

# The Middle East's Evolving Security Landscape: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and US Engagement

by Daniel Kurtzer and Maira Seeley

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## ABSTRACT

Amid ongoing conflict in the Middle East, collective security arrangements have historically proven elusive. Regional states' mutual mistrust, the absence of shared perceptions of threats, and competing national interests have contributed to the failure of attempts to create a broad, region-wide security system. In the Gulf, Russia, Iran and the United States have proposed competing mechanisms to foster cooperation, but these proposals have foundered, garnering little support from either Arab Gulf nations or international actors. Longer-term progress towards Gulf security cooperation will remain unlikely unless Saudi–Iranian tensions decrease. This rapprochement would require stronger cooperation between the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council themselves. US efforts to support regional security cooperation should focus on strengthening intra-GCC defence and political relationships, including through confidence-building measures, resolution of the Saudi–Qatari rift and increased interoperability of defence systems, as well as reducing perceptions that a US withdrawal from the region is imminent.

*US foreign policy | Gulf countries | GCC | Regional integration | Russia | Iran*

**keywords**

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Paper produced in the framework of the FEPS-IAI project “Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East”, April 2020.

The project has benefited from the financial support of the European Parliament and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Parliament or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
and International Cooperation

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by Daniel Kurtzer and Maira Seeley\*

## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

## 1. US interests and policy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Third, although the United States attempted to build a region-wide security structure after the war – the so-called GCC+2, involving Egypt and Syria – this failed to materialise in any meaningful way, and it put to rest any idea of a broader regional security architecture. From that point on, the focus of the United States was on Gulf security, including establishing bases in Qatar and Bahrain, administering “facilities” in Saudi Arabia, arms sales to regional states, and the effort to create interoperability among the Gulf countries. Those outside the Gulf, most prominently Egypt, were kept in the loop in broad strategic terms and the United States maintained the use of facilities there as well. However, there was no expectation of direct Egyptian involvement in Gulf security arrangements.

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

## 2. Security mechanisms in the Gulf

Attempts to create mechanisms of security cooperation in the Gulf have historically been stymied by significant roadblocks. These include enduring mistrust between states, fears of encroachment on their sovereignty, differences in definitions of security and threat perceptions, and the absence of enduring shared interests. Some forms of cooperation, such as the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, have worsened regional security.<sup>4</sup> The US security role in the Gulf in recent decades has kept security costs low for GCC countries and has diminished the urgency of security cooperation, defined as “mutual collaboration of a group of states to mitigate threats caused by a common set of identified concerns”.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> Brian Katulis, “Too Important to Give Up: Challenges and Opportunities for Middle East Regional Security Integration”, in Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis (eds), *Order from Ashes. New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2018, p. 118-142, <https://tcf.org/content/report/too-important-to-give-up>.

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> Tom O'Connor, "China 'Welcomes' Russia's Call for Persian Gulf Coalition as U.S. and Iran Back Rival Plans", in *Newsweek*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/1463957>; Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", in *Valdai Club Expert Opinions*, 6 August 2019, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/security-in-the-gulf-area-russia-s-new-initiative>; Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", in *Al-Monitor*, 11 October 2019, <http://almon.co/39nk>; Maxim A. Suchkov, "Intel: Why Russia Is Calling for Rethinking Gulf Security", in *Al-Monitor*, 24 July 2019, <http://almon.co/38ix>.

Iran's 2019 proposal – the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) – lacks support from GCC countries as an alternative to US security guarantees. Any prospect for coordinated and productive GCC dialogue with Iran will likely remain remote absent Saudi Arabia's willingness to engage Iran directly.<sup>8</sup> Iran's proposal is motivated by its interest in excluding US forces from the Persian Gulf, minimising US influence with Iran's neighbours, and building better (and more formalised) relations with those neighbours to decrease its own vulnerabilities.

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

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

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

The Treaty of Joint Defence and Economic Cooperation created by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen in the wake of their military defeat by Israel in 1948 sought to establish a system of collective defence to deal with "armed aggression" against any of the signatories; this treaty led to the creation of the Arab League's Joint Defence Council.<sup>10</sup> The Treaty remains in force, although internal politics and divisions between monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and initially Yemen) and nationalist republics (Egypt, Syria and Iraq) throughout the Cold War largely prevented effective cooperation.

<sup>8</sup> Mehran Haghiri and Luciano Zaccara, "Making Sense of HOPE: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?", in *IranSource*, 3 October 2019, <https://atlanticcouncil.org/?p=186210>.

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

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



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

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

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

#### 4. GCC security cooperation (1981–present)

In the 1980s, a new focus on security cooperation emerged among Arab monarchies in the Gulf in response to the Iranian Revolution, the ouster of the US-backed shah in 1979 and the beginning of the Iran–Iraq war in 1980.<sup>15</sup> The six Gulf Arab countries

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

<sup>12</sup> Brian Katulis, "Too Important to Give Up", cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Carla E. Humud, "Lebanon", in *CRS Reports*, No. 44759 (5 October 2018), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44759.pdf>; Robert Rabil, "From Beirut to Algiers: The Arab League's Role in the Lebanon Crisis", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 976 (21 March 2005), <https://washin.st/3eIcec8>.

<sup>15</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here?", cit.

formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 with member countries viewing Iran as a common threat. The Council subsequently established the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) in 1984 to provide joint defence, following proposals by Oman and Kuwait.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on regional security integration arose in the context of concerns that a military alliance with the United States would lead Iran and Iraq to perceive the GCC as too closely aligned with Western powers.<sup>17</sup> By 1986, the PSF included 7,000 permanent troops commanded by a Saudi general, but it was unable to prevent the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>18</sup> The PSF also proved incapable of assuring the security of oil and gas exports from the Gulf; Kuwait turned to the United States which “reflagged” oil tankers so as to provide a legal justification for the deployment of additional US naval forces to protect energy exports.

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

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

The Damascus Declaration, abandoned by 1992, represented an attempt to create a framework specifically to protect Arab states’ sovereignty through joint military action.<sup>21</sup> The Declaration explicitly envisioned an “Arab peace force” that would “guarantee the security and safety of the Arab states in the Gulf region, and an example that would guarantee the effectiveness of the comprehensive Arab defence order”.<sup>22</sup> Signatories also hoped to limit weapons of mass destruction in

<sup>16</sup> Robert Mason, “The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force: A Case Study of a Small State’s Search for Security”, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2014), p. 355-367; Nasser bin Nasser and Jasmine Auda, “Cooperation, Contestation, and Historical Context”, cit.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Mason, “The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force”, cit., p. 360.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Katulis, “Too Important to Give Up”, cit.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Mason, “The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force”, cit., p. 357; Brahim Saidy, “GCC’s Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity”, in *FPRI E-Notes*, 15 October 2014, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/10/gccs-defense-cooperation-moving-towards-unity>.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, Santa Monica, Rand, 2016, p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1429>; Brahim Saidy, “GCC’s Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity”, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Mason, “The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force”, cit.; “The GCC: Alliance Politics”, in *Whitehall Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1993), p. 35-50.

<sup>22</sup> “The GCC: Alliance Politics”, cit., p. 36.

the region. The overwhelming majority of troops in the Declaration's initial plan were to be Syrian (19,000), Egyptian (36,000) and Saudi (40,000), while the smaller GCC states would collectively contribute 15,000.<sup>23</sup> GCC states' concerns about hosting large foreign forces for an indefinite period, as well as Iran's view that such a large Arab joint force would be seen as a threat, led to a second, more limited proposal in which the joint force would include 10,000 Saudis, 10,000 troops from other GCC countries, 3,000 Egyptians and 3,000 Syrians.<sup>24</sup> However, this draft too was rejected, and no joint security arrangement emerged.

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

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

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks: Progress, Problems, and Prospects", in *IGCC Policy Papers*, No. 26 (1996), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97z9g13f>; US Department of State, *Fact Sheet: Middle East Peace Process Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Working Group*, 1 July 2001, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/pm/rls/fs/4271.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks", cit.; Ariel E. Levite and Emily B. Landau, "Confidence and Security Building Measures in the Middle East", in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1997), p. 143-171.

<sup>27</sup> David Josar, "Troops from Six Arab Nations Guard Kuwait's Border with Iraq", in *Stars and Stripes*, 27 March 2003, <https://www.stripes.com/news/1.3474>.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 364-365; Shamlan Y. Al-Essa, "Security Imperatives from the Perspective of the GCC States: Priorities and Approaches", in Christian Koch and Felix Neugart (eds), *A Window of Opportunity. Europe, Gulf Security and the Aftermath of the Iraq War*, Dubai, Gulf Research Center, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force", cit., p. 365.

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

By 2013, amidst US engagement with Iran and the ongoing challenge of "Arab Spring" movements in the region, Saudi Arabia proposed creating a force of 100,000 troops and even taking steps towards unifying the GCC into a single state with a common currency, a move emphatically opposed by Oman.<sup>32</sup> In 2018, the Saudi proposal morphed into a functional GCC Unified Military Command of 100,000 troops, half of which are Saudi, headed by a Saudi commander.<sup>33</sup> The GCC has also seen a joint Saudi-Qatari-Emirati military campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and a Saudi-Emirati campaign against Yemen's Houthis, with cooperation and a unified command structure emerging in the context of an immediate shared threat.<sup>34</sup>

GCC states' relationship with the United States as a security guarantor and as the major source of military equipment has resulted in relative interoperability across militaries, with Gulf states obtaining some common platforms including F-16 multi-role fighter aircraft and Patriot air defence systems. Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman rely primarily on two US-made tank types and utility vehicles; and naval surface combatants are also relatively standardised.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, some significant obstacles to interoperability remain.<sup>36</sup> Within the GCC, as of 2017, militaries used more than 16 types of armoured personnel carriers sourced from 12 different countries, more than 25 artillery types, 32 aircraft types from six countries, and 53 types of patrol boats from nine countries. Air and missile defence systems particularly lack integration.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, despite encouraging

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union", in *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2013, <http://almon.co/1xdh>; Shenaz Kermali, "The GCC Is Expanding Its Army, But for What?", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/06/2011626112649845386.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here?", cit.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Moving Ahead with Gulf Union", cit.

<sup>33</sup> Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit.; Eleonora Ardemagni, "The Gulf Monarchies' Complex Fight against Daesh", in *NATO Review*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/09/28/the-gulf-monarchies-complex-fight-against-daesh/index.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Haroon Sheikh, Bob Mark and Bassem Fayek, "The Emerging GCC Defence Market: The \$30 Billion Opportunity", in *PwC Strategy & Reports*, 2017, <https://pwc.to/2WQPDUb>.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit. "Interoperability" between allies is defined as "operational concepts, modular force elements, communications, information sharing, and equipment that accelerate foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces". See Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", cit., p. 2.

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



cooperation through efforts at interoperability, US security guarantees have also historically reduced incentives for GCC states to establish stronger collective security mechanisms.

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

Previously, major divisions within the GCC regarding relations with Iran, the role of political Islam in the region, and fears of Saudi hegemony have historically represented obstacles to effective security cooperation. Today, concerns about US reliability could lead to gradual changes in Saudi and Emirati approaches to mitigating Iranian threats and prompt greater security cooperation within the GCC.<sup>40</sup>

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

[csis.org/node/25228](https://www.csis.org/node/25228).

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

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

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

<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Martini et al., *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, cit.

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

calls for economic and military integration within the GCC.<sup>43</sup>

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

### 5.1 US Middle East Strategic Alliance (2017–present)

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

A key aspect of MESA is improving the interoperability of member countries’ defence capabilities. The initiative would likely limit the ability of members to purchase arms from non-US suppliers. This would also facilitate US assessment of potential violations of end-use agreements.<sup>47</sup> By providing space for member states to resolve disputes and facilitate security cooperation during crises, MESA would theoretically also reduce opportunities for Russia and China to expand their roles and influence in the region. The arrangement also seeks to “plan and coordinate regional economic development and energy sector integration” with US assistance, in response to Russian and Chinese direct investment and involvement in the development of the oil, gas and nuclear sectors.<sup>48</sup>

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

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

<sup>45</sup> Clayton Thomas, “Cooperative Security in the Middle East”, cit.

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

<sup>47</sup> Yasmine Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go”, cit.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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

The assassination of Iranian general Soleimani in Iraq on 3 January 2020 will likely complicate US efforts to implement MESA with support from Qatar, Kuwait and particularly Oman. These countries seek to maintain a long-term posture of balancing cooperative relationships with both the United States and Iran. Immediately after the attack, Qatari foreign minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani visited Tehran to discuss approaches to regional “collective security” with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif, signalling Doha’s commitment to hedging amidst escalating US–Iranian confrontation.<sup>53</sup> Saudi officials publicly called for “restraint” and urged de-escalation.<sup>54</sup> Oman’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the crisis with a public statement calling on both the United States and Iran to “apply a spirit of dialogue and consider diplomatic means” to address their conflict.<sup>55</sup> Oman will likely continue to avoid actions suggesting close alignment with either country under the newly crowned Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, unless Oman’s economic woes ultimately force it to accept a GCC fiscal bailout at the cost of its neutrality.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; Sadeq Al Ta’i, “Arab NATO: For Whom and Against Whom?” (in Arabic), in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=1814050>; Mohamed al-Minshawi, “The Arab NATO Project... What Does It Foresee in 2019?” (in Arabic), in *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2019/1/20/برح-الكريم-بمبارت-وتان-لا-يبرع-وتان>; “Mixed Reactions to the Proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance”, in *Middle East In Focus*, 9 October 2018, <https://mepc.org/node/5103>.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Kalin and Jonathan Landay, “Exclusive: Egypt Withdraws from U.S.-Led Anti-Iran Security Initiative – Sources”, in *Reuters*, 11 April 2019, <https://reut.rs/2GgqQjO>.

<sup>51</sup> Yasmine Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go”, cit., p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

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

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

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

<sup>56</sup> Aya Batrawi, “Oman Names Culture Minister as Successor to Sultan Qaboos”, in *AP News*, 11 January 2020, <https://apnews.com/9ca4a9910ede3e11b2fbf085189e628b>; Nikita Lalwani, Josh

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

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

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

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Rubin and Sam Winter-Levy, "Can Oman's New Leader Uphold Qaboos' Peaceful Legacy?", in *Foreign Affairs*, 14 January 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Bruce Jones (ed.), "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region", in *Brookings Reports*, January 2019, <https://brook.gs/2FdR330>; Marc Lynch, "Does the Decline of U.S. Foreign Power Matter for the Middle East?", in *Monkey Cage*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/19/does-decline-us-power-matter-middle-east>. Factors contributing to a decreased focus on the MENA region prior to May 2019 include a diminished appetite for direct involvement in the region among the US public, less immediate reliance on oil from the Persian Gulf due to the expansion of the domestic energy industry, increased interest in Asia, and the predominance of sub-state conflicts that prove difficult to address through existing capacities. See Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January/February 2019), p. 88-100.

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

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

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



both sides' openness to de-escalation, and Iranian interest in resuming diplomatic relations.<sup>61</sup> The need of Gulf allies to balance hedging actions with continued reliance on US security guarantees will increase the difficulty of formalising MESA, due to perceptions of the mechanism as primarily a means to counter and isolate Iran, and to serve US interests.

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

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

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

<sup>61</sup> Mohammad S. Alzoubi, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Imagining a Path Towards Rapprochement", in *Fikra Forum*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iran-and-saudi-arabia-imagining-a-path-towards-rapprochement>.

<sup>62</sup> Marianna Belankaya, "Should the United States Be Worried about Russian Activity in the Gulf?", in *Carnegie.ru Commentaries*, 21 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80130>.

<sup>63</sup> Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", cit.

<sup>64</sup> James M. Dorsey, "Will There Be a New Russian-Chinese Security Architecture in the Gulf?", in *BESA Center Perspectives Papers*, No. 1287 (13 September 2019), <https://besacenter.org/?p=27044>; "Putin's Gulf Security Plan Depends on Trump", in *Al-Monitor*, 16 August 2019, <http://almon.co/38v7>.

<sup>65</sup> Sabahat Khan, "China Backs Russian Proposal for Gulf Security", in *The Arab Weekly*, 3 August 2019, <https://theArabweekly.com/china-backs-russian-proposal-gulf-security>; Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", cit.

<sup>66</sup> Paul J. Saunders, "How Does Washington See Russia's Gulf Security Concept?", cit.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

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

There are conditions under which the Russian proposal could gain support. If the US disengagement in the Gulf continues, or if the United States is perceived as reacting tepidly to Iranian actions targeting US forces and allied countries, GCC states may come to believe that their security is no longer guaranteed by the US presence and accelerate their outreach to Russia and Iran.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, if GCC members interpret the January 2020 killing of Soleimani as indicating renewed US commitment to countering Iranian actions in the Gulf, they may delay efforts to strengthen ties with Russia.

### 5.3 Iran's Hormuz peace endeavour

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

<sup>68</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, "Intel: Why Russia Is Calling for Rethinking Gulf Security", cit.

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

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

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

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

for an end to reliance on US “weapons and intervention” and states’ participation in alliances against one another.<sup>73</sup>

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

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

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

## Conclusion: Is There a Way Forward?

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

To deal with these issues, US efforts need to focus even more on fostering stronger intra-GCC personal, professional and economic relationships and cooperation. The United States needs to build the trust necessary for future joint command and control relationships, as well as supporting coordinated acquisitions to improve

<sup>73</sup> Mehran Haghiriian and Luciano Zaccara, “Making Sense of HOPE”, cit.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Osborn, John Stonestreet and Hugh Lawson, “Russia, China, Iran Start Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean”, in *Reuters*, 27 December 2019, <https://reut.rs/2Q2fUv3>.

<sup>75</sup> Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, “Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?”, cit.

<sup>76</sup> Sanam Vakil, “Iran and the GCC. Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism”, cit.

<sup>77</sup> Mehran Haghiriian and Luciano Zaccara, “Making Sense of HOPE”, cit.

interoperability. Also needed is progress towards Saudi–Qatari rapprochement. In this context, confidence-building measures could support a balance between military and political aspects of intra-GCC relationships, fostering conditions for greater flexibility and broader cooperation, as well as decreased Saudi–Qatari tensions.<sup>78</sup>

Russia's proposed Collective Security Concept has elicited no positive responses from Western powers whose participation it requires. The Concept lacks clarity on how to overcome divisions among GCC members or facilitate their participation while they continue to seek US security guarantees.

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

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

*Updated 22 April 2020*

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



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## The Middle East's Evolving Security Landscape: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and US Engagement



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