh al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir* [The Gulf moment in contemporary Arab history], Beirut, Dar al-Farabi, 2018.

the Arab world. To be sure, Erdoğan's alignment with and support for the transnational Islamist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, his deployment of military troops in Qatar, his military incursion into northern Syria, as well as his deployment of Syrian proxies in order to fight Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Libya, were not endearing steps for the vast majority of Arabs, especially Saudis.[25] When it comes to Syria specifically, Ankara is playing its Kurdish card well, maintaining that it can and must manage stability along its 600-mile border with Syria. However, it is a dangerous game for Turkey, with possible negative repercussions for the region as a whole, to address what it perceives as a threat to its security by aligning itself with radical Islamist groups and rebels.

Inasmuch as the post-2011 Arab uprisings crystallised Washington's preferences – especially in Egypt and Libya – Saudi officials took note of US apprehensions after Barack Obama's Ankara and Cairo speeches that did not hide the president's loathing of traditional regimes.[26] It was this realisation that sank whatever goodwill existed in Riyadh. With dramatic regional transformations that engulfed the bulk of the Arab world after Spring 2011, Saudi Arabia backed President ʿAbdul Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, President ʿAbd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi

---

25. See Soner Cagaptay, "Erdoğan's Failure on the Nile", in *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 33 (Spring 2019), p. 82-95, https://www.thecairoreview.com/?p=9767; Helen Warrell, Chloe Cornish and Laura Pitel, "Turkey's Military Incursion into Syria Threatens to Revive ISIS Cells", in *Financial Times*, 10 October 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/3fb0791e-e9e9-11e9-a240-3b065ef-5fc55; Bethan McKernan and Hussein Akoush, "Exclusive: 2,000 Syrian Fighters Deployed to Libya to Support Government", in *The Guardian*, 15 January 2020, https://gu.com/p/d4zff.

26. The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman said in an interview with Bloomberg in October 2018, "Throughout his Administration that lasted 8 years, President Obama worked against most of our agendas, not only in Saudi but throughout the Middle East. And despite that, we were able to protect our interests". See Stephanie Flanders et al., "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests: Transcript", in *Bloomberg*, 5 October 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-05/saudi-crown-prince-discusses-trump-aramco-arrests-transcript; Turki al-Faisal al-Saud, "Mr. Obama, We Are Not 'Free Riders'", in *Arab News*, 14 March 2016, https://www.arabnews.com/node/894826.

in Yemen, even PM Sa'ad Hariri in Lebanon, though the latter kowtowed to Hezbollah and lost his opportunity to save Beirut from collapse. What stood out in most of these evolving settings was the role played by Iran as it asserted its leadership and expanded its influence.

Taking advantage of the ensuing chaos and weakened central governments and state institutions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and beyond, Iran was able, through financial, material and physical support, to expand its influence and entrench its transnational network of armed militias and non-state actors. The main reason is that it plays with its own set of rules, and pays little or no attention to good neighbourliness and the rules of the Westphalian system governing relations between sovereign nation-states. Whatever paradox existed in Gulf foreign policies could well be explained by the dangers posed by an increasingly assertive Iran, whose legitimacy gained traction in the aftermath of the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA). The JCPOA sought to solely limit Iran's nuclear program, and did not deal with its regional adventurism or its ballistic missile programme, with the hope that it will positively contribute to the moderation of Tehran's behaviour and, thus, regional and international peace and security. Effectively, however, it permitted Tehran to expand its influence and pressure its Arab neighbours after securing a partial lifting of sanctions and receiving substantial financial relief, both of which were provided within JCPOA guidelines that, truth be told, allowed Iran to maintain its regional activism and threaten its regional antagonists.[27] Iran stood as a regional rival, not because conservative Arabs perceived it as a mortal danger to their domestic stability and security, but because the Iranian regime has seldom shied from pursuing its expansionist agenda and advancing its destabilising model of a regional order that stands in stark contrast to the one adopt-

---

27. The JCPOA is the so-called Iran nuclear deal that was inked on 14 July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States – plus Germany.

ed and pursued by the Saudi-led alliance. Its actions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere, all highlighted Iranian hegemonic aspirations that exploited chaos and skirted good neighbourly relations.

For over four decades, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments cajoled their Western allies to address the Iranian threat in toto, though those efforts were either overlooked or, most recently under the Obama administration, allowed to expand as his administration both downgraded Iran's problematic regional policies below the objective of reaching an agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as allegedly viewing the real threat to Western interests as Sunni extremism manifested in Salafist traditions.[28] In fact, the decade-long vacillation in US leadership portrayed the image of a retreating superpower, anxious to appease a hegemonic regional power instead of supporting traditional allies. Doubts were raised by some concerning the reliability of the United States, especially following Obama's shocking contention that Saudi Arabia should "share" the region with Iran, their regional foe and a US-designated state sponsor of terrorism.[29] Was Washington still committed to its decades-old security architecture – as upheld by every president since Jimmy Carter – at a time when Saudi Arabia perceived Iranian expansionism with grave concerns?

Notwithstanding the Obama administration's convenient regional accommodations that appeared to favour Iran, Saudi Arabia opted for a two-pronged approach to ensure regional

---

28. Nabil Khalifé, *The Attempt to Uproot Sunni-Arab Influence. A Geo-Strategic Analysis of the Western, Israeli and Iranian Quest for Domination*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2017. See also, Suzanne Maloney, *Progress of the Obama Administration's Policy Toward Iran*, Testimony Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 15 November 2011, http://brook.gs/2bAHDvo.

29. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", in *The Atlantic*, Vol. 317, No. 3 (April 2016), p. 70-90, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525.

security, first by adopting a far more assertive role in Bahrain and Yemen, and second by imposing order within the GCC family. Even if complications arose at both levels, few could dismiss Riyadh's policies to preserve its core interests, especially after its steps put to rest the festering canard that Saudi Arabia seldom assumed security burdens. In 2011, the GCC deployed military forces, the Peninsula Shield Force, into Manama to end an insurrection against the ruling family, as well as engineering the GCC initiative that aimed to put an end to the political crisis in Yemen. In 2015, when the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels hijacked the political process and took control of Sana'a, Saudi Arabia used even greater force in Yemen as it mobilised and led a strong coalition of states at the request and in support of the legitimate Yemeni government. Parallel to these measures, Riyadh organised large-scale military exercises that conveyed a keen determination – under the reigns of both King 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz and King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz – to protect the Arabian Peninsula.

In addition to these grave concerns, the Kingdom confronted a genuine security hazard from Qatar, which reached the level of a diplomatic crisis in June 2017 when 12 countries joined Saudi Arabia in severing relations with Doha. Riyadh and its partners were particularly irked by Qatar's strong support and encouragement of the Muslim Brotherhood and other proxies in Syria and Libya, including some with ties to terrorist jihadist movements, representing a more or less direct threat to the governance model proposed and pursued by the Kingdom. The coalition that imposed a boycott cited Doha's support for extremist organisations, its continuous incitement against its Gulf neighbours through its media arms, along with the Qatari accommodation of Iran.

Remarkably, Doha acknowledged that it had provided assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood (though it denied aiding militant groups linked to al-Qaeda or the so-called Islamic State), and while Qatar shared vital economic ties with Iran over the North Dome Gas Field in the middle of the Gulf, close Iranian–Qatari ties remained puzzling. Significantly, Doha condemned

the 2 January 2016 Iranian attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad, and even recalled its ambassador from Iran as this constituted a violation of international diplomatic norms, but it did not alter its general course of action vis-à-vis Tehran and other GCC states. Qatar did not criticise Iran over its interferences in Bahrain, and after the boycott, returned its ambassador to the Iranian capital on 23 August 2017. Further distancing itself from its GCC partners, the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its willingness to improve bilateral ties with Tehran.

To date, Kuwaiti efforts to mediate a lasting reconciliation have failed to produce a settlement of existing differences, which led a handful of commentators to bury the alliance as yet another failed Arab initiative.[30] However, while the situation within the GCC alliance is not perfect, the aforementioned commentators' readings are perhaps overly pessimistic. In fact, the diplomatic rupture showed the immense benefits in having a regional grouping such as the GCC, as coordination between all six members continued on many levels, including military drills. To be sure, and beyond critical security ties, effective economic relationships fostered greater intimacy as GCC officials developed and adopted mutually beneficial policies. Moreover, non-negligible geostrategic benefits of integration occurred even if few anticipated the latest Doha crisis.

When the six monarchies nestled on the Arabian Peninsula joined to create the GCC in early 1981, they shared economic integration aspirations, common ideologies, conservative

---

30. See, for example, Geoffrey Martin, "Is the GCC Dead after the Qatar Crisis?", in *Gulf States Analytics*, 5 February 2018, https://gulfstateanalytics.com/?p=1777. See also Imad K. Harb, "The Qatar Blockade Killed the GCC, But What Next?", in *The New Arab*, 5 June 2019, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2019/6/5/the-qatar-blockade-killed-the-gcc-but-what-next-; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Can the Gulf Cooperation Council Survive the Current Crisis?", in *ACW Policy Analysis*, 7 September 2017, http://arabcenterdc.org/?p=5671; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Evolving Narratives of Political Contestation and Geopolitical Rivalry in the Persian Gulf", in Wolfgang Mühlberger and Toni Alaranta (eds), *Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa. Conceptions of Order and Perceptions of Instability*, Cham, Springer, 2020, p. 71-91.

values, identical security aims and, above all else, similar assessments regarding the need to protect their countries and preserve their rule. For the most part, none of these purposes changed, and it would be wrong for any single country to think that it can survive and achieve its strategic objectives while working against the interests of the remaining ones, especially in a region subjected to continuous ideological, political and military assaults.

Nonetheless, as Henry Kissinger wrote, "Saudi foreign policy, for most of the existence of the modern Saudi state, has been characterized by a caution that elevated indirectness into a special art form".[31] However, as a result of the new regional as well as international strategic environment, Saudi Arabia decided to do away with caution and assume a more hawkish posture as it adopted forward-looking foreign policy instruments. This was not because Saudi officials were overconfident of their Muslim credentials or were persuaded that intrinsic manipulations of regional rivals would be easy. Rather, Saudis assumed the responsibility because they concluded that their security required a hands-on approach, though the costs remained high. Equally important was the conclusion that the United States, still a vital ally, was telegraphing changing priorities and might no longer be willing to invest in the Kingdom's wellbeing the way it used to.

To be sure, US power has not declined in recent years, and it would be inaccurate to presume that it would withdraw substantially from the region in the foreseeable future. Still, "the questions being posed today are less about American capability than about American will, leading to deep uncertainty as to whether the United States still defines its regional interests as it once did".[32] These questions, exacerbated by the rise of

31. Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York, Penguin Press, 2014, p. 136.
32. William F. Wechsler, "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality", in Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (eds), *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, Milano, ISPI, 2019, p. 25, https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/24090.

protectionism, populism and isolationism within segments of the US public, fed a perception that in turn could dictate a new reality.

Notwithstanding growing apprehension, at least among the Saudi public, regarding the long-term commitment of the United States, Saudi Arabia welcomed the Trump administration and the latter's support for the Kingdom's regional vision, as Washington distanced itself from Iran in the area. Saudi leadership assumed the responsibility of a major regional power, paying a larger portion of the defence burden. As stated above, and while the Kingdom lacked the population of its putative rivals, including Iran and Turkey, it intended to boost its technical capabilities and, notwithstanding intrinsic challenges, to acquire effective military competencies that would allow it to protect and defend the Arabian Peninsula.

3. Regional security: Increased burdens for increased threats

Resulting from these developments, Riyadh emphasised the need to be more responsible for ensuring its security and the security of the Arabian Peninsula and the region, and embarked on comprehensive re-evaluations of military needs starting in early 2015. In fact, Saudi defence industry ambitions, which were included in the comprehensive Vision 2030 plans, promised to address fundamental national security challenges even if these ambitious projects demanded minute attention to detail as authorities worked to eliminate institutional obstacles for sorely needed reforms. While the development of the Saudi defence industry accelerated, requiring updated capabilities as emphasised by Vision 2030, few expected existing strategic ties with supplier countries to change over the short term. What Saudi security plans envisaged was technological expertise from reliable partners and, when such partners were not available, to seek fresh supplies from Russia and China, both of which were ready to assist the Saudi defence industry to develop faster.

As discussed in the Vision 2030 blueprint, Riyadh intended to push for a localisation of defence industries, not only to reduce military spending, but also to stimulate other "industrial sectors such as industrial equipment, communications and information technology", all of which were expected to create more job opportunities.[33] Although the Kingdom was the world's fifth largest military spender in 2019 behind the United States, China, India and Russia,[34] barely 5 per cent of its estimated 60 billion US dollar annual spending was within the Kingdom, with only seven indigenous national defence companies and two research centres. Whether Vision 2030's aim "to localize over 50 percent of military equipment spending" could be achieved was impossible to know, though first efforts were promising. By concentrating on "less complex industries such as those providing spare parts, armored vehicles and basic ammunition",[35] the plan intended to learn how to walk in the field before starting to run. Moreover, and because Riyadh required trained personnel to produce and efficiently use what leading companies could produce, the real challenge rested on the ability to secure an effective transfer of technology, which major powers were seldom disposed to accept.

It was critical to underscore that the security burden increased because of intensified threats that could no longer be overlooked. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) military expenditure databases, GCC states spend about 100 billion US dollars a year on defence, just behind the United States and China, though Gulf Arab monarchies were progressively entrusted with the gargantuan task of protecting the entire Arabian Peninsula and its immediate surrounding airspaces and sea-lanes.[36] GCC states led by Sau-

33. Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, 2017, p. 48, https://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/report/Saudi_Vision2030_EN_2017.pdf.
34. Nan Tian et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure 2019", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, April 2020, https://www.sipri.org/node/5103.
35. Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030*, cit., p. 48.
36. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2020*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020, p. 324-387; and Stockholm International

di Arabia disbursed significant resources to shield the Arabian Peninsula, where 36 million indigenous inhabitants along with an additional 22 to 24 million expatriate workers live in 2020.

Furthermore, and since most of these individuals live on the coasts as well as within isolated urbanised oases, extensive infrastructures, including vital desalination plants that provide sorely needed water for human, animal and plant lives, required costly safety measures. Of course, the Arabian Peninsula's oil resources, estimated to contain about 500 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and 1,500 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, compelled decision-makers to invest in effective defences of vital facilities also. One may add to this list the protection of large cities, critical electricity grids, airport installations, land, air and naval bases, as well as other vital facilities.[37]

Protecting this large area, including those living within its space, was a major responsibility that GCC states took seriously even if they continued to confront sharp strategic challenges after 1981. For over four decades, sectarian, ethnic and ideological divisions grew in scope, which added to existing vulnerabilities as a major regional foe seldom shied from its quest to upset regional stability. Repeated Iranian interference in the internal affairs of GCC states – ranging from an attempt to assassinate the ruler of Kuwait in 1981,[38] to repeated meddling in Bahrain after the mid-1990s,[39] to periodic clashes at Hajj ceremonies in Saudi Arabia,[40] to its tactical marriage

Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, London, Oxford University Press, 2019, Chapter 4.

37. Economist, "Spiralling", in *The Economist*, No. 9153 (27 July 2019), p. 27-28, https://econ.st/2Yj5WWX.

38. UPI, "Car Bomber Fails in Attempt to Kill Leader of Kuwait", in *The New York Times*, 26 May 1985, p. A1, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/26/world/car-bomber-fails-in-attempt-to-kill-leader-of-kuwait.html.

39. Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 155-161 and 275-296.

40. Gwenn Okruhlik, "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 2003), p. 113-125, https://mepc.org/node/4008. See also Joshua Teitelbaum,

of convenience with al-Qaeda post 9/11[41] and its well-documented financial and material support of the Houthi militia in Yemen[42] – necessitated heavy investments by GCC member-states, most of which were amply aware that their limited populations prevented the establishment of effective security forces that, consequently, required unity if not union. GCC states invested significant resources to upgrade their military competences, and while they had in the past relied on global allies to ensure regional security, awakened nationalism and core sovereignty questions now shifted some of the burden onto their shoulders.[43]

Equally as important as the Gulf, on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula lies the Red Sea which is one of the world's most heavily trafficked waterways, handling around 15 per cent of global trade. Recent years have seen a flurry of regional and international interest in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa region, which unfortunately, and despite its immense strategic and economic importance, has been plagued by a plethora of economic, political and security threats and challenges ranging from piracy and terrorism to irregular migration and the smuggling of weapons and drugs. The fact that a number of states in the region suffer from fragile institutions exacerbates an already precarious situation. Extremist groups, such as the Iranian-backed Houthis, began in recent years to demonstrate

"Terrorist Challenges to Saudi Arabian Internal Security", in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2005), p. 1-11.

41. Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa'ida'a Tactical Cooperation", in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (April 2017), p. 12-18, https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation; "CIA Docs from Osama bin Laden Raid Suggest Iran-al Qaeda Link", in *CBS News*, 2 November 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-osama-bin-laden-al-qaeda-before-september-11-terror-attacks-cia-documents; Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, "Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself–With Iran's Help", in *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/al-qaeda-iran-cia/545576.

42. Farzin Nadimi, "The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3261 (13 February 2020), https://washin.st/38u1Xgc.

43. Nawaf Obaid, *A New Assertive Saudi Arabia?* (podcast), European Council on Foreign Relations, 22 November 2013, https://www.mixcloud.com/ECFR/a-new-assertive-saudi-arabia.

sophisticated capabilities, including the use of anti-shipping missiles, sea mines and self-guiding explosive boats, threatening the freedom of navigation and international trade. In fact, these terrorist activities forced Saudi Arabia to temporarily halt shipments in the Red Sea in mid-2018.[44]

These dynamic Red Sea, Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden trans-regional developments increased the fear of being caught in a great power competition. In Djibouti, for example, where US, French, Japanese and Italian military facilities co-existed for several years, China joined the club in 2017 with its first naval overseas military base, which added to US and Japanese concerns. Against these enhanced deployments, the US Congress expressed alarm in 2018, concerned over the potential national security implications of big-power politics, as best highlighted by former National Security Advisor John Bolton who devised President Trump's new Africa strategy and stressed the need to confront major rivals such as China and Russia.[45] While the Chinese presence in the region has traditionally been economic in character, Beijing has certainly expanded its military footprint in the region over the course of several years due to various threats and challenges to its economic interests.[46]

As the commercial and military footprint of external actors continues to expand, Horn of Africa and Red Sea states may find themselves subjected to global power competition, especially in an era characterised by dramatic shifts in the international balance of power. In the midst of this evolving strategic context, Saudi Arabia felt it important to increase its engage-

44. Elana DeLozier, "Seeing Red: Trade and Threats Shaping Gulf-Horn Relations", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 3079 (15 February 2019), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/seeing-red-trade-and-threats-shaping-gulf-horn-relations.

45. Zach Vertin, "Toward a Red Sea Forum: The Gulf, the Horn of Africa, & Architecture for a New Regional Order", in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 27 (November 2019), https://brook.gs/2oMGldc.

46. Mohammed al-Sudairi, "The People's Republic in the Red Sea: A Holistic Analysis of China's Discursive and Material Footprint in the Region", in *Dirasat*, No. 52 (January 2020), http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/259.

ments in the region to safeguard it from nefarious external influences and protect the national as well as mutual economic and strategic interests of the states sharing this increasingly crowded neighbourhood.

Therefore, Saudi Arabia increased its diplomatic and mediation efforts in the region with notable successes, the highlight of which was the historical peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea that was signed in Jeddah in September 2018 and marked an end to a bitter war that had lasted 20 years. However, the most sustained, successful and potentially rewarding initiative that Saudi Arabia spearheaded was the establishment of a new entity comprising the littoral states of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which it first announced in December 2018, and whose founding charter was signed in January 2020 under the name "Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden".[47] Security is certainly high on the agenda but it is not the only focus or concern of the new Council. The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs stated upon the signing of the charter with his counterparts from Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea, that it was important "to expedite the pace of our countries' cooperation and enhance our capabilities in order to confront any risks or challenges facing our region as well as to protect [its] security".[48]

There are, of course, other economic as well as environmental benefits that can be reaped through such close cooperation and coordination. Through the Council, for instance, the smaller economies and developing countries in the Horn of Africa could potentially gain access to previously inaccessible opportunities, and, collectively, be able to better manage the flurry of new foreign engagements, rebalancing the asymmetrical relationship with other wealthy countries.

---

47. Saudi Press Agency, *Foreign Ministers of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden Sign Charter of the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden*, 6 January 2020, https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2019799.
48. Ibid.

Though little known outside government circles, an equally important alliance the Kingdom took the lead in forming was the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which was created in December 2015 to enhance cooperation and "form a unified pan-Islamic front against terrorism".[49] The IMCTC has since grown in membership to 41 countries, and has been active in the area of training, capacity building, and intelligence sharing between member states.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia is placing a huge burden on itself, both in political terms and in advancing the necessary financial capital to several institutions, though leading such ambitious undertakings is a precise fit with enhancing its long-term national security interests. Indeed, taking the lead in building such regional coalitions and groupings is testament to the Kingdom's firm belief in the benefits of multilateralism, and a concrete example of its determination to be proactive in forging regional solutions to many of the region's problems.

4. Gulf security: Russian, US and Iranian proposals

In the midst of the abovementioned regional and international developments, few were surprised when Moscow proposed a new collective security concept to replace the Arabian Gulf's US defence umbrella and, in the process, position Russia as a co-equal power broker alongside Washington.[50] What President Putin foresaw was nothing short of a radical overhaul of the Western-created security architecture, which guaranteed access to defend Arab Gulf societies and the area's vast petroleum resources fuelling the global economic engine, as he envisaged an international conference on security and cooperation in the Gulf, with a view to establishing a regional

---

49. See the IMCTC official website: *Brief History*, https://imctc.org/English/About.

50. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

security organisation that would, ostensibly, adopt "a long-term programme of action aimed at normalizing the situation, improving stability and security, resolving conflicts, [identifying] key benchmarks and parameters for a future post-crisis architecture, as well as ways to fulfill the related tasks".[51] What this entailed was the eventual removal of the "permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states in the territories of states of the Gulf",[52] a reference to US, British and French forces and bases.[53]

The Russian proposal was backed by China, and would presumably include other stakeholders, including Iran, though it failed to discuss why Saudi Arabia and its Arab Gulf partners would accept to join in this plan. Even if convoluted, the Russian logic was based on the alleged perception that the United States, which was no longer dependent on oil imports from the Arab Gulf region, was gradually reducing its commitments to its Arab allies and that local powers, led by Saudi Arabia, ought to distance themselves from Washington. Of course, this very reading was controversial.

In fact, the number of US troops dispatched to the region has grown in recent years because of renewed tensions with Iran, confirming that Washington is not leaving the Arabian Peninsula despite a widespread belief that that was precisely what would occur before long. Iranian officials and pro-Iranian analysts concluded that this fundamental assumption steered Arab leaders in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to hedge against a US departure, including by making overtures to China, Russia, Turkey and even Iran, which was certainly provocative even if pedantic.[54]

51.   Ibid.
52.   Ibid.
53.   Theodore Karasik, "Is Russia's 'Old' Gulf Security Plan the Best It Can Do?", in *Arab News*, 30 July 2019, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1533096.
54.   Associated Press, "Iran Asks West to Leave Persian Gulf as Tensions Heightened", in *CNBC News*, 22 September 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/22/iran-asks-west-to-leave-persian-gulf-as-tensions-heightened.html. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, "The American Threat to America in the Gulf", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 6 January 2020, https://www.csis.org/node/55068.

Interestingly, Russia perceived the security of the Gulf region as a counter-terrorism conundrum, in which stakeholders would join efforts to eliminate "the hotbed of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East" without, however, identifying what that might be. Those efforts, Moscow believed, ought to be under the aegis of the United Nations and its alleged "solid basis of international law" that was highly questionable because of the catch-22 Security Council veto power. Moreover, it insisted that the new Gulf area security system ought to be universal and comprehensive, "based on respect for the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions". Of course, its most interesting feature was the call to create "a security and cooperation organization in the Persian Gulf (PGSCO) that would include, in addition to the Gulf countries, Russia, China, the USA, the EU, India and other stakeholders as observers or associated members".[55]

Regrettably, this call overlooked the existence of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which plays an important role in maintaining security, stability and prosperity in the region. The reason was perhaps the 2017 rupture with Qatar, which stood as an illustration of the estrangement, although this did not greatly hinder GCC's cooperation as illustrated above.

In addition to the GCC alliance, the Kingdom joined the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC),[56] and supported the European-led naval mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), which strengthened ties between the Arab Gulf monarchies and European powers. Indeed, EMASOH was an additional sign of European backing as member-states shared in the security burden and their presence in the Gulf was deemed to be useful by GCC states.[57] From the Saudi perspec-

---

55. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, cit.
56. "Saudi Arabia Joins International Maritime Security Alliance", in *Al Arabiya*, 18 September 2019, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/09/18/Saudi-Arabia-joins-International-Maritime-Security-Construct.
57. Nathan Gain, "European-led Coalition in the Strait of Hormuz Begins Operations", in *Naval News*, 31 January 2020, https://www.navalnews.com/?p=8870.

tive, those two maritime security missions were certainly preferred over the Iranian HOPE proposal, which wished to see a Western military withdrawal from the area, if only because Iran has long been an active participant in the destabilisation of many countries in the region, and, especially following the US withdrawal of the JCPOA, the main culprit behind the attacks in the Straits of Hormuz as well.[58]

As to the US-proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), which was first announced during President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, it is still a work in progress and the shape it will ultimately take remains unclear.[59] This alliance was to include all six GCC states, Egypt, Jordan, as well as the United States, and proposed to focus not only on security, but also on the economy and energy questions.[60] However, it seems that some members have expressed hesitation towards the initiative, which culminated in the withdrawal of Egypt in April 2019. Despite that drawback, MESA meetings continue to be held and the remaining members, including Saudi Arabia, seem to be coordinating and "moving ahead with the initiative".[61]

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran stemmed from opposing regional order visions and significant geopolitical disputes, and served as a salient component in the security architecture of today's Middle East. Saudi Arabia remained

---

58. Mehran Haghirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?", in *IranSource*, 3 October 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=186210.
59. Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", in *Carnegie Articles*, 8 February 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/78317.
60. Kristen Fontenrose, "A Crisis of Commitment in the Middle East, But Whose?", in *New Atlanticist*, 15 November 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=199162.
61. Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Egypt Withdraws from U.S.-led anti-Iran Security Initiative – Sources", in *Reuters*, 11 April 2019, https://reut.rs/2GgqQjO.

troubled by Tehran's support of a network of armed non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Inasmuch as Iranian regional policies are perceived as posing direct threats to the security of the Gulf as well as the wider region, it was a foregone conclusion that Saudi Arabia and its partners would react with firm diplomatic positions, appropriate political responses, concrete economic steps and, when absolutely necessary, carefully tailored military responses.

As highlighted above, Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions vis-à-vis the situation in the Middle East and the Gulf, particularly concerning the role of Iran, was no longer in doubt. In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, Tehran was unabashed in backing Shi'a militias that threatened the internal stability of all four societies, while Riyadh defended its traditional allies and sought to preserve and strengthen the state institutions. Likewise, Saudi Arabia confronted a reinvigorated Turkey, whose leader followed a dual nationalist and Islamist strategy, and contemplated the restoration of Ottoman hegemony over a vast swath of territory. From the Saudi point of view, Ankara was a leading regional power but could not possibly be allowed to re-establish its Ottoman lore. To be sure, Turkey remained an ally but its military presence in Qatar, along with its support of the transnational Muslim Brotherhood, was not perceived positively. Still, the gravest threat emerged from Iran, where religious leaders seldom shied away from issuing anti-Saudi declarations, including brazen calls to "liberate" the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah.

As analysed above, the shifts that occurred within the regional and international environments over the past decades have presented the Saudi leadership with new sets of challenges and difficult choices. A proactive policy of diversification, not only in the economic sphere but also in security and foreign relations, has been pursued in order to meet internal needs and remain relevant in an ever-evolving international environment. Throughout all of these changes, it is safe to argue that neither King Salman nor his Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman shirked their responsibilities to defend the Kingdom and promote stability in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

7
HOPE FOR A NEW REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: TOWARD A HORMUZ COMMUNITY

SAEED KHATIBZADEH

Over the past decades, the Middle Eastern region has faced constant and rapidly evolving challenges, becoming entangled in escalatory rhetoric and actions that have led to a number of critical situations. If there is a consensus among experts about the current state of affairs in the region it is that *time* is sensitive, *context* is complex and *uncertainty* is widespread.

Indeed, from the Palestinian crisis to the ones in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the region is deeply entrapped in unsettled disputes and conflicts, reflecting intra-regional rivalries and foreign intervention. These crises are developing at an accelerated rate and the spillovers into neighbouring states and regions, as witnessed recently in North Africa, are increasingly interconnected with current tensions and rivalries between extra-regional powers.

Among all the major conflicts and crises in the Middle East, the only one to have been addressed through diplomacy and political negotiations was the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, which was ultimately addressed through the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. The US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, followed by its unilateral and unlawful re-imposition of extraterritorial sanctions not only on Iran but also on any foreign company doing business with Iran, brought tensions back to centre stage in the region, leading to an unprecedented escalation that left the region on the brink of a major military confrontation, both in the summer of 2019 and

in January 2020, after US president Donald Trump ordered the assassination of Iranian top General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq.

As new and old disputes and crises unfold in the region, there are also growing calls and demands for de-escalation. This would serve not only to address the root causes of ongoing disputes but also to bring stable peace and security to a region which can truly be considered as the most internationalised in the world.

Iran is well represented in many developments in the region and therefore is not only subject to the consequences of the current situation but also has a central role. Like any other state, Iran has its own interests, policies, strategies and threat perceptions. From Tehran's point of view, the current situation is the result of different interconnected factors, among them the reality that almost all previous projects, policies and attempts to bring security, peace and stability to the region have failed. They have not been successful mainly because they have excluded major regional powers, particularly Iran. Moreover, they have not been homegrown plans, generally being imposed by outsiders pursuing their own specific interests with little consideration for the realities in the region and thus lacking in basic and mutually endorsed principles and assurances.

Based on these past experiences, it is apparent that only inclusive and cooperative frameworks can succeed.[1] The region needs a realistic security framework that mirrors the new power relations in the region and is not based on old parameters. As perceived in Iran, there is an absolute need for such a comprehensive regional package for cooperation, which is reflected in Iran's proposal for a Hormuz Community embedded in the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) initiative.

---

1. See for instance, Andrea Dessì, "Inclusivity and Cooperative Security over Containment and Exclusivity: Guidelines for EU Policy in the Middle East", in *EUREN Briefs*, No. 13 (January 2020), http://www.eu-russia-expertnetwork. eu/en/analytics/euren-brief-13.

The following sections will analyse Iran's HOPE initiative, outlining its differences from previous efforts. Additionally, the analysis will address a number of questions, including why all previous regional policies and proposals have failed, whether there are viable ways out of this regional conundrum, and finally, what principles and criteria could inform a workable framework for regional security.

1. Understanding the challenges: Iran's perception of the root cause of regional insecurity

As seen from Iran, regional challenges can be categorised as structural versus situational, as well as challenges that arise from inside versus outside the region, with both being interconnected. The region is structurally involved in daily violence to the extent of being in a state of permanent war. As a result, countries of the region are entrapped in different structural deficiencies and weaknesses, and consequently their supposedly ordinary interactions with each other, whether political, economic or people-to-people exchanges, have become securitised. This situation is very far from what could be considered normal interactions in other regions, where even if there are significant fields of divergence, countries can manage their differences and positions through established political, bilateral or regional mechanisms, in an effective and functional way to keep them out of the realm of confrontation.

The concept of "understanding" is crucial in explaining the origins of the current situation.[2] Almost every conflict has started with assumptions, by both inside and outside players, which have often turned into self-fulfilling prophecies. These inaccurate assumptions have ultimately led to poor concepts and misleading analyses concerning surrounding circumstances. The natural consequence has been erroneous recommen-

2. Sebastian Sunday Grève, "The Importance of Understanding Each Other in Philosophy", in *Philosophy*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (April 2015), p. 213-239.

dations and destructive policies, and a region defined by war and conflict over the course of the past decades, including the Iraq–Iran war, the US wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, the catastrophic and tragic situations in Syria and Yemen, and of course the multi-layered confrontation between various players with US–Iran tensions at their core.

These misunderstandings run so deep that some extra-regional powers, such as the US, consider this region as a sphere of influence and hegemony and cannot depart from their past policies.[3] Ultimately, such misunderstandings have created vast security implications for the region. A first implication has been mismanagement of the region's issues which itself has caused a sense of *sustainable uncertainty* among the nations and governments of the region.[4] Secondly, great powers have tended to approach the region in a *reductionist* manner. The best example is in the analyses that reduce tension in the region to perceived Iran–Saudi rivalries and forget to recognise the deep internal rifts among Arab states within and beyond the Arabian Peninsula.[5] Furthermore, the complex and multidimensional nature of the region's challenges has been overlooked. This is mirrored, for example, in all those oversimplified analyses that trace conflicts in the region to so-called historical Sunni–Shia divisions or Muslim Brother-hood–Wahhabi differences, trying to explain everything from Iraq to Afghanistan, Qatar and Libya through religious or sectarian lenses.

The dichotomy of *ideas* versus *realities* should also be taken into account to understand the current state of affairs. This huge gap between idea and reality explains why almost all

---

3. James Barr, "How a Forgotten Rivalry Between Superpowers Helped Shape the Modern Middle East", in *Time*, 12 September 2018, https://time.com/5393023.

4. Karel Černý, *Instability in the Middle East. Structural Changes and Uneven Modernisation 1950–2015*, Prague, Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2017.

5. Simon Tisdall, "Why Instinct and Ideology Tell Trump to Get Out of the Middle East", in *The Guardian*, 11 January 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/p/d475f.

mega plans for the region have failed during the past few decades. There are four problems that can, in part, explain why the region is in chaos:

- *Cognitive problem*: This mainly entails the zero-sum mentality and the policy of exclusion pursued by major regional as well as extra-regional powers. This problem in the cognitive map of decision makers and leaders has been, and still is, the root cause of the majority of past confrontations, unsettled disputes and unsuccessful attempts for an inclusive regional arrangement.[6] This is a mentality according to which win-win solutions are not considered an option, and therefore there has been an active policy of excluding the "other". Sub-regional blocks and coalitions, even if shaky like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or ad-hoc and opportunistic like the ones that emerged in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, have been established to oppose the "other".
- *Structural mistrust and divergent contexts*: This problem is very much interconnected with the cognitive problem and is derived from, and added to, the lack of regional dialogue, regional working relations and regional cohesion. As such, the region is facing a deep problem of "othering".[7] This has led to antagonistic behaviours and endless rivalries between regional players.
- *Extra-regional politics of interests and interventions*: This problem includes great power politics, the exploitation of the region's energy resources, billions of dollars' worth of arms sales[8] to the region and countless wars and conflicts, that combine to make a balance of power between different sub-regional blocs difficult. Because of this, the region has been held hostage to the power politics of ma-

6. Michael J. Shapiro and G. Matthew Bonham, "Cognitive Process and Foreign Policy Decision-Making", in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1973), p. 147-174.
7. Timur Kuran, "The Roots of Middle East Mistrust", in *Project Syndicate*, 8 July 2016, https://prosyn.org/yAAkCRh.
8. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Global Arms Trade: USA Increases Dominance; Arms Flows to the Middle East Surge, Says SIPRI*, 11 March 2019, https://www.sipri.org/node/4770.

jor extra-regional forces and their direct and indirect interventions.[9]

- *Substantive deficiencies of regional plans and proposals*: A combination of the three problems outlined above has resulted in the failure of past proposed plans for regional arrangements. Such plans have failed primarily because they have rarely reflected the realities of the region, have not been inclusive or comprehensive and have lacked the basic principles needed to address the issues and concerns of stakeholders, mostly reflecting the objectives and interests of external great powers.

These factors have gone hand in hand with more systemic realities such as weak or failed states trapped in identity and legitimacy crises, all resulting in structural chaos in West Asia.[10] This structural chaos has been the result of various interconnected issues on the ground, including the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the large-scale human tragedies that are still unfolding in Syria and Yemen; the normalisation of violence and war in the region through the constant use of naked force – particularly after the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; the barbaric brutality of terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); and the militarisation and securitisation of the region with hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of military equipment being poured into the Middle East by various actors.[11]

From Tehran's point of view, fundamental changes need to be adopted on both cognitive as well as practical levels in order to advance new regional mechanisms for cooperation. Two pack-

9.   Yuqin Liu, "On the Great Power Intervention in the Middle East Upheaval and Political Trend in the Middle East", in *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2013), p. 1-34, https://doi.org/10.1080/1937067 9.2013.12023221; Fred H. Lawson, "Rethinking U.S. Intervention in the Middle East", in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999), p. 385-389.

10. Nick Danforth, "Four Maps that Explain the Chaos of the Middle East", in *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2016, http://wapo.st/2dkNzJP.

11. Pieter D. Wezeman, "Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East", in *SIPRI Backgrounders*, 14 December 2018, https://www.sipri.org/node/4711.

ages which reflect such cognitive and policy ingredients, and can be examples of blueprints for a broader regional framework, include the JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, and Iran's proposed HOPE initiative, which itself is based on this understanding that creating and establishing a regional arrangement in Iran's immediate neighbourhood is a first necessary step towards a broader regional architecture for the MENA region.

2. Iran's foreign policy: From idea to practice

It was just a few months after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that, on 22 September 1980, Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, with support of both the US and the Soviet Union, started a bloody eight-year war against Iran, promising to conquer Tehran in only three days. This war was imposed on Iran just two months after a failed military coup (Nojeh Coup)[12] was uncovered in July 1980 and five months after a failed military operation by the US, on 25 April 1980, to free US diplomats held in the US Embassy in Tehran by revolutionary students. These developments were pivotal in shaping the threat perceptions of the young Islamic Republic, and many still exist in the mind of Iranian decision makers.

Since the revolution, Iran has consistently rejected the use of force against any country or government in the region, a policy that has roots in both the "idea" of the revolution, as a rejection of all forms of dominance, as well as the real threats the Islamic Republic faced during its early days due to the antagonistic polices pursued by major powers. This rejection of the use of force is reflected in Iran's opposition to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, US interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan

---

12. This coup has been considered as the first and only attempt by loyalists to the Shah of Iran, led by high-ranking elements in the Army and allegedly supported by the US, to overthrow the newly established Islamic Republic. The coup was easily defeated before it even got started. For more details see "Documents Prove US Involvement in 1980 Nojeh Coup Attempt in Iran", in *Fars News Agency*, 10 July 2017, https://en.farsnews.ir/newstext.aspx?nn=13960419001420.

(even though Washington removed two important anti-Iran elements), Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and even Saudi attempts to forcefully change Qatari leadership through its blockade. Iran has also been consistent in its policy of rejecting regime change in Syria or elsewhere in the region.

For Iran, having a peaceful region in which potential antagonists are effectively deterred is of vital importance. This is why Iran has always been very sensitive and attentive to developments in its immediate neighbourhood, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or the broader sub-regions such as the Levant or Near East. As a country that has experienced four decades of America's sanctions and faces an active US policy that aims to demonise and delegitimise Iran, securing territorial integrity and an ability to normalise its relations with the outside world are of fundamental importance.

Although Iran's foreign policy in the early years of the Islamic revolution can be framed mostly as a reaction to the policies pursued by regional and extra-regional powers, Tehran soon noticed that it has no option but to add a more proactive dimension to its foreign policy. Iran's support for the so-called "axis of resistance" – from Lebanon and the Levant to Iraq and Yemen – can be understood both in terms of a reaction to the pressure imposed by the US and its allies as well a proactive attempt by Iran to push back against extremist forces such as Da'esh (or ISIS) and the US-led axis against Iran.

2.1 Iran's foreign policy under President Rouhani: From JCPOA to HOPE

President Hasan Rouhani's foreign policy, developed and articulated by his top diplomat Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, can be explained as a new attempt to develop a proactive foreign policy based on a shifting discourse aimed at recapturing the core message of the 1979 revolution: "independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic". Rouhani campaigned for the presidency based on a political and economic platform of "prudent moderation", "hope" and rapprochement with the international community.

After a heavily contested presidential election in June 2013, Rouhani won a decisive victory and adopted two interconnected political and economic strategies. The first, as the top political priority, was resolving the dispute over Iran's peaceful nuclear activities and following détente both regionally and internationally; and the second sought to diversify Iran's external political, cultural and economic relations.

Among major threats Iran has dealt with in the course of the past four decades, the dispute over its nuclear activities remains the most significant. In fact, by using the nuclear file, the US effectively securitised international discourse around Iran, later implementing the harshest international sanctions ever devised to target a single country. UN Security Council Resolution 1929, adopted on 9 June 2010 under Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which implemented the international sanctions regime, was effectively interpreted in Iran as a basis to legitimise the hostile actions of those who were seeking regime change in Iran from the early days of the Islamic Republic.

President Rouhani, a moderate politician with detailed knowledge and a long history of dealing with Iran's nuclear file as the chief negotiator with the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) between 2003 to 2005, came to office with a very nuanced understanding about the need to normalise Iran's position in the international system and to neutralise those major threats. For this, he decided to dismantle the main engine used by the US and its allies to securitise Iran. The first step was to select a top internationalist diplomat as his foreign minister and chief negotiator. The negotiations between Iran and P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), coordinated by the European Union, immediately started and many rounds of talks took place in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere. An interim agreement signed in November 2013[13] ultimately led to the landmark Iran nuclear deal, or the JCPOA, on 14 July 2015.

13. Marcus George, "Interim Nuclear Agreement between Iran and Six Powers", in *Reuters*, 24 November 2013, http://reut.rs/IbRAB5.

This agreement could not have been achieved without meaningful and profound cognitive as well as practical changes in major Western capitals, most importantly in Washington, vis-à-vis Iran. By abandoning its insistence on a "zero enrichment policy" in Iran, the US provided the needed space for a win-win compromise.

This opening was however closed by the Trump administration. Trump's foreign policy orientation and behaviour toward the Middle East recalls the old neo-con approach, and represents a departure from the Obama administration which had, to some extent, moved away from reductionist approaches to the Middle East, even to the point of accepting the bitter reality that Washington's allies are not necessary serving US interests in the region.

The JCPOA was a unique moment of mutual recognition between Iran and the major international powers. Iran recognised the P5+1 as a suitable representative of the multipolar order to make a deal with on such an important issue, while its counterparts recognised not only Iran's right to peaceful nuclear programme but also the Islamic Republic as a partner. The JCPOA was successfully de-securitising Iran. In return, Iran accepted unprecedented non-proliferation standards and a rigid inspection regime, of course within a time-limited framework. This two-way street that is deliberately mapped in the JCPOA, and is embedded in the UNSC Resolution 2231, was unanimously adopted on 29 March 2016.[14]

Further to the above-mentioned systemic aspect, other dimensions of Iran's nuclear deal gave rise to hopes that this agreement could be a departure point for a more inclusive rapprochement between Iran and its neighbours. Foreign Minister Zarif in a tweet called the deal a base for a broader rapprochement: the "Iran deal is not a ceiling but a solid foundation. We must now begin to build on it".[15] The regional aspect of the

---

14. UN Security Council website: *Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue. Background*, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/node/63117.

15. See his Twitter account (@JZarif), 14 July 2015, https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/620946867371810816.

deal was even mentioned in the preface of the JCPOA, which noted that the "JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security" and underlined how "Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons".[16]

In spite of initial hopes, Trump's unlawful withdrawal from the JCPOA not only fundamentally challenged the whole merit of the deal but also brought profound ramifications for Iran, the region and the world. If achieving the nuclear deal was a game changer for overall security in the Middle East, not having the deal in place would be also a game changer in the opposite direction.

Legally speaking, the JCPOA is an annex to a still-binding UNSC resolution, but the US exit from the deal caused a critical change to the balance embedded in the agreement: the balance between non-proliferation aspects of the agreement and Iran's commitments on one hand, and sanction relief and commitments to normalise Iran's economic relations on the other.

Trump's decision to exit the deal came as a shock to the JCPOA participants, but Iran, in response to a European request and all the messages sent by then High Representative Federica Mogherini, decided to stay in the deal in order to give time to European as well as Chinese and Russian efforts to compensate for the US withdrawal and to re-establish critical balance. However, it soon became clear that the US's unilateral extraterritorial sanctions have mostly neutralised such efforts. Fearing to lose out on the US market, European companies in practice complied with all US sanctions and gradually withdrew from Iran.

As a result, Iran was left with no option but to react. This reaction came after Tehran pursued a one-year policy of "strategic patience" between May 2018, when the US withdrew from the JCPOA, until May 2019. During this period the Europeans

---

16. See *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Vienna, 14 July 2015, https://www.undocs.org/S/2015/544.

promised to ensure Iran's basic economic benefit and set up a special purpose vehicle to allow for EU–Iran economic relations by shielding these from the reach of the US sanctions. This vehicle, the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), was established in January 2019, but proved unable to perform its promised duties. Although it was supposed to facilitate "legitimate businesses" under the JCPOA between Iran and European counterparts, it failed even to facilitate business interactions for humanitarian goods such as food and medicine, apart from one limited transaction delivered in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran.[17]

Iran reluctantly welcomed the first INSTEX transaction but called it insufficient.[18] In the meantime, however, the US took whatever actions it could to make it impossible for Iran to remain in the deal. These largely consisted of blacklisting the totality of Iran's economy and punishing any entity complying with the commitments under the JCPOA and UNSC Resolution 2231 to do usual business with Tehran, and also refusing to issue nuclear-related waivers.[19]

While Iran remains committed to voluntarily implement the JCPOA's additional protocol and its robust verification regime, as confirmed by several reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),[20] on 8 May 2019 Tehran began to cease implementation of parts of its commitments under the JCPOA.[21] These steps were implemented within the

17. "Long-Awaited INSTEX Transaction Insufficient", in *Financial Tribune*, 5 April 2020, https://financialtribune.com/node/102692.

18. "For Tehran, Activation of INSTEX Is a Good Omen, But It Is Not Enough", in *Europe Daily Bulletin*, No. 12462 (7 April 2020), https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12462/33.

19. John Hudson, "Trump Administration to End Iran Dear Waivers in a Blow to Obama-Era Pact", in *The Washington Post*, 28 May 2020, https://wapo.st/2M36xsb.

20. Daniel Larison, "IAEA Confirms Iranian Compliance for the Fifteenth Time", in *The American Conservative*, 31 May 2019, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/?p=235335.

21. The newest IAEA reports indicate that Iran's decision to reduce its commitments under the JCPOA has been implemented (see IAEA, *IAEA Board Calls*

framework of the JCPOA's terms and conditions. The main logic behind Iran's decision was to give diplomacy a chance for a win-win solution and to save the deal. Iran thus took five carefully calibrated reductions, which are all reversible and do not imply new restrictions on the oversight work being conducted by the IAEA in Iran. These included reducing restrictions on enrichment capacity, the enrichment level, amount of enriched material and research and development activities.[22]

Whether the JCPOA survives or not, one thing has become crystal clear: without the nuclear deal the region will face more crises and uncertainties. Thanks to its multilateral setting, the JCPOA helped to address – decisively, and until the disruptions to the deal brought about by Washington – one of the most complicated, protracted and unnecessary crises in the region and the world. Yet, all of the incidents that have occurred since the US withdrawal serve as obvious indications that a regional architecture is a must.

The JCPOA was intentionally negotiated to address just the nuclear issue and not the security dilemma in the Middle East. The region, though, needs a broader, more comprehensive and inclusive arrangement. With this realisation, soon after the JCPOA was signed and sealed Iran reached out to its Arab neighbours for such an architecture. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in April 2015, in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, tried to send a clear message to the region, stating that:

---

on Iran to Fully Implement Its Safeguards Obligations, 19 June 2020, https://www.iaea.org/node/83241). The IAEA has called on Tehran to honour its safeguard obligations, given that Iran has limited IAEA access to two locations which, based on Israeli allegations, are related to the possible military dimensions file (known as PMD). Iran however strongly argues this issue is already concluded and solved under the JCPOA and mutual understanding between Tehran and the IAEA.

22. Official statement of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran: "Iran Takes Final Step in Reducing Nuclear Obligations", in *Iran Press News Agency*, 5 January 2020, https://iranpress.com/content/17354.

> The purview of our constructive engagement extends far beyond nuclear negotiations. Good relations with Iran's neighbors are our top priority. Our rationale is that the nuclear issue has been a symptom, not a cause, of mistrust and conflict. Considering recent advances in symptom prevention, it is time for Iran and other stakeholders to begin to address the causes of tension in the wider Persian Gulf region.[23]

The HOPE initiative, officially proposed in 2019, was the result of these efforts and an evolution of Iran's regional proposals and ideas.

Before assessing the underlining principles of Iran's HOPE initiative, it is important to take into account other formal proposals for security cooperation in the region while addressing the relationships between Iran and major external powers.

3. Iran and major powers relations in the region: The US and Russia

3.1 Trump and Iran: From maximum pressure to maximum failure

For at least four decades, the US has developed a Middle East policy[24] based on well-known principles such as providing full support to Israel, containing both Iran and Ba'athist Iraq, and securing the US's "vital interests" (such as preserving and securing the flow of oil, and preventing alternative forces – to wit, the Soviet Union or later Iran – from challenging the US and its allies). Starting from the Islamic Revelation in 1979 and the ensuing Iraq–Iran war, the US has maintained a constant focus on the strategic Strait of Hormuz area, pursuing an interventionist

---

23. Javad Zarif, "Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran", in *The New York Times*, 20 April 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html.
24. Alireza Ahmadi, "What Should We Learn from 40 Years of U.S. Intervention in the Middle East?", in *Middle East Watch*, 14 January 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/node/41542.

policy and establishing a string of military bases used to project Washington's influence into the area.[25]

However, it is hard to argue that the region is now more secure, stable or peaceful than in the period before the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is even harder to argue that in spite of all the tactical triumphs, the US has been able to achieve and secure sustainable strategic gains in the Middle East.

In fact, after spending trillions of dollars,[26] Washington is currently engaged in a relative retrenchment from the Middle East, shifting its strategic focus towards Asia while developments in Afghanistan and Iraq are far from resolved. If there is one strategic issue on which both Presidents Trump and Obama are in agreement, it is the decision to pivot towards Asia. While Obama was planning to carry out this pivot in accordance with a step-by-step plan, Trump is rushing along in an ad-hoc, inconsistent and contradictory way. It is exactly because of this impulsive foreign policy on the part of Trump that some of his initial decisions to leave countries such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have actually and surprisingly resulted in more of a US military presence there.[27]

This is why many experts argue that, in contrast to previous US administrations, Trump has no clear strategy in the Middle East – that his administration, in fact, is entrapped in a kind of schizophrenia and oscillation in its foreign policy. This is true to some extent, but there is also strong evidence that the current US administration and its small but very influential foreign pol-

---

25. Eugenio Lilli, "Debating US Military Strategy in the Persian Gulf: What is the Way Forward?", in *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (12 April 2018), Art. E002, http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201800102.

26. Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: $6.4 Trillion", in *Costs of War Project Reports*, 13 November 2019, https://www.brown.edu/news/2019-11-13/costsofwar.

27. Sara Elizabeth Williams and Nick Allen, "US Troops Leave Northern Syria for Iraq Despite Trump's Claims They Are Returning 'Home'", in *The Telegraph*, 20 October 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/20/us-troops-leave-northern-syria-iraq-despite-trumps-claims-returning.

icy team have clear principles to follow in the region, namely: a) to kill the Iran nuclear deal,[28] to adopt an assertive policy against Tehran to contain it and work to actively exclude Iran from any possible and potential future regional arrangement; b) to provide unconditional support to Israel in order to create a new regional balance;[29] and c) to sell as much military equipment as possible to rich Arab allies in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.[30] These principles, which are interconnected to each other on different levels, have led the US to adopt a binary policy towards Iran of either capitulation and submission, or sanctions and confrontation.

The US's maximum pressure policy against Iran is the best manifestation of this binary choice of either accepting whatever the US dictates for a so-called "better deal" or facing unprecedented and crippling sanctions. The Trump administration has embraced this maximum pressure policy as its core US strategy in the Middle East with the intention to confront Iran wherever it is present or may have interests – from Syria and Lebanon in the Levant to Iraq and Afghanistan in West Asia, and definitely in the Persian Gulf.[31]

Against this backdrop, Washington is also trying to establish a new unprecedented balance in the region by fostering an Israeli-Saudi-UAE axis to confront Iran. It is in this context that Trump has enacted the US's traditional pro-Israel foreign policy orientation with further unconditional support for Israel's expansionist tendencies, as mirrored in his administration's "Deal

28. Kathy Gilsinan, "Trying to Kill the Iran Deal Could End Up Saving It", in *The Atlantic*, 17 March 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/03/us-attempts-kill-iran-nuclear-deal-could-save-it/585109.

29. Nick Wadhams and David Wainer, "Trump Supports Israel Sovereignty over Golan, Aiding Netanyahu", in *Bloomberg*, 21 March 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-21/trump-says-time-to-recognize-golan-heights-as-part-of-israel.

30. For example see: SIPRI, *USA and France Dramatically Increase Major Arms Exports; Saudi Arabia Is Largest Arms Importer, Says SIPRI*, 9 March 2020, https://www.sipri.org/node/5076.

31. Michael R. Pompeo, "Confronting Iran", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 6 (November/December 2018), p. 60-70, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1123189.

of Century" on Israel–Palestine and many other unilateral decisions taken in Washington to back Netanyahu's aggressive policies. In this axis, Israel provides intelligence while Riyadh's function is to provide money and financial resources.[32] This anti-Iran axis is also highly active inside the US. One example is the role of Israeli- as well as Saudi- and Emirati-funded lobbies and think-tanks in shaping US Middle East policies,[33] but with Trump, their influence, especially when it comes to Iran, has reached unprecedented levels.[34] Anti-Iran hawks, including Israeli and Saudi elements which are actively trying to disintegrate the "axis of resistance", have been able to artificially make Iran a profoundly significant issue for the US, and therefore Washington has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with this manufactured threat. This has led Washington to neglect ample opportunities for an inclusive solution that includes all regional stakeholders.

Iran hawks in the White House have been able to formulate such policies by fundamentally misrepresenting Iran as a country on the verge of collapse. Many believe that Trump exited the Iran deal in early May 2018 out of a belief that Iran would not survive for six months if Washington left the deal and re-imposed sanctions. Since that time the US has pursued all possible measures to weaken Tehran and make it collapse, to no avail. In February 2020 Iran celebrated its 41st anniversary and disproved the prognosis of top US officials such as then National Security Adviser John Bolton that the Islamic Republic "will not last until its 40th birthday".[35]

32. Sheikh Shabir, "Israeli-Saudi Axis: What Lies Behind?", in *The Geopolitics*, 12 January 2019, https://thegeopolitics.com/?p=7628.
33. Morgan Palumbo and Jessica Draper, "How Saudis, Qataris and Emiratis Took Washington", in *Asia Times*, 10 June 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/how-saudis-qataris-and-emiratis-took-washington.
34. Jack Thompson, "Trump's Middle East Policy", in *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 233 (October 2018), https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/834f4615-d48f-44d6-b048-e932cb7c9572.
35. Robert Mackey, "Here's John Bolton Promising Regime Change in Iran by the End of 2018", in *The Intercept*, 23 March 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/03/23/heres-john-bolton-promising-regime-change-iran-end-2018.

Driven by its obsession with Iran, the US has officially waged a full-fledged covert and overt economic and political war on the country. The logic is very similar to the one President Ronald Reagan adopted against the Soviet Union. While this historical analogy is for many obvious reasons naive and incorrect, Iran hawks in Washington including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo,[36] Steve Bannon[37] and influential insider think-tanks such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and its director Mark Dubowitz[38] have all supported such parallels. In their misleading analogy, Trump is Reagan, Iran is the Soviet Union and the only way to confront Iran is to push it to the end of its tether in order to make it collapse.

The so-called maximum pressure campaign is also derived from the same policy that Reagan adopted against the Soviet Union, hoping to have the same result of regime change in Iran. The reality however is that Washington has achieved almost no success while constantly compounding the pressure on Iran.[39] For a credible evaluation of the success of any foreign policy strategy, it is crucial to evaluate its avowed objectives. Trump's main objectives for the maximum pressure policy were to: a) force Iran to withdraw from the JCPOA and get a "better nuclear deal"; b) dismantle Iran's missile and aerospace programmes; and c) put an end to Iran's active presence in the region – or as Iran understands it, demolishing the axis of resistance, which has served as the main obstacle to US and Israeli ambitions to dominate the region. In fact, none of these objectives have been achieved, meaning that the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy should be judged a failure.[40]

---

36. Michael R. Pompeo, "Confronting Iran", cit.
37. Mike Giglio, "Trump's New Iran Strategy, Inspired by the Cold War, Calls for 'Maximum Pressure'", in *BuzzFeed*, 25 September 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/trump-officials-are-reading-a-book-about-the-cold-war-for.
38. Mark Dubowitz, "Confront Iran the Reagan Way", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 July 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/confront-iran-the-reagan-way-1499197879.
39. Vali Nasr, "A New Nuclear Deal Won't Secure the Middle East", in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 February 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125614.
40. Kori Schake, "Trump's Iran Strategy Isn't Working as Well as He Thinks", in *The At-*

On the nuclear file, Iran has resisted multiple US attempts to push it to withdraw from the deal and to accept negotiations for a new agreement. Contrary to what Trump expected, Iran has followed a step-by-step policy of reducing its commitments, while remaining within the framework of the JCPOA.[41] In the meantime, Iran has rejected any bilateral negotiation with the US beyond the parameters of the nuclear deal, which has indeed been the ruling principle for Iran in engaging in other parties' initiatives, including the ultimately failed effort by French President Emmanuel Macron that was assayed in August–September 2019.[42] In fact, by losing its leverage embedded in the JCPOA, the US now has less opportunity to get what it wishes from the other signatory parties to the agreement.

On the missile and aerospace programmes, Iran has remained adamant that it will not slow down development, as these capabilities are crucial to its defence and deterrence. In this context it is worth remembering that other major players in the region such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess billions of dollars of advanced and sophisticated military equipment including offensive American and European missiles with a range of more than 2,500 kilometres. It is worth noting also that despite efforts by the US and its allies to show a relation between Iran's defensive military programmes and its aerospace projects, these streams remain fully separated. Iran has pursued its scientific aerospace projects based on previous indigenously developed plans that are aimed at responding to its civilian needs, including the placement of low-orbit satellites by space launch vehicles such as Simorgh and Safir.[43]

lantic, 2 February 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/trumps-iran-strategy-doesnt-work-as-well-as-he-thinks/605947.

41. "Iran Takes Final Step by Abandoning JCPOA Restrictions", in _IRNA_, 5 January 2020, https://en.irna.ir/news/83622509.

42. David Sanger, Steven Erlanger and Adam Nossiger, "France Dangles $15 Billion Bailout for Iran in Effort to Save Nuclear Deal", in _The New York Times_, 2 September 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/middleeast/iran-france-nuclear-deal.html.

43. Rasanah, _Iran's Space Program: Timeline and Technology_, 29 April 2020, https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=7883.

On regional issues, the situation is no better for the US maximum pressure policy. In spite of all the sanctions and provocations, Iran still plays a central role in the region, particularly by engaging in efforts to help put an end to the crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon. Although Iran has a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, it has been ready to use its political, religious and political influence to facilitate crisis-solving processes in the region. If it were not for Iran's mediation, it is most likely that there would have been no power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah to formulate a unified government. In Iraq, the new cabinet under Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi was elected with great support from Tehran. There are similar situations in Syria and Lebanon, despite huge US and Israeli pressure.[44] In fact, regionally speaking, the result of Trump's maximum pressure policy is more crises and confrontations.

Tehran's response to Washington's new assertive policies and provocations can be categorised under three major strategy lines, each enacted within a specific time period: a) maximum resistance and strategic patience: from 8 May 2018 to 8 May 2019, when Washington announced its policy of zero-oil export from Iran, withdrawing limited waivers for oil imports from Iran that it had granted to a number of countries; b) measured push-back: from 8 May 2019 to 3 January 2020, when US forces assassinated General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's top military commander, in Baghdad; c) full push-back and firm response to any moves taken by the US against Iran, which started on 8 January 2020 when Iran launched a retaliatory missile attack against the US at the Ayn Al-Assad military base in Iraq.[45]

---

44. Sequence of unrest and turmoil in recent months in Lebanon, aiming to introduce Iran and Hezbollah as the main source of problem for the country.
45. "Iran Launches Missile Attacks on US Facilities in Iraq", in *Al-Jazeera*, 8 January 2020, https://aje.io/fvcxz.

As the US crossed all of Iran's red lines, Tehran decided to push back. Just after the US assassinated General Soleimani, Secretary of State Pompeo claimed that the entire strategy has been one of "deterrence".[46] If restoring deterrence was the genuine logic behind Trump's decision to assassinate Iran's top general on the soil of another country, then it failed, as US forces were targeted by Iran's missiles in a retaliatory strike. Iran decided to respond openly to make the credibility of its threats of force crystal clear, and also to show that it has the capability and the will to target US vulnerabilities in the region.[47] On the other hand, instead of dominating the escalation, as the literature of deterrence suggests, the US called Iran's response calibrated and measured and even Trump tried to conceal the casualties in order to cool the situation.[48] This means that another round of escalations is quite probable, though from Iran's standpoint the retaliation to the US assassination of Soleimani helped restore Tehran's deterrence.

There are also those who argue that the US carried out the assassination based on an erroneous understanding that Iranian society is deeply divided, and that people and elites of Iran would not react to it. Trump and Pompeo's attempt to introduce General Soleimani as an enemy to the people of Iran, Iraq and the region was a bold attempt in this direction. To the contrary, however, not only did the assassination bridge the gaps inside Iran but it also showed to what extent Trump and his administration are isolated inside and outside of Iran. Unprecedented public funeral processions were held for General

46. Michael R. Pompeo, *The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example*, speech at The Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Palo Alto, 13 January 2020, https://www.state.gov/the-restoration-of-deterrence-the-iranian-example; "Pompeo Says Killing of Suleimani Is Part of 'Bigger Strategy' to Deter US Foes", in *The Guardian*, 14 January 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/p/d4yc4.
47. Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Supreme Leader Says Missile Strike a 'Slap on the Face' for U.S"., in *Reuters*, 8 January 2020, https://reut.rs/2T2wf4M.
48. Omar Ahmed, "The Truth about US Casualties in the Iran Attack Is Slowly Coming Out", in *Middle East Monitor*, 24 January 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200124-the-truth-about-us-casualties-in-the-iran-attack-is-slowly-coming-out.

Soleimani, from Iraq to India and South America, and millions of people poured out in the streets in Tehran to say farewell.

Washington has implemented all these policies hoping to change Iran's strategic decision-making calculus or bring the Iranian people to revolt against their government. The US, however, has failed on all of these accounts. In fact, although the Iranian people have been suffering greatly and there have been isolated instances of social unrest and protests, mainly due to price hikes and economic problems, these never developed into a nation-wide, sustained uprising. The US also failed to change the strategic calculus of Iran's leadership, as Iran has not capitulated to US pressure, or abandoned its friends in the region.

Although US policies have harshly targeted ordinary Iranian people, as time passes and the economy absorbs the shock, Iran has become more self-confident, seeking to seize this opportunity to build a resilient and oil-free economy.[49] The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast for 2020 showed that Iran's economy not only has absorbed the shock imposed by US sanctions, but also has been able to exit recession: from -9.46 real GDP growth in 2019 to at least +0.5 GDP forecast for 2020. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has significantly changed this outlook, with Iran's GDP predicted to contract by -6 per cent in 2020, according to IMF forecasts from June 2020.[50]

Iran was the second major country to be hit hard by the pandemic after China, and it soon developed into a major social, political and economic problem. Iran was able to tackle the pandemic thanks to its strong health network and infrastructure, but has been hugely affected by the economic implica-

---

49. "Rouhani's Government Broke Mosaddegh's Record in an Oil-free Economy" (in Farsi), in *IRNA*, 4 July 2020, https://www.irna.ir/news/83843121.
50. IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020*, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020. See also "IMF: Iran Economic Growth to Reach 3.1 Percent in 2021", in *Financial Tribune*, 15 April 2020, https://financialtribune.com/node/102866.

tions, while the US maximum pressure campaign continued throughout the crisis, limiting humanitarian assistance Tehran needed the most.

What is quite obvious is this reality that the US has to learn how to deal with a new Middle East that it cannot dominate anymore as the sole hegemon. It has to either compete or co-operate with the rising regional powers such as Russia, China and Iran, and to accept the new balance of power. The political, economic and cultural East is a reality in the region that Washington should recognise. This is partly because of Washington's overuse of its hard and military power in the region, especially from 2001, but also due to a new awareness in the region that the time for hegemony, imposed by anybody or any country, is past. The US is no longer able to impose its will on the region unconditionally. The region now is a multipolar mess of conflictual and offensive balancing.

3.2 Russia: A rising power in the Middle East

Russia has always kept a certain level of interaction with countries in the MENA region. However, its 2015 decision to support the Syrian government in the fight against extremist groups, in conjunction with Trump's impulsive regional policies, has provided a golden opportunity for Moscow to regain its lost influence and leverage. Although Russia's policies in the Middle East have their own historical explanations and roots, it is clear that the Kremlin is playing high to advance its interests in different parts of the region – including the Persian Gulf, where Russia was a total outsider before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Syria was the gateway for Russia to re-engage in the strategic equilibriums of the MENA region. It was a miniature world war in which almost all major global and regional players were involved. In all likelihood most experts and probably even decision makers in Moscow were not anticipating that Russia's then modest involvement in Syria would bring such strategic triumphs for Russian policy in the region. Although Russia and

Iran had cooperated to avoid the collapse of the Syrian state, the 2015 Syria operation soon became a strategic asset for Russia to show how reliable Moscow is in defending its allies.[51]

Since then, Russia has been able to successfully expand its reach in the region, both horizontally and vertically. It has access to all the capitals, most of which are involved in direct and indirect confrontations – a reality that no one could have imagined before 2015. Moscow has also played a relatively successful broker role in various regional crises, from Yemen to Syria. Its stable, working and expanding relations with all the major stakeholders, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and even Turkey, in spite of bilateral ups and downs, as well as non-state actors from Hezbollah to Houthis, have allowed Russia to position itself well in the region. Russia's regional role should not be exaggerated, but its growing influence is a fact.

The Persian Gulf region has long been a geopolitical attraction for Russia but the Cold War prevented Moscow from gaining access to this sub-region. Except for Iraq and to some extent Pahlavi's Iran, during Soviet times and even before, there were very limited interactions between Moscow and GCC littoral states, especially with the newly independent Arab states of Saudi Arabia, established in 1932, Kuwait in 1961, and Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Bahrain in 1971.[52]

Even in the 1990s, relations remained cold as they were subject to highly political and national security issues such as conflicts over Saudi and Emirati financial support for the Chechen separatists or their involvement in the Balkan crisis. Trends have

---

51. For more in-depth analysis see: Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria", in *CSIS Briefs*, July 2019, https://www.csis.org/node/53383; Michel Duclos, "Russia and Iran in Syria. A Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?", in *Atlantic Council Issue Briefs*, June 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=129994.

52. Ali Akbar Jokar, "Russia's Relations with Persian Gulf Southern States: Focus on Saudi Arabia", in *IPIS Topics and Regions*, June 2020, https://ipis.ir/en/subjectview/598115.

changed gradually since the 2000s, as Russia assumed a more reconciliatory tone and behaviour towards the US and its allies, including states in the Arabian Peninsula.[53] Relations increased in the wake of the Saudi King's official visit to Moscow in 2003 and Putin's response in 2007, followed by Russian visits to the UAE and Qatar. King Salman's 2017 visit to Russia and dozens of concluded bilateral agreements, including but not limited to a 3 billion dollars' arm deal, a 1 billion dollars' investment agreement in Russia and a 1.1 billion dollars' agreement on a petrochemical factory in Saudi Arabia undertaken by the Russian Sibir Energy[54] – all are indications of how Moscow is expanding its relationships in the region. Recent developments tied to the advent of COVID-19 and the Russian-Saudi disagreements on oil prices and outputs indicate that increased cooperation between Russia and states in the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia, may witness unexpected rifts due to diverging viewpoints on hydrocarbon issues and the US factor.

Russia's collective security concept for the region, presented in mid-July 2019, should be seen and explained in such a context of increased Russian interest in the region, but it is equally important to understand how Tehran perceives Moscow's new policies. Iran and Russia share not only borders but common interests and concerns at the regional and international levels. Russia has gradually but deeply turned into a strategic partner for Iran on significant issues directly related to Iran's national interest, from the nuclear file to resisting US unilateral sanctions imposed on both Tehran and Moscow and, more importantly, on number of regional issues including Syria and Afghanistan. Of course, bilateral relations have not been without challenges, but the two capitals have managed their differences to minimise divergence.

53. Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None", in *Carnegie Papers*, October 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/80233.
54. Vladimir Soldatkin and Katya Golubkova, "Russia, Saudi Arabia Cement New Friendship with King's Visit", in *Reuters*, 5 October 2017, https://reut.rs/2xY-6DcZ.

Against this backdrop, Iran supported Russia's initiative for security arrangements in the region when Moscow first introduced the proposal.[55] Russia announced its proposal in mid-July 2019, when tensions in the Strait of Hormuz had reached unprecedented levels. It soon became clear that this was an updated version of an older security concept for the area. In his remarks at the Valdai International Discussion Club in Moscow, Putin tried to distance his country from a perception advocated by some European and US experts that the Russian initiative is a time-serving and advantage-seeking measure. Instead, he argued that the initiative aims to launch a long-lasting, step-by-step and comprehensive process that would enable all parties, with no exclusions, to have their voices heard:

> [L]et me remind you that this [creation of an organisation to provide security in the Persian Gulf] was Russia's logic this July, when it presented the concept of providing collective security in the region. Western countries, Russia, China, the US, the EU, India and other interested countries could join as observers.[56]

The Russian initiative[57] is inclusive and tries to include all stakeholders, even those who are not at the core such as India, but it is still mainly focused on the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.[58] Although supported by China, the initiative was not well received by most of Europe and the US.[59] As the United States and the United Kingdom had proposed their

---

55. "Tehran Welcomes Russia's Concept for Persian Gulf Security - Iranian Foreign Minister", in Sputnik News, 2 September 2019, https://sptnkne.ws/9C2P.

56. Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, *Dimensions of Russian Security Plan in Persian Gulf*, 15 October 2019, https://www.scfr.ir/en/defense-security/113909.

57. For the text see: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

58. Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", in *Valdai Club Expert Opinions*, 6 August 2019, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/security-in-the-gulf-area-russia-s-new-initiative.

59. Abhishek G. Bhaya, "China Backs Russian Plan for 'Collective Security' in Persian Gulf", in *CGTN*, 26 July 2019, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-26/China-backs-Russian-plan-for-collective-security-in-Persian-Gulf-IDEJRWKHLy/index.html.

own plans for the Hormuz area, which were not embraced by other European countries, they tried to ignore the Russian proposal. EU members including France and Germany also failed to respond decisively. The littoral states by contrast either welcomed the proposal, as Iran and Oman did, or avoided rejecting it, as the Saudis and Emiratis did. In addition, it appears that, as the Russian initiative includes both national states as well as a few weak and divided regional organisations such as the GCC and the Arab League, the proposal does not reflect the new power relations and realities of such organisations.

It should be highlighted here that the Russian proposal was not fundamentally different from the comprehensive solution Iran was looking for, but Iran had decided to develop its own initiative to address the issue from a homegrown perspective, an initiative which it later introduced and coined as the Hormuz Peace Endeavour – HOPE.

4. Iran's neighbourhood policy: HOPE for a strong region

The notion that the only way to achieve peace and stability in the region is through the rule of "strongmen" is widely embraced by senior experts and intellectuals in and beyond the Middle East.[60] The region has for decades had different types of strongmen and yet peace remains distant and insecurity widespread. Based on this reading, Iran understood it was time to propose new approaches and frameworks, ranging from the concept of a "strong region", to Iran's "security networking" proposals and finally its most recent HOPE initiative.

The key ingredients of such frameworks are common knowledge. They first include a belief in inclusive political solutions to the region's problems, from Syria to Yemen; second, they

---

60. Sam Sasan Shoamanesh et al., "Whither Regional Security in West Asia?", in *Global Brief*, No. 24 (Summer/Fall 2019), p. 60-61, https://globalbrief.ca/?p=17602.

embrace diplomacy and dialogue based on mutual respect and equality among participants; third, a recognition of mutual and collective rights and responsibilities; and fourth, the mobilisation of political will to reach mutually and collectively acceptable solutions based on a win-win approach, recognising that no party can gain security at the expense of the insecurity of others.

Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was the first to introduce the concept of a strong region in the Hormuz area and its immediate neighbourhood. In his remarks at the Raisina conference in New Delhi in January 2019,[61] he elaborated on the characteristics attributed to a strong region as: a) political and territorial stability, and also reliance on the populace as the source of legitimacy, security and prosperity; b) participation of all relevant regional countries in ensuring peace in the region through regional institutions, organisations or ad hoc arrangements; c) more confidence, more trade and more interaction between and among the countries in the region, than with external powers; d) economic relations and people-centred interactions, making any resort to war costly and untenable; and e) a regional culture that will place national security on a par with regional security.

Based on what was later described as a security network, all regional states (small or large) can interact on an equal footing, and jointly contribute to peace and stability for mutual and collective benefit. The concept of security networking ensures that diversity and differences – be they geographical, demographic, religious, cultural, developmental, human or natural resources – do not serve as a base for demonising "the other" or causing threat perception which itself can be used as a justification for exclusion. Those in the driver's seat of this process should primarily be regional rather than extra-regional actors. The core of this concept is dialogue and the rejection of any form of dominance or hegemonic aspirations by any power.

---

61. "Iran's Zarif Offers Plans to Strengthen Region against West", in *Tasnim News*, 9 January 2019, https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/01/09/1919362.

These notions of security networking and a strong region were later incorporated into the idea of a Persian Gulf Regional Dialogue Forum under UN aegis[62] and in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 598, which calls for a security arrangement among the littoral states of the region, and based on the Helsinki type of process that led to the establishment of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. During an interview at the Center on International Cooperation on 29 April 2015, Javad Zarif elaborated on the fundamental principles underpinning such processes in the Persian Gulf:

> [S]overeign equality, independence, sovereignty, respect for borders, inviolability of international borders, non-interference in the internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes – you see the non-use (sic) of force that is unfortunately taking place. All of this would be the starting principles, as they used – in the Helsinki process they called them tickets; for you to enter this process, you need to accept these principles.[63]

Yet, tensions kept escalating in the region. On 4 July 2019, the British Royal Marines forcefully stopped and seized an Iran's oil tanker, the Grace 1, off the shore of Gibraltar. Iran called this a clear violation of international law and accused London of piracy and acting under US pressure. Two weeks later, Iran's navy detained the Stena Impero, a British-flagged vessel, in the Strait of Hormuz for "violating international regulations". It was the first time the UK was faced with such a bold response from Tehran. Iran released the British vessel after Gibraltar defied the US and the UK and released the Grace 1. Added to other incidents in the Strait of Hormuz, this confrontation turned into a new round of attempts by extra-regional actors such as the US, the UK and, as was previously explained, Russia to propose security arrangements for the Hormuz area.

---

62. Ayhan Simsek, "Iranian FM in Munich Proposes Regional Dialogue Forum", in *Anadolu Agency*, 19 February 2017, http://v.aa.com.tr/753652.

63. NYU Center on International Cooperation, *A Conversation with H.E. Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (transcript), New York, 29 April 2015, https://cic.nyu.edu/events/conversation-he-dr-mohammad-javad-zarif-foreign-minister-islamic-republic-iran.

Except for the Russian proposal, other initiatives, including the UK–US maritime effort in the area and even the French-led naval mission headquartered in Abu Dhabi, either directly or indirectly excluded Iran. The central problem of "othering" in this domain is the fact that none of these external actors can actually bring about an inclusive and comprehensive regional security arrangement for the area without regional buy-in.

As a country which has 1,500 miles of coastline, the Hormuz area and surrounding waters have always represented a red line for Tehran. For this reason, Iran has always rejected the heavy military presence of extra-regional powers including the string of US military bases as well as those of the UK and France. Iran, relying on its own resources, has always considered security and freedom of navigation in this body of water as a priority and an absolute responsibility.

Against this backdrop, and parallel to its efforts to defuse US threats and enhance its capabilities through military cooperation with countries such as China and Russia with which Iran held military exercises in December 2019, Tehran elevated its previous plans and concepts in order to introduce a home-grown endeavour for security in the Persian Gulf. As the only initiative originating from within the region, Iran's HOPE initiative represents a platform within which all stakeholders can be included and contribute to peace and stability of the region, while the role and interests of regional players remain central. In such a context, Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in his address to the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly officially introduced Iran's proposal as a coalition for hope: "I should like to invite all the countries directly affected by the developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the Coalition for Hope meaning Hormuz Peace Endeavor".[64]

---

64. UN News, *At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'*, 25 September 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472.

On 14 October 2019, President Rouhani sent a letter to all Arab littoral states outlining the main ingredients of the HOPE proposal, while officially inviting them to join the proposal. Countries such as Oman, Qatar, Iraq and Kuwait welcomed the initiative, while others, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, did not openly reject it.

Iran was smart to show its flexibility and prudence by naming its proposal the "Hormuz" initiative, sticking to a name which is shared by everybody inside and outside the region. The Hormuz Peace Endeavour was born in such an atmosphere. In the same speech, President Rouhani outlined very briefly goals, objectives, principles and actions for the HOPE initiative, which in the following months were detailed by his foreign policy team.

The main principles of the HOPE initiative were not very different from Iran's previous proposals but were articulated in a way that reflects the urgency of developing a new cognitive map for the region, outlining key concepts such as good-neighbourly relations; the UN Charter; sovereignty and territorial integrity; inviolability of international borders; peaceful settlement of disputes; rejection of the threat or use of force or participation in coalitions or alliances against each other; non-intervention in internal or external affairs of each state; mutual respect, interest and equal footing; and respect for sanctities, historical, religious and national symbols of states and peoples of a newly formed Hormuz Community.[65]

5. Conclusion

The history of different regional arrangements around the world shows that no proposal or architecture has been perfect or universally welcomed when it was first announced. The de-

---

65. Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *FM Zarif's Al-Rai Article on Hormuz Peace Endeavour*, 10 October 2019, https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/544114.

parture point, though, has always been a shared political will, boosted by one or two regional players as power engines, to address common concerns and threats. The HOPE initiative is not an exception. It needs a shared political will and a plan of action to translate this will into real achievements and to accumulate the regional capacities and capabilities for common goals and objectives. It needs small but practical steps such as establishing joint task forces to develop: a) conflict prevention measures such as hotlines and early warning systems; b) conflict management measures such as inter-governmental direct communications and agreed protocols in the case of conflict; and c) conflict resolution measures such as outlined procedures and processes within the framework of a joint regional arrangement.

There are many deep-rooted conflicts and crises in the broader Middle East region, most of which have remained unsettled. Although there is ample hope for more regionalism and cooperation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, prospects for de-escalation and a comprehensive security arrangement remain somewhat unclear, especially given the US presidential election in November 2020 which is likely to be a determining factor.

Trump is still in office and may be re-elected, and because of his personal characteristics and rather impulsive foreign policy team, it is hard to predict if the US will adopt a more balanced, inclusive and win-win approach toward the region or will follow his current line of unilateral policies. The US has taken steps supposedly against Iran but actually with adverse and disastrous consequences for the region and arguably even for its own interests.

The Hormuz Peace Endeavour is representative of a hope for diplomacy to triumph, helping establish a blueprint for broader arrangements, should it be embraced by the regional as well as international players and powers. A new inclusive and comprehensive security arrangement is more urgent than ever, but must acknowledge new realities of the Middle East and the

world system. History will judge if this will be another missed opportunity or if the stakeholders will finally come to the conclusion that the only way out of this catastrophe is to start an inclusive dialogue and unconditional cooperation with one another.

8
THE UAE'S SECURITY PERCEPTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL CHALLENGES, ALLIANCES AND THE DIVERSIFICATION OF PARTNERS

KHALID ALMEZAINI

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has received significant attention over the past years due to its increasing role in the Middle East. The Emirates' exceptional military capability (as a small state) and coordination with international players such as the United States, Russia and European countries places the UAE in a position of exerting power and influence across many parts of the Middle East. Its military involvement in Yemen, Syria and Libya and its varying coalition strategies raise questions in regard to how the UAE perceives threats and security in the region.

The UAE's current foreign policy behaviour reflects some features of a regional middle power. Middle powers are neither great nor small in terms of capacity and influence, and demonstrate a propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system.[1] Stuye de Swielande identifies and explains five characteristics of middle powers: capacities, self-concept, status and regional and systemic impact.[2] In reference to these characteristics, the UAE has middle-range economic and military power, which allows it to pursue foreign policy objectives

---

1. Eduard Jordaan, "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers", in *Politikon*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2003), p. 165-181.
2. Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "Middle Powers: A Comprehensive Definition and Typology", in Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al. (eds), *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century. New Theories, New Cases*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge, 2019.

in autonomy. Moreover, it has influence at the regional level (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) and sometimes the international level (the United States).[3] These features have given the state more confidence to navigate the region with a mix of soft and hard power as well as strategic hedging. In this role, the UAE has been creating regional alliances, diversifying security partners and establishing new military cooperation with countries such as Russia, China and EU member states.

This is the result of the changing dynamics in the neighbourhood particularly with regard to issues related to Iranian activism in the region, the rise of non-state actors and political instability in Yemen, Libya and Syria. Specifically, the UAE's assertive behaviour is a consequence of the so-called Arab uprising in 2011 and the signing of the Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which did not include the UAE or any other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, ultimately leading some of these countries to adopt different behaviours to cater for their security (in general, the Obama administration's foreign policy towards the Middle East was seen as a failure). The Gulf states were angered by Obama's positions on Iran, Syria and the Arab uprisings.[4] This is because the Obama administration was perceived as breaking away from its support towards its allies. Yet, with the rise to power of the Trump administration, the UAE supported the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA. In addition, it was evident that most of the GCC states have seen more optimism with Trump's US policy towards the Gulf states due to shared perception of threats in the region such as the Joint UAE-US Financial Counterterrorism Task Force, the establishment of US-UAE Sawab Center to combat extremist propaganda and the Defense Cooperation Agreement.

---

3. Trump has adopted several policies and positions that have been favoured by Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed.
4. Gerald M. Feierstein, "U.S.-Gulf Relations in the Age of Trump: The End of the Trust Deficit?", in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 29 March 2017, https://www.mei.edu/node/24636.

However, despite the development of US–UAE relations, there are still uncertainties about the changes in US foreign policy towards the region. The continuing US retrenchment from the Gulf has two implications for the UAE and other Gulf states; first, the UAE's strategy of diversification of its security partners includes not only the European Union countries but also Russia and China. This entails finding further partners who support the UAE's perception of security in the Middle East; namely a region free from political Islam movements that are seen by the UAE as a permanent source of instability. This perception leads to the need to fight extremist non-state actors who are driven by political Islam ideologies such as the Islamic State (ISIS), and create further regional alliances to confront the perceived threat from the rise of any Muslim Brotherhood (MB) groups across the region. Second, the UAE as well as other Gulf states have begun to take independent decisions and engage in conflicts in the Middle East, such as in Libya, using their own military power.

Against this backdrop, the chapter seeks to answer two questions. Firstly, what explains the UAE's security perceptions and interests towards the Middle East, particularly in the post-JCPOA context? Secondly, to what extent do regional changes explain the UAE's new behaviours and objectives? The chapter consists of three main sections: first, it underlines the UAE's main security concerns since 2015; second, it delves into the UAE's positions and changing strategies in the post-JCPOA context; and third, it discusses the UAE's hedging and alliance strategies since 2015.

1. The security threats to the UAE: Real but not existential

In 1971, the UAE was established as a small state with extremely limited capabilities. However, as oil revenues began to flow, the state started spending a significant amount of money on military, defence and economic development to reduce its vul-

nerability. The UAE gradually improved and developed these capabilities and by the start of the new millennium it had become one of the most active regional states, with strong military capabilities. This transformation is not only a product of the development of the state since its formation, but also of the hostile environment in the Middle East, threat perceptions of Iran, as well as being sandwiched between Saudi Arabia and Iran which have been in conflict since the late 1970s.

Moreover, during the past ten years the Gulf region has experienced dramatic changes that have represented significant threats to the UAE such as the rise of non-state actors, particularly the activism of the MB and ISIS, as well as threats from groups that are supported by Iran such as the Houthis in Yemen. It is important to note that the MB's threats towards the UAE at the domestic level are mainly targeting the security, stability and legitimacy of the government. Joseph Braude points out that the "ideological writings by UAE Brotherhood stalwarts […] encourage calls to overthrow the government in Abu Dhabi".[5] By contrast, the ideology of ISIS has penetrated into the Emirati society as some citizens have joined this group. In addition, the threats posed by ISIS to the UAE's regional allies are seen by the UAE as a threat to its own security. This has led the government to take severe measures at both the domestic and the regional levels to fight these extreme ideologies.

The UAE perceives the main threat from state actors as coming from Iran. On 30 November 1971, Iran occupied three Emirati islands, thus posing a serious and real threat to the survival of the newly established state. The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 added further complexities to the relationship between the two countries. The ideological tools that Iran used in past years to spread its revolutionary ideals have created serious concerns not only in the UAE but also in other members of the GCC. Iran's idea to export the revolution in 1979

---

5.   Joseph Braude, "The UAE's Brotherhood Problem", in Al-Mesbar Center website, 10 October 2013, https://mesbar.org/?p=4302.

was meant to extend to the entire Muslim neighbourhood, including the UAE. This led the UAE to support Saddam Hussain during the Iraq–Iran war of 1980–1988. The image of Iran as a neighbouring country that poses a threat to the UAE continued, and moved to the level where the UAE along with other GCC states have built part of their security apparatus as a reaction to perceived threats from Iran.

Since the end of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq in 2003, however, the threat from Iran has increased,[6] yet it should not be seen as existential for the UAE due to the development of its own military capabilities and alliances as well as the Western security umbrella. Iran, nonetheless, has engaged during the past ten years in a number of proxy wars that have led the UAE to engage militarily to fight Iranian-backed groups such as the Houthis in Yemen. This has caused the UAE to increase its regional activism particularly by engaging with threats not only towards its own security but also that of its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia. In addition, this has led international allies to continue providing further security support to the UAE by maintaining military bases such as the French military base in Abu Dhabi in addition to the US and the UK bases. This is not only to support the UAE, but also to provide a further security umbrella for the region, playing a hegemonic role there and influencing as well as supporting their regional allies. Nonetheless, the rising number of foreign military bases in the Gulf is considered one the reasons why Iran has decided to build a nuclear capability.

However, with the 2015 signing of the JCPOA, regional dynamics shifted the UAE's strategies. This agreement provided some optimism for reduced tensions in the region as well as an opportunity to open a channel of dialogue with Iran with regard to several regional issues. Yet, the UAE, along with other GCC members, has been marginalised from the agreement,

6. Before 2003, Iran's activities in the region were limited and not directly threatening to the UAE, but after that Iran began to increase its proxy wars targeting the UAE's regional allies, particularly in Yemen.

and therefore is not a signatory to it. While this was a success for the European countries as well as the United States under Barack Obama, the UAE began to consider diversifying its security partners while retaining some of its old allies.

The UAE has deepened alliances with actors such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Emirates' active participation in the Saudi-led coalition that intervened militarily in Yemen in 2015 was the very first independent UAE military engagement without Western powers. Its main objective was to counter the Iranian-backed Houthi and other violent non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Muslim Brotherhood represented by Al-Islah. This war created further security concerns for the UAE when several oil tankers were targeted within the territorial waters of the UAE emirate of Fujairah, very close to the Strait of Hormuz. In May 2019, four oil tankers were attacked within the UAE territorial waters. According to *Gulf News*, assessment of the damage to the four vessels and chemical analysis of the debris recovered revealed it was highly likely that limpet mines were used in the attacks on the four vessels.[7] The United States blamed Iran for the attack, and the UAE clearly indicated that a state actor was behind it.[8] It is important to note that the fact that Iran was behind these attacks, was due to the reimposed US sanctions, which coincided with Iran's increased participation in regional proxy wars also through violent means.

With President Trump's coming to power, the UAE's regional security policies have been shared with and affirmed by the US government. The UAE's lobbying activities in Washington demonstrate the influence the UAE has on the current administration. According to Ben Freeman, "The UAE has a vast and immensely influential lobbying and public relations campaign

---

7. "Fujairah Tanker Attack Most Likely by State Actor: UAE", in *Gulf News*, 7 June 2019, https://gulfnews.com/1.1559862216730.
8. Glen Carey, Margaret Talev and David Wainer, "U.S. Blames Iran for Oil Tanker Attacks as Gulf Tensions Climb", in *Bloomberg*, 13 June 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-13/u-s-blames-iran-for-oil-tanker-attacks-as-tensions-escalate-jwuzlj4u.

in America, that has allowed the monarchy to exert considerable sway over U.S. policy while keeping the UAE's indiscretions largely hidden".[9] These activities and influence have strengthened the UAE's role in the Middle East and transformed its foreign policy.

The security threat from non-state actors is also real but not existential. The UAE had allowed certain groups to operate, mainly MB-affiliated actors, since the 1970s, but the government put an end to these activities in the early 1990s. The 2011 uprisings marked the beginning of the UAE's clear and direct confrontation against political Islam movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, which the UAE claims is supported by Qatar and Turkey. The UAE has classified 83 Islamic organisations as "terrorist".[10] This classification, despite the criticism it has received from some governments because of the definition of terrorism it adopts, points to the UAE's resolve to fight political Islam movements with every means at its disposal.[11] This is evident from the role and objectives the UAE has pursued in Yemen. According to Eleonora Ardemagni, "From 2015 onwards, the UAE have been intervening in Yemen focusing on four security dimensions: regime stability, counterterrorism, local training and humanitarian assistance".[12] However, it has been argued that other objectives have evolved to include the UAE's intention to control parts of Yemen, mainly its strategic waterways, for economic reasons. More recently, the UAE has been accused of fully controlling Socotra Island.

9. Ben Freeman, *The Emirati Lobby: How the UAE Wins in Washington*, Washington, Center for International Policy, October 2019, p. 2, https://docs.wix-static.com/ugd/3ba8a1_cc7f1fad2f7a497ba5fb159a6756c34a.pdf.

10. Simeon Kerr, "UAE Blacklists 83 Groups as Terrorists", in *Financial Times*, 16 November 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/09e13dee-6db8-11e4-bf80-00144fe-abdc0.

11. Rashed Lekhraibani, Emilie Rutledge and Ingo Forstenlechner, "The UAE's Quest for Stability", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer 2015), p. 108-124, https://mepc.org/node/2799.

12. Eleonora Ardemagni, "UAE's Military Priorities in Yemen: Counterterrorism and the South", in *ISPI Commentaries*, 28 July 2016, https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/15573.

Due to the continuous security concerns from non-state actors for the UAE and its allies, the UAE has moved to engage militarily to fight groups that are religiously oriented and adopt extremist ideologies, or Shia-dominated groups supported by Iran. In particular, the past few years witnessed the UAE's engagement in Yemen, Libya, Syria and other parts of the Middle East and Horn of Africa; in most of these cases it fights political Islam movements and Iranian-backed groups. Nonetheless, seeking to exert power and influence is also one of the main objectives, as well as to counter the role of Turkey and Qatar in supporting political Islam groups not only in the Middle East but also in the Horn of Africa. However, it is important to clarify that the UAE engaged with other regional and international forces to remove Gaddafi who was not very much welcomed by many GCC states. Toby Matthiesen explains that "the leaders of virtually all GCC states had personal issues with the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi".[13] He adds that "Gaddafi had alienated them and in 2009 directly attacked King 'Abdullah of Saudi Arabia during an infamous Arab League meeting in Doha".[14] Therefore, the role of the UAE was originally that of opposition to Gaddafi, then transformed into a proxy war between different states in the region in which the UAE has taken up the role of mainly fighting Muslim Brotherhood groups. Similarly, in Syria it has supported the moderate Syrian opposition against the MB. Although the UAE preferred a secular Syria, the opposition groups supported by the Emirates have failed to achieve their objectives. The less aggressive approach adopted by the UAE towards Syria since 2011 led in 2018 to re-normalisation of diplomatic relations with the Assad regime.

It can be argued here that the UAE's perception of the MB as a security threat can be interpreted in three points. First is the

---

13. Toby Matthiesen, "Renting the Casbah: Gulf States' Foreign Policy Towards North Africa Since the Arab Uprisings", in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 52.

14. Ibid.

fear that this ideology may spread throughout the conservative society in the Emirates, changing the perception of the society towards the government. Second, fighting the MB can be seen as a tool for the UAE to justify its involvement in various parts of the Middle East and to continue its influential strategies over some governments in the region. Third, the Emirates' role in fighting extremist groups leads Western powers to continue their support to the country. The United States is the best example in that they perceive the UAE as one of their most trusted allies in the region. Hussein Ibish points out that "[t]he most recent State Department Country Report on Terrorism (2015) praises UAE counterterrorism capabilities and efforts, citing 'its firm counterterrorism stance through implementation of strict counterterrorism laws and a strong counterterrorism partnership with the United States'".[15]

2. The JCPOA and implications for regional security: A view from the Emirates

One of the most significant developments in the Middle East after the Arab uprising in 2011 was the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Iran had managed to conclude an agreement to reduce its nuclear programme activities in exchange for the lifting of Western economic sanctions weighing on it. This was considered by the signatories a success after lengthy negotiations between Iran and the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany. The UAE and other members of the GCC were not invited to be part of this agreement. This was interpreted by the GCC countries as a marginalisation and underestimation of their role as vital players in the regional dynamics not only of the Gulf but also of the Middle East in general. Although the JCPOA is not a collective security agreement, the GCC have shared their concerns about Iran's nuclear

---

15. Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy", in *AGSIW Issue Papers*, No. 4 (6 April 2017), p. 45, https://agsiw.org/uaes-evolving-national-security-strategy.

programme with Western powers due to the geographic proximity as well as their support for non-proliferation.

The UAE's perception of this agreement can be described with reference to two main points. First, this agreement has indirectly strengthened the role of Iran in the region. Since 2015, Iranian activities have increased significantly as was evident in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Second, this agreement reflects that major powers and main signatories would perceive Iran as a major player whose role in the region is important. According to Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "[t]he UAE fears that Tehran interpreted the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on its nuclear programme as a signal that world powers would accept Iranian regional hegemony".[16] The view of Ebtisam El-Ketbi reflects to some extent the view of the UAE government. This has also been evident in the words of the UAE ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba: "behind all the talk of change, the Iran we have long known – hostile, expansionist, violent – is alive and well, and as dangerous as ever".[17] In spite of the fact that the UAE and the other GCC states have endorsed the JCPOA, a change of language began to emerge as soon as President Trump came to power, as discussed in the next section.

This agreement led the UAE to further increase its activism in the region. A clear example of this is the UAE's engagement in Libya, providing military support to Haftar, engaging with states in the Horn of Africa (e.g., the striking of the peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the deepening of relations with the Somali government) and continuing to support international efforts to fight ISIS.

---

16. Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "Regional Viewpoints: United Arab Emirates", in Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh and Hugh Lovatt (eds), *The Middle East's New Battle Lines*, London, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), May 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/battle_lines/uae.

17. Yousef Al Otaiba, "One Year after the Nuclear Deal", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/one-year-after-the-iran-nuclear-deal-1459721502.

On another front, the UAE and other GCC members, particularly Saudi Arabia, felt that the JCPOA agreement marked a clear shift for the United States and some countries of the EU in terms of their foreign policy towards Iran. Consequently, the UAE's relationship with the United States and also some European countries was at risk. Despite reassurance from Washington and Brussels, the UAE began to consider a diversification of its security partners. In reality, the design of this new strategy had started before the signing of the JCPOA under President Obama, but it was implemented after 2015.[18] Russia and China have represented the two main directions of the UAE's security strategy diversification. In 2019, the UAE signed a defence and military cooperation agreement with China.[19] It also purchased weapons from China for the amount of 40 million US dollars in 2018.[20] Although this is a relatively small amount, the UAE projects that there will be further defence cooperation in the future. Also in 2018, the UAE and Russia signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership to cooperate in various sectors such as politics, security, economy and culture, along with cooperation in the humanitarian, scientific, technological and tourist domains.[21] In 2018, Russia's biggest military client was the UAE. According to agencies and Nicolas Parasie and Robert Wall, the UAE spent 710 million US dollars in 2017,[22] and another 799 million in 2018.[23] Furthermore, the French army presence in Abu Dhabi evidences that the UAE is seeking alternative security partners. The Emirates have proposed to host the headquarters

---

18. Khalid Almezaini, "The Transformation of UAE Foreign Policy Since 2011", in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (ed.), *The Changing Security Dynamics of the Persian Gulf*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 191-204.

19. "16 MoUs Signed at UAE-China Economic Forum in Beijing", in *Gulf News*, 22 July 2019, https://gulfnews.com/1.1563795131412.

20. Nicolas Parasie and Robert Wall, "Russia and China Target Middle East Arms Deals", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 April 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-china-target-middle-east-arms-deals-11554555600.

21. "UAE and Russia Forge Strategic Partnership", in *Gulf News*, 1 June 2018, https://gulfnews.com/1.2230246.

22. "UAE Buys $5 Bn of Weapons During Four-Day Arms Exhibition", in *Middle East Eye*, 23 February 2017, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/61324.

23. Nicolas Parasie and Robert Wall, "Russia and China Target Middle East Arms Deals", cit.

of the European naval mission. Reuters reported in November 2019 that "A French naval base in Abu Dhabi will serve as the headquarters for a European-led mission to protect Gulf waters that will be operational soon".[24] More recently, the French base which hosts also Dutch, Danish, Belgian, Greeks, Portuguese, Italian and German military personnel began to operate along with these states to ensure the safety of this strategic waterway. Despite the fact that the British and American forces already provide maritime security, a general agreement has emerged in Brussels on the need to ensure some sort of military presence in regional waters.[25] There are also other foreign military bases in the UAE, for instance Australian and Italian bases as well as those of the traditional two main security partners, namely the United States and the UK.

These practical steps towards security diversification have been echoed by analysts such as Abdulaziz Sager, the director of the Gulf Research Center, who argues that the instability of the Gulf "demands more than at any time in the past that the GCC states coordinate their policies with regard to the United States, on the one hand, and strengthen their relations with the great international powers like China, Russia, Japan, and the EU, on the other hand".[26] Despite this congestion, the UAE clearly adopts a strategic hedging approach. One of the most interesting implications of the diversification of security partners concerns the UAE's relations with Syria. After opposing the Assad regime, the UAE re-established its relations with Damascus due to its rapprochement and cooperation with Russia that has increased Moscow's influence over the Emirates and some other Arab states.

---

24. "France Says Abu Dhabi to Host HQ for European Naval Mission for the Gulf", in *Reuters*, 24 November 2019, https://reut.rs/2OdmbmK.

25. Eva Pejsova, "What the European Maritime Initiative in the Strait of Hormuz Tells Us about Brussel's Security Ambitions", in *European Leadership Network Commentaries*, 27 March 2020, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/?p=11297.

26. Cited in Lynn E. Davis et al., *Iran's Nuclear Future. Critical U.S. Policy Choices*, Santa Monica, RAND, 2011, p. 90, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1087.html.

In addition, despite the UAE disagreement with Iran, the UAE's change of its policies towards Syria from support to the opposition to re-normalisation with the Assad regime demonstrates the success of Russia's lobbying activities in the Middle East. According to Samuel Ramani, "the UAE's current position shares more common ground with Russia's than any other Gulf Arab country, except Oman, which – in keeping with its policy of neutrality and engagement with all regional parties – maintained an embassy in Damascus throughout the Syrian civil war".[27] The UAE has taken a less aggressive approach towards Syria even during the time of its support of the Syrian opposition. This is because during the early months of the uprising in Syria religious groups were predominant, which kept the UAE at a certain distance. The re-normalisation of relations with Syria shows that the UAE's preference is for a secular state distanced from religious extremist groups. In this context, the UAE–Russia relation reflects a convergence of policies towards Syria.

Furthermore, the UAE started to develop bilateral and multilateral regional alliances. This was intended to counter not only the Iranian influence in the region but also MB-affiliated groups. This alliance strategy is built on two levels: first, bilateral alliances such as the UAE-Saudi regional alliance and the Emirati-Egyptian alliance. These two bilateral alliances reflect the intentions of the Emirates to work with individual states to improve UAE security at the regional level. The second level includes multilateral alliances such as the Saudi-Egyptian-Emirati alliance that has been working together since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in 2013. In addition, in 2017 the UAE joined a regional alliance which included Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt and was intended to put pressure on the Qatari government but eventually contributed to ending diplomatic relations with the latter indefinitely. This kind of alliance has arguably worked to the benefit of the UAE,

---

27. Samuel Ramani, "UAE and Russia Find Common Ground on Syria", in *AGSIW Blog*, 11 March 2019, https://agsiw.org/uae-and-russia-find-common-ground-on-syria.

particularly the bilateral alliance linking the UAE and Egypt in Libya and the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. There has been more coordination between Egypt and the UAE in regard to the bombing of serval sites in Libya than with the Saudis. Beyond the military cooperation in Libya, these two countries have been cooperating also in different fields. The UAE is one of the biggest investors in Egypt, where it has invested around 6 billion US dollars in the space of only four years, and the two countries have set up an investment fund worth 20 billion US dollars.[28]

In addition, the UAE began to consider building its own military capabilities. According to Dania Saadi, "[t]he UAE, the 14th largest military spender in the world in 2016, has a comparative advantage to create a local defense industry as it seeks to meet security needs, diversify its economy, boost employment and enhance its knowledge base".[29] Between 2016 and 2020, the UAE's annual defence expenditure stood at an average of 26.6 billion US dollar per year.[30] Accurate governmental statistics are not published. Nevertheless, the launch of EDGE military holding group – the largest defence company in the Middle East – in the UAE in November 2019 is considered a milestone in the building up of the country's military defence system, and demonstrates that the UAE seeks alternative tools to diverge from its dependency on arms from Western powers, as well as Russia and China. This is particularly salient after pressure has increased over the use of foreign military equipment in the war in Yemen in the past five years. Dudley points out that Germany, Spain, Norway, Belgium and Finland have suspended arm

---

28. John Dennehy, "UAE and Egypt Launch $20bn Joint Investment Platform", in *The National*, 14 November 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/1.937533.

29. Dania Saadi, "UAE Well Positioned to Build Own Defence Industry", in *The National*, 6 December 2017, https://www.thenational.ae/1.682127.

30. "United Arab Emirates (UAE) Defense Market Outlook to 2025...", in *Global News Wire*, 2 March 2020, https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/02/1993237/0/en/United-Arab-Emirates-UAE-Defense-Market-Outlook-to-2025-Size-Drivers-Budget-Allocation-Key-Challenges-Import-Export-Dynamics-Market-Opportunities-Competitive-Landscape-Strategic-In.html.

sales to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.[31] Nonetheless, the UAE is a trusted ally for some Western countries due to its atypical military capability. David Roberts argues that the Emirati use of air power was similarly notable; alongside Australia, the UAE was the only non-NATO force trusted to provide hundreds of close-air-support missions for NATO ground troops, and it took an active role in bombing Taliban positions.[32]

Thus, the JCPOA has pushed the UAE to reconsider some of its strategies in the region. Among the new strategies actively pursued by the UAE are building alliances, developing its own defence, and diversifying its security partners in case the traditional allies shift their interests from the region in the long term due to changes in international dynamics and economic issues.

3. The UAE in the post-JCPOA context: Strategic hedging

Since the signing of the JCPOA, the UAE has become a clear example of a small state that adopts strategic hedging. According to Yoel Guzansky,

> A strategy of hedging is suited to an anarchic system; it allows a small power, interested in immediate gain, to offset risks and improve its situation in relation to the rising power while avoiding a major confrontation. In the present context, the strategy makes it possible to maintain significant ties with the threatening force and, at the same time, to form alliances to balance the impending threat.[33]

31. Dominic Dudley, "Why More and More Countries Are Blocking Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE", in *Forbes*, 7 September 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2018/09/07/why-more-and-more-countries-are-blocking-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae.
32. David B. Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World", in *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2020), p. 301-334.
33. Yoel Guzansky, "The Foreign-Policy Tools of Small Powers: Strategic Hedging in the Persian Gulf", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 2015), p. 112-122.

Within the context following the demise of the JCPOA, the UAE's strategic hedging is seen in various significant developments of its foreign policy. With the changes in the policies of the UAE, it has tried to gain maximum benefits despite its relations with all regional and international actors, such as Iran, Russia, China, the EU, the United States and Saudi Arabia. The UAE's strategic hedging is seen in two frameworks: first, Saudi-Iranian and US-Iranian rivalries in the region; second, the UAE-Iran indirect relations.

On the one hand, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry reflects the classical argument of realism that both states seek security and power in the region; yet, identity and ideology appear to be of less importance within this rivalry, particularly since Mohammed Bin Salman came to power. The new leadership in Saudi Arabia is more determined than before to stop any further Iranian engagement in different parts of the Middle East. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA has brought more optimism among the Saudi leadership and its closest ally in the region: the UAE. Saudi Arabia is no longer seeing itself alone in its conflict to Iran, rather it takes into consideration that the UAE is a main and reliable partner in a troubled region. The Saudi and Emirati convergence of threat perception and cooperation vis-à-vis Iran was a significant development. It has encouraged the UAE position against the Iranian threat, and contributed to the US initial idea of withdrawing from the JCPOA.

This consensus of policies towards Iran between the UAE and Saudi Arabia encouraged the United States to rethink previous strategies adopted during Obama's administration. Trump has been very clear in indicating that Iran poses a serious threat to regional and international security. Therefore, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has become more militarised, mainly through proxy wars. Saudi Arabia increased its military intervention in Yemen, while the UAE has also become more assertive towards Iran to stop its military support to the Houthis. In spite of its staunch support to Saudi Arabia, the UAE has been more cautious that this tension does not escalate into direct confrontation. Con-

sequently, in order to achieve multiple policy objectives, it has had direct talks with the Iranians in order to ensure the security of the strait of Hormuz. However, it was not clear if these talks were related to the recent attacks on the oil tankers. Recently, Saudi-Emirati relations have witnessed some changes: the UAE has withdrawn from Yemen and has pushed for further peace deals instead of continuing military intervention. In addition, after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and increasing tensions in the region, the UAE has called for de-escalation to avoid a military confrontation.

On the other hand, the US approach towards Iran under Trump became more aggressive with further economic sanctions and the proposal to establish a regional strategic alliance, the so-called "Arab NATO". This ambitious project by the Trump administration has not progressed though. This is because of disagreement between some Gulf states as well as the US failure to bring its allies together. Oman and Qatar have relatively good relations with Iran and the United States, however it is difficult to create a regional alliance that shares common threats if its members are in disagreement. The UAE has supported the United States' new policy towards Iran, yet it has not ended economic relations but only decreased its own trade with Iran. According to *Gulf News*, "[t]he reintroduction of US sanctions on Iran will not impact the UAE economy nor will it stop investment or development in the region".[34] It is important to note that the federal nature of the UAE gives each emirate the possibility to pursue its own foreign or external goals as long as these do not contradict the state's overall foreign policy. Consequently, Dubai appears to continue its (albeit limited) economic relations with Iran despite the US sanctions. Ebtisam Al-Ketbi points out that:

> The UAE faces a dilemma in that it wants to push back against Tehran's regional expansion but also recognises that Iran is its second-largest trading partner – and is particularly important to Dubai.

---

34. "UAE Not Impacted by US-Iran Sanctions", in *Gulf News*, 24 November 2018, https://gulfnews.com/1.1543073944112.

> For many years, the UAE has sought to expand frameworks of economic cooperation with Iran (as well as Turkey and Qatar) in the hope that the logic of common interests would overcome that of ideology, helping create a regional climate centred on collaboration and mutual benefit. However, the success of this approach has been modest at best.[35]

This dilemma is not new and can be traced back to the 1970s when Iran occupied the three UAE islands. The small state has been critical towards Iran but at the same time has maintained good economic relations that have evolved over the years, turning Iran in one of its most significant trading partners. Isaac John points out that:

> The UAE, the fourth-largest trading partner of the embattled country, recorded a surge in trade exchange with Iran to $17 billion (Dh62.42 billion) last year but remains lower than the record $23 billion set in 2011 before sanctions began to bite. Most of that trade originates from Dubai, home to a 400,000-strong Iranian community that runs a large business network.[36]

This strategic hedging approach reflects two dimensions in the UAE's foreign policy. First, the UAE understands that due to historical relations and geographic proximity, Iran remains an important state at the regional level. The presence and economic activities of a large Iranian community in the UAE is crucial for Dubai's economy in particular. Therefore, regardless of the international sanctions, the UAE economic relations with Iran remain vital for both states. Second, the UAE has called for regional and international allies to continue to put pressure on Iran and take further measures to deal with Iran's threatening behaviour. The objective is to stop Iran's regional influence and activities. This is because the UAE, despite firm statements from the government on Iran, perceives the threat as real but not existential. Consequently, we can summarise that this approach of strengthening security relations with Western powers while at the same time maintaining some links with Iran is

---

35. Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, "Regional Viewpoints: United Arab Emirates", cit.
36. Isaac John, "Boost for UAE-Iran Trade", in *Khaleej Times*, 15 July 2015, https://www.khaleejtimes.com/business/economy/boost-for-uae-iran-trade.

due to domestic economic and historical issues, as well as the federal nature of the UAE.

The complexities of state behaviour of the Gulf states towards Iran, Russia and the United States have led to the emergence of several proposals to deal with regional insecurity. While the US security proposal (as mentioned above) sought to bring a "Sunni" coalition under the so-called Arab NATO, Russia has attempted to provide alternative solutions to the problems in the Gulf. Russia has proposed a Gulf collective security that not only includes the GCC states and Iran, but also the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference as well as the UN Security Council. Russia feels trapped between satisfying its two main regional allies, Iran and Syria, while maintaining good relations with the GCC states, particularly the UAE. This proposal can serve multiple objectives, but it does not seem to be greatly welcomed. The UAE announced in November 2019 that it was studying the Russian proposal. However, no progress has been made since that time.

Thus, neither the American nor the Russian security proposals seem to be accepted in the region, even if Iran has welcomed the Russian initiative. Iran, on the other hand, proposed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) that seeks to create a regional security arrangement through "intra-regional dialogue" with countries involved in the region (mainly the GCC countries and Iran). However, Iran's proposal excludes great powers such as the United States. Rouhani argued that the formation of any security coalition and initiative under any title in the region with the centrality and command of foreign forces is a clear example of interference in the affairs of the region, adding that the security of the region will be assured when American troops pull out and that security is not supplied with American weapons and intervention.[37] As with the Russian and American proposals, the UAE and other GCC states appear to

---

[37] Mehran Hagirian and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?", in *IranSource*, 3 October 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=186210.

be less than keen on such security arrangements. This reflects the complexities of the region. An acceptance of any of the proposals would require limiting or ending the activities and interventions by Iran and some other GCC actors in the Middle East. The interests of all actors involved are clearly intrinsically intertwined with their interests in both the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular. This is what makes it difficult for any proposal to be taken seriously and accepted by all state actors.

4. Conclusion

The UAE bases its regional security perception on the fact that there is a real threat, which yet falls short of being existential. This perception has contributed to the shaping of the UAE's foreign policy over the past few years. Its preferred approach has been avoiding direct confrontation with Iran, while fighting along with Saudi Arabia a proxy war in different parts of the Middle East to stop Iranian influence. It is clear that strategic hedging is a prominent feature of the UAE's foreign policy and a response to the complexities and threats in the region. The UAE has demonstrated its willingness to acquire greater power but at the same time to maintain good relations with all regional and international actors. The ambitions of a small state with some middle power capabilities are reflected in the Emirates' diversification of security partners, engaging in the Middle East to exert power and influence, as well as aspiring to be an economic hub.

However, this strategy is not going to be sustainable in the long term due to economic and financial constraints. With the decrease of oil prices, UAE foreign policy will be greatly affected. Economic diversification cannot fully support the UAE's regional and international security strategies as the non-oil sector accounts for only 60 per cent of GDP. In particular, the cost of the UAE's military involvement in different parts of region, particularly in Yemen, is too high. According to the New York Times, "the Emiratis are driven mostly by their desire to exit a

war whose cost has become too high, even if it means angering their Saudi allies".[38] The cost of its military activism in the region will lead to a reduction of its activities, which will result in the UAE having to rely more on its traditional security partners instead of trying to resolve some of the conflicts on its own or fighting the extremist groups in the Middle East. There can be no doubt that the UAE's role in the region will change in the coming years, particularly with the implications of COVID-19 over oil prices and the private sector. The fall in oil prices in April 2020 and the shutting down of activities in the private sector will lead to a significant financial deficit that will have an impact over the UAE's foreign policy and external activities in the Middle East.

---

38. Declan Walsh and David D. Kirkpatrick, "U.A.E. Pulls Most Forces From Yemen in Blow to Saudi War Effort", in *The New York Times*, 11 July 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/world/middleeast/yemen-emirates-saudi-war.html.

9
COLLECTIVE SECURITY AND MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PATHWAYS FOR EU POLICY

SILVIA COLOMBO AND ANDREA DESSÌ

In the ten-year period since the outbreak of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, the regional environment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has gone from bad to worse. Conflicts and proxy wars have expanded, socio-economic indicators deteriorated, geopolitical rivalries deepened and the gap between states and societies widened. At no point in the recent history of the Middle East have crises, fragmentation and dysfunctionality been so prevalent across the region, fuelling significant apprehension for the short and medium future of the Middle East.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn, coupled with the recent collapse of oil prices, will only aggravate this scenario, worsening economic outlooks and disrupting social life, jobs and trade. Domestic pressures will grow as a result, and with them so will the regime survival instincts of ruling elites, hardening repression at home and dangerous brinkmanship abroad. The result is a highly volatile regional disorder where trends of conflictual multipolarity and zero-sum rivalry run supreme, amidst a combustible mix of overlapping domestic, regional and international instability drivers that could well explode into new conflicts and crises in the near future.

Stepping back from the brink and developing new and inclusive mechanisms for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the Middle East is no easy task. Such efforts will likely be a long-term, even generational endeavour. There are no assurances of success and progress will ultimately depend on

the active buy-in and support from regional actors themselves, as such mechanisms cannot simply be imposed from the outside. The fact that such goals have been avowed objectives for many decades only speaks to the depths of the challenges at hand, while shifts in the international arena underscore the new complexities of such efforts against the backdrop of declining transatlantic cohesion and leverage vis-à-vis the Middle East and the increasingly proactive and independent policies of other actors, both regional and international.

The European Union (EU) and its member states retain limited capabilities to assume a lead role in efforts to establish new security frameworks for the Middle East, lacking in internal cohesion and appropriate instruments to foster regional buy-in, oversight and/or accountability. Faced with three regional cleavages – the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the growing Arab-Turkish rupture – that are responsible for much of the geopolitical tensions in the region, the EU should focus on gradual, intermediate steps that aim to create a more conducive environment for de-escalation across conflict lines, pursuing ad hoc dialogue formats, de-confliction initiatives and a principled defence of international law and EU values. Acknowledging the EU's limited leverage to address the underlying material and ideational drivers that are defining these regional cleavages, efforts could be directed towards a number of hot-spots – the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, Palestine and the Persian Gulf – in which these ruptures converge and where EU interests and leverage are more clearly defined. Working to stabilise these hot-stops and a number of associated pressure points therein could have positive carry-on effects on the broader region, avoiding a further deepening of rivalries across regional cleavages. Conversely, a deepening of conflict and competition in each of these hot-spots would further exacerbate regional cleavages, harden threat perceptions and thereby further complicate efforts to de-escalate tensions through dialogue and confidence building.

Such objectives imply both an internal and external dimension to EU policy. They involve both a correct assessment of ex-

ternal threats and challenges and a careful quantification of EU leverage and influence to have a positive impact. This latter dimension requires the EU to look inwards, reassessing its policy-making approaches and decision-making modalities in an effort to strengthen its cohesion and coherence vis-à-vis the region. The establishment of lead groups composed of key member states working in close cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the delineation of stable working groups gathering representatives from the policy planning units and relevant ministries of large EU member states represent two indispensable components of any effort to better position the EU in the region, helping to pool leverage among EU members and better delineate objectives and the sequencing of policies in a given context.

Underscoring how the Middle East is likely to make or break the European Union's newfound ambition to act geopolitically on the world stage while enhancing its strategic autonomy in foreign and security policy, the challenge facing the EU is that of operationalising its concept of "principled pragmatism" in the region, demonstrating the EU's ability to pursue principled but independent policies that best reflect its values and interests, working to de-escalate tensions and establish new avenues for direct and indirect dialogue among competing states as a means to establish a more conducive environment for the discussion of formal regional or sub-regional security frameworks for the Middle East.

1. Regional challenges: Socio-economic turmoil and geopolitical ruptures

The post-2011 MENA is "more combustible than ever",[1] as multiple overlapping challenges span the geopolitical, socio-eco-

---

1. Robert Malley, "The Unwanted Wars", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (November/December 2019), p. 38-47, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-02/unwanted-wars.

nomic and security domains placing increased strain on social contracts and already weak and fraying regional cooperation forums. Intra–Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) tensions and the ongoing blockade of Qatar, the mounting Saudi and Emirati rivalry with Turkey and Iran and the emergence of energy and geopolitically driven alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean, not to mention competition over the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Palestine and Yemen as well as the fragile states of Iraq and Lebanon, are all examples of the present conflictual multipolarity in the MENA region. On top of these developments, the protest movements that have rocked Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria and Sudan have once again displayed the weakness of social contracts in many countries of the region, reminding observers that many of the underlining criticalities that contributed to the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 remain unaddressed and have actually worsened considerably over the ensuing decade.[2]

Indeed, on top of the risk of regional war and the multiple ongoing proxy conflicts, attention should also be directed towards the internal, domestic causes of instability and insecurity, among which corruption, lack of opportunities and growing repression are contributing to high levels of popular frustration and anger.[3] As noted by one observer, "geoeconomics, not geopolitics, is the key"[4] and the COVID-19 pandemic will further affect internal stability and state–society relations. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has noted that the Arab region will

2. Andrea Dessì, "Crisis and Breakdown: How Can the EU Foster Resilience in the Middle East and North Africa?", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 17|37 (December 2017), https://www.iai.it/en/node/8678; Marwan Bishara, "Beware of the Looming Chaos in the Middle East", in *Al Jazeera*, 3 August 2020, https://aje.io/qgw3q.
3. Rami Khouri, "Poverty, Inequality and the Structural Threat to the Arab Region", in *POMEPS Studies*, No. 34, March 2019, p. 28-32, https://pomeps.org/?p=10712.
4. Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 15 October 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_trump_or_biden_three_ways_to_make_europe_matter_in_the_middle_ea.

shed 1.7 million jobs due to the pandemic, while Arab states' GDP is expected to decline by at least 42 billion US dollars in 2020.[5] A further study by ESCWA has demonstrated a striking increase in poverty and inequality levels across the Middle East. Outlining how the "current growth model in the Arab region is no longer economically feasible", the report estimates that 115 million people in 14 Arab countries live in poverty in 2020, up from the 66 million in 2010. Inequality, meanwhile, has continued to grow, with the top 10 per cent of wealthiest adults in the Arab region, all of whom are male and live in the GCC countries, accounting for 76 per cent of total household wealth in the region in 2019.[6]

Faced with these twin geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges, Europe must urgently develop a more effective set of policies to mitigate these risks, preventing the further exacerbation of conflicts and rivalries before the next major crisis erupts. For this to come about, the European Union not only needs to better contextualise the causalities and interlinkages between recent challenges in the Middle East, internalise past errors and work to diminish disagreements among its member states; it must also revisit certain principles and approaches that have long accompanied its action in the region.

After decades of reliance on the United States, recent disagreements with Washington surrounding President Donald Trump's policy on Iran are serving as a wakeup call for the urgent need to develop a degree of "strategic autonomy" in EU foreign and security policy.[7] Trends of US relative retrenchment and un-

---

5. ESCWA, "COVID-19 Economic Cost to the Arab Region", in *ESCWA Policy Briefs*, No. 1 (March 2020), https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/escwa-covid-19-economic-cost-arab-region-en.pdf.

6. ESCWA, "A Solidarity Tax to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Poverty in the Arab Region" in *ESCWA Policy Briefs*, No. 7 (June 2020), https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00187_covid-19-policy-brief-en.pdf.

7. Andrea Dessì and Vassilis Ntousas (eds), *Europe and Iran in a Fast-Changing Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), June 2019, https://www.iai.it/en/node/10554.

predictability in the region,[8] which predate the Trump administration and are dictated by the United States' growing focus on Asia, will remain a constant independent of who sits in the White House.[9] Given Europe's geographic vicinity and exposure to migration, terrorism, economic and energy disruptions from this region, the European Union does not have the luxury of simply ignoring these developments and nor can it withdraw into a so-called Fortress Europe. Ultimately, the risks of complacency with (or de facto support for) the deeply flawed and unsustainable status quo far outweigh the challenges and uncertainties of proactive engagement, starting in those domains where the European Union does retain influence and leverage, and seeking to position the Union as a reliable and trustworthy external actor, capable of tracing balanced policies across conflict lines without deepening the militarisation and polarisation of the region.[10]

The United States' relative retrenchment from the Middle East, combined with the resurgent influence of Russia and the growing activism and competition among a number of regional states – Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel and Iran – are the major elements that define the contemporary region. They will not be reversed and cannot be ignored or simply contained. Indeed, the objective of fostering security dialogue and cooperative frameworks cannot be that of rolling back the recent advances of one or another actor. Rather, the objective should be developing avenues for dialogue and de-confliction on the basis of inclusive frameworks and principles that reflect the contemporary geopolitical realities of the Middle East, seeking to enhance mutual under-

8.   Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessì, "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting vis-à-vis a Volatile External Security-Provider", in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 17 February 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1580185.

9.   Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East", cit.

10. Silvia Colombo et al., "The Art of the (Im)Possible: Sowing the Seeds for the EU's Constructive Engagement in the Middle East And North Africa", in *MENARA Final Reports*, No. 4 (April 2019), http://menara.iai.it/?p=1588.

standings, diminish threat perceptions and mitigate the risk of miscalculations or further escalations in the region.

Developments since 2010–11 have only increased these trends, also contributing to a further weakening of regional and sub-regional integration forums such as the League of Arab States and the GCC. More importantly a new, geopolitical cleavage has emerged, pitting the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and al-Sisi's Egypt against Turkey and Qatar, a cleavage that is spreading instability to other locations, including the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya. Centred around Ankara and Doha's support for Muslim Brotherhood–linked parties in the wake of the Arab uprisings, movements considered as existential threats to the legitimacy of Arab Gulf monarchies, this regional fault line has progressed in parallel to another, older regional cleavage involving the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The combination of these twin fault lines, and their at times overlapping convergence on the third and oldest regional cleavage, the Arab-Israeli conflict, are such as to create a critically combustible region with high risks of conflict, either by design or miscalculation. Each cleavage involves a number of regional (and international) states and together they converge in various pressure points that could well catapult new and multidimensional crises across the region. Capturing the interplay between these three regional cleavages and their respective pressure points, broadly located in three hot spots – the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Near East – can help the European Union prioritise engagements, tailoring policies and pooling leverage to maximise influence and results.

The oldest of these regional cleavages is the still unresolved Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a rupture that for decades has sprouted instability, militarisation and conflict. Independently from the growing Israeli–Arab Gulf cooperation, and the more recent announcement of normalisation agreements by the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan with Israel, one would be naïve to ignore the importance the Arab-Israeli conflict has had – and continues to have – on the international relations of the Middle

East, including the two further cleavages of Saudi-Iranian and Arab-Turkish tensions.[11] Indeed, the future of Palestine arguably retains key significance for the viewpoints and ambitions of key states that make up each of these three regional cleavages, retaining a central role in their respective rhetorical and conceptual aspirations for the future of the region, the role of the state, of citizenship and the balance between authoritarianism and representation, rights and repression.

Aside from its local dimension in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the conflict remains of significant relevance for Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian relations, it has long been a source of contention between Israel and Iran and has more recently returned to cause significant tensions and animosities between Israel and Turkey as well as Turkey and certain Arab states. These elements, combined with the continued internal tensions caused by the Palestinian issue within Jordan and Lebanon among others, are sufficient to remind audiences of the continued importance of this regional cleavage for any effort that aims to stabilise and build trust among regional actors, their citizens and the international community. Palestine is also an issue on which internal EU cohesion is more established and where support for international law and the two-state framework could provide avenues for a more proactive (and public) EU policy approach, one that would also imply carry-on benefits for EU legitimacy and influence, both regionally and internationally.

The next regional cleavage, that of Saudi-Iranian rivalry, exhibits four separate pressure points. These include both Syria and Lebanon, as mentioned above; Iraq, which in a similar fashion to Lebanon has become a battleground between opposing axes; and finally, the Strait of Hormuz, where significant tensions and

11. An overwhelming 88 per cent of Arabs surveyed in the latest Arab Opinion Index 2019–2020 were opposed to recognition of Israel by their home countries. See, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies (ACRPS), *The 2019-20 Arab Opinion Index. Main Results in Brief*, Doha Institute, October 2020, p. 54-55, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Arab-Opinion-Index-2019-2020-Inbreef-English-Version.pdf.

a series of pinpoint military attacks targeting US allies during the summer of 2019 repeatedly brought the region to the brink of conflict. While EU leverage is arguably less pronounced when it comes to the Gulf, a sub-region which has traditionally been the remit of the United States, European states have more recently sought to (re)assert themselves in this area and this may provide some room for increased EU action. A case in point is the French-led naval mission in the Strait of Hormuz, the European Maritime Awareness (EMASOH), which is headquartered in Abu Dhabi and has remained separate from the other, more avowedly anti-Iran naval missions launched by the United States and the United Kingdom.[12] The French led-mission involves the navies of other member states, including the Netherlands, Greece and Denmark, as well as political support from Italy, Belgium and Portugal.[13] EMASOH could prove conducive to reassure Arab Gulf states of EU commitment to freedom of navigation, helping to balance the perception of Europe being biased towards Iran out of its continued support for the 2015 nuclear deal. It is also a way to ensure that the European Union has a presence in this volatile area, eventually allowing it to build on this initiative to develop further avenues for dialogue and de-confliction between the Arab Gulf states and Iran. Proposals for hotlines for military de-confliction and other track II initiatives could be pursued in this pressure point, building on EU experience in these domains.[14]

---

12. See for instance, "We Are Here to De-escalate and Reassure Merchant Shipping", 22 September 2020, in *Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide*, https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/?p=833684; Tangi Salaun and John Irish, "French Warship to Spearhead European Mission in Gulf from Next Year", in *Reuters*, 19 December 2019, https://reut.rs/2ExBjWf.

13. See, French Foreign Ministry, *European Maritime Awareness in the SoH (EMASOH): Political Statement by the Governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal*, 20 January 2020, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the. The mission's mandate was extended by one year on 1 October 2020.

14. See for instance, Crisis Group, "The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline", in *Crisis Group Middle East Briefings*, No. 77 (23 April 2020), https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13846.

Indeed, even in the midst of significantly heightened threat perceptions emanating from the Persian Gulf during 2019 and 2020, a number of regional and international states have recently advanced proposals for security networking or multilateral dialogue in this sub-region.[15] While elements of these Russian, Iranian and Chinese proposals may be problematic, and have thus far not received any formal reaction let alone engagement by the European Union or its member states, they do signal a growing understanding about the value of such forums to mediate intra-state relations and avoid costly misunderstandings or misinterpretations that may well catapult further crises or conflicts in the region. Such approaches are conceptually very close to the EU's own principles and experiences, with significant parallels existing in terms of language and inspiration with other regional security initiatives, particularly the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the subsequent Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe. The fact that such calls have been presented in public demonstrates the growing applicability of such objectives, and while significant challenges remain, the EU would be best placed to act as a facilitator for the establishment of such mechanisms, building on its past experiences and less divisive reputation in the region.

The most recent regional cleavage in the Middle East is the Arab-Turkish rupture. This cleavage revolves around the growing animosities between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Al-Sisi's Egypt and Israel on the

---

15. Proposals range from the Iranian Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) initiative to Russia's call for a Collective Security Concept for the Gulf and, most recently, China's call for a "regional multilateral dialogue platform" for the Gulf. See, Poornima Balasubramanian, "China's Approach to Mediating Middle Eastern Conflicts", in *The Diplomat*, 16 October 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/chinas-approach-to-mediating-middle-eastern-conflicts. On top of these formal state-led initiatives, research centres and think tanks have long been working on similar themes, developing proposals and bridging solutions to help foster dialogue and de-escalation across the Middle East. See for instance, Crisis Group, "The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown", in *Crisis Group Middle East Reports*, No. 212 (27 April 2020), https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832.

other. Centred around opposing models and viewpoints about the future of the Middle East, the role of political Islam and the West in the region, this rivalry has increased in relevance over the past year and has arguably today become the most threatening fault line in the Middle East, both for the region and Europe.[16] Turkish-Arab rivalry is today playing out in the context of Libya, where the two axes support opposing sides in the ongoing civil war, in the context of the energy and geo-political realignments underway in the Eastern Mediterranean,[17] as well as more recent tensions over the UAE and Bahrain's normalisation agreements with Israel. Brewing for some years, this rivalry has most recently taken the form of a growing Arab economic boycott of Turkey,[18] a dynamic that poses further worrying challenges for the goals of regional stabilisation.

2. EU cohesion and coherence: The challenge of (re)building consensus on interests and instruments

The European Union and its member states have often been criticised for being bystanders to conflicts and crises in the region. A recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations described EU influence in the region as "weaker than ever", with policies largely focused on short-term, transactional concerns.[19] In light of the interlocking regional cleavages and pressure points, the European Union's role

---

16. Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simeon Kerr, "UAE vs Turkey: The Regional Rivalries Pitting MBZ against Erdogan", in *Financial Times*, 26 October 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786.

17. Asli Aydıntaşbaş et al., "Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines", in *ECFR Publications*, No. 322 (May 2020), https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med.

18. Hebshi Alshammary and Mohammed al-Sulami, "Campaign to Boycott Turkish Products Gains Momentum," in *Arab News*, 18 October 2020, https://arab.news/npkfy; Mustafa Sonmez, "How Much Damage Can Arab States Do to Turkish Economy?", in *Al-Monitor*, 2 October 2020, http://almon.co/3efy.

19. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), "Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region", in *ECFR Publications*, No. 310 (December 2019), https://ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena.

risks shrinking to the point of further endangering its already limited leverage in a region of strategic importance. To offset this prospect, it is important to start by dissecting the internal obstacles and challenges to a more robust and effective EU role in the Middle East.

The obstacles and challenges identified pertain, first and foremost, to the lack of cohesion and coherence in the EU foreign and security policy towards the MENA.[20] The contrasting viewpoints among EU member states when it comes to the Middle East have become even more manifest in the growing tensions underway in the Eastern Mediterranean. Besides Cyprus and Greece's long-lasting tensions with Turkey over maritime demarcation lines and Northern Cyprus, the conflict in Libya and the issue of access to offshore energy resources have added to the conundrum, with France in particular taking an assertive stance on Turkish policies in both theatres. Despite some limited attempts by Germany to play a mediation and de-conflicting role on Libya, the European Union has failed to coalesce around common policies. Furthermore, competing interests concerning trade opportunities and arms sales by individual EU member states vis-à-vis their partners in the Gulf (and Egypt) have complicated efforts to design and implement EU-wide responses to regional crises in a way that could also account for the Union's core principles and values.

While EU member states often share the diagnosis of the problem(s) – with security concerns topping the list of priorities[21] – they struggle to translate this understanding into concrete policies due to the fact that their interests diverge. The greater the lack of a clear and defined set of common interests in the short, medium and long term, the more room there is for

---

20. Silvia Colombo et al., "The Art of the (Im)Possible", cit.
21. Vincent Durac, "Counterterrorism and Democracy: EU Policy in the Middle East and North Africa after the Uprisings", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2018), p. 103-121; Anthony Dworkin and Fatim-Zohra El Malki, "The Southern Front Line: EU Counter-terrorism Cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 15 February 2018, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation.

individual member states to entrap the European Union. The result is that "principled pragmatism" does not have a solid anchoring in clearly defined and identifiable common interests beyond the broadly framed need to protect the multilateral system and the need to foster economic and trade opportunities, thus diluting its practical implementation as the sum of the individual member states' preferences and actions.

The European Union also struggles to ensure consistency between the goals on which its foreign policy is based and the instruments it deploys in the MENA. Democracy, respect for the rule of law and personal freedoms, as well as international law and cooperative security, have traditionally been the cornerstones of EU declarations and strategic documents on the Middle East. Yet, the pursuit of these goals has been incoherent at best. With regard to the conflicts in the Middle East, the European Union's ambition to play a more geopolitical role has stumbled upon the lack of adequate tools and capabilities, not just of political willingness. In particular, the crisis-management dimension of the EU toolbox – as applied to the MENA – has traditionally been less developed compared to the conflict-prevention one, making it difficult for the Union to undertake its actions coherently with its principles and stated goals. Crisis-management, entailing policies aimed at stopping or containing violent conflicts, by seeking to influence the attitude and behaviour of other actors, such as securing ceasefires, demobilisation, disarmament and peacekeeping, deploying civilian and military missions and emergency humanitarian aid, has suffered from three main shortcomings. First is the lack of adequate resources available to reach the stated goals of de-confliction and dialogue. Second is the existence of conflicting goals and priorities leading to a re-prioritisation of partial, short-term interests that appear to be lower-hanging fruits. And third, the member states more often than not pursue policies that are tied to their own partial interests, which often means going against the EU's proffered principles and values. On the contrary, conflict prevention, largely based on development cooperation and on a mildly transformative agenda centred on the concept of resilience, and "entailing democracy

promotion, good governance, human rights respect and the fostering of civil society, is good but, being preventive measures, [these actions] cannot be implemented when conflicts are already in full swing".[22] This situation is deeply connected with some degree of bureaucratic inertia that percolates through the EU institutions, from the European Commission to the EEAS, and relates also to the competition for funds among different priorities, frameworks and policies, both at the national and the supranational level.

Given the intricate geopolitical situation discussed above, dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures are of utmost importance. However, as recalled above, these are going to be long-term goals at best. A number of steps, also entailing putting the European common house in order, are needed to create an environment that is more conducive to regional governance. First, given the complexity and intractability of the security issues at stake, it is important to acknowledge that that EU cannot address them in one go. On the contrary, the Union should break them down into several components, compile a list of priorities as well as borrow from Europe's own experiences in other geopolitical contexts, such as the Balkans, and those of other regional organisations, such as the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe or the Association of Southeast Asian States. Such a list of priorities should not make the geographical scope its guiding principle – that is, an approach based on the supposed Europe/US division of labour between North Africa and the Middle East. On the contrary, there is an urgent need for a prioritisation of the European Union's engagement in those areas and on those issues where the Union has the highest stakes and can truly make a difference, starting from Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, but also including Turkey and Palestine, and perhaps only finally the Gulf.

---

22. Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber, "The EU and Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood: Tackling New Realities through Old Means?", in *IEMed/EuroMeSCo Papers*, No. 27 (March 2016), p. 35, https://www.euromesco.net/publication/the-eu-and-conflict-resolution-in-the-mediterranean-neighbourhood-tackling-new-realities-through-old-means.

Second, another important step would be to make good use of the interests and instruments the EU can already mobilise to provide substance to its agency. With regard to the interests, just as it is necessary to create a conducive environment in the region for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures through gradual steps, a similar conducive environment for intra-EU discussions and coordination on EU Middle East policy is also needed. In this respect, work should begin immediately, starting with the German Presidency of the European Council and the new Commission, by exploiting the added value provided by the external arrangements and actions of its member states on the different dossiers and pressure points. There is no need to reinvent the wheel but to inject an element of coordination and leadership into the pool of often conflicting interests of the member states by strengthening the capability and budget of the EEAS so as to attain a greater degree of cohesion in EU external action.

Third, there is evidence that the European Union would do better to invest its cards in playing a geoeconomic rather than a geopolitical role with a view to addressing those structural factors that are core drivers of regional insecurity and conflict proliferation.[23] The Union's repeated calls and pledges to play a more robust geopolitical role on the Middle Eastern regional chessboard obscure more than they reveal. First of all, this is not in its nature and could therefore be detrimental to its ontological self (or the perception thereof both by its own citizens and by external stakeholders). It is also misleading as it assumes that the European Union should compete with other geopolitical players, such as Russia and China. On the contrary, the Union has much more to offer by simply being a different kind of player that makes use of its already sophisticated toolbox ranging from trade and economic development, climate and energy policies, and food security to migration management, education policies and people-to-people contacts. All these are important soft-power issues related to conflict

---

23. Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Trump or Biden: Three Ways to Make Europe Matter in the Middle East", cit.

prevention, that can have indirect albeit significant effects on the broader agenda of fostering dialogue, de-confliction and confidence building measures.

3. Stepping back from the brink: EU pathways for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the Middle East

Preserving EU influence across geopolitical conflict lines, while not ignoring the ticking geoeconomic timebomb brewing in many states of the region, represent the twin challenges facing the EU in its proverbial "southern neighbourhood". Acknowledging that instability in the region impacts Europe in a far more direct manner than the United States, China or even Russia, complacency with the unsustainable status quo is not an option. More courageous and proactive engagements are needed, starting in those areas where the EU holds most leverage and has greatest interests and capabilities to act. All in all, what is proposed here as a pathway to harness the European Union's potential to promote collective security and multilateral engagement in the Middle East by fostering dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building is to increase the dialogue and coordination between the EEAS, the other EU foreign policy institutions and individual member states. To bridge gaps, divergences and forms of competition in interests and instruments, both among the member states and between the EU institutions and the member states, two avenues should be explored. First, creating and strengthening ad hoc, permanent working groups (some of which are already in existence) composed of representatives of the EU institutions, and members of the policy-planning units and foreign ministries of the member states. Second, facilitating the establishment of lead groups of key member states working in close cooperation with the EEAS.

The former would provide much-needed arenas to discuss and define collective EU priorities and goals while remaining mindful of specific national interests; to decide upon instruments

vis-à-vis specific dossiers and pressure points to be deployed in the short, medium and long term; and to identify possible divisions of labour among member states in different contexts. In a nutshell, these working groups would represent a way to strengthen EU coordination, cohesion and coherence in preparation for concrete action to foster dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building measures on a limited number of dossiers and individual pressure points in the Middle East. The latter – acting in close coordination with the working groups – would be responsible for undertaking concrete actions. Having a thematic or a strict geographical focus (i.e., not encompassing the entire Middle East) and composed of a limited number of member states (ideally one or two of the key member states joined by other smaller ones) with significant exposure to and key interests and capabilities when it comes to each specific issue area/context, these lead groups would meet and act in the form of small, flexible coalitions that would thus become prominent vehicles to channel foreign and security policy proposals and actions for the region. This approach would build on the past successes of small European coalitions, particularly those on the Iran nuclear deal.[24]

The combination of the working groups and the lead groups would provide the EU with the necessary platforms to discuss, articulate and implement its own approach to conflicts and crisis management, while strengthening the cohesion and coherence of the Union in foreign and security policy in general. A number of key specific actions addressing each of the three regional cleavages identified above are presented here. They stem from the need to have clear and actionable policies to put on the table, discuss, detail and concretely implement while bearing in mind the strategic opportunities and limitations offered by the external conditions. Taking local approaches and solutions to regional problems into account is another important precondition to conduct this exercise.

---

24. Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran's Nuclear Crisis. Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making*, Cham, Springer-Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Starting with the Arab-Turkish cleavage, this is arguably the one in which the European Union enjoys the most potential for leverage. There are a number of dimensions to a potential EU role in seeking to mitigate the growing Arab-Turkish rivalry. In Libya, the European Union should continue its support for the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and oppose and call-out continued violations of the UN arms embargo by multiple states, also expanding its aerial component to the renewed EU efforts to enforce the embargo via the Irini naval mission in the Mediterranean while adding a land-based monitoring capability. Avoiding singling out Turkey over other destabilising actors, including Egypt, the UAE, Qatar and Russia as well as France, would be conducive to these efforts. Meanwhile, the European Union should make an effort to promote dialogue between Tel Aviv and Ankara as well as Cairo and Ankara, as EU leverage on these countries is by far greater than the influence it enjoys over the UAE and Saudi Arabia. One way to do so is the – no doubt difficult – integration of Turkey into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum headquartered in Cairo. Any easing of tension between Turkey and Israel or Turkey and Egypt, building on the fact that Ankara represents less of a threat for Tel Aviv or Cairo compared to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, would have significant benefits on multiple dossiers, from Libya to the Eastern Mediterranean gas tensions and even Palestine.

At the bilateral level, the European Union and Turkey have a deep, albeit no doubt difficult and at times contentious relationship. Aside from Libya, the Union can utilise Turkey's undeniable interest in the modernisation of the EU–Turkey customs union as well as the long-delayed visa liberalisation process to gain some leverage over Ankara. These are domains, also including the migration issue, that play on mutual interests, as opposed to disagreements, and could be used as springboards to build new avenues for dialogue and discussion on other fronts. To support these objectives, the European Union should counsel its member states, Greece, France and Cyprus in particular, to limit public displays of political or military support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turning to the Arab-Israeli regional cleavage, specific attention should be paid to the dire humanitarian and socio-economic crisis in the Gaza Strip and to the political stalemate in the West Bank, domains where the European Union could provide badly needed assistance and political-diplomatic support, pushing for a resumption of long-delayed elections in the Palestinian territories while supporting nascent reconciliation attempts between the Palestinian groups Fatah and Hamas. There is also much that the Union could do to deter continued Israeli settlement construction, home demolition and other illegal activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, policies that would go some way towards demonstrating a real European commitment to the two-state formula and international law, beyond its rhetorical embrace of these notions. Europe should moreover publicly clarify its stance vis-à-vis Trump's vision for "peace and prosperity" and the recent normalisation deals with Israel as well as publish its own diplomatic parameters, while pushing for and embracing any changes made by the incoming Biden administration by highlighting the inconsistencies between the current US approaches and the significant security risks they imply for Israel in the absence of progress on the Palestinian front.

The Arab-Israeli fault line also has a significant impact on Syria and Lebanon, which are technically still in a state of war with Israel. The European Union should direct more efforts to assist Lebanese civil society, dialoguing with local organisations and trustworthy individuals to channel technical assistance and economic support while not directly benefitting the corrupt governing elites or indirectly strengthening the sectarian system on which they rely. European actors, especially but not only France, retain important interests and leverage in Lebanon and this should be utilised to avoid a deepening of the socio-political and economic crisis in the country. In this respect, the European Union should promote a degree of "daylight" between US and European approaches on Lebanon (as well as on Palestine), particularly when it comes to the US use of primary and secondary sanctions that are causing further socio-economic hardship in the country and efforts to pressure

Europe into a blanket sanctioning of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation.

Turning to the harrowing ten-year conflict in Syria, EU policy and leverage is substantially restricted. Yet, principled policy stances – including via public diplomacy – that seek to prioritise the human security of ordinary Syrians and ensure access for aid and UN humanitarian missions are the bare minimum. To step up the EU's engagement on Syria, creative diplomacy in the name of "principled pragmatism" should be pursued along two paths. On the one hand, in synergy with the United Nations, the EU should increase its dialogue and engagement with the external actors involved in the country (Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States and Israel) with a view to containing their spoiling effects in the case of Syria itself and in light of the deepening Arab-Turkish animosities.[25] On the other, a process of ad hoc and limited engagement with Syrian institutions for humanitarian and development assistance should be pursued by the EU and a specific lead group in line with the policy of mutual engagement with those other Arab states that are slowly returning to Damascus, with a view to advancing the discussion about Syria and its future.[26]

Finally, lying more distant from the EU geopolitically and where it enjoys less leverage, the Gulf region is the epicentre of the Saudi-Iranian fault line. To address this regional cleavage, more concerted action and focus towards Yemen and Iraq, building on the EU's involvement in negotiating the Stockholm Agreement in the former and the presence of various European

---

25. David Hearst, "Exclusive: Mohammed bin Zayed Pushed Assad to Break Idlib Ceasefire", in *Middle East Eye*, 8 April 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/166021; Andrew England, Laura Pitel and Simeon Kerr, "UAE vs Turkey", cit.

26. The UAE, Oman and Bahrain have all announced the re-opening or re-appointment of ambassadors to Damascus, in a clear signal of a growing effort to limit Iranian and Turkish influence in the country. See, "Oman Reinstates Ambassador to Syria after Years-Long Hiatus", in *AP News*, 5 October 2020, https://apnews.com/article/embassies-dubai-united-arab-emirates-oman-middle-east-35335060326a924ecd46f0df4373935b.

military contingents in the latter, would be required to retain leverage and influence over these two pressure points. Yemen clearly represents a key hotspot of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but has recently also become an object of increased Turkish–Arab Gulf rivalry.[27] Working closely with the United Nations, Europe should strengthen the action of the existing lead group composed of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (E4) as well build on the recent prisoner exchanges between the warring factions to advance dialogue and mitigate the country's humanitarian catastrophe.[28] Speaking to the Houthis would be important in this domain, as would a clearly communicated limit on the sale of European weaponry to the Saudi-led coalition.

Iraq represents another key pressure point of the evolving Saudi rivalry with Iran. The European Union is well placed to enhance its proactive engagements with Iraq across multiple sectors in an effort to mitigate a further erosion of public services, rebuild public trust in the government and institutions and mitigate new outbreaks of inter-communal violence and geopolitical meddling. Given the United States' increasingly uncertain presence in the country,[29] a decision will soon need to be made in European capitals as to what future policies to pursue in this country. A complete withdrawal of European forces still deployed to Iraq carries particular risks, not only in terms of a possible revival of activities by the Islamic State (ISIS), but also in light of the increased likelihood of more widespread conflict

---

27. "Turkey Sets Sights on Yemen, Raising Regional Security Concerns", in *The Arab Weekly*, 5 September 2020, https://thearabweekly.com/node/48831; Ali Bakeer, "How the UAE Is Using Fake News to Manufacture a Turkish Role in Yemen", in *TRT World*, 9 July 2020, http://trt.world/13j3.

28. See for instance, Raiman Al-Hamdani and Helen Lackner, "Talking to the Houthis: How Europeans Can Promote Peace in Yemen", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 14 October 2020, https://ecfr.eu/publication/talking_to_the_houthis_how_europeans_can_promote_peace_in_yemen.

29. See, Robert Burns and Zeke Miller, "US Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from Iraq and Afghanistan", in *AP News*, 10 September 2020, https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-islamic-state-group-donald-trump-iraq-a6d9550ea12d041436dda09f30873f55; Louisa Loveluck, Missy Ryan and John Hudson, "U.S. Tells Iraq It's Planning to Pull Out of Baghdad Embassy", in *The Washington Post*, 28 September 2020, https://wapo.st/3i8rPT1.

given the continued efforts by Iran and Arab neighbours, as well as Turkey, to compete in pressuring Iraqi authorities. Continued and visible European military and diplomatic presence in Iraq – not only in Baghdad but also in some key provinces – clearly carries risks, but if communicated correctly and pursued in synergy with broader policies that aim to enhance dialogue with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – as well as the incoming Biden administration – could also help deter provocative actions and help Iraqi authorities increase manoeuvrability to foster good governance in the country. Ultimately, increased European efforts in Iraq should not only be directed at the traditional security sector and the central authorities, but should also assist local stakeholders and civil society groups, particularly in improving basic services and the reconstruction of badly damaged cities – like Mosul – which have been starved for funds and support since the defeat of ISIS.

4. Conclusion

2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the 1995 Barcelona Process that sought to promote closer cooperation and dialogue among European and southern Mediterranean countries and usher in a new era of reform and security for the MENA. Looking back at the past 25 years, it is clear that much still needs to be done to attain this goal and that renewed efforts by Europe towards the region are badly needed. As the European Union grapples with the painful and uncertain adjustment process triggered by the unprecedented socio-economic impact of COVID-19, the space for a common foreign and security policy seems modest due to persistent disagreements among member states, budgetary constraints and the revival of inward-looking tendencies due to the pandemic.

However, calls for a more prominent geopolitical role in foreign policy and for gaining strategic autonomy from the United States have become the new mantras in Brussels. Nowhere have these calls been heard more loudly than in the Middle East, a region that is tied to Europe because of proximity, his-

tory, people-to-people connections and mobility, trade patterns and security issues. The Middle East stands at the core of Europe's own present and future challenges, thus making it impossible for EU and its member states to turn their heads and ignore the crises and conflicts besetting this space at Europe's immediate doorstep.

Indeed, the Middle East facing Europe today is completely different compared to 1995 when the Barcelona Process was launched in the wake of the 1991 Madrid Conference seeking to develop closer ties and cooperation between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. While commendable, these efforts were gradually overcome by events in the region – particularly the exacerbation of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict and other crises – and ultimately failed to develop concrete avenues for regional integration and/or a resolution of outstanding tensions and rivalries.

Significantly, the Barcelona Process was developed at a time when optimism was running high in the region and when US and European influence were at their climax. The failure of such efforts serves as a reminder that external influence and leverage alone are not sufficient to engender peace and stability in the region, requiring the active buy-in and support of regional and local actors themselves. This in turn would require them to compromise on their interests in order to accommodate inclusive understandings with opposing states and axis, a dynamic that has been rendered difficult due to the deep power asymmetries across the region and the active support and backing that certain regional states enjoy from the United States, which diminishes their propensity for compromise, particularly if this would require them to diminish their reliance on the US security umbrella.[30]

---

30. See for instance, Paul R. Pillar et al., "A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination", in *Quincy Papers*, No. 2 (July 2020), https://quincyinst.org/?p=2924; also see, Trita Parsi, "Pax Americana vs. Inclusive Security in the Middle East", in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|30 (November 2020), https://www.iai.it/en/node/12327.

The US presence in the region seems to be retrenching and old as well as new patterns of external balancing and alliances across the Middle East are emerging in its wake, contributing to a deeply volatile and uncertain geopolitical environment. As argued above, the region is currently experiencing the effects of at least three geopolitical ruptures (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the Arab-Turkish cleavage) that manifest in specific pressure points, namely the manifold conflicts and tensions raging in the Middle East as broken down in three hot spots (the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Near East). On top of this, or better largely as a result of the state of competition and conflict experienced by most state and non-state actors in the region, the Middle East suffers from the accumulation of multiple crises, of different nature and spanning both the geopolitical and geoeconomic domains, which represent a ticking bomb. Worsening economic indicators, social cleavages and conflicts, fragile environments, heightened militarisation and the restoration of authoritarian governance are all factors that make the situation in the Middle East deeply dysfunctional and unstable.

Against this backdrop, the European Union cannot afford to remain idle and observe other international and regional actors increase the fragmentation of the region or attempt to forge new security mechanisms according to their own principles and interests. The Union needs to remain engaged with the Middle East and to do so it needs to carry out a thorough revision of its modes of action towards the region. In other words, it needs alternative pathways to conduct its policy amidst external and internal challenges.

The European Union's ultimate objective would be to navigate the current troubled Middle Eastern waters by offering its contribution in terms of fostering a more conducive environment for dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the region instead of opting for a "grand bargain" approach in the form of a security architecture, which could only represent a long-term and gradual process. The set of policies to be undertaken would range from directing more efforts and assis-

tance to Lebanese civil society in dialoguing with government entities to carry out the necessary reforms with the ultimate goal of overcoming the country's deeply corrupt sectarian system; to remaining steadfast in Europe's support for Palestinian self-determination and rights; to launching a gradual process of ad hoc and limited engagement with Syrian institutions and entities for humanitarian and development assistance; to strengthening EU commitment to freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, helping to balance the perception of Europe being biased towards Iran out of its continued support for the Iran nuclear deal; to maintaining European focus and visibility on Iraq at a time when this country is dangerously slipping from the international radar; and to favouring de-confliction and dialogue between Tel Aviv and Ankara and Cairo and Ankara respectively as a way to foster dialogue, de-escalation and confidence building in the wake of the Arab-Turkish regional cleavage.

To accomplish all this, two preliminary steps should however be taken: first, clearly articulate common EU interests as a means to avoid the cacophony of standpoints and positions by individual member states that diminish EU effectiveness and leverage; and second, to make good use of the existing instruments in a way that is mindful of the European Union's key principles and values with a view to substantiating the call for principled pragmatism. Greater cohesion and coherence are two necessary ingredients if the European Union wants to provide its contribution to a more peaceful, prosperous and stable Middle East.

10
COUNTERING ZERO-SUM RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: INSIGHTS FROM THE EXPERT SURVEY

FLAVIA FUSCO

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is recognised as one of the most strategic and volatile regions in the world. Yet, the area that stretches from Morocco in the west to Iran and Afghanistan in the east and from Turkey in the north until Yemen and Oman at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula is also the least integrated region on the planet. This may not hold true for people, culture and the arts, but it does for trade and commerce and is particularly pronounced in the security field as the MENA region has historically suffered from deep internal fractures that have prevented the establishment of cooperative regional frameworks similar to those born in other regions of the world.

Such fragmentation has persisted even though MENA states shared and continue to share common concerns, ranging from energy, food and environmental security to socio-economic growth, terrorism and external interventions. Repeated attempts to foster some form of a regional security architecture in the Middle East, starting in the 1950s and the early Cold War and stretching well into present days, have ended in failure. The reasons are diverse, ranging from the legacy of foreign intervention and unresolved regional conflicts to hegemonic ambitions and deep-seated intra-elite rivalries. A combination of these trends has prevented the emergence of formal structures of collective security cooperation or genuine multilateral approaches to common challenges.[1] Yet, recent developments

---

1. See for instance: Joost Hiltermann, *Tackling Intersecting Conflicts in the MENA Region*, speech at the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Bar-

in the region, and particularly the resurgent tensions between the US and Iran as well as the emerging rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar on the other, have renewed international focus on the need to develop agreed mechanisms for dialogue and de-escalation among regional and extra-regional actors involved in the Middle East, especially in the strategically vital region of the Gulf.

In light of the growing interest and efforts to develop some form of de-escalation mechanism for the region, the Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Brussels-based Foundation for Progressive European Studies, with support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, launched a one-year research and outreach project to investigate different threat perceptions, perspectives and interests of key regional and extra-regional actors in the MENA as a first step towards discussing more concrete mechanisms for de-escalation and confidence-building measures in the region. Connected to the research dimension of the project, project coordinators launched an expert survey targeting European, US, Russian, Middle Eastern and Chinese experts and practitioners to collect insights and recommendations on key themes associated with a potential new security architecture for the region.

The results of the survey, which ran from 22 February to 30 April 2020 and included 34 responses, are reported below. The survey questionnaire totalled 20 questions, grouped into three sections: "General priorities, threat perceptions and recent developments"; "Towards a collective security framework in the Middle East?"; "Future priorities and challenges". In selecting experts for the survey, prioritisation was given to exposure and knowledge – both practical and theoretical – over the num-

---

celona, January 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13024. Also see Anthony H. Cordesman, "Stability in the Middle East: The Range of Short and Long-Term Causes", in *CSIS Reports*, 22 March 2018, https://www.csis.org/node/45887.

ber of respondents. Organisers were mindful of gender and geographical representation and an effort was made to collect viewpoints and insights from a broad variety of countries, expert practitioners, academic and think-tank researchers as well as officials from international organisations and the private sector.

1. Framing instability: A multidimensional concept entangled in a zero-sum logic

The first section of the questionnaire – "General priorities, threat perceptions and recent developments" – tackled issues related to regional insecurity, the main actors involved in the area and the recent dynamics which are shaping the regional (dis)order. A total of seven questions were provided in this section, including five in which respondents were asked to rank three or more responses out of a pre-existing list and two open-answer questions, where experts were free to draft their own text responses.

The survey began with a general question aimed at setting the stage for the remaining questionnaire and topic of investigation. Experts were asked to outline the major features of the post-2011 regional order in the Middle East, highlighting its key strengths and weaknesses. While the Middle East is indeed recognised as one of the most penetrated and volatile regions in the world, a clear consensus about what actually is meant by *instability* does not exist.[2] While "instability" was among the terms most frequently used by respondents to describe the post-2011 regional order (Figure 1), the diversity of understandings about the drivers for this instability as well as the way this is impacting the regional order demonstrates the fluidity and multidimensional nature of this concept.

---

2.   Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2019.

**Figure 1 | Word cloud: What are the major features
of the post-2011 regional order in the Middle East? What are its major
strengths and weaknesses? (Brief description, max 150 words)**

Turkey Egypt order regional powers Syria Gulf power security states KSA UAE Iran **instability** conflicts civil war Saudi Arabia Iraq rise regional order Israel international

Below are a number of extracts from the responses provided. One respondent noted how one key question is "whether there is still a regional order in 2020", while a second outlined how "the region is order-less. There is no hegemon and no combination of states that can establish order. It is a region in search of an order, hence [the main feature is] instability". Other key terms used to describe the post-2011 Middle East included "fragmentation", "competition" and "political polarisation", while "corruption" and "authoritarianism" were terms deployed to describe the internal weaknesses of states and a feature tied to the "rise (and fall) of political Islam" in the post-2013 period. Resurgent civil society movements – particularly in countries that have recently experienced a revival of street protests such as Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq – were highlighted by some as a source of strength for the region.

Further reoccurring themes included a shift in the balance of power from the traditional "core Arab states" (Egypt, Syria, Iraq) to the non-Arab periphery, particularly Turkey, Iran and Israel, but also including other states on the Arabian Peninsula, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The relative retrenchment of the United States from the Middle East also figured as a reoccurring theme, tied to the rise of other actors, including both regional and extra-regional powers, most notably Russia.

Overall, when it comes to conceptualisations of stability and instability, identifying a strict casual mechanism between

drivers and outcomes is somewhat problematic, since what is seen by some as a source of turbulence, may be described by others as a mere symptom of deeper challenges. This is particularly true for the Middle East, where complex and interconnected regional, international and local drivers have all contributed across history to the present trends of state weakness, regional volatility and zero-sum rivalry among regional and extra-regional actors. Much therefore depends on where one begins the explanatory analysis that seeks to untie the security knot in the region, tracing underlying trends back in time from the era of colonialism to the Cold War and beyond.

Against this backdrop, the second question sought to gauge the different perspectives on key drivers of instability across the Middle East. Respondents were asked to rank the top four drivers of instability out of a list of nine possible choices (Figure 2). Results demonstrate that while instability is a generally recognised term, disagreements persist among the experts regarding the relative weight of different drivers for this instability.

Figure 2 | What are the main drivers of instability in the post-2011 Middle East? (Rank four in order of importance)
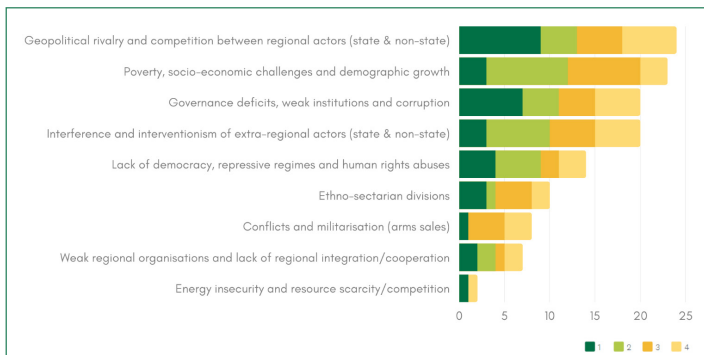
A majority of respondents selected regional rivalries and competition among state and non-state actors as the single most important driver for regional instability, receiving a relative majority of preferences equal to 26.47 per cent (Table 1). In aggregate terms, more than 70 per cent of interviewees selected this category as among the four most destabilising drivers, followed by poverty, socio-economic challenges and demographic growth (67.64 per cent) and governance deficits, weak institutions and corruption (58.81 per cent).

Foreign interventionism figures as the fourth most destabilising driver in aggregate terms (58.80 per cent) with a percentage that comes very close to that of governance deficits, weak institutions and corruption. A look at the disaggregated data, however, demonstrates that more respondents ranked foreign interventionism as the second most destabilising driver overall (20.58 per cent), while governance deficits, weak institutions and corruption was ranked second by only 11.71 per cent of respondents, but first by a significant portion of 20.59 per cent. The lack of democracy, repressive regimes and human rights abuses received 41.16 per cent of the preferences among the top four drivers, while issues related to conflicts and militarisation secured less than 25 per cent. Finally, the least selected driver relates to energy insecurity, resource scarcity and competition, which only received two preferences (5.88 per cent) and thus seems to provoke fewer concerns among interviewed experts.

These insights suggest that instability is a structural element of today's Middle East, affecting both the regional and domestic layers and being shaped by dynamics that are both internal and external to states in the region. It is worth noting that along with the more traditional geopolitical concerns, the second and third most disruptive drivers are aspects related to so-called soft security. Indeed, poverty-related issues were selected as the second and third most important drivers of instability by 26.47 and 23.53 per cent of respondents respectively. This places so-called soft security issues at a higher level of importance compared to other drivers such as con-

flicts and ethno-sectarian divisions. One possible explanation is that conflict and ethno-sectarian divisions are generally interpreted as symptoms rather than drivers for regional instability.

Table 1 | What are the main drivers of instability in the post-2011 Middle East? (Rank four in order of importance)

|	1	2	3	4	Aggregate total
Geopolitical rivalry and competition between regional actors (state & non-state)	26.47	11.76	14.70	17.65	70.58
Poverty, socio-economic challenges and demographic growth	8.82	26.47	23.53	8.82	67.64
Governance deficits, weak institutions and corruption	20.59	11.76	11.76	14.70	58.81
Interference and interventionism of extra-regional actors (state & non-state)	8.82	20.58	14.70	14.70	58.80
Lack of democracy, repressive regimes and human rights abuses	11.76	14.70	5.88	8.82	41.16
Ethno-sectarian divisions	8.82	2.94	11.76	5.88	29.40
Conflicts and militarisation (arms sales)	2.94	0.00	11.76	8.82	23.52
Weak regional organisations and lack of regional integration/cooperation	5.88	5.88	2.94	5.88	20.58
Energy insecurity and resource scarcity/competition	2.94	0.00	0.00	2.94	5.88

Note: Absolute percentages figured in this and following tables may include small inaccuracies due to some unanswered questions or errors in the compilation of the questionnaire by certain respondents. These represent a small margin of error but do not compromise the overall results, particularly in terms of the overall percentages of aggregated data figured in the far-right hand column of this and subsequent tables.

What is also interesting, and perhaps counterintuitive, is that in a context of clearly shared challenges at the regional level, only 20.58 per cent of interviewees selected the weakness of regional organisations and the lack of regional cooperation as among the top four instability drivers in the region. This could be explained by the generally low level of trust in existing regional organisations, both within the region and beyond, given that these have repeatedly failed to translate agreed principles into action or shift regional relations from a zero-sum logic to a more cooperative plane.

The above considerations point to a growing awareness about the need for more comprehensive approaches to understand the drivers of Middle Eastern instability, beginning also from a broader re-conceptualisation of the terms "security" and "insecurity". Moving closer to more encompassing notions of *human* security, as opposed to state-centric approaches that tend to prioritise stability and regime survival, could represent one avenue to pursue. As demonstrated above, the instability hurdle touches on a huge variety of delicate issues belonging to both hard and soft security, demanding multidimensional approaches that are capable of addressing both the *internal* and *external* drivers of instability, with regard to both the region and specific states therein.

Beyond what causes instability in the Middle East, it is also worth addressing who shapes it. Subsequent questions thus asked respondents to focus on specific actors and alliances that may be promoting regional instability. A first question asked experts to choose among four main regional cleavages – the Iran vs. Saudi/UAE rivalry; the Saudi/UAE/Egyptian rivalry with Turkey and Qatar; Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict; and Kurdish issue(s) – and rank these according to their destabilising impact on the region (Figure 3). This was followed by a second question asking respondents to rank individual state and non-state actors according to their contribution to such trends of regional instability.

Figure 3 | Which regional cleavage has the most destabilising impact on the Middle East and why? (Rank in order of importance)
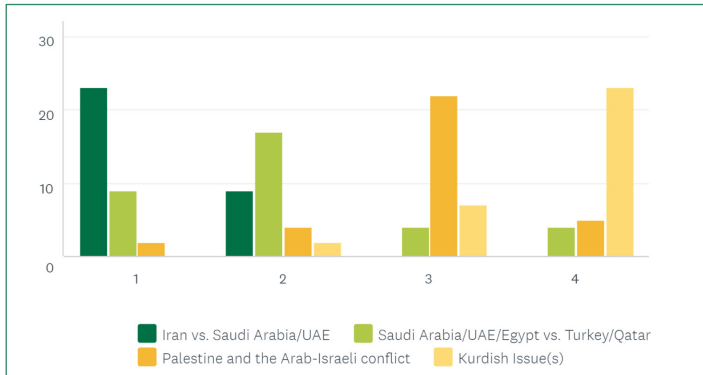

Clearly, the destabilising impact of each cleavage has changed over time, but when asked about present-day realities, an overwhelming majority (67.65 per cent) agreed that the Iran-Saudi geopolitical rift represents the most pressing contemporary rupture. This was followed by the growing rivalry between Arab Gulf states on the one hand and Turkey and Qatar on the other, a rupture that emerged in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings and is today evidently at play in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as in Syria and Palestine and in the Arabian Peninsula regarding the blockading of Qatar by its neighbours. This second rupture received 50 per cent of the preferences as the second most destabilising cleavage. Significantly, while the Iran-Saudi rivalry remained solidly in the lead, this second fault line was not that far behind, with 26.47 per cent of respondents also ranking it in first place. Finally, Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict, the oldest and most traditional of Middle Eastern cleavages, was ranked third by 64.70 per cent of respondents, followed by the Kurdish issue(s) with 67.65 per cent (Table 2).

Table 2 | Which regional cleavage has the most destabilising impact on the Middle East and why? (Rank in order of importance)

	1	2	3	4
Iran vs. Saudi Arabia/UAE	67.65	26.47	0.00	0.00
Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt vs. Turkey/Qatar	26.47	50.00	11.76	11.76
Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict	5.88	11.76	64.70	14.71
Kurdish issue(s)	0.00	5.88	20.58	67.65

Moving to the role of specific state and non-state actors in contributing to the present destabilisation of the region (Figure 4), responses are generally consistent with those outlined above. Indeed, in absolute terms, a large majority of respondents outlined Saudi Arabia and Iran as the first and second most destabilising actors in the Middle East (67.64 and 61.67 per cent respectively), charging them with primary responsibility for regional volatility and confirming what one interviewee referred to as a "clear shift of the regional security centre of gravity towards the Gulf". Following Saudi Arabia and Iran in absolute terms, are Al Qaeda and ISIS (which figure in third place with

Figure 4 | Which actor has most contributed to the destabilisation of the Middle East? (Rank four in order of importance)
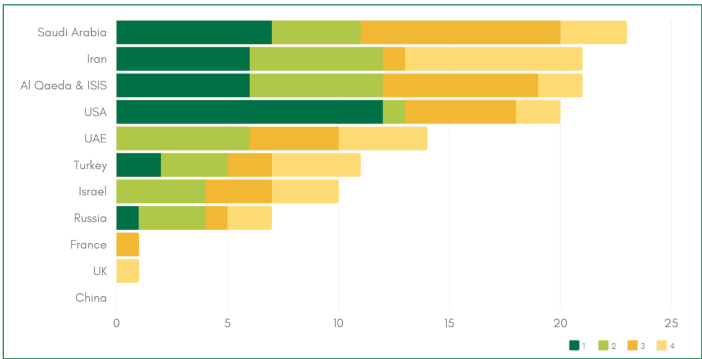
the same 61.67 per cent score as Iran), the United States (58.82 per cent) and the UAE (41.17 per cent).

While in absolute terms the United States figured in fourth place, a glance at the disaggregated data shows a clear majority (35.29 per cent) ranking the US as the single most destabilising actor in the region (Table 3). This placed the US well above Saudi Arabia (20.59 per cent) as well as Iran (17.65 per cent) and the non-state actors Al Qaeda and ISIS (17.65 per cent) as the first most destabilising actor. The non-Arab states of Turkey and Israel, notwithstanding their activism and assertive policies, are in aggregate terms considered respectively the least and penultimate most disruptive regional actors in the Middle East, with Turkey receiving 32.34 per cent of preferences overall and Israel 29.40 per cent. In terms of disaggregated data, only a small percentage (5.88 per cent) listed Turkey as the single most destabilising actor in the region (and 8.82 per cent as the second), while for Israel zero respondents identified it in first place, followed by 11.76 per cent in second place and 8.82 per cent respectively for third and fourth place.

Table 3 | Which actor has most contributed to the destabilisation of the Middle East? (Rank four in order of importance)

	1	2	3	4	Aggregate total
Saudi Arabia	20.59	11.76	26.47	8.82	67.64
Iran	17.65	17.65	2.94	23.53	61.77
Al Qaeda & ISIS	17.65	17.65	20.59	5.88	61.77
US	35.29	2.94	14.71	5.88	58.82
UAE	0.00	17.65	11.76	11.76	41.17
Turkey	5.88	8.82	5.88	11.76	32.34
Israel	0.00	11.76	8.82	8.82	29.40
Russia	2.94	8.82	2.94	5.88	20.58
France	0.00	0.00	2.94	0.00	2.94
UK	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.94	2.94
China	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

With the significant exception of the US, other extra-regional powers received far fewer preferences, with Russia receiving only 20.58 per cent of preferences overall, while France and the UK are considered destabilising by a meagre 2.94 per cent of respondents. China, meanwhile, did not garner a single preference, reflecting its still limited engagements across the Middle East, particularly in the political and security domains.

Building on the above, subsequent questions moved to focus on the role, capabilities and interests of China and Russia in the Middle East. Regarding the resurgence of Russian activism in the MENA, those questioned see it as tied to Moscow's geopolitical aspirations both in the region and further afield. In the words of one interviewed expert, Russia sees the Middle East "as an opportunity arena" to boost its credentials as a reliable global power, presenting itself as an indispensable mediator in regional disputes and conflicts. Russian engagements seem to be a matter of "power and prestige" based on a "well-pondered cost-benefit calculus", noted a second expert. Survey participants agreed on the security, political and economic (including energy) nature of Russian interests in the region. One expert stressed the strategic importance of securing access to the Mediterranean (which, amongst other things, has driven Moscow's involvement in Syria and perhaps Libya). From a Russian perspective, the Middle East also provides good opportunities to expand Russian business ties and investments, while a number of other experts also stressed Moscow's interest in counter-terrorism and the relevance that Middle Eastern developments have for domestic stability, particularly among Russia's Muslim communities. Below are a number of sample replies collected by the survey:

> Russia aims to restore *its status of global and regional power*, open a new front with NATO and the West in the Mediterranean, *be part of the energy game, test and sell weapons*. [...] *Russia's interests intersect between geopolitics and economic goals*, with the former (Syria) taking priority over the latter (financing). Russia also uses the Middle East as a lever to gain international standing in diplomacy, and has been incrementally transforming the MENA region into a theatre of confrontation with the West. [...] This is complemented

by hard security interests in the field of *counter-terrorism, and opposition against Muslim Brotherhood-type politics*, both relevant on the domestic level. [...] Russia wants to regain some *status as a great power, secure its (maritime) southern flank*, and try and maintain contact with a region that poses an internal threat.

While Russia tends to be framed as a purely geopolitical actor seeking to project power and influence across the region and beyond, the nature of Chinese engagement is generally considered in economic and energy terms. Such claims were not shared by all participants, however. While there is a clear consensus that China is presently limiting its engagement to commercial and investment opportunities and is likely to continue to do so in the short and medium term, in the long run there was some debate as to whether China will gradually shift toward a more "political approach". Below is a sample response provided by one interview expert:

As for China, it is mostly driven by *concrete needs* related to its *energy security* and the possibility to *control trade routes and strategic passages* such as in the Horn of Africa to implement its development strategy. For the moment this strategy is mostly geared towards domestic stability and development but is also starting to branch out with important regional and global ramifications in terms of China's perception in the region as a partner that is *able to foster stability and security and not just collecting economic gains*.

According to one expert, China's "increasing economic interests and footprint in the region will ultimately force it to engage militarily in order to safeguard those interests if nothing else", while others find it unlikely that China would become a security provider in the region. In this context, experts consider China's presence in strategic areas such as Djibouti as not necessarily part of a broader political or military strategy in the Middle East but mostly related to its economic interests and balanced approach vis-à-vis the region.

When asked to comment on the statement "China's economically driven approach toward the region is conducive to new security arrangements among regional actors" (Figure 5), only a minimum percentage (6.06 per cent) of experts had a clear

stance, strongly agreeing and/or strongly disagreeing with the claim. A significant percentage (21.21 per cent) expressed neutrality and almost the same percentages were scored by the "agree" and "disagree" options, with 36.36 and 30.30 per cent respectively.

**Figure 5 | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?**
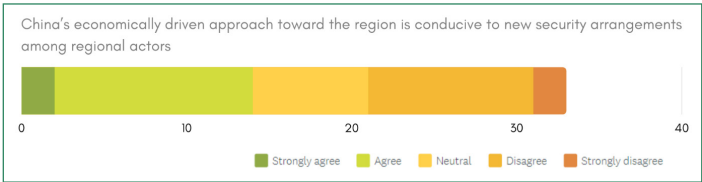
The diverse standpoints on the effects of China's economic engagement reflect different readings of broader Chinese interests and aspirations in the region in the longer term. Below is a further example of a written response provided by interviewed experts to the question of what defines Chinese interests in the Middle East:

> China has advanced its geo-economic position by bringing major regional countries on board of its ambitious One Belt One Road initiative, and yet Beijing attempts to *remain involved as little as possible in local political disputes*, having a limited appetite for challenging the US-led security architecture or playing a significant political role.

To better contextualise the rising role of other, non-US powers in the region, it is also necessary to address a broader macro trend related to the relative retrenchment of the US from the region. While Washington remains by far the most influential external power in the Middle East, increasing debates about a diminishing US resolve are important and have significant ramifications for the Middle East. In this context, two final questions were directed at gauging the viewpoints, expectations and concerns of interviewed experts on this growing trend of a relative US retrenchment from the Middle East.

A first question sought to gauge various perceptions on the issue, enquiring whether they believe the United States is in fact retrenching or not and if so, what driver can explain this declining US resolve in the Middle East. For this, respondents were asked to rank three drivers in order of importance (Figure 6).

**Figure 6 | Do you believe the US is retrenching
from the region? If so, what in your opinion is driving this retrenchment?
(Rank three in order of importance)**
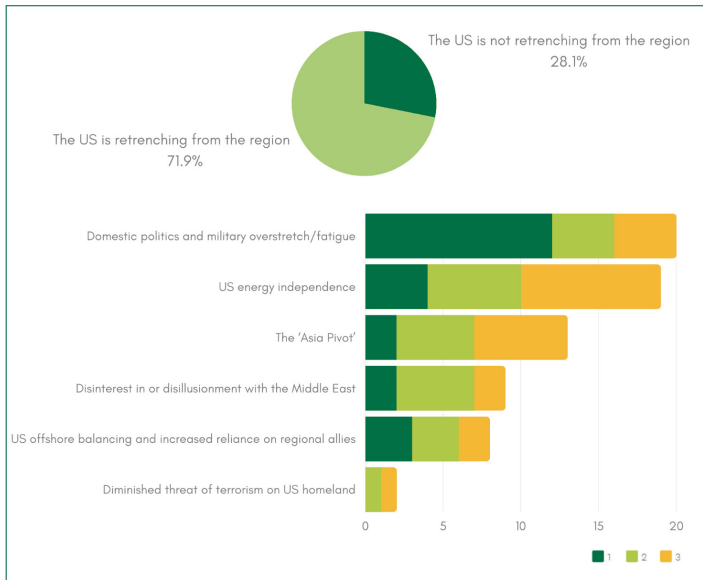
While there is not unanimous consent on the topic of US retrenchment, the vast majority (71.9 per cent) believed this to be the case. Moving into the rationale for such retrenchment, half of the respondents (50 per cent) cited domestic politics and military fatigue as the first most important factor, while a large majority (83.32 per cent) selected this option as among the three most relevant drivers in aggregate terms (Table 4).

US energy independence came in second in aggregate terms (79.16 per cent), but with a majority of respondents ranking it as the third most relevant driver (37.50 per cent), 25 per cent as second and only a meagre 16.66 per cent ranking it in first place.

The third most relevant driver for US retrenchment is the so-called Asia Pivot, receiving 54.16 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms, even though only 8.33 per cent see it as the first driver and 20.83 per cent as the second. The fact that a hypothetically diminished threat of terrorism on the US homeland figures as the least important driver (only accounting for 8.20 per cent in aggregate terms and with no expert listing it as their first choice) may be interpreted as a sign of the relatively secondary importance this threat has played in US policy towards the Middle East.

Table 4 | Do you believe the US is retrenching from the region? If so, what in your opinion is driving this retrenchment? (Rank three in order of importance)

	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Domestic politics and military overstretch/fatigue	50.00	16.66	16.66	83.32
US energy independence	16.66	25.00	37.50	79.16
The "Asia Pivot"	8.33	20.83	25.00	54.16
Disinterest in or disillusionment with the Middle East	8.33	20.83	8.33	37.49
US offshore balancing and increased reliance on regional allies	12.50	12.50	8.33	33.33
Diminished threat of terrorism on US homeland	0.00	4.10	4.10	8.20

A subsequent question moved to address the impact of the US's relative retrenchment on the Middle East, with experts asked to choose and rank three major consequences out of a pre-ordained list of eight different options (Figure 7).

Figure 7 | How has the US's diminished resolve in the region affected the post-2011 Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)
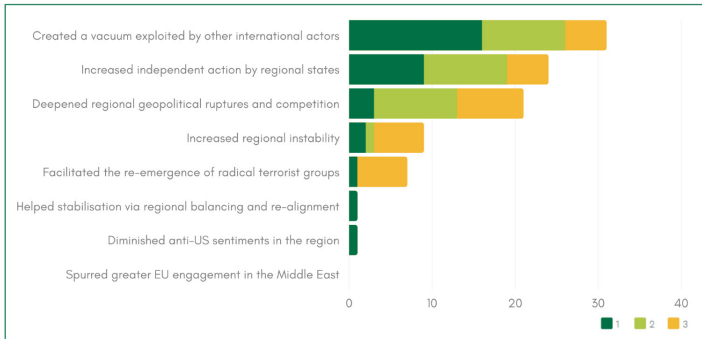
An overwhelming majority (91.18 per cent) of respondents pointed to the vacuum of power in the region caused by the US's retrenchment as the most visible impact in aggregate terms, while just under half of the experts (47.06 per cent) selected this as the first most important consequence (Table 5). A second key impact of the US's relative retrenchment has been the increased propensity of regional actors to pursue independent and proactive policies in the region, with 70.59 per cent of respondents selecting this option in aggregate terms and 26.47 per cent as the first most consequential impact, followed by 29.41 per cent as the second.

Increased action by regional states has not produced a more cooperative or stable region, however. Rather, such activism is reproducing old logics of zero-sum competition and rivalry, thus contributing to the region's overall instability and disorder. Indeed, 61.76 per cent of respondents highlighted how a third key consequence of the US's retrenchment is the deepening of regional geopolitical rifts in aggregate terms, while a further 26.47 per cent noted that it has increased regional instability. Yet, looking at the disaggregated data shows that 29.41 per cent of respondents listed geopolitical rifts as the second most relevant impact of the US's retrenchment, while

17.65 per cent selected increased instability as the third most relevant outcome. This places regional instability at the same level as the re-emergence of radical terrorist groups as the third most relevant outcome in disaggregated terms (compared to a total aggregate ranking for this option which stood at 20.59 per cent).

Finally, a small minority of respondents see the US's disengagement as having a positive impact on the region: only 2.94 per cent argued that it has helped stabilise the region, while another 2.94 per cent noted that it has helped heal anti-US sentiments across the Middle East.

Table 5 | How has the US's diminished resolve in the region affected the post-2011 Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)

	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Created a vacuum exploited by other international actors	47.06	29.41	14.71	91.18
Increased independent action by regional states	26.47	29.41	14.71	70.59
Deepened regional geopolitical ruptures and competition	8.82	29.41	23.53	61.76
Increased regional instability	5.88	2.94	17.65	26.47
Facilitated the re-emergence of radical terrorist groups	2.94	0.00	17.65	20.59
Helped stabilisation via regional balancing and re-alignment	2.94	0.00	0.00	2.94
Diminished anti-US sentiments in the region	2.94	0.00	0.00	2.94
Spurred greater EU engagement in the Middle East	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

From the previous analysis of responses related to Russian and Chinese interests and postures in the region it seems that the two global powers have largely benefitted from this US retrenchment, exploiting vacuums and the ensuing power void.

Yet, the European Union stands out as the great absentee in these considerations, a sort of elephant in the room when it comes to the Middle East. As eloquently pointed out by one expert in the context of a written reply to the question on Russian and Chinese posture in the Middle East: "The *Europeans found themselves struggling to take stock of these changes and largely irrelevant* in the dynamics of their southern, enlarged, neighbourhood".

It is worth noting that none of the interviewees argued that the US's diminished resolve in the region has spurred a greater EU engagement in the Middle East, perhaps due to the "internal divisions" which prevent the EU from speaking and acting with one voice in the region and beyond, along with "decades of reliance on the US in the region", as one respondent noted. This stands out as a sad paradox since, as one expert noted, "no other global actor beyond Europe has a vested interest in containing competitive multipolarity in the MENA region". Clearly, instability in the Middle East poses a direct challenge to EU interests and policies, and yet Europe has largely been absent from the responses provided by interviewed experts, notwithstanding the fact that the EU is perhaps the one extra-regional actor that is best placed to argue for cooperative and multilateral approaches to regional disputes, given both its particular history and institutional makeup and its vicinity and knowledge of regional dynamics.

2. Collective security in the Middle East: Can the past inform the present?

The second section of the questionnaire – "Towards a collective security framework in the Middle East?" – focussed on past initiatives for collective security in the region. Experts were asked to outline their perspectives on why such initiatives failed, and then consider the strengths and weaknesses of more recent proposals for security cooperation and de-escalation in the region.

Against this backdrop, a first question sought to gauge their viewpoints on the major obstacles for the emergence of security frameworks in the region, asking respondents to rank three obstacles in order of importance out of a pre-ordained list of seven options (Figure 8).

Figure 8 | What, in your opinion, are the primary obstacles to the emergence of a collective security framework in the Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)
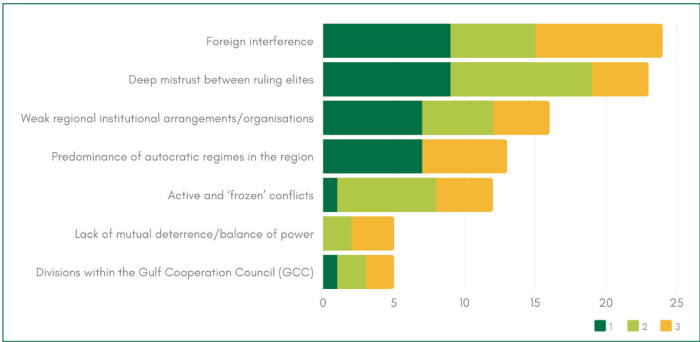
Foreign interference and the deep mistrust between ruling elites topped the list, securing equal percentages (26.47 per cent) as the first most relevant obstacles to security cooperation in the region, with an aggregate total across all rankings equal to 70.59 and 67.64 per cent respectively (Table 6). This means that while foreign interference and intra-elite mistrust were considered as the first most relevant obstacle by the same number of respondents, a higher number (29.41 per cent) selected elite mistrust as the second most relevant obstacle compared to foreign interference (17.65 per cent), which however received an equal number of preferences (26.47 per cent) as both the first and third most relevant obstacle overall, thus accounting for its higher aggregate score.

Weak regional institutional arrangements were also seen as problematic, with an aggregate total equalling 47.06 per cent

and a sizable 20.59 per cent of respondents selecting it as the very first obstacle. This score equalled that received by the predominance of autocratic regimes (20.59 per cent as first obstacle overall), but lower percentages for the second and third ranking led this option to receive an aggregate score of 38.24 per cent, placing it in fourth place overall, behind the category of weak regional institutional arrangements.

Although the Gulf is widely believed to be the most volatile sub-region in the Middle East, the intra-GCC rift does not figure as a primary impediment according to interviewed experts, receiving an aggregate score of 14.70 per cent, the same overall percentage secured by issues related to the lack of mutual deterrence and weak balance of power in the region. This places these categories well below that of frozen conflicts, which received an aggregate score of 35.29 per cent. From the experts' standpoint, therefore, heavy responsibilities regarding the inability to address the volatile security environment through a cooperative response lay both inside and outside the region, with international powers and regional governments having negative effects on such efforts.

Table 6 | What, in your opinion, are the primary obstacles to the emergence of a collective security framework in the Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)

	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Foreign interference	26.47	17.65	26.47	70.59
Deep mistrust between ruling elites	26.47	29.41	11.76	67.64
Weak regional institutional arrangements/organisations	20.59	14.71	11.76	47.06
Predominance of autocratic regimes in the region	20.59	0.00	17.65	38.24
Active and "frozen" conflicts	2.94	20.59	11.76	35.29
Lack of mutual deterrence/balance of power	0.00	5.88	8.82	14.70
Divisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	2.94	5.88	5.88	14.70

To better contextualise experts' viewpoints, it is worth cross-referencing the answers above with a number of subsequent questions, which provide interesting insights and complementary information on the perspectives expressed.

With regard to the category of foreign interference, a subsequent question asked experts to qualify their agreement or disagreement with a statement relating to the role played by foreign troops in the Middle East (Figure 9). While foreign interference was overwhelmingly identified as the major obstacle by over 70 per cent of the respondents in the preceding question, when it came to analysing the presence of foreign troops in the Middle East significant percentages (29.31 per cent) either disagreed or held a neutral position regarding their role in preventing such mechanisms for security cooperation, compared to 26.47 per cent who agreed and only 8.82 per cent who strongly agreed with the statement.

**Figure 9 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statement?**
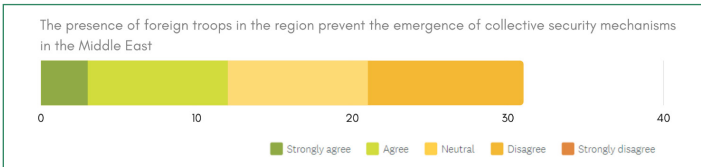
Turning to look at sub-regional frameworks such as the intra-GCC crisis, which in the preceding question received the least preferences regarding its relevance as an obstacle to security cooperation in the region, a follow-up question demonstrates that it is still considered important. When asked if the intra-GCC dispute and the isolation of Qatar by its Arab Gulf neighbours prevent the emergence of collective security arrangements, a sizable majority was in agreement, either strongly (8.82 per cent) or agreed (50 per cent), compared to 20.59 per cent who disagreed and 17.65 per cent who held a neutral position, while no one selected the option of strongly disagreeing with the statement (Figure 10).

**Figure 10 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statement?**

The intra-GCC crisis and the isolation of Qatar prevent the emergence of collective security arrangements in the region

| 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 |

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
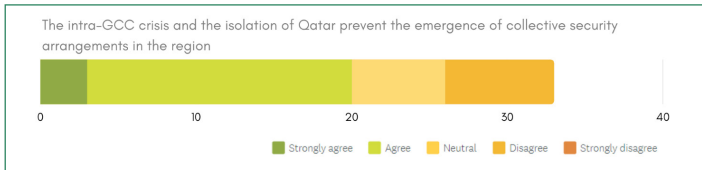
While there tends to be broad agreement regarding the reasons for past failures of security cooperation efforts in the region, current proposals and initiatives based on multilateral frameworks and confidence-building measures are also highly divisive. In the subsequent set of questions, respondents were asked to focus on recent proposals, outlining the major strengths and weaknesses of parallel Russian, Iranian and US proposals for security networking in the region.

Beginning with the recent Russian Collective Security Concept for the Gulf, a majority of respondents agreed that the main problem lies not with the proposal's design, but rather with Russia itself. Even though only a minority of interviewees see Russia as a threat and a destabilising actor in the region, almost the totality of interviewed experts were sceptical about the viability of the Russian proposal, since Moscow tends to be considered a divisive actor lacking resources and credibility to carry out such an ambitious initiative. Below are a number of sample replies provided by the interviewed experts.

> I *don't find [the Russian proposal] credible*. Many regional actors see it as an attempt to marginalise the US – or an initiative that will further fuel US retrenchment. *Russia is not a truly trusted player* on either side of the Gulf. [...] Increasingly [Russia] is described an "*opportunistic player*". It is increasingly regarded in the region as a great player for *tactical engagement not strategic initiatives*.

Moving to the primary strengths and weaknesses of the Russian proposal, the key themes are summarised in the infographic below (Figure 11).

**Figure 11 | Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Gulf**
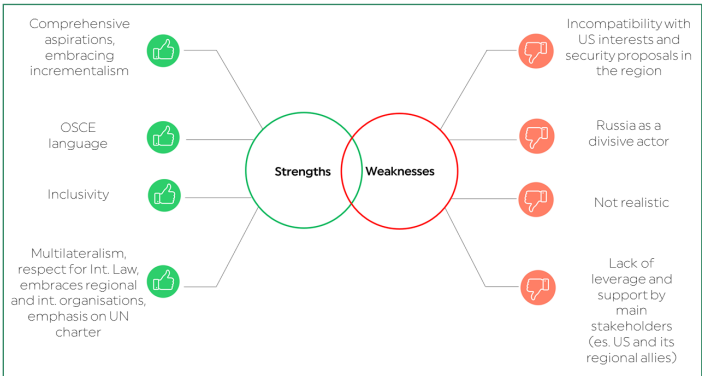
Beyond scepticism regarding Russia, there is clear apprecia-tion for elements of the proposal, including some of its key principles, particularly its inclusivity and the use of language similar to that which informed the Helsinki dialogues leading to the creation of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). At the same time, many have described the proposal as unrealistic, particularly given its perceived anti-US orientation and emphasis on the withdrawal of foreign troops from the region (according to the proposal this goal was con-ceived as a gradual, incremental process, however, not the starting point of the dialogue). Below are a number of sample responses provided by interviewed experts.

> The main strength of the Russian initiative is its *inclusivity, in con-trast with the Arab NATO* supported by the US that isolates Iran. Such a regional security framework is quite *unrealistic however giv-en the deep fractures between Arab Gulf countries and Iran*. Russia's call to set the region free of foreign military presence (mainly the US) is delusional. [...] *Russia is a divisive actor in the region*, Arab Gulf states are too dependent on the US to engage Russia on this concept. Idea of withdrawal of foreign troops (gradual) is also prob-lematic for Arab Gulf States and Israel. *Russia alone cannot promote such a vision*, it needs a broader multilateral framework, which is also called for by the Russian concept. [...] Russia's initiative is *for-*

mally a good approach to a broad and *inclusive* security agreement, focused on achieving stability, non-aggression and end of terrorism. *But Russia's credibility has been questioned due to its role in Syria and Putin's authoritarian drive.*

Some respondents see the Russian proposal as part of its broader "opportunistic" power politics in the region, an attempt to reaffirm its role as a global player. In this regard, when subsequently asked if "Russia lacks willingness and/or capabilities to promote a collective security initiative in the Middle East", 11.76 per cent of interviewees strongly agreed, a high 47.96 per cent agreed, 14.71 per cent expressed neutrality and only a relative minority of 23.53 per cent disagreed (Figure 12). Such results seem to confirm what the vast majority of experts outlined in the open-ended question about the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian Collective Security Concept.

**Figure 12 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statement?**

Russia lacks willingness and/or capabilities to promote a collective security initiative in the Middle East

| 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 |

Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree
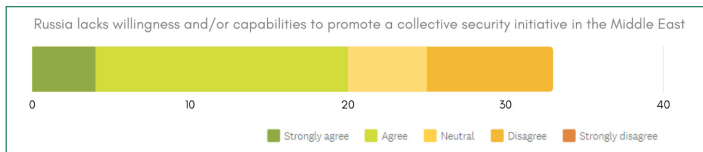
Having addressed the Russian security concept, the questionnaire moved to focus on the Iranian Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) initiative, officially announced during the 2019 UN General Assembly. While many stressed the importance of an endogenous and inclusive security proposal originating from *within* the region, there was broad agreement among experts regarding Iran's divisive role which undermines its ability to act as a credible convener for such an initiative. As outlined by one sample response: "Overall, it is a positive development since it promotes *flexibility* by being a subject-oriented initiative. Another strength is its *inclusiveness*. However, the initiative *is led by a non-neutral regional actor*, with specific interests, so it proves to be biased".

Iran's divisive reputation is generally identified as the most important shortcoming in the plan, given the deep mistrust and rivalry that exist between regional states bordering the Gulf and with the US. Meanwhile, other experts noted that like Russia, Iran is also seeking to promote its own interests via the HOPE initiative and these are not necessarily aligned with those of other regional and international actors. One expert noted how the initiative represents an effort by President Hassan Rouhani to consolidate domestic support, demonstrating that engagement with international actors can bring benefits to Iran, while at the regional and international levels, the proposal helps present Iran as a constructive player, seeking legitimisation of this status in and beyond the Gulf.

A key weakness of the proposal according to interviewed experts relates to its call for the withdrawal of foreign troops which, as said for the Russian proposal, is known to be a non-starter for many in the region. Indeed, a number of interviewed experts also noted how the inclusion of such objective may be framed as a tactical ploy aimed at encouraging a rejection by the Arab Gulf states, thus passing on the blame to Iran's Arab neighbours. As outlined in one sample reply:

> The Iranian initiative responds to a real need for *regional inclusive dialogue*, something that has been proposed also by GCC states. However, the degree of *distrust* between GCC and Iranian leaders is too high. For political reasons, it is impossible for GCC leaders to endorse the Iranian proposal, even if some of them have called for similar regional initiatives (and Iran knows that. It is launching the initiative *to present itself as a constructive player* and force Gulf countries to reject its proposal). The *countries do not share the same threat perceptions and definitions of terrorism*. Moreover, Iran makes no secret that *its ultimate goal is the withdrawal of the US, which GCC states will never let happen*.

The main strengths and weaknesses recorded by interviewed experts with regard to Iran's HOPE initiative are summarised in the infographic below (Figure 13).

The US is certainly recognised as the most influential actor in the region, but when asked to evaluate US-sponsored security

Figure 13 | Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE)
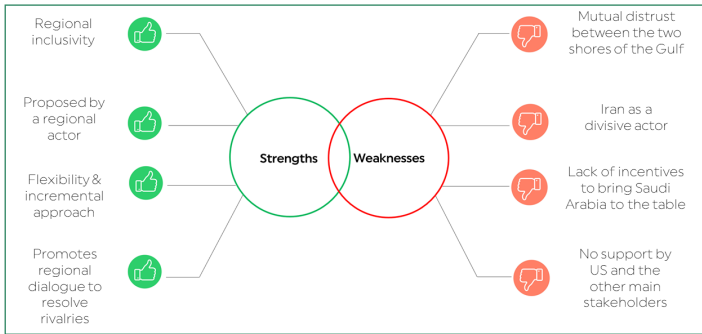
and alliance initiatives in the Middle East, very few saw them as appropriate frameworks to foster cooperative security. Two US proposals, the so-called "Arab NATO" initiative and the Middle East Treaty Organisation (METO), were addressed, with a majority of respondents outlining doubts as to the actual feasibility of such proposals and others outlining their perspective of them actually being counterproductive to stabilisation and de-escalation in the Middle East. The key features are summarised below (Figure 14).

**Figure 14 | US proposals: The Arab NATO
and the Middle East Treaty Organisation (METO)**
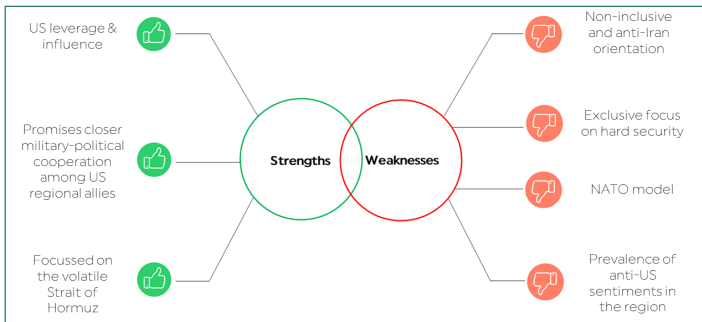
A key concern regarding these US proposals is their non-inclusive nature, with arrangements purposely excluding a number of key regional actors, most notably Iran. This, as one respondent put it, "would solidify geopolitical cleavages [in the region] and lead to permanent confrontation". The exclusion of Iran is indeed generally understood as a deal-breaker, with one expert noting that "no regional security framework can lead to stability without the inclusion of Iran". Such perspectives are confirmed by a subsequent question, in which over half of the respondents (52.94 per cent) noted that they "strongly agreed" with the statement that the "non-inclusion of Iran will undermine any regional security dialogue in the Middle East", followed by another sizable 32.35 per cent who agreed and only 8.82 per cent who disagreed (Figure 15).

**Figure 15 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statement?**
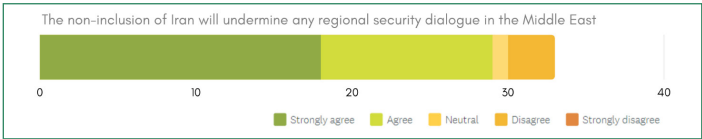
While respondents acknowledged the potential of these US proposals for improved military and political cooperation among key US allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel and Jordan, others highlighted how such initiatives could further the dangerous militarisation of the region. A number of others expressed concerns that a focus on hard security issues is insufficient, given the existence of multiple overlapping hard and soft security challenges, which often feed off one another creating vicious cycles of instability and mutual mistrust among state actors as well as between them and their populations. Below are a further selection of sample responses outlining the strengths and weaknesses of these US proposals.
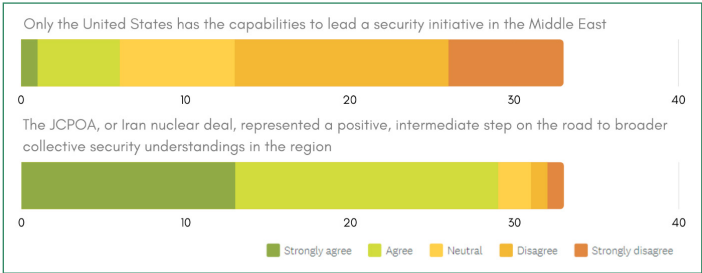
The *NATO model is not transferable to the region*. European allies are reluctant. A regional security regime must emerge from within, via initiatives by regional players and supported by international

powers. [...] A *locally negotiated, locally owned* regional security architecture may well require some new kind of regional institution. But it cannot *be one that is seen as a product of the US*. [...] The US-sponsored Arab NATO or MESA or METO has a number of limitations. The two major ones are: 1) the alliance is *thought to be about threat deterrence/confrontation* but the *members do not have common threat perceptions*; 2) it is interpreted by many regional players as a *way for the US to pass responsibilities for regional security to regional actors* – something many of them are not ready for.

Scepticism surrounding US-led proposals is matched by responses to a subsequent question, in which only 2.94 per cent of respondents strongly agreed with the claim that "only the United States has the capabilities to lead a security initiative in the Middle East". Indeed, a significant majority of 58.82 per cent either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this claim, with a further 20.59 per cent expressing neutrality (Figure 16). Only a tiny minority of interviewees, therefore, trust the US to lead a security dialogue in the region, a dynamic that is also explained by the Trump administration's distancing from multilateral principles, a trend that is best reflected in the US's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of respondents (85.29 per cent) considered the JCPOA a "positive, intermediate step on the road to broader collective security understandings in the region", agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, while only 5.88 and 2.94 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 16).
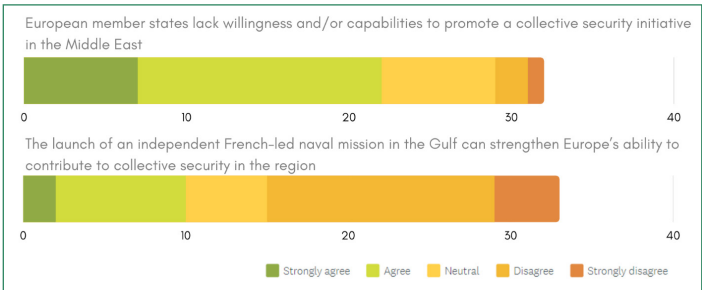
Moving to a further set of questions which more closely addressed the role of the European Union and its member states with regard to the Middle East, respondents were generally critical of the EU's role, or lack thereof, when it comes to regional security. One expert noted a "European unwillingness to get involved" and read it as a constitutive element of the present insecurity and instability in the region. Indeed, EU member states are believed to "lack willingness and/or capabilities" to promote collective security in the Middle East by almost 65 per cent of respondents overall, with 20.59 per cent strongly agreeing and 44.12 per cent agreeing with this statement (Figure 17).

**Figure 16 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statements?**

Only the United States has the capabilities to lead a security initiative in the Middle East

The JCPOA, or Iran nuclear deal, represented a positive, intermediate step on the road to broader collective security understandings in the region

Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

A further question on the EU targeted the recent announcement of a French-led naval mission in the Gulf headquartered at the French military base in the UAE and including the participation of eight EU member states. While separate from the US-led maritime security effort in the same area, the initiative remains controversial, and is not believed to make a significant contribution to the EU's ability to promote regional cooperation by over half of the respondents, with 41.18 per cent disagreeing and 11.76 per cent strongly disagreeing with the claim, against 30 per cent who collectively held more positive viewpoints (including only 5.88 per cent expressing strong agreement with the statement) and a further 14.71 per cent who held a neutral view (Figure 17).

**Figure 17 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statements?**

European member states lack willingness and/or capabilities to promote a collective security initiative in the Middle East

The launch of an independent French-led naval mission in the Gulf can strengthen Europe's ability to contribute to collective security in the region

Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Quite literally caught between the old and new powers of the day, the EU is struggling to find its geopolitical posture in the Middle East, a region in which Europe has traditionally aligned with the US, particularly when it comes to hard security and issues of war and peace. The US's relative retrenchment, combined with the resurgent role of Russia and a still distant but growing China, represent important variables for the EU's external action in the region, requiring careful analysis.

This general uncertainty is underlined by the fact that almost 65 per cent of the interviewees suggested deepening EU cooperation with Russia and China to facilitate the emergence of collective security mechanisms in the EU's southern neighbourhood, whereas at the same time a significant percentage (almost 53 per cent) also find closer coordination with the US as instrumental to this same objective (Figure 18). A closer look at the data, however, demonstrates a higher consensus on the topic of cooperation with Russia and China, with 17.67 and 47.6 per cent expressing their strong agreement and agreement with the statement. Only 14.71 per cent disagreed with this notion, and no single expert strongly disagreed with the benefits of cooperating more closely with Moscow and Beijing. Comparing this to the US, more experts expressed their opposition to continued cooperation with Washington, as 20.59 per cent of respondents disagreed with this notion and a further 5.88 per cent strongly disagreed (Figure 18).

As demonstrated by the above responses, all existing and proposed initiatives for collective security in the Middle East do not seem capable of addressing the many overlapping challenges facing the region. Each contains a number of interesting dimensions and should not therefore be completely discarded. However, the fact that the three major proposals for a new security framework have been advanced by divisive actors has dampened their respective applicability, particularly with regard to the buy-in and support from regional actors. Meanwhile, when an actor is generally recognised as less divisive and enjoys good credibility across regional cleavages, as is the case with the EU, the presence of a plan and the capabilities to promote one have tended to be lacking.

**Figure 18 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statements?**
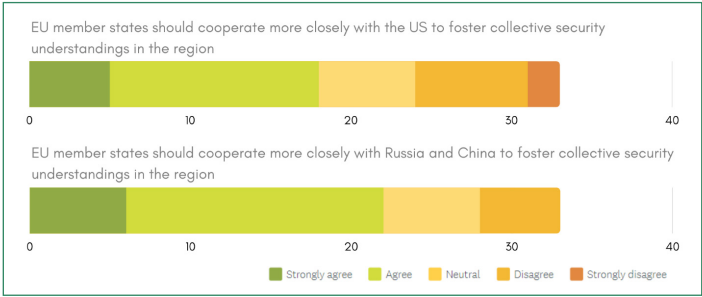
3. Future priorities: De-escalation, confidence-building measures and reconciliation

If it is clear that past efforts to foster a security architecture in the Middle East have failed and existing proposals lack the necessary buy-in and support, the final section of the question-naire – "Future priorities and challenges" – moved to assess po-tential intermediate steps which may prove beneficial for the emergence of a more conducive environment for such objec-tives, both in the region and internationally. In this context, in-terviewed experts were asked to reflect on various institutional models and principles which may inform such efforts aimed at de-escalating tensions and moving regional interactions onto a more cooperative plane.

A first question sought to gauge expert perspectives on fu-ture threats to regional stability in the medium term, asking respondents to rank three developments out of a pre-ordained list of eight options (Figure 19).

According to experts, inter-state regional conflicts represent the first and most consequential medium-term threat to re-gional stability, receiving almost 30 per cent of preferences

Figure 19 | What, in your opinion, are the primary threats to regional stability in the medium term? (Rank three in order of importance)
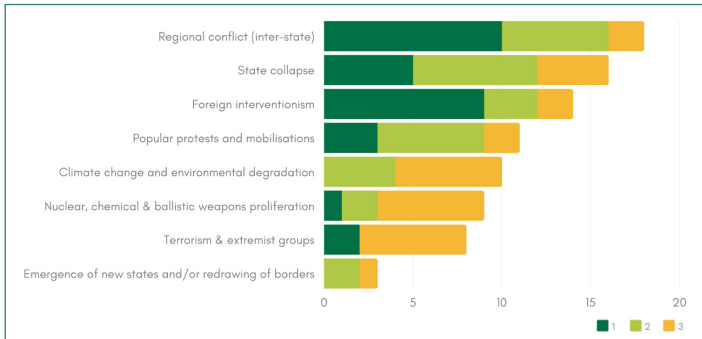
and an overall aggregate score of 52.94 per cent (Table 7). This specific concern is followed by the threat of state collapse (receiving 47 per cent of aggregate preferences) and foreign interventionism (41.17 per cent in aggregate terms). In disaggregated terms, state collapse was selected as the second individual threat by a significant 20.59 per cent, while foreign interventionism received only 5.88 per cent of preferences as the third threat, albeit also recording a sizable amount of preferences for the first threat, with 26.47 per cent of respondents placing this in first place, compared to 14.71 per cent for state collapse and 29.4 per cent for the outbreak of new intra-state regional conflicts.

The above data points to a relative consensus regarding the threat of regional inter-state conflict and state collapse as likely medium-term challenges for the region, but when it comes to the third most relevant threat, a greater disparity of opinions emerged. This is reflected by the sizable percentages received by a number of options: climate change and environmental degradation; nuclear, chemical and ballistic missile proliferation; and terrorism and extremist groups all received 17.65 per cent of preferences for the third most relevant threat, the same score received by a further category of popular protests and

Table 7 | What, in your opinion, are the primary threats to regional stability in the medium term? (Rank three in order of importance)

	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Regional conflict (inter-state)	29.41	17.65	5.88	52.94
State collapse	14.71	20.59	11.76	47.06
Foreign interventionism	26.47	8.82	5.88	41.17
Popular protests and mobilisations	8.82	17.65	5.88	32.35
Climate change and environmental degradation	0.00	11.76	17.65	29.41
Nuclear, chemical & ballistic weapons proliferation	2.94	5.88	17.65	26.47
Terrorism & extremist groups	5.88	0.00	17.65	23.53
Emergence of new states and/or redrawing of borders	0.00	5.88	2.94	8.82

mobilisations, which also received 17.65 per cent of preferences, but as the second most relevant medium-term threat overall. The relatively high percentage scored by popular protests and mobilisation (32.35 per cent in aggregate terms, placing it in fourth place overall), reflects the previous findings related to the importance of human or soft security indicators when discussing regional security and stability. This category was followed by climate change and environmental degradation (29.41 per cent in aggregate terms), nuclear, chemical & ballistic weapons proliferation (26.47 per cent) and terrorism & extremist groups (23.53 per cent). Interestingly, the emergence of new states and/or the redrawing of borders receive the least preferences by experts (8.82 per cent in aggregate terms).

Moving to the subsequent question, experts were asked to reflect on the key principles and models for a potential collective security framework, ranking three out of a list of eight possible options (Figure 20).

**Figure 20 | What principles should inform efforts
to foster a collective security framework in the Middle East?
(Rank three in order of importance)**
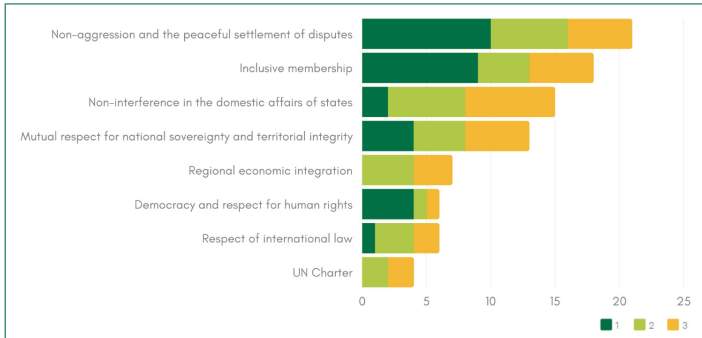
Non-aggression and peaceful settlement of disputes topped the ranking, receiving 61.77 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms, followed by inclusive membership (52.94 per cent) and non-interference in the domestic affairs of states (44.12 per cent). While in aggregate terms a clear ranking emerged, a look at the disaggregated data demonstrates a certain variety of opinions. Indeed, while non-aggression received 29.41 per cent of the preferences as the first key principle, other dimensions were not that far behind, as 26.47 per cent of respondents selected inclusive membership as the first principle overall, followed by 11.76 per cent for the categories of mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity and democracy and human rights (Table 8).

Moving to the second principle, results were rather evenly distributed, with the highest disaggregated percentages (17.64 per cent) given to both non-interference in the domestic affairs of states and non-aggression, followed by a list of other options, which all received 11.76 per cent. Indeed, the only categories that received much lower preferences as the second key principle overall were respect for international law (8.82 per cent), democracy and the respect of human rights (2.94 per cent)

Table 8 | What principles should inform efforts to foster a collective security framework in the Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)

	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Non-aggression and the peaceful settlement of disputes	29.41	17.65	14.71	61.77
Inclusive membership	26.47	11.76	14.71	52.94
Non-interference in the domestic affairs of states	5.88	17.65	20.59	44.12
Mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity	11.76	11.76	14.71	38.23
Regional economic integration	0.00	11.76	8.82	20.58
Democracy and respect for human rights	11.76	2.94	2.94	17.64
Respect of international law	2.94	8.82	5.88	17.64
UN Charter	0.00	5.88	5.88	11.76

and the UN Charter, which received 5.88 per cent but was also the principle to have received the least preferences, only securing 11.76 per cent in aggregate terms (Table 8).

Looking at middle-rank choices, mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity scored a relevant 38.23 per cent in aggregate terms, placing it fourth in the ranking, followed by regional economic integration (20.58 per cent), while democracy and respect for human rights and respect for international law both received 17.65 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms. Significantly, regional economic integration, which has represented an essential ingredient for cooperation in other regions of the world, tends to receive lower preferences in the Middle East, perhaps reflecting the long legacy of regional fragmentation and the continued prevalence of zero-sum competition among key regional actors, trends that have prevented genuine economic integration and are likely to continue to do so in the medium term.

Having tackled the underlying principles which may inform such efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and avoid a further descent into conflict and chaos, a subsequent question sought to gauge viewpoints on the best approach for such objectives. Experts were asked to express their preference for an incremental and sub-regional, or comprehensive and region-wide approach to fostering security cooperation and de-escalation in the Middle East. The results demonstrate that what may be desirable in abstract terms, often becomes unviable in practice, particularly given the great variety of multidimensional issues and challenges at play in the region. Indeed, both approaches have pros and cons, but while a comprehensive approach seems to be the most promising mechanism to address the root causes of regional instability, many also argued this to be the most difficult approach to put in practice. Conversely, as noted by a number of experts, incrementalism also tends to be a tried and tested approach, which has not produced lasting results in the past, leading some to argue that the time is ripe for a more comprehensive prism. Below are a number of sample responses:

> Progress *incrementally* as the amount of challenges is monstrous. Adopt variable-geometry formats and *start from those issues* and players that can *deliver something concrete to incentivise others to join*. Those *states that are less exposed* in terms of regional conflictuality, such as Oman, Kuwait and Jordan, *should take the lead*. Some EU member states, such as Italy, Spain, Germany and the Nordic countries, could play a *similar role by assisting regional players*. [...] The *step-by-step approach has been tested for decades with no results* as the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), for example, has shown incontrovertibly. Incrementalism does not work. [...] Collective security in the Middle East should aim for a *comprehensive approach* built on shared building blocks. *Incrementalism* could be embraced as *a starting point* but should be *limited to the medium term*.

The subsequent question moved to focus on a number of facilitating steps which may serve as trust- and confidence-building measures for regional de-escalation. Experts were asked to rank three specific domains of action out of eight options, with the answers demonstrating a rather diverse range of opinions (Figure 21).

Figure 21 | What, in your opinion, could represent positive confidence-building measures for regional de-escalation and cooperation? (Rank three in order of importance)
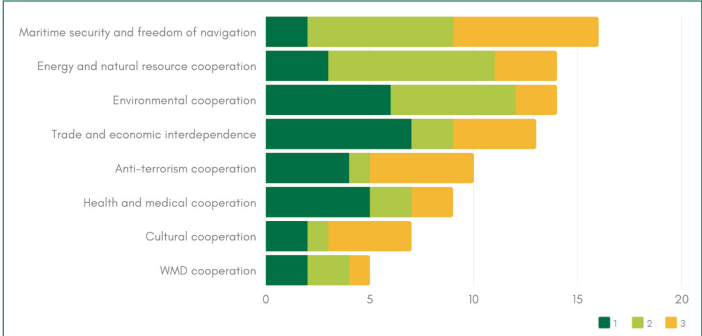
Maritime security, environmental cooperation and energy and natural resource cooperation figured as the three most select-ed options in aggregate terms, joined also by trade and eco-nomic interdependence, which secured 38.23 per cent of pref-erences in aggregate terms, placing this option in third place, with the same percentage as energy and natural resource co-operation (Table 9). Maritime security and freedom of naviga-tion issues, increasingly relevant for both the Strait of Hormuz and the Eastern Mediterranean, secured the highest aggregate score (47.06 per cent), but only received 5.88 per cent of pref-erences as the first most constructive measure, well behind the category of trade and economic interdependence, which re-ceived the highest score (20.59 per cent) as the first choice in disaggregate terms. Following economic interdependence, a relevant 17.65 per cent chose environmental issues as their first choice, perhaps expressing confidence in the less divisive na-ture of the issue, and 14.71 per cent selected health and medical cooperation, perhaps reflecting the contemporary relevance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While long representing a key concern at both the regional and international levels, anti-terror cooperation did not receive

Table 9 | What, in your opinion, could represent positive confidence-building measures for regional de-escalation and cooperation? (Rank three in order of importance)

|	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Maritime security and freedom of navigation	5.88	20.59	20.59	47.06
Environmental cooperation	17.65	17.65	5.88	41.18
Energy and natural resource cooperation	8.82	23.53	5.88	38.23
Trade and economic interdependence	20.59	5.88	11.76	38.23
Anti-terrorism cooperation	11.76	2.94	14.71	29.41
Health and medical cooperation	14.71	5.88	5.88	26.47
Cultural cooperation	5.88	2.94	11.76	20.58
WMD cooperation	5.88	5.88	2.94	14.70

high support as a potential tool for de-escalation, nonetheless receiving a sizable 29.41 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms, placing it ahead of the traditionally less controversial domain of cultural cooperation (20.58 per cent) but well below the other domains listed above. Finally, the delicate issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation received the least amount of preferences (14.70 per cent in aggregate terms) as a realm of potential cooperation, perhaps reflecting the general pessimism surrounding this domain in the wake of the US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and the deep divisions that persist across the region on this most consequential of hard security concerns.

However divisive, debate and discussion on potential avenues for WMD cooperation in the region deserve further scrutiny. A subsequent, open-answer question thus asked respondents to outline their viewpoints on existing proposals for such cooperation, specially touching on the themes of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) and Nuclear Weapons Free

Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. Similar to the incremental vs. comprehensive debate outlined above, respondents seemed to believe that while theoretically desirable, a WMDFZ in the Middle East appears rather unrealistic for the time being. A more granular analysis points to a preference for a NWFZ over a more encompassing WMDFZ, likely due to the sheer complexity of this broader goal. For a relevant number of respondents, however, neither a NWFZ nor a WMDFZ is realistic, due to Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity and the lack of incentives for other regional actors to limit their options.

A subsequent question, which also builds on previous ones, asked experts to provide their perspective on two statements outlined in the figure below (Figure 22).

**Figure 22 | How much do you agree or disagree
with the following statements?**
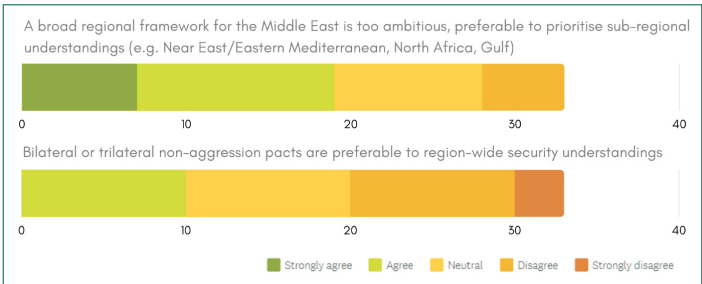
More than 55 per cent of interviewees held positive views[3] on the statement that a broad regional framework was too ambitious at the moment, preferring instead to focus on sub-regional understandings. While a significant 29.10 per cent outlined neutral opinions on the statement, perhaps indicating that both approaches deserve scrutiny, only 14.71 per cent disagreed with a sub-regional approach, with no experts strongly disagreeing.

3.   Among these, 20.59 per cent strongly agreed and a further 35.29 per cent agreed with the statement.

Results for the subsequent statement on bilateral or trilateral non-aggression pacts being preferable to region-wide security understandings, demonstrated some disparate opinions. Indeed, while bilateral or trilateral arrangements were seen as preferable by a significant 29.41 per cent of respondents who agreed with the statement, an equal percentage disagreed and a further 8.82 per cent strongly disagreed. While 29.10 per cent were neutral, no expert was in strong agreement with this statement, pointing to the fact that a slim majority of respondents would endorse region-wide security understandings over bilateral or trilateral agreements, again underlining the importance of the principles of inclusivity and multilateralism which emerged from the questions above.

Beyond the specific principles, approaches and the geographical remit of efforts to foster regional security cooperation, it is also important to examine existing regional mechanisms which may serve as models or inspiration for the Middle East. In this context, experts were asked to outline their preferences from a pre-ordained list of existing organisations on the basis of their relevance to addressing the Middle East's present security challenges (Figure 23).

Figure 23 | What organisation, if any, can provide a model or inspiration for collective security efforts in the Middle East?
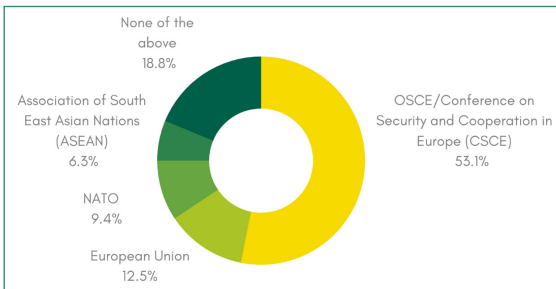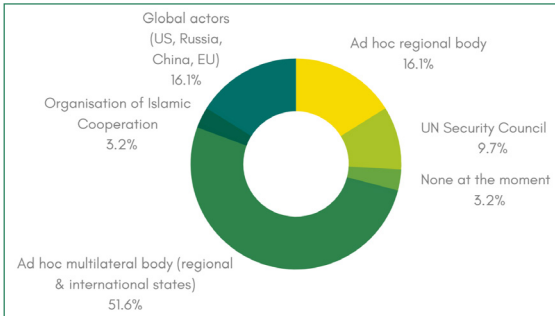

While regional peculiarities made more than 18.8 per cent of the experts consulted conclude that none fit the specific

needs of the Middle East, a large majority of 53.1 per cent was shown to appreciate the OSCE model, perhaps due to its embrace of a comprehensive definition of security and its specific historical legacy and evolution from the Conference on Security Cooperation in Europe to the OSCE. Confirming the general scepticism surrounding the idea of an Arab NATO, only 9.4 per cent of respondents see NATO as a viable model for the Middle East security cooperation, probably because of the purely military nature of such an alliance and its non-inclusive nature. Meanwhile, the experience of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while potentially interesting in certain domains, was generally thought to be hard to translate into the Middle Eastern setting, receiving only 6.3 per cent of preferences.

Turing to the European Union, long promoted as a key model for regional integration and peace building, it scored a meagre, but still important, 12.5 per cent of preferences, placing it well behind the OSCE but also well above all other selection options. This ranking is perhaps due to the significant lack of economic integration and cooperation in the Middle East, elements highlighted above, but which in the European experience proved instrumental for the successful birth of the European project.

The final question in this section moved from the existing models and potential sources of inspiration to a more concrete issue of what actor or organisation is best placed to ensure compliance and/or accountability for any potential agreement reached for the region (Figure 24). What clearly emerges is that old structures are not believed to be adequate for such a task; in fact, only 9.7 per cent of interviewees would rely on the UN and a lower 3.2 per cent on the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). More than 50 per cent consider an ad hoc multilateral body (composed of both regional and international states) as the best option, while an equal percentage of 16.1 per cent of respondents believed that an hoc regional body and/or global actors (such as the US, Russia, China and the EU) were best placed to play such roles.

Figure 24 | What actors and/or institutional mechanisms are best placed to ensure compliance and accountability with new collective security initiatives for the region?

Global actors (US, Russia, China, EU) 16.1%

Ad hoc regional body 16.1%

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 3.2%

UN Security Council 9.7%

None at the moment 3.2%

Ad hoc multilateral body (regional & international states) 51.6%

4. Conclusion: The way(s) forward

Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, a watershed moment that ushered in a short-lived period of optimism but subsequently unleashed further trends of instability and fragmentation, the Middle East has experienced a convoluted decade of transitions and still ongoing structural changes which have radically altered the regional outlook, increasing trends of conflict and zero-sum rivalry across the local, regional and international layers of analysis. Indeed, if instability represents one key term associated with the contemporary Middle East, uncertainty and fluidity are further important characteristics of the regional (dis)order, reflecting similar trends taking place at the broader international level as well.

Against the backdrop of a more fragmented, volatile and fluid regional system, it is hard to advance concrete proposals for security networking and de-escalation in the Middle East. Results of the expert survey point to a generally unanimous agreement on the need for dialogue and confidence-building measures, but no agreement emerged as to where to begin such efforts and how to make them effective and inclusive by

ensuring buy-in and support from regional actors themselves. Addressing the underlying drivers of instability, and not only their contemporary symptoms, represents a significant objective, but this too opens up a wide diversity of opinions and interpretations, making it hard to bridge gaps and find effective frameworks and principles to guide such efforts. The fluidity and uncertainty characterising the present regional (and international) system does not allow for single interpretations of these underlying drivers of instability. That is why it is necessary to progress gradually and explore different *ways* forward for security networking in the Middle East.

Amidst this uncertainty, a final question in the survey asked interviewed experts to reflect on potential "black swan" events, developments that are considered plausible but which have not yet materialised and would carry significant – positive or negative – implications for the regional outlook. What emerges from the responses is the prevalence of rather pessimistic predictions on the near future of the Middle East. Indeed, while most negative scenarios outlined by the experts are linked to already existing dynamics, originating from an exacerbation or even simple maintenance of current trends, most of the positive developments would require fundamental political, ideological or societal breakthroughs of a completely different level of ambition. This should serve as a stark warning as to the significant risks for future escalations in the region, again underscoring the urgent need for creative approaches to the region's many overlapping challenges. Below are a number of sample replies provided by interviewed experts when asked to reflect on positive or negative "black-swan" events in the region:

> Positive? A *meaningful political transition in Syria* and a *weakening of hardliners in Iran.* Both would create new opportunities for movement toward a regional security architecture. Negative? *State collapse in Lebanon and/or Jordan* as a result of economic, social, medical strains, or events that would *interrupt flows* of goods or energy *from the Gulf to major importers*. Both would challenge existing regional and global capacity to respond to sharp shocks and escalate regional tensions. […] An official *end to the JCPOA* would raise tensions and given the US position on its sanctions pol-

icy against Iran, this could happen at some point. An *agreement between the KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] and Iran* on spheres of influence would be helpful. This could start by finding agreements on *Yemen and Iraq*. [...] Positive: *end of US sanctions, return of US to JCPOA*. Negative: *Iran's expansion of nuclear programme* triggering a *military attack by Israel/US*.

Evident from the sample replies above is the weight of the JCPOA and the US's unilateral withdrawal in May 2018, a decision which has sparked renewed tensions and instabilities across the Middle East. While some debate persists as to the JCPOA's role as a framework or steppingstone capable of de-escalating regional tensions and animosities, the modalities of the US withdrawal, followed by Washington's embrace of sanctions vis-à-vis Tehran, have done little to improve the regional outlook, deepening regional fault lines and increasing the stakes of intra-regional competition and rivalry. Looking forward to the US elections in November 2020, it is also unlikely that a Democratic administration will be able to repair the damage and simply return to the JCPOA, indicating that further work and reflection will be needed to return US–Iran relations to a more stable plane, independently from the results of the upcoming elections in November.

While many experts focussed on the traditional hard security domains and in particular on the risks of a regional conflict in the Gulf, internal risks and human security concerns were also present. Thus, one interviewed scholar noted how a positive scenario would be a comprehensive reform of "the social contract", allowing states to "transcend the persistent crises of development, good governance and the rule of law", while contrasting this with a negative scenario that would simply rest on a "maintenance of these conditions" within multiple Middle Eastern states. The above demonstrates how the negative scenarios appear more likely and plausible. Indeed, the conditions for an escalation between the US and Iran, a definitive end of the JCPOA, the rise of extremism from sectarian tensions and the worsening of an already dire economic situation are trends that are already present across the region. Conversely, the more optimistic scenarios, such as a bottom-up renegotiation

of the social contract, a US return to the JCPOA or a sudden resolution of the ongoing geopolitical dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran are all eventualities that are harder to imagine, particularly in the short term.

Also important have been a number of reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Middle East. A number of interviewed experts who provided later responses to the questionnaire tackled this issue head-on, given that the pandemic can be considered something of a black-swan event, with significant repercussions on the region (and beyond). One expert noted that "on the negative side, the current sanitary emergency […] risks shifting the region towards increased authoritarianism and under-development" while a second underscored the fluidity and unpredictability of "the current COVID-19 crisis and the economic and social upheaval" it will cause across the region. If left unaddressed, the pandemic could "lead to state collapse in most MENA countries", while also providing authorities with an excuse to further limit freedoms and rights. However, on the more positive side of the spectrum, one expert did refer to hopes for a "birth of a democratic Arab state system", underlining how the recent trends of "social mobilisation witnessed in several MENA countries in 2019 and 2020" do provide a glimmer of hope for the future. While it is true that the pandemic has been used to stifle such popular mobilisations, another expert posited that the pandemic may also serve to awaken regional actors and authorities, forcing them to "realise that nobody is immune" from the virus and that "only cooperation" can hope to mitigate its effects.

In light of such a pessimistic outlook, and against the backdrop of further escalations in the Eastern Mediterranean and Gulf, the Middle Eastern region appears to be fast approaching a crossroads. This can either lead to further conflict and fragmentation or begin a gradual process that pushes the region back from the brink, opening new channels for dialogue and trust building which alone can hope to transform zero-sum tensions into more cooperative frameworks. Such efforts need to rest on solid buy-in and support from *within* the region, and

cannot be imposed from the outside, as has often been the case in the past. Inclusivity, pragmatism and a non-ideological approach to these efforts could be highlighted as important building blocks to foster a more conducive environment for regional security networking and cooperation, helping to establish mechanisms of cooperation that are both *of the Middle East* and *for the Middle East*.

A number of key principles and modalities that are believed to be essential to inform efforts to foster cooperation in the region are outlined below. These have been inferred from the present expert survey results, but are further combined with the findings of the overall research project as well as the work being conducted by other think tanks and research centres, including the International Crisis Group.[4] These guidelines have to do with the geographical remit of these efforts, the role of extra-regional actors and finally, the need to not overlook developments *within* states, and thus the importance of elevating human security to a central plane in any forward-looking efforts to foster de-escalation and cooperation in the region.

Inclusivity and local ownership

One of the main reasons for the failure of past attempts to promote security cooperation in the region is that these efforts have primarily been driven by extra-regional actors, lacking the buy-in and support of regional states and, more often than not, actually geared to exclude or contain certain states in the region, thus enhancing polarisation. Excluding certain actors while focussing on a concerted effort to solidify cooperation and alliance frameworks among more like-minded states, whether in the Arab Gulf via the GCC, or between Arab Gulf states and Israel for instance, has been pursued in the past. This may prove conducive in the short term and within specific *sections* of the region, but it will not result in a more sta-

---

4. International Crisis Group (ICG), "The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 212, 27 April 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832.

ble regional environment. Rather than creating a balance of power situation, such efforts will only deepen and fuel regional cleavages, increasing the stakes of zero-sum competition both among and within states. Inclusivity, therefore, accompanied also by a non-ideological approach to regional fault lines and disputes, are important ingredients for any successful effort to dampen regional tensions.

Extra-regional actors

One cannot ignore the vast influence and interests of key extra-regional actors in the Middle East. These actors have an important role in any effort to foster dialogue and security mechanisms for de-escalation, particularly in the preliminary phases and in advancing proposals and models that may prove conducive to such objectives. Building on the above need for inclusivity and local ownership, however, the role of extra-regional actors should be limited to providing support and acting as facilitators (and where necessary in providing accountability). So-called "outside-in" approaches hold limited chances of success, due to the depth of regional rivalries and the role that certain extra-regional actors have themselves played (and are still playing) in exacerbating these fault lines. Extra-regional actors, from the US to Russia, the European Union and even China, but also including other, potentially more neutral actors such as India, Pakistan and Japan, should therefore focus on providing advice, particularly in the identification of less controversial domains that may be used as steppingstones to more comprehensive security dialogues. An external contact group is seen favourably in this domain. Such a group can help provide assurances needed to convince regional states to engage in dialogue and serve as conveners and facilitators to explore creative means to bridge existing challenges without undermining regional ownership.

Hybrid approach

Premised on an understanding that incrementalism and comprehensiveness are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and acknowledging the limited nature of the former and the over-am-

bition of the latter, a hybrid approach that includes both comprehensive principles and a more limited, sub-regional territorial dimension could represent a means to *start small while aiming high*. One option could be that of starting with a less sensitive field, such as environmental cooperation, but engaging all the relevant actors in the region. Another could be to focus on guiding principles such as non-interference, mutual respect and the peaceful resolution of disputes that would be applied to the whole region, while prioritising more focussed sub-regional efforts, for instance in the Gulf and/or Eastern Mediterranean, the mitigation of which could provide impetus for more ambitious objectives.

Human security

Acknowledging that drivers of instability are present between but also and perhaps increasingly *within* states is an indispensable component for any effort to foster security cooperation in the Middle East. While by definition a security architecture is based on state-to-state frameworks and arrangements, ignoring the growing importance of socio-economic challenges and fraying social contracts may well end up undermining any hesitant prospect of intra-state dialogue and cooperation. Ensuring that mechanisms for dialogue and de-confliction also include a dimension of human security, itself a key component of any comprehensive approach to security and stability, will therefore be essential, helping to also develop a people-centric framework for the Middle East. This could include various dimensions and levels of ambition, from the economic, energy, environmental and food security domains to health cooperation and cultural diplomacy all the way to the more ambitious aspects of human rights and political representation. Prioritisation of less politicised domains, including health and cultural diplomacy for instance, could represent constructive avenues to dampen social pressures, while at the same time seeking to bridge the growing gaps between states and societies across the region.

***

The general principles outlined above require further development and analysis. By no means exhaustive, they are far from serving as an actual blueprint for action. Fostering security networking and regional cooperation is understood as a long-term, perhaps even *generational* goal fraught with significant obstacles and challenges. There are no quick-fix solutions and any effort to nudge regional actors towards new mechanisms of dialogue and de-confliction will require significant and sustained investments of political capital by a wide variety of actors with little assurance of success. Most importantly they will depend on the agreement and buy-in of regional states themselves, and in order for that to come about it will also be necessary to assess dynamics of dependence and alliance between these actors and their major extra-regional backers, not all of which are enthusiastic about embracing inclusive frameworks that require compromise and a reassessment of long-held assumptions applied to the Middle East.

Yet, the current status quo is clearly unsustainable. Coexisting with or working to preserve these realities will present similar risks and challenges, first and foremost for the European Union. Continued rivalry and fragmentation will further weaken the regional ecosystem, distract attention from mounting domestic and human security concerns within states and lead to a continued militarisation of the Middle East. This will only widen the gaps between states and societies across the region, thus increasing not only the risk of intra-state conflict and reciprocal meddling but also the potential for state collapse under mounting socio-economic pressure that will only become worse given the multidimensional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of these challenges, and the daunting reality that instability and conflict in the Middle East will impact European interests in a far more direct manner than other international actors, the time for proactive and courageous diplomacy is now, before the next crisis erupts, closing down avenues for dialogue and de-escalation. Acknowledging its limited capacities to alone provide direction and support for the

emergence of new security frameworks in the region, Europe should at the very least make sure that its policies retain a margin of equidistance, if not neutrality, between the various regional cleavages and fault lines, avoiding taking sides in the Middle East's many overlapping disputes. Focusing on human security and promoting multilateral frameworks for dialogue and de-escalation are part of the EU's DNA, and while present circumstances in the Middle East do not seem conducive to such efforts, the EU could seek to convene other international and extra-regional actors to begin discussing such principles and frameworks. Ultimately, the risks of complacency and in-action far outweigh those of proactive and creative engagement in the region.

This implies that Europe should at the very least react to and acknowledge the recent Russian and Iranian proposals for security networking in the Middle East, seeking to further develop these proposals with a European document that aims to bridge gaps while at the same time providing assurances to others who view such proposals as detrimental to their interests. Ultimately, one must promote an understanding that *inclusivity* and *compromise* are principles that may require certain sacrifices in the short term but will end up providing more comprehensive benefits and *security* (in both its hard and soft dimensions) to the whole region in the long run. Most importantly, such efforts are needed to allow states and societies to focus on new and fast-approaching threats that will impact all regional states independently from their alliance frameworks or security and defence capabilities. Climate change and environmental degradation, energy transitions, healthcare and pandemics, sustainable jobs and social contracts are the real threats brewing on the horizon when it comes to the Middle East. Only concerted and inclusive blueprints capable of overcoming old geopolitical rivalries and zero-sum logics stand a chance of providing some room to begin addressing these challenges before it is too late – for the Middle East, its inhabitants and neighbouring states and regions as well.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACRS	Arms Control and Regional Security
AKP	Justice and Development party
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CENTCOM	US Central Command
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
EEAS	European External Action Service
EMASOH	European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
G20	Group of Twenty
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GCC+2	GCC plus Egypt and Syria
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNA	Government of National Accord
HOPE	Hormuz Peace Endeavour
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IMCTC	Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition
IMSC	International Maritime Security Construct
INSTEX	Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/al-Sham
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LNA	Libyan National Army
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPP	Middle East Peace Process
MESA	Middle East Strategic Alliance
METO	Middle East Treaty Organisation
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NWFZ	Nuclear Weapons Free Zone
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PA	Palestinian Authority
PGSCO	Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organisation
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PMD	Possible Military Dimension
PSF	Peninsula Shield Force
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	UN Security Council
US	United States
USS	United States Ship
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WMDFZ	Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone
YPG	People's Protection Units

CONTRIBUTORS

KHALED ALMEZAINI
is Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations at Zayed University. He completed his Ph.D. in 2009 from the University of Exeter (UK). Prior to joining Zayed University, he taught in many different universities – including the University of Cambridge, the University of Exeter and the University of Edinburgh – in the UK. In addition, he taught at Qatar University and Sciences Po (Paris); he also worked as a researcher at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His teaching and research interests include politics and international relations with particular focus on the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular. In addition, he is interested in the politics of the Gulf, foreign policy, foreign aid and development in the Middle East.

ABDULLAH BIN KHALED AL-SAUD
is Assistant Professor of Security Studies and Head of the Combating Terrorism and Extremism Programme at the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences (NAUSS) in Riyadh. He is also an associate fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London (KCL), as well as the Center for Local Governance at Prince Sultan University (PSU) in Riyadh. He previously worked as Director of Research at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Riyadh and was a member of the

Steering Committee of the Think20 (T20) engagement group of the G20 Saudi Arabia. His research interests include security studies and international relations in general, with a focus on issues related to terrorism, radicalisation, political violence, armed non-state actors, and political Islamism. His work has been published in renowned academic journals in both English and Arabic, and he has participated in numerous conferences and seminars locally, regionally and internationally. He holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from King's College London, an MA in International Peace and Security from King's College London and a BA in Law from King Saud University in Riyadh.

MELIHA BENLI ALTUNIŞIK
is Professor in the Department of International Relations at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara. She is also a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. She was a Fulbright Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University in 1988–89 and received her Ph.D. in political science from Boston University in 1994. She has written on mainly international relations of the Middle East and Turkey's foreign policy. Some of her recent publications focus on cusp states, rentier state theory, regional powers, humanitarian diplomacy, soft power and social movements and international relations.

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR
is Secretary General of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), a Hungarian economist and former EU Commis-

sioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2010–14). After stepping down from the Commission, he became head of department of economic policy at Corvinus University (Budapest), Senior Fellow at Hertie School of Governance (Berlin) and a visiting professor at ULB (Brussels) as well as Sciences Po (Paris). He also became a member of various think tanks (EPC, RAND Europe, Friends of Europe) in an advisory capacity. Andor has authored, edited or co-edited a dozen books in Hungary, including on economic and political history, comparative economics and globalisation. Andor has also taught at Rutgers (State University of New Jersey) as Visiting Fulbright Professor (1997–98) and worked as an adviser for the World Bank on SAPRI (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative). He has worked as an adviser for the Budget Committee of the Hungarian Parliament (1998–99) and the Prime Minister's Office (2002–5). From 2005 to 2010, he was a Member of the Board of Directors of the EBRD (London), representing the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary and Slovakia. Andor was awarded Doctor Honoris Causa at Sofia University of National and World Economy and the Legion of Honour by the French President in 2014.

SILVIA COLOMBO

is Senior Fellow in the Mediterranean and Middle East programme at IAI. She is an expert on Middle Eastern politics and in this capacity she is working on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, transatlantic relations in the Mediterranean and domestic and regional politics in the Arab World. Among her research interests there are also the relations between the European Union and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Politics from the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (Florence Branch) and a Master's Degree in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

ANDREA DESSÌ

is Head of IAI's Italy's Foreign Policy Programme, Senior Fellow within IAI's Mediterranean and Middle East programme and Editorial Director of IAI's english-language series *IAI Commentaries*. Andrea is also a Non-Resident Scholar at the Strategic Studies Implementation and Research Centre, Başkent University (Ankara). He has worked extensively on US and European foreign policy towards the Middle East with a particular focus on the diplomatic and military history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, US policy towards Israel and Washington's alliance frameworks in the Middle East. His research interests include security studies, the geopolitics of the Middle East and the intersection between global and regional trends and developments. Andrea holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) with a thesis on the US–Israel relationship during the 1980s. He has worked with IAI since 2011 and has contributed to a number of EU-funded projects and research tasks (FP7 & H2020).

EHUD EIRAN

is Senior Lecturer (US Associate Professor) of International Relations, University of Haifa (on leave 2020–21). He is Visiting Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Stanford University, an affiliate of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford, as well as an Israel Institute Visiting Professor of Israel Studies, UC Berkeley. Previously, he held research appointments at Harvard Law School, Harvard's Kennedy School, and was a visiting lecturer in the Department of Political Science at MIT. Prior

to academia, Eiran held a number of positions in the Israeli civil service including as Assistant to the Prime Minister's Foreign Policy Advisor. He is the author of two books and some fifty scholarly articles, book chapters, and policy briefs. His research interests include spatial, technological and legal aspects of international conflict (mostly in the Arab-Israeli context), negotiation and conflict resolution, and maritime strategy.

FLAVIA FUSCO

is Junior Research Fellow within the Mediterranean and Middle East and Italian Foreign Policy programmes at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). She holds a Master's Degree in International Relations of the Middle East and North Africa from the University of Naples "L'Orientale" with a thesis concerning a critical analysis on decentralisation policies as peacebuilding and developmental tools in the Middle East, focusing on the case studies of Lebanon and Iraq.

JIN LIANGXIANG

is Senior Research Fellow at the Center for West Asian and African Studies and Institute for International Strategic Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). He is specialised in the Middle Eastern international relations and is particularly engaged in the field of Iran's foreign policy and domestic politics. He has also conducted some research on international relations on China's neighbouring areas. He has been a frequent visitor of numerous influential academic institutions and conferences. He was a visit-

ing fellow of the Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace (2002–03), Fredrich Ebert Stiftung New York Office (2006), the Baker Institute (2011) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2013). He has written more than fifty academic papers on Middle Eastern studies, most of which are about Iran. He is also a frequent writer in English for www.china.org,cn and China-US Focus.

JOSEPH A. KÉCHICHIAN

is Senior Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Riyadh. He held the post of Senior Writer with the Dubai-based Gulf News between January 1995 and August 2017, and served as the Honorary Consul of the Sultanate of Oman in Los Angeles between 2006 and 2011. Kéchichian received his doctorate in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia in 1985, where he also taught (1986–88), and assumed the assistant deanship in international studies (1988–89). Between 1990 and 1996, he laboured at the Santa Monica-based RAND Corporation as an associate political scientist, and was a lecturer at the University of California in Los Angeles. He has authored fifteen published books.


SAEED KHATIBZADEH

is currently Spokesman and President of the Center for Public and Media Diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He previously was the Vice President for Research at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) (2019–20). He has worked as Senior Adviser to the Deputy Foreign Minis-

ter and President of the IPIS (2018–19), Acting Director General of IPIS (2017–18), Head of the IPIS Regional Office in Berlin (2013–17), Director of Publication Department of IPIS (2011–13) and IPIS Resident Representative in Canada (2007–11). He has been also Editor of the Iranian Journal of International Affairs (2002–06) and has published and conducted numerous articles and research projects in both Persian and English.

DANIEL KURTZER

is the S. Daniel Abraham Professor of Middle East Policy Studies at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs. During a 29-year career in the US Foreign Service, Kurtzer served as Ambassador to Israel and as Ambassador to Egypt. He served as a speechwriter and member of Secretary of State George Shultz's Policy Planning Staff; and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs and as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research. He served as a member of Secretary of State John Kerry's Foreign Affairs Policy Board, and as an advisor to the bipartisan Iraq Study Group. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University.
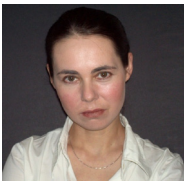
EKATERINA STEPANOVA

heads Peace and Conflict Studies Unit at National Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow. She also teaches at MGIMO-University and European University in Saint-Petersburg and edits Russia's only journal on peace and conflict studies, "Pathways to Peace and Security". She serves on

editorial boards of "Global Governance" and "Global Responsibility to Protect" and on Global Peace Index methodology panel, and is a contact point for the UN Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate's Global Research Network. In 2007–09, she led the Armed Conflicts Programme at Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). She holds a Ph.D. in History from Moscow State University and Dr.Habil. in Political Science from IMEMO.

NATHALIE TOCCI

is Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Honorary Professor at the University of Tübingen. She is Special Advisor to EU High Representative and Vice President of the Commission Josep Borrell. As Special Advisor to HRVP Federica Mogherini she wrote the European Global Strategy and worked on its implementation. She has been a member of Eni's Board of Directors since May 2020. Previously she held research positions at the Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, the Transatlantic Academy, Washington and the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Florence. Her research interests include European foreign policy, conflict resolution, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Nathalie is the 2008 winner of the Anna Lindh award for the study of European Foreign Policy.

The Middle East is experiencing growing tensions as a result of competing geopolitical agendas and reciprocal meddling in the internal affairs of states. This volume – the outcome of a joint FEPS–IAI project – examines various means to foster de-escalation, dialogue and confidence-building in the Middle East. It does so by mapping the viewpoints, interests and threat perceptions of key regional and international actors in the region. Individual country case studies, written by leading scholars from the US, Russia, China, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Europe, are coupled with a final chapter analysing the results of an expert survey addressing modalities through which regional and international actors may support efforts to de-escalate tensions and assist the region in developing new, home-grown mechanisms for dialogue and regional cooperation.

FEPS is the progressive political foundation established at the European level. Created in 2007, it aims at establishing an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project. As a platform for ideas and dialogue, FEPS works in close collaboration with social democratic organisations, and in particular national foundations and think tanks across and beyond Europe, to tackle the challenges that we are facing today. FEPS inputs fresh thinking at the core of its action and serves as an instrument for pan-European, intellectual political reflection.

IAI is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. IAI is part of a vast international research network, and interacts and cooperates with the Italian government and its ministries, European and international institutions, universities, major national economic actors, the media and the most authoritative international think tanks.