

# Countering Zero-Sum Relations in the Middle East: Insights from the Expert Survey

by Flavia Fusco

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## ABSTRACT

Building on emerging debates on the need to develop de-escalation mechanisms for the Middle East, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Brussels-based Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), with support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, launched a one-year research and outreach project entitled “Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East”. Connected to the research, an expert survey targeting European, US, Russian, Middle Eastern and Chinese experts and practitioners was conducted on key themes, principles and approaches associated with a potential new security architecture for the region. The results of the survey – first published in an edited book volume jointly published by IAI and FEPS in November 2020 – are analysed below, complete with tables and infographics on key themes associated with the research project and the search for new, inclusive mechanisms for dialogue and de-escalation in the Middle East.

*Middle East | North Africa | Gulf countries | Regional security*

**keywords**

## Countering Zero-Sum Relations in the Middle East: Insights from the Expert Survey

by Flavia Fusco\*

### Introduction

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.<sup>1</sup> Yet, recent developments in the

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: Joost Hiltermann, *Tackling Intersecting Conflicts in the MENA Region*, speech at the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Barcelona, January 2020, <https://www.>

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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 European Progressive 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 number 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

[crisisgroup.org/node/13024](https://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>.

<sup>2</sup> The project "Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East" produced a ten chapter edited volume. See, Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessi (eds), *Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East: Challenges and Prospects*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12507>.

(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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

**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

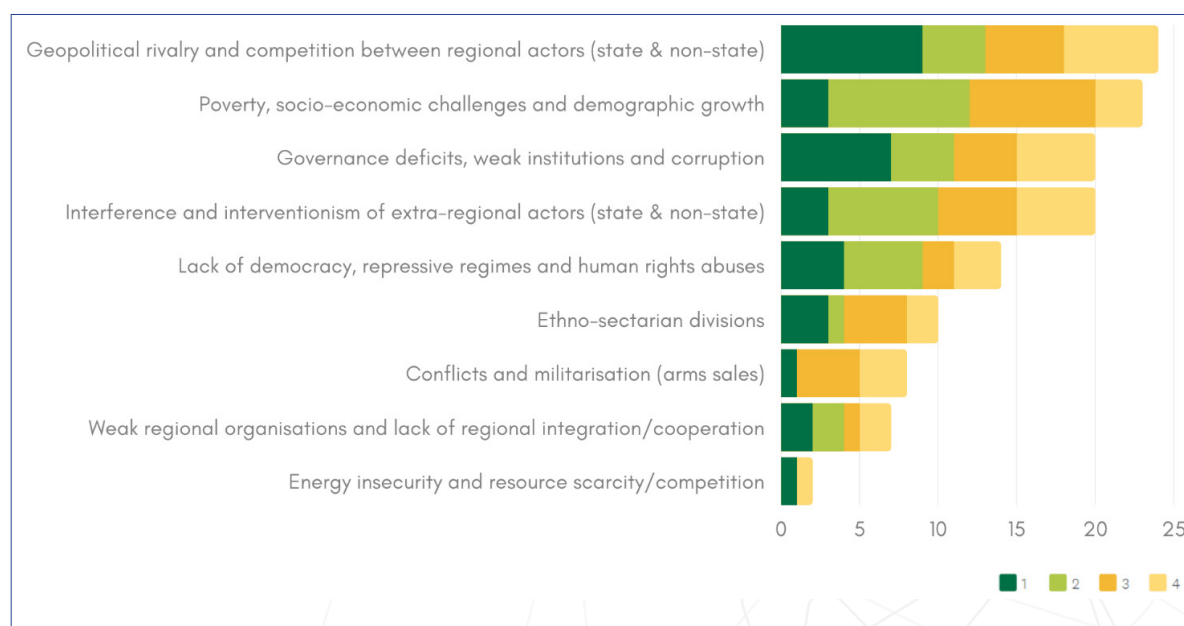
<sup>3</sup> Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), *The Middle East: Thinking About and Beyond Security and Stability*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2019.

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.

**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.

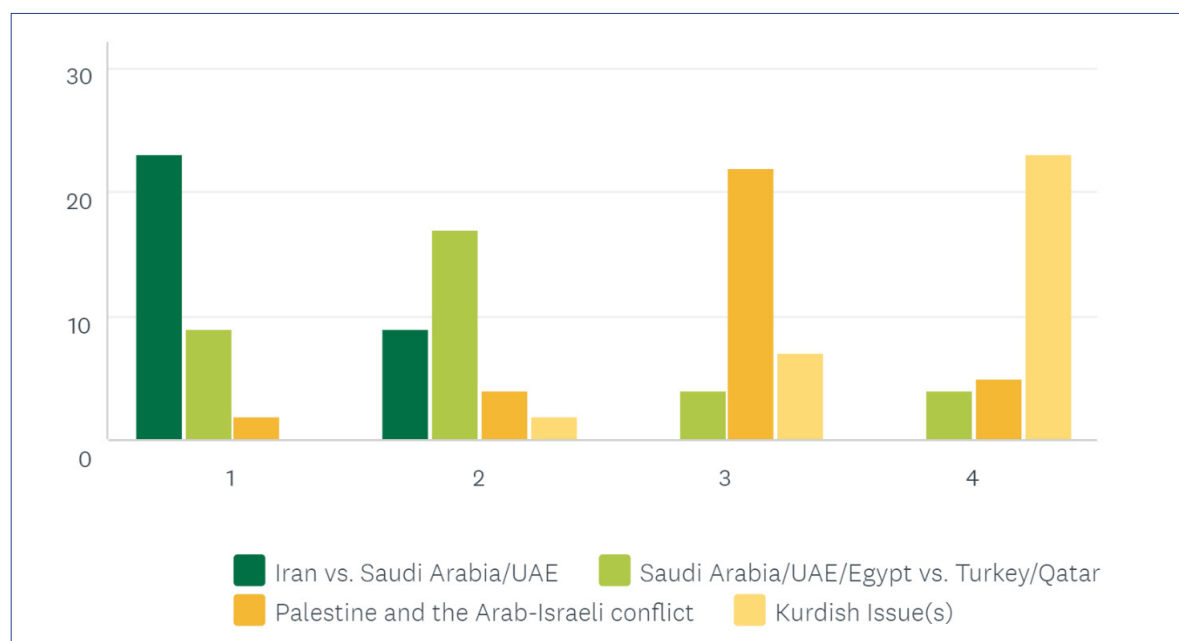
These insights suggest that instability is a structural element of today's Middle East, affecting both the regional and domestic layers and being shaped by dynamics that are both internal and external to states in the region. It is worth noting that along with the more traditional geopolitical concerns, 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 conflicts 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.

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).

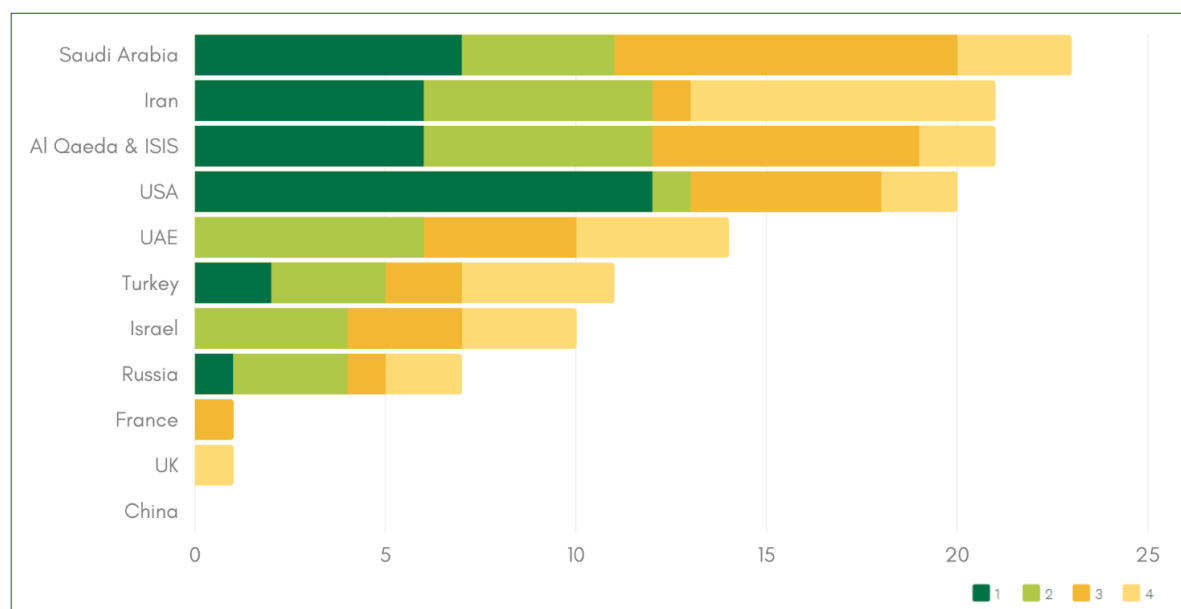
**Table 2** | Which regional cleavage has the most destabilising impact on the Middle East and why? (Rank in order of importance)

	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 the same 61.67 per cent score as Iran), the United States (58.82 per cent) and the UAE (41.17 per cent).

**Figure 4** | Which actor has most contributed to the destabilisation of the Middle East? (Rank four in order of importance)



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.*

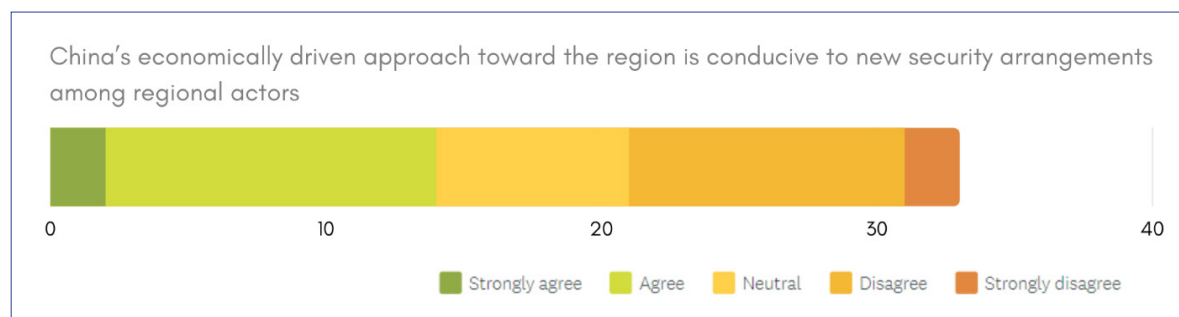
While Russia tends to be framed as a purely geopolitical actor seeking to project power and influence across the region and beyond, the nature of Chinese engagement is generally considered in economic and energy terms. Such claims were not shared by all participants, however. While there is a clear consensus 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 towards 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 towards 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?



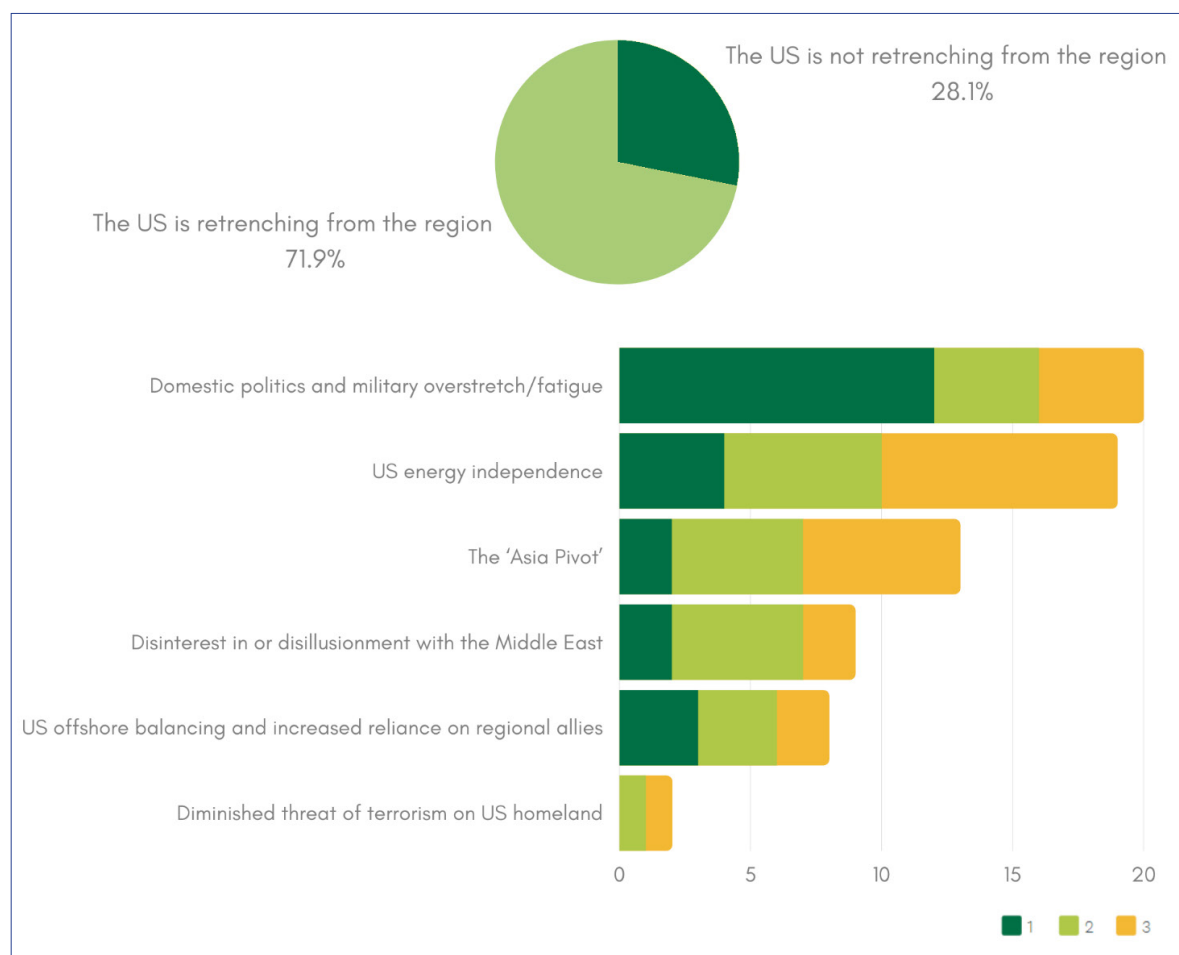
The diverse standpoints on the effects of China's economic engagement reflect different readings of broader Chinese interests and aspirations in the region in the longer term. Below is a further example of a written response provided by interviewed experts to the question of what defines Chinese interests 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



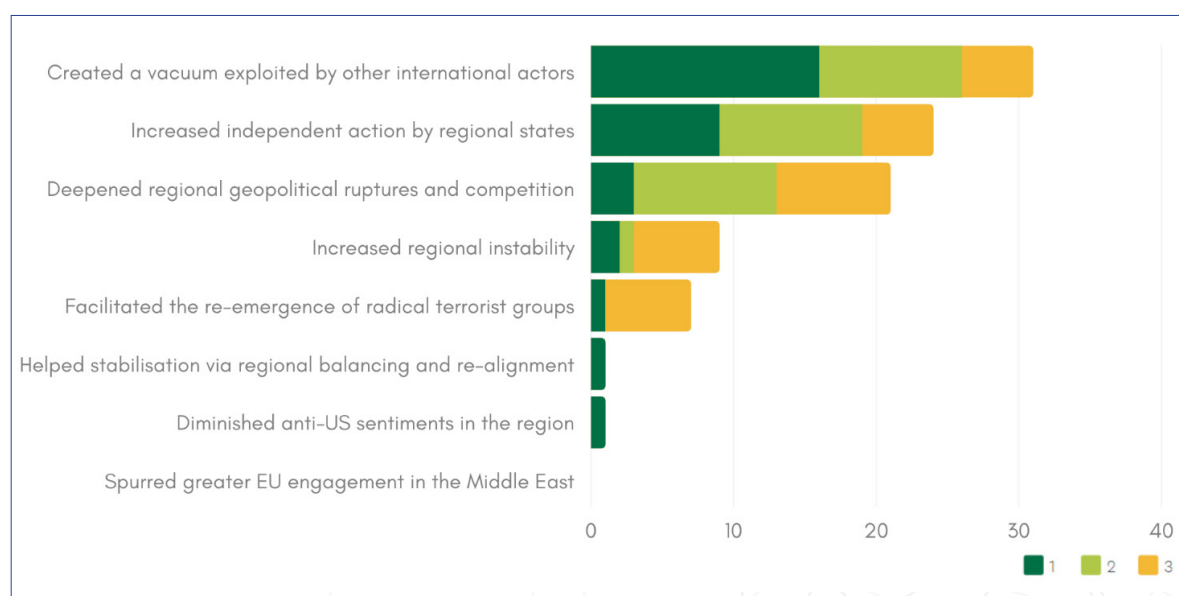
Middle East.

**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"*.

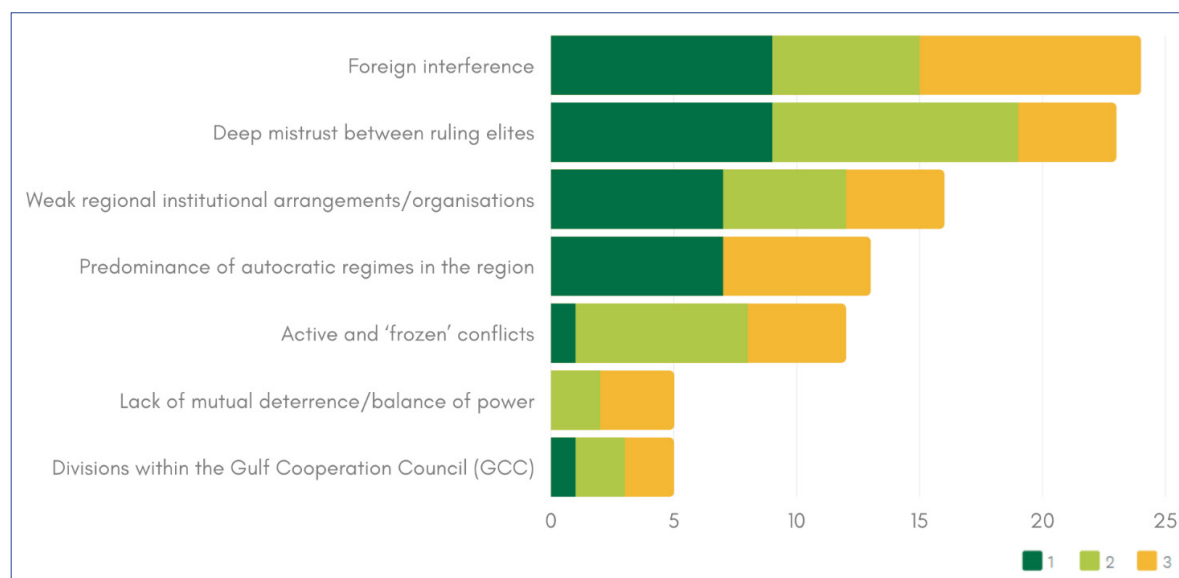
It is worth noting that none of the interviewees argued that the US's diminished resolve in the region has spurred a greater EU engagement in the Middle East, perhaps due to the "internal divisions" which prevent the EU from speaking and acting with one voice in the region and beyond, along with "decades 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.

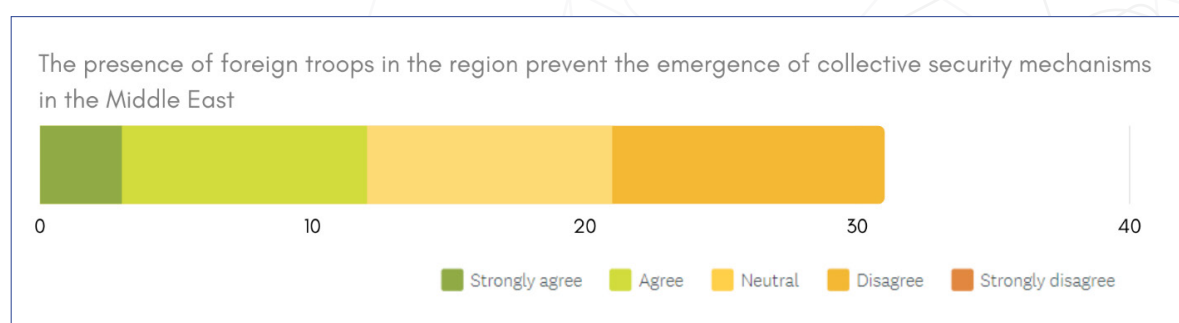
**Table 6** | What, in your opinion, are the primary obstacles to the emergence of a collective security framework in the Middle East? (Rank three in order of importance)

	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.

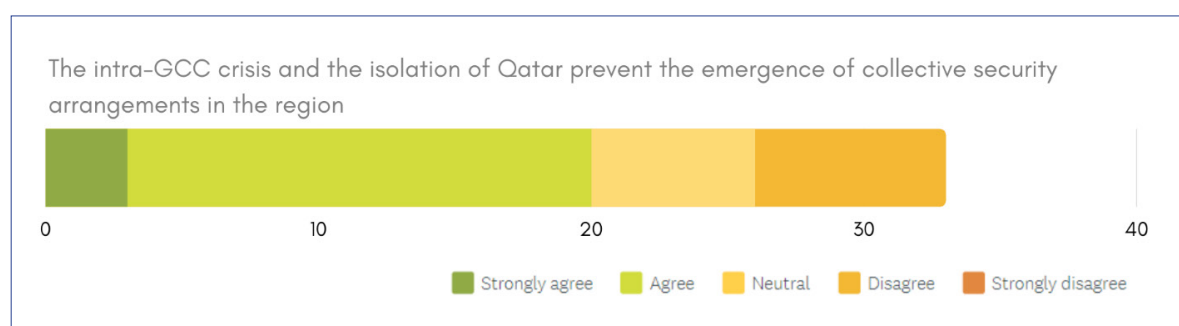
**Figure 9** | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?





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?



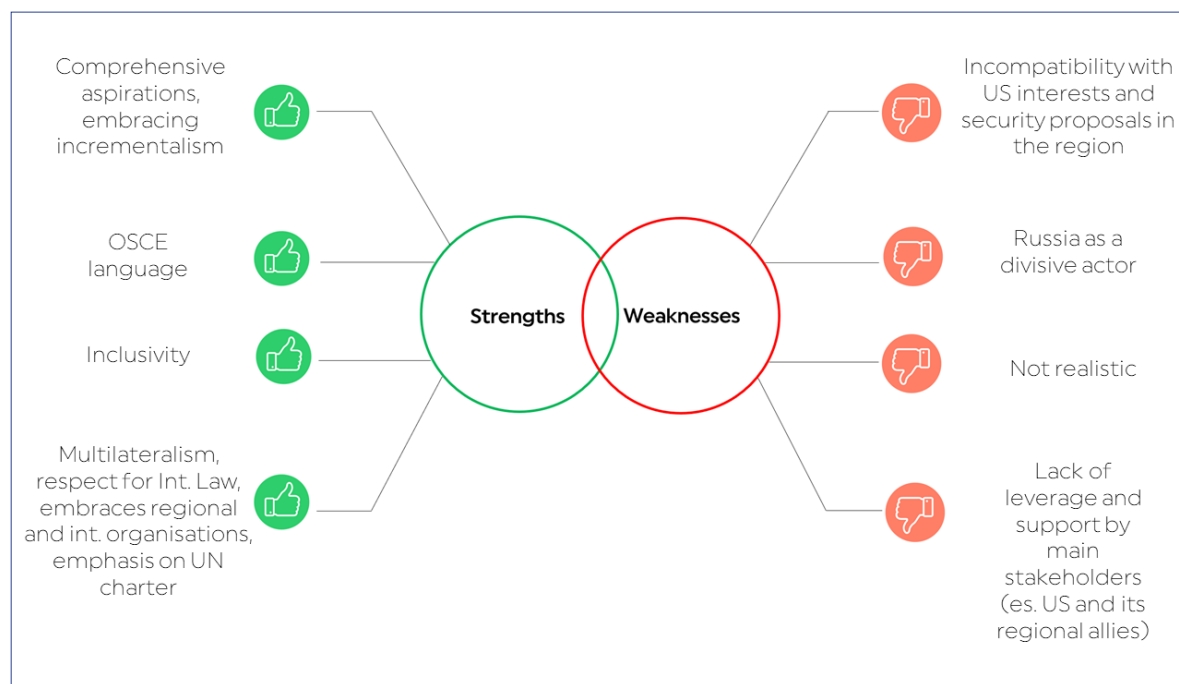
While there tends to be broad agreement regarding the reasons for past failures of security cooperation efforts in the region, current proposals and initiatives based on multilateral frameworks and confidence-building measures are also highly divisive. In the subsequent set of questions, respondents 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



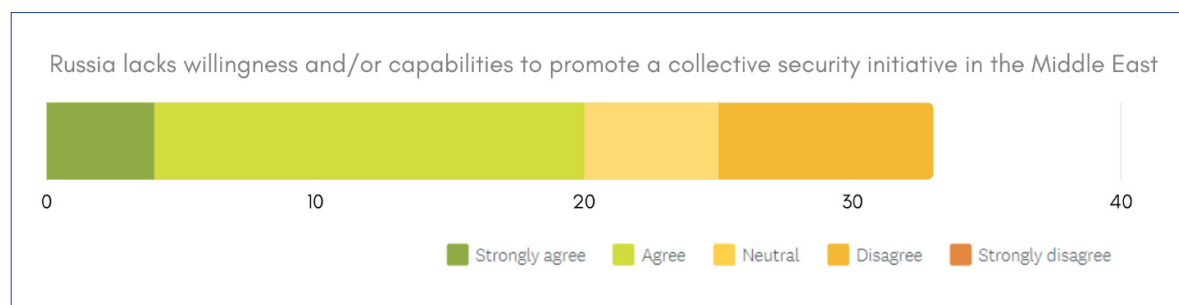
Beyond scepticism regarding Russia, there is clear appreciation for elements of the proposal, including some of its key principles, particularly its inclusivity and the use of language similar to that which informed the Helsinki dialogues leading to the creation of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation 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 conceived 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 contrast with the Arab NATO supported by the US that isolates Iran. Such a regional security framework is quite *unrealistic* however given 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 problematic 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 *formally* 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?



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".

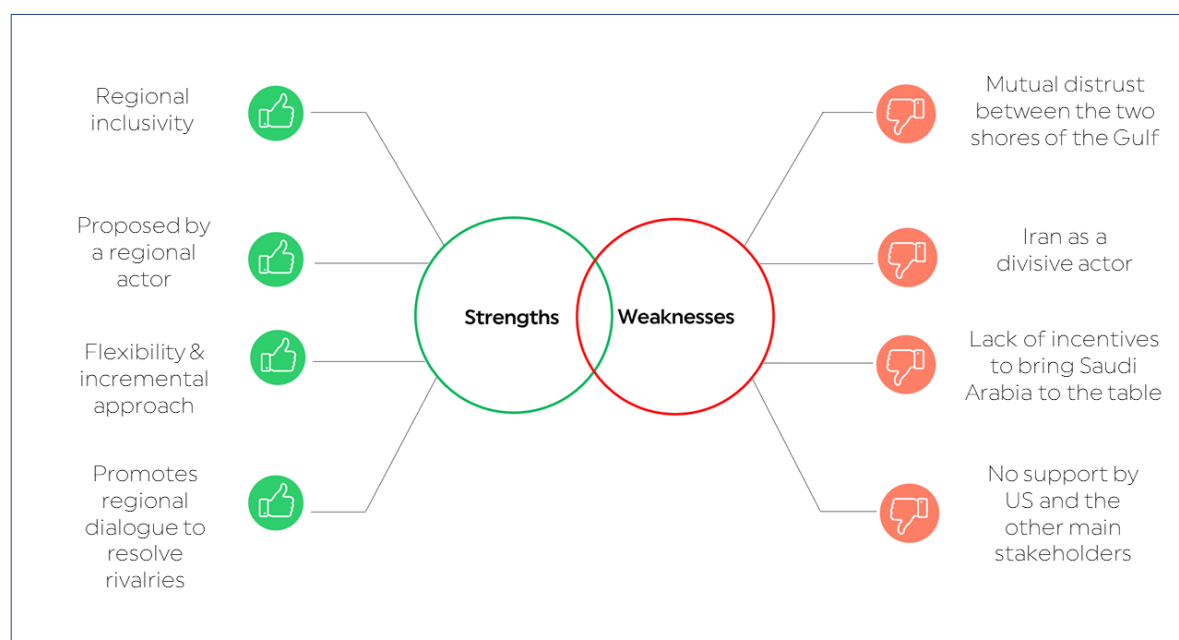
Iran's divisive reputation is generally identified as the most important shortcoming in the plan, given the deep mistrust and rivalry that exist between regional states bordering the Gulf and with the US. Meanwhile, other experts noted that like Russia, Iran is also seeking to promote its own interests 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).

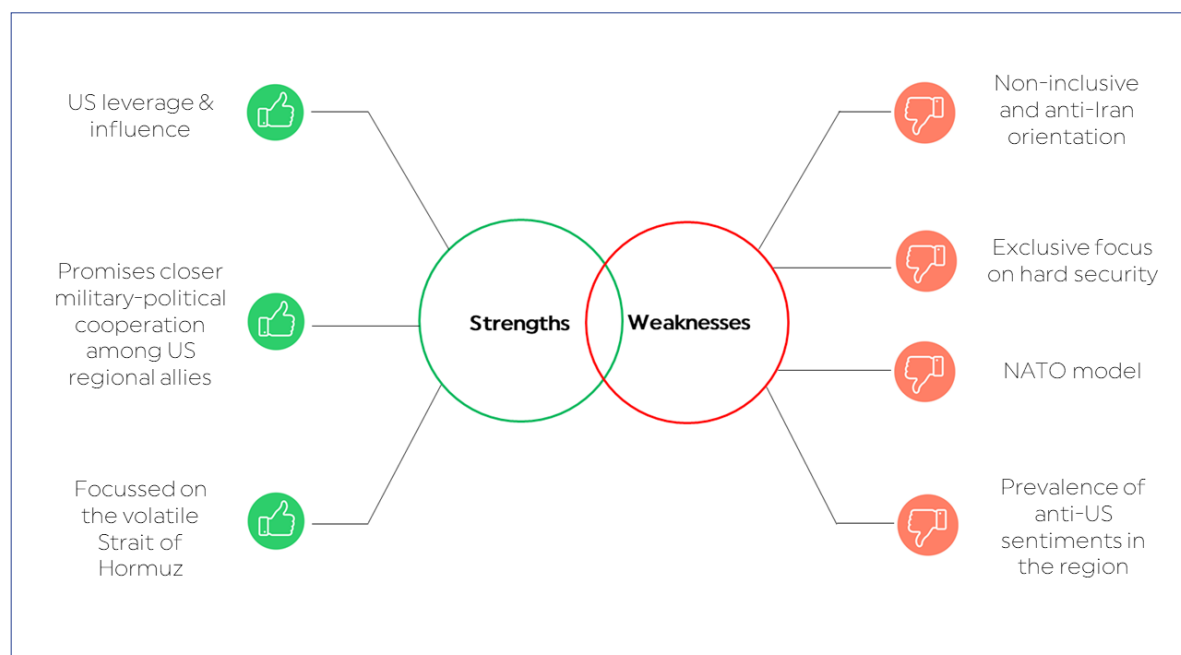
**Figure 13** | Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE)



The US is certainly recognised as the most influential actor in the region, but when asked to evaluate US-sponsored security 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

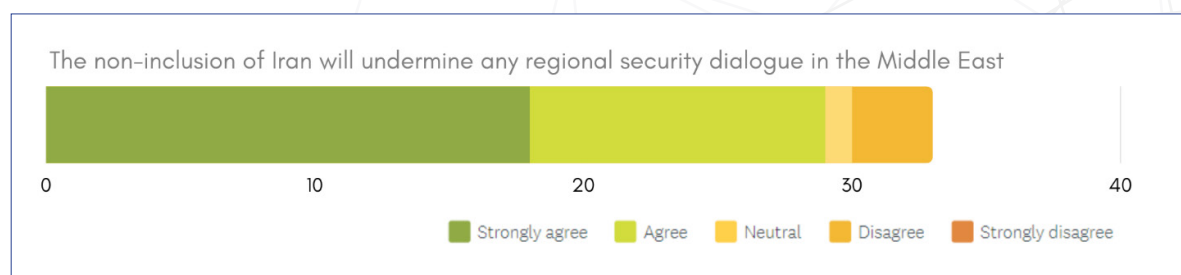
outlining doubts as to the actual feasibility of such proposals and others outlining their perspective of them actually being counterproductive to stabilisation and de-escalation in the Middle East. The key features are summarised below (Figure 14).

**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.

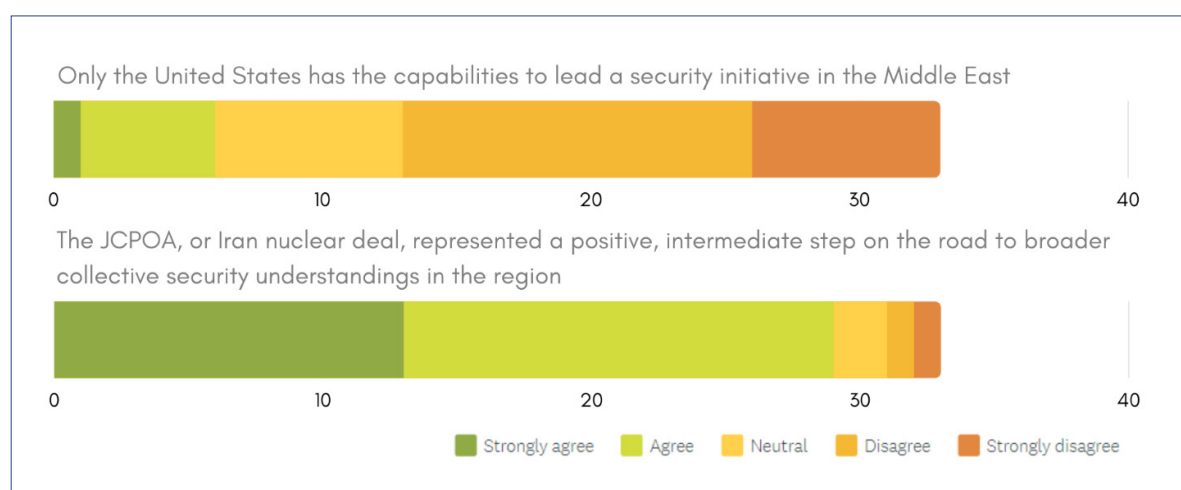
*The NATO model is not transferable to the region. European allies are reluctant. A regional security regime must emerge from within, via initiatives by regional players and supported by international powers. [...] A locally negotiated, locally owned regional security architecture may well require some 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).

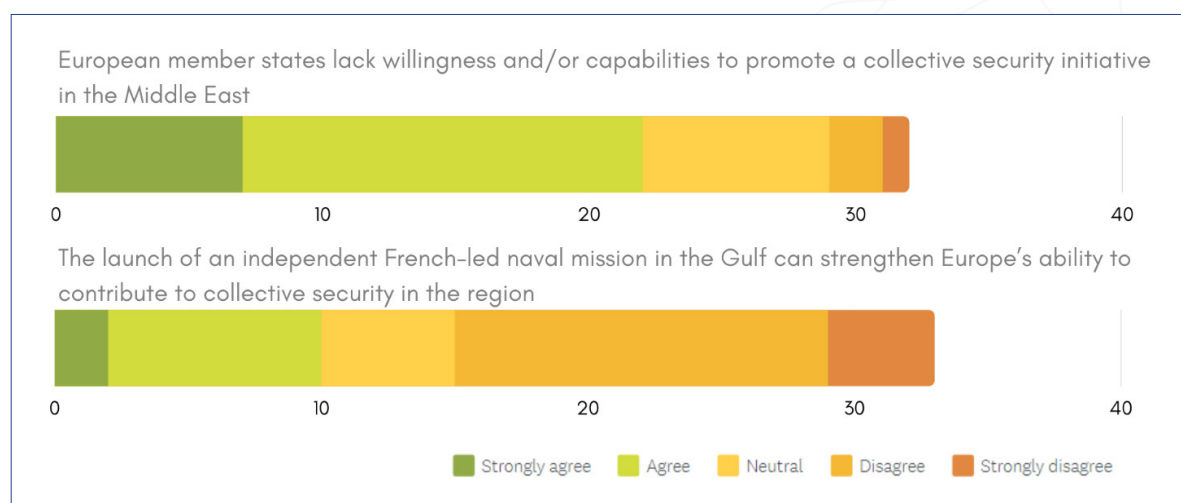
Moving to a further set of questions which more closely addressed the role of the European Union and its member states with regard to the Middle East, respondents were generally critical of the EU’s role, or lack thereof, when it comes to regional security. One expert noted a “European unwillingness 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).

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 16** | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



**Figure 17** | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

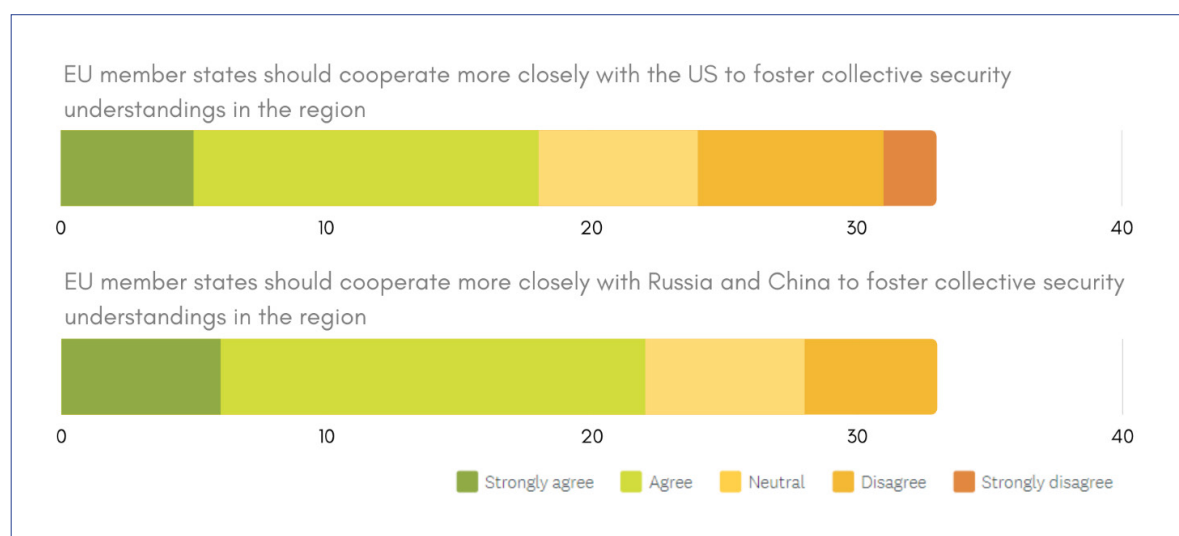


Quite literally caught between the old and new powers of the day, the EU is struggling to find its geopolitical posture in the Middle East, a region in which Europe has traditionally aligned with the US, particularly when it comes to hard

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).

**Figure 18** | How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



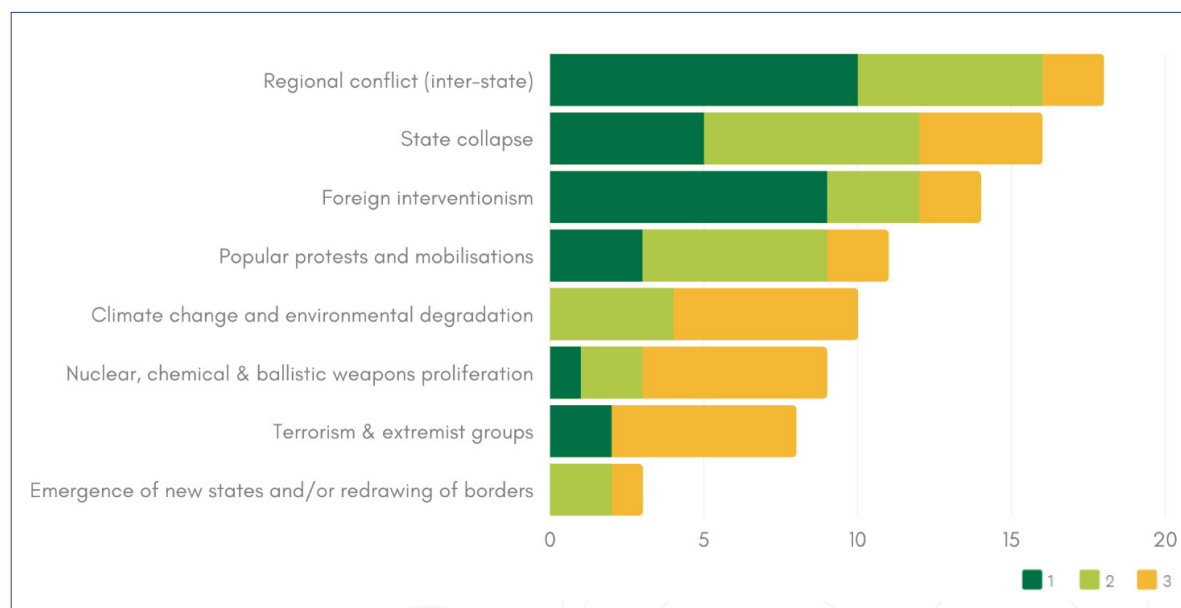
As demonstrated by the above responses, all existing and proposed initiatives for collective security in the Middle East do not seem capable of addressing the many overlapping challenges facing the region. Each contains a number of interesting dimensions and should not therefore be completely discarded. 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.

### 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 questionnaire – “Future priorities and challenges” – moved to assess potential intermediate steps which may prove beneficial for the emergence of a more conducive environment for such objectives, both in the region and internationally. In this context, interviewed 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 future 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).

**Figure 19** | What, in your opinion, are the primary threats to regional stability in the medium term? (Rank three in order of importance)



According to experts, inter-state regional conflicts represent the first and most consequential medium-term threat to regional stability, receiving almost 30 per cent of preferences 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.

**Table 7** | What, in your opinion, are the primary threats to regional stability in the medium term? (Rank three in order of importance)

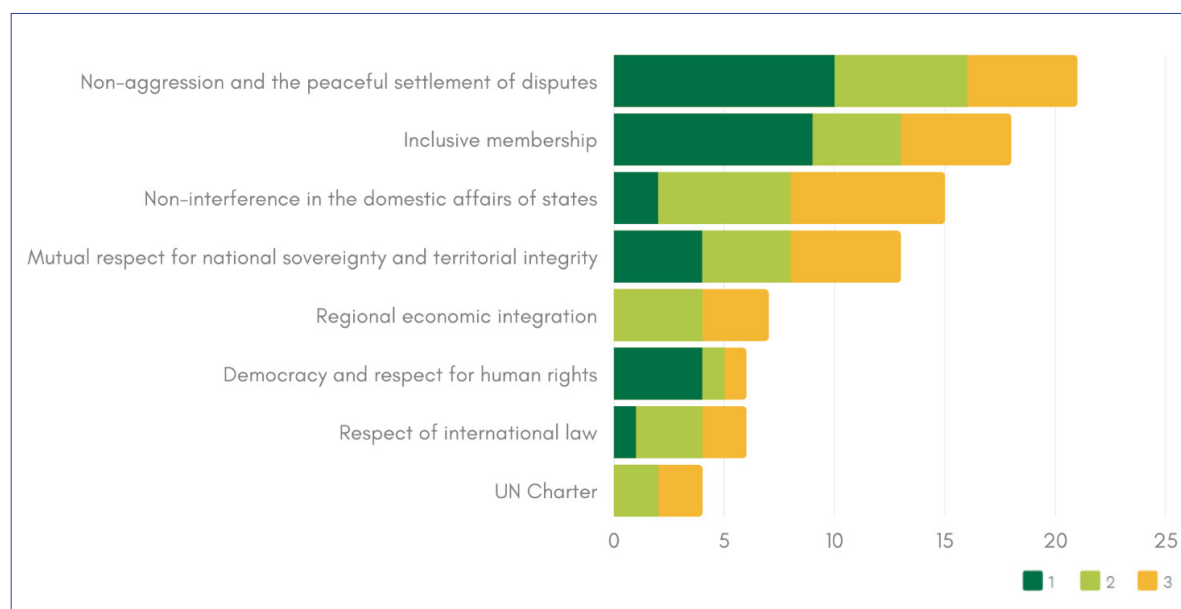
	1	2	3	Aggregate total
Regional conflict (inter-state)	29.41	17.65	5.88	52.94
State collapse	14.71	20.59	11.76	47.06
Foreign interventionism	26.47	8.82	5.88	41.17
Popular protests and mobilisations	8.82	17.65	5.88	32.35
Climate change and environmental degradation	0.00	11.76	17.65	29.41
Nuclear, chemical & 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

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 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) 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).

**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

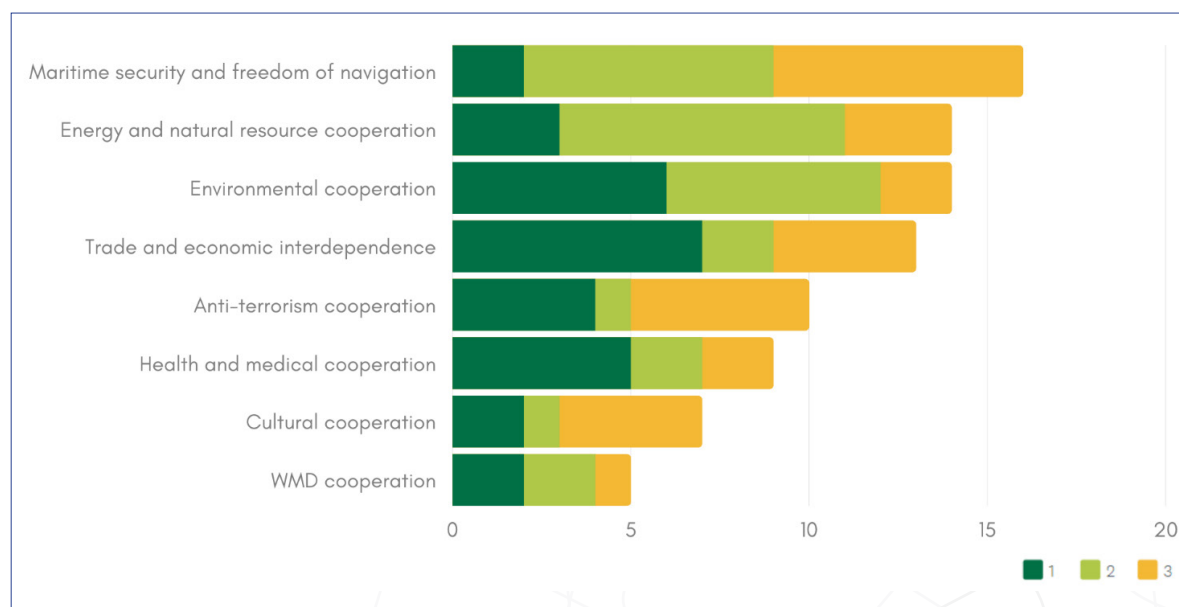
Looking at middle-rank choices, mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity scored a relevant 38.23 per cent in aggregate terms, placing it fourth in the ranking, followed by regional economic integration (20.58 per cent), while democracy and respect for human rights and respect 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 selected options in aggregate terms, joined also by trade and economic interdependence, which secured 38.23 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms, placing this option in third place, with the same percentage as energy and natural resource cooperation (Table 9). Maritime security and freedom of navigation 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 preferences as the first most constructive measure, well behind the category of trade and economic interdependence, which received 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 nature of the issue, and 14.71 per cent selected health and medical cooperation, perhaps reflecting the contemporary relevance of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**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

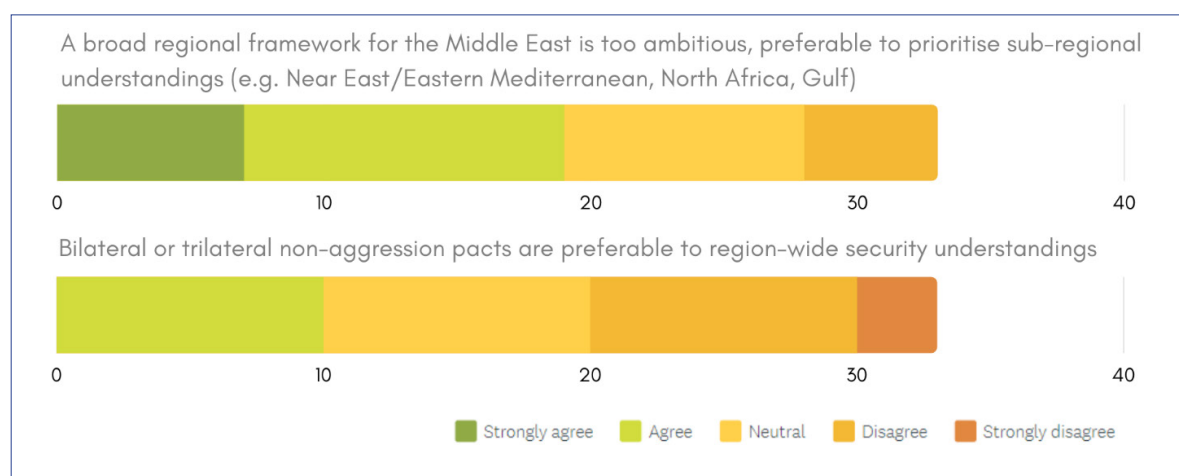
While long representing a key concern at both the regional and international levels, anti-terror cooperation did not receive high support as a potential tool for de-escalation, nonetheless receiving a sizable 29.41 per cent of preferences in aggregate terms, placing it ahead of the traditionally less 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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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.

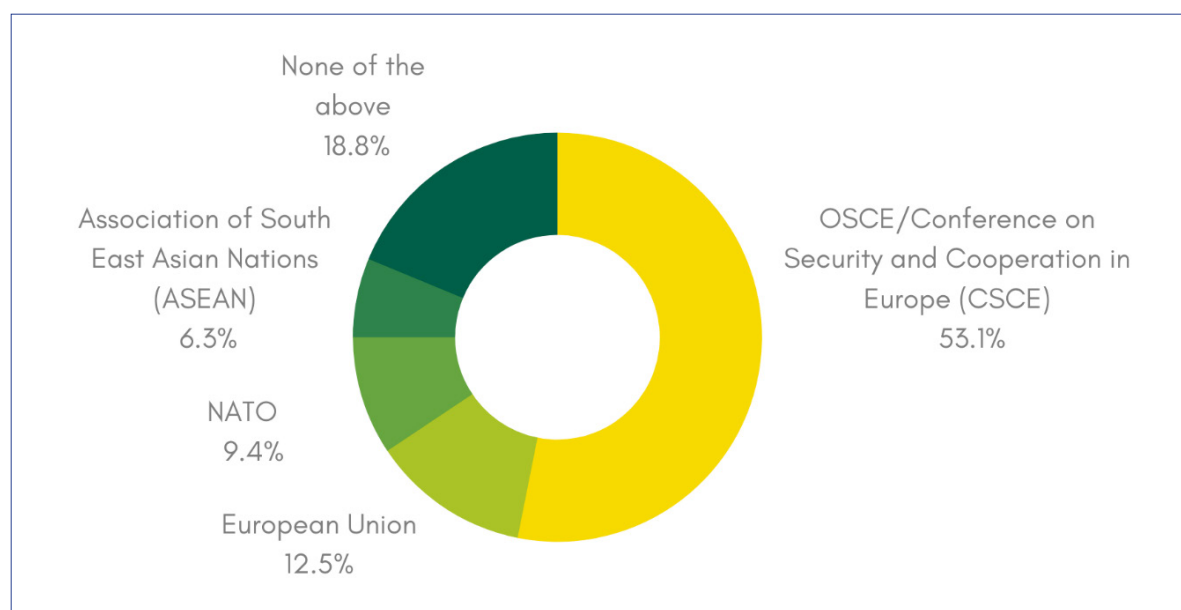
Beyond the specific principles, approaches and the geographical remit of efforts to foster regional security cooperation, it is also important to examine existing

<sup>4</sup> Among these, 20.59 per cent strongly agreed and a further 35.29 per cent agreed with the statement.



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?

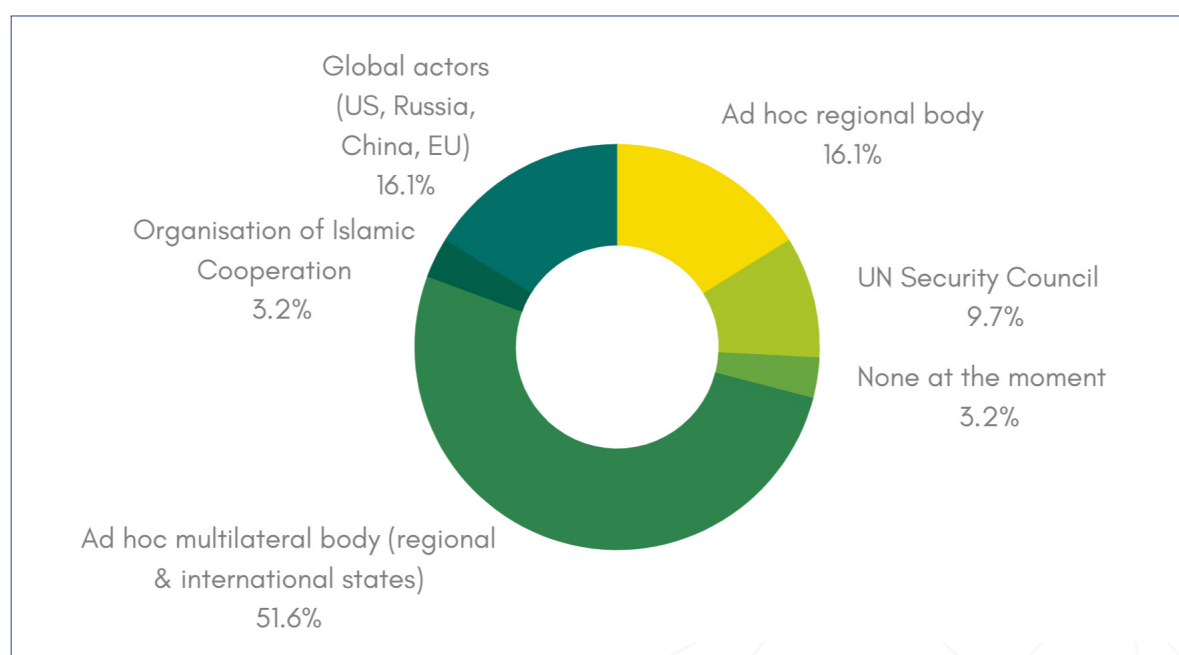


While regional peculiarities made more than 18.8 per cent of the experts consulted conclude that none fit the specific needs of the Middle East, a large majority of 53.1 per cent was shown to appreciate the OSCE model, perhaps due to its embrace of a comprehensive definition of security and its specific 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.

Turning 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?



#### 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 towards 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 policy 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 stable 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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>.



### *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-ambition 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.

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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 inaction 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.

*Updated 16 December 2020*

## Countering Zero-Sum Relations in the Middle East: Insights from the Expert Survey

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