

HOPE for a New Regional Security Architecture: Toward a Hormuz Community

by Saeed Khatibzadeh

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East and North African region has experienced drastic changes over the past decades. As the world is experiencing transitions on different levels, the Middle East is also facing a new set of realities, including the emergence of a balance of power between old and rising regional players. As new conflicts and developments unfold in the region, adding to the existing unresolved ones, there is an urgent need for a workable comprehensive and inclusive regional security arrangement, which reflects parameters of the new power relations in the region, as well as collective interests of all the stakeholders. Iran has proposed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour to provide basic principles for an inclusive regional arrangement and prepare the ground for the emergence of a Hormuz Community.

*Iran's foreign policy | Persian Gulf | Regional security | US foreign policy |
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keywords

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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HOPE for a New Regional Security Architecture: Toward a Hormuz Community

by Saeed Khatibzadeh*

Introduction

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

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

Among all the major conflicts and crises in the Middle East, the only one to have been addressed through diplomacy and political negotiations was the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, which was ultimately addressed through the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. The US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, followed by its unilateral and unlawful re-imposition of extraterritorial sanctions not only on Iran but also on any foreign company doing business with Iran, brought tensions back to centre stage in the region, leading to an unprecedented escalation that left the region on the brink of a major military confrontation, both in the summer of 2019 and in January 2020, after US president Donald Trump ordered the assassination of Iranian top General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq.

As new and old disputes and crises unfold in the region, there are also growing calls and demands for de-escalation. This would serve not only to address the root

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causes of ongoing disputes but also to bring stable peace and security to a region which can truly be considered as the most internationalised in the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

regional mechanisms, in an effective and functional way to keep them out of the realm of confrontation.

The concept of “understanding” is crucial in explaining the origins of the current situation.² Almost every conflict has started with assumptions, by both inside and outside players, which have often turned into self-fulfilling prophecies. These inaccurate assumptions have ultimately led to poor concepts and misleading analyses concerning surrounding circumstances. The natural consequence has been erroneous recommendations and destructive policies, and a region defined by war and conflict over the course of the past decades, including the Iraq–Iran war, the US wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, the catastrophic and tragic situations in Syria and Yemen, and of course the multi-layered confrontation between various players with US–Iran tensions at their core.

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

The dichotomy of *ideas* versus *realities* should also be taken into account to understand the current state of affairs. This huge gap between idea and reality explains why almost all mega plans for the region have failed during the past few decades. There are four problems that can, in part, explain why the region is in chaos:

- *Cognitive problem*: This mainly entails the zero-sum mentality and the policy of exclusion pursued by major regional as well as extra-regional powers. This

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

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

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

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

problem in the cognitive map of decision makers and leaders has been, and still is, the root cause of the majority of past confrontations, unsettled disputes and unsuccessful attempts for an inclusive regional arrangement.⁶ This is a mentality according to which win-win solutions are not considered an option, and therefore there has been an active policy of excluding the “other”. Sub-regional blocks and coalitions, even if shaky like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or ad-hoc and opportunistic like the ones that emerged in Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya, have been established to oppose the “other”.

- *Structural mistrust and divergent contexts*: This problem is very much interconnected with the cognitive problem and is derived from, and added to, the lack of regional dialogue, regional working relations and regional cohesion. As such, the region is facing a deep problem of “othering”.⁷ This has led to antagonistic behaviours and endless rivalries between regional players.

- *Extra-regional politics of interests and interventions*: This problem includes great power politics, the exploitation of the region’s energy resources, billions of dollars’ worth of arms sales⁸ to the region and countless wars and conflicts, that combine to make a balance of power between different sub-regional blocs difficult. Because of this, the region has been held hostage to the power politics of major extra-regional forces and their direct and indirect interventions.⁹

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

These factors have gone hand in hand with more systemic realities such as weak or failed states trapped in identity and legitimacy crises, all resulting in structural chaos in West Asia.¹⁰ This structural chaos has been the result of various interconnected issues on the ground, including the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian

⁶ Michael J. Shapiro and G. Matthew Bonham, “Cognitive Process and Foreign Policy Decision-Making”, in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 1973), p. 147-174.

⁷ Timur Kuran, “The Roots of Middle East Mistrust”, in *Project Syndicate*, 8 July 2016, <https://prosyn.org/yAAkCRh>.

⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Global Arms Trade: USA Increases Dominance; Arms Flows to the Middle East Surge, Says SIPRI*, 11 March 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/node/4770>.

⁹ Yuqin Liu, “On the Great Power Intervention in the Middle East Upheaval and Political Trend in the Middle East”, in *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2013), p. 1-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19370679.2013.12023221>; Fred H. Lawson, “Rethinking U.S. Intervention in the Middle East”, in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999), p. 385-389.

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

conflict and the large-scale human tragedies that are still unfolding in Syria and Yemen; the normalisation of violence and war in the region through the constant use of naked force – particularly after the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; the barbaric brutality of terrorist groups such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); and the militarisation and securitisation of the region with hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of military equipment being poured into the Middle East by various actors.¹¹

From Tehran's point of view, fundamental changes need to be adopted on both cognitive as well as practical levels in order to advance new regional mechanisms for cooperation. Two packages which reflect such cognitive and policy ingredients, and can be examples of blueprints for a broader regional framework, include the JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, and Iran's proposed HOPE initiative, which itself is based on this understanding that creating and establishing a regional arrangement in Iran's immediate neighbourhood is a first necessary step towards a broader regional architecture for the MENA region.

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

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

Since the revolution, Iran has consistently rejected the use of force against any country or government in the region, a policy that has roots in both the "idea" of the revolution, as a rejection of all forms of dominance, as well as the real threats the Islamic Republic faced during its early days due to the antagonistic policies pursued by major powers. This rejection of the use of force is reflected in Iran's opposition to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, US interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan (even though Washington removed two important anti-Iran elements), Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and even Saudi attempts to forcefully change Qatari leadership through its blockade. Iran has also been consistent in its

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

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

policy of rejecting regime change in Syria or elsewhere in the region.

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

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

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

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

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

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

President Rouhani, a moderate politician with detailed knowledge and a long history of dealing with Iran's nuclear file as the chief negotiator with the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) between 2003 to 2005, came to office with a very nuanced understanding about the need to normalise Iran's position in the international system and to neutralise those major threats. For this, he decided to dismantle the main engine used by the US and its allies to securitise Iran. The first step was to select a top internationalist diplomat as his foreign minister and chief negotiator. The negotiations between Iran and P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), coordinated by the European Union, immediately started and many rounds of talks took place in Geneva, Vienna and elsewhere. An interim agreement signed in November 2013¹³ ultimately led to the landmark Iran nuclear deal, or the JCPOA, on 14 July 2015.

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

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

The JCPOA was a unique moment of mutual recognition between Iran and the major international powers. Iran recognised the P5+1 as a suitable representative of the multipolar order to make a deal with on such an important issue, while its counterparts recognised not only Iran's right to peaceful nuclear programme but also the Islamic Republic as a partner. The JCPOA was successfully de-securitising Iran. In return, Iran accepted unprecedented non-proliferation standards and a rigid inspection regime, of course within a time-limited framework. This two-way street that is deliberately mapped in the JCPOA, and is embedded in the UNSC Resolution 2231, was unanimously adopted on 29 March 2016.¹⁴

Further to the above-mentioned systemic aspect, other dimensions of Iran's nuclear deal gave rise to hopes that this agreement could be a departure point for a more inclusive rapprochement between Iran and its neighbours. Foreign Minister Zarif in a tweet called the deal a base for a broader rapprochement: the "Iran deal

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

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

is not a ceiling but a solid foundation. We must now begin to build on it.”¹⁵ The regional aspect of the deal was even mentioned in the preface of the JCPOA, which noted that the “JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security” and underlined how “Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons”.¹⁶

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

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

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

As a result, Iran was left with no option but to react. This reaction came after Tehran pursued a one-year policy of “strategic patience” between May 2018, when the US withdrew from the JCPOA, until May 2019. During this period the Europeans promised to ensure Iran’s basic economic benefit and set up a special purpose vehicle to allow for EU–Iran economic relations by shielding these from the reach of the US sanctions. This vehicle, the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), was established in January 2019, but proved unable to perform its promised duties. Although it was supposed to facilitate “legitimate businesses” under the JCPOA between Iran and European counterparts, it failed even to facilitate business interactions for humanitarian goods such as food and medicine, apart from one limited transaction delivered in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran.¹⁷

¹⁵ See his Twitter account, 14 July 2015, <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/620946867371810816>.

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

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

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

While Iran remains committed to voluntarily implement the JCPOA's additional protocol and its robust verification regime, as confirmed by several reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),²⁰ on 8 May 2019 Tehran began to cease implementation of parts of its commitments under the JCPOA.²¹ These steps were implemented within the framework of the JCPOA's terms and conditions. The main logic behind Iran's decision was to give diplomacy a chance for a win-win solution and to save the deal. Iran thus took five carefully calibrated reductions, which are all reversible and do not imply new restrictions on the oversight work being conducted by the IAEA in Iran. These included reducing restrictions on enrichment capacity, the enrichment level, amount of enriched material and research and development activities.²²

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

The JCPOA was intentionally negotiated to address just the nuclear issue and not the security dilemma in the Middle East. The region, though, needs a broader, more comprehensive and inclusive arrangement. With this realisation, soon after

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

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

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

²¹ The newest IAEA reports indicate that Iran's decision to reduce its commitments under the JCPOA has been implemented (see IAEA, *IAEA Board Calls on Iran to Fully Implement Its Safeguards Obligations*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/node/83241>). The IAEA has called on Tehran to honour its safeguard obligations, given that Iran has limited IAEA access to two locations which, based on Israeli allegations, are related to the are related to the possible military dimensions file (known as PMD). Iran however strongly argues this issue is already concluded and solved under the JCPOA and mutual understanding between Tehran and the IAEA.

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

the JCPOA was signed and sealed Iran reached out to its Arab neighbours for such an architecture. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in April 2015, in an op-ed for the *New York Times*, tried to send a clear message to the region, stating that:

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

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

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

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

3.1 Trump and Iran: From maximum pressure to maximum failure

For at least four decades, the US has developed a Middle East policy²⁴ based on well-known principles such as providing full support to Israel, containing both Iran and Ba'athist Iraq, and securing the US's "vital interests" (such as preserving and securing the flow of oil, and preventing alternative forces – to wit, the Soviet Union or later Iran – from challenging the US and its allies). Starting from the Islamic Revelation in 1979 and the ensuing Iraq–Iran war, the US has maintained a constant focus on the strategic Strait of Hormuz area, pursuing an interventionist policy and establishing a string of military bases used to project Washington's influence into the area.²⁵

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

²³ Javad Zarif, "Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran", in *The New York Times*, 20 April 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>.

²⁴ Alireza Ahmadi, "What Should We Learn from 40 Years of U.S. Intervention in the Middle East?", in *Middle East Watch*, 14 January 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/node/41542>.

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

and secure sustainable strategic gains in the Middle East.

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

This is why many experts argue that, in contrast to previous US administrations, Trump has no clear strategy in the Middle East – that his administration, in fact, is entrapped in a kind of schizophrenia and oscillation in its foreign policy. This is true to some extent, but there is also strong evidence that the current US administration and its small but very influential foreign policy team have clear principles to follow in the region, namely: a) to kill the Iran nuclear deal,²⁸ to adopt an assertive policy against Tehran to contain it and work to actively exclude Iran from any possible and potential future regional arrangement; b) to provide unconditional support to Israel in order to create a new regional balance;²⁹ and c) to sell as much military equipment as possible to rich Arab allies in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.³⁰ These principles, which are interconnected to each other on different levels, have led the US to adopt a binary policy towards Iran of either capitulation and submission, or sanctions and confrontation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

definitely in the Persian Gulf.³¹

Against this backdrop, Washington is also trying to establish a new unprecedented balance in the region by fostering an Israeli-Saudi-UAE axis to confront Iran. It is in this context that Trump has enacted the US's traditional pro-Israel foreign policy orientation with further unconditional support for Israel's expansionist tendencies, as mirrored in his administration's "Deal of Century" on Israel-Palestine and many other unilateral decisions taken in Washington to back Netanyahu's aggressive policies. In this axis, Israel provides intelligence while Riyadh's function is to provide money and financial resources.³² This anti-Iran axis is also highly active inside the US. One example is the role of Israeli- as well as Saudi- and Emirati-funded lobbies and think-tanks in shaping US Middle East policies,³³ but with Trump, their influence, especially when it comes to Iran, has reached unprecedented levels.³⁴ Anti-Iran hawks, including Israeli and Saudi elements which are actively trying to disintegrate the "axis of resistance", have been able to artificially make Iran a profoundly significant issue for the US, and therefore Washington has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with this manufactured threat. This has led Washington to neglect ample opportunities for an inclusive solution that includes all regional stakeholders.

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

Driven by its obsession with Iran, the US has officially waged a full-fledged covert and overt economic and political war on the country. The logic is very similar to the one President Ronald Reagan adopted against the Soviet Union. While this historical analogy is for many obvious reasons naive and incorrect, Iran hawks

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

³² Sheikh Shabir, "Israeli-Saudi Axis: What Lies Behind?", in *The Geopolitics*, 12 January 2019, <https://thegeopolitics.com/?p=7628>.

³³ Morgan Palumbo and Jessica Draper, "How Saudis, Qataris and Emiratis Took Washington", in *Asia Times*, 10 June 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/how-saudis-qataris-and-emiratis-took-washington>.

³⁴ Jack Thompson, "Trump's Middle East Policy", in *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 233 (October 2018), <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/834f4615-d48f-44d6-b048-e932cb7c9572>.

³⁵ Robert Mackey, "Here's John Bolton Promising Regime Change in Iran by the End of 2018", in *The Intercept*, 23 March 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/23/heres-john-bolton-promising-regime-change-iran-end-2018>.

in Washington including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo,³⁶ Steve Bannon³⁷ and influential insider think-tanks such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and its director Mark Dubowitz³⁸ have all supported such parallels. In their misleading analogy, Trump is Reagan, Iran is the Soviet Union and the only way to confront Iran is to push it to the end of its tether in order to make it collapse.

The so-called maximum pressure campaign is also derived from the same policy that Reagan adopted against the Soviet Union, hoping to have the same result of regime change in Iran. The reality however is that Washington has achieved almost no success while constantly compounding the pressure on Iran.³⁹ For a credible evaluation of the success of any foreign policy strategy, it is crucial to evaluate its avowed objectives. Trump's main objectives for the maximum pressure policy were to: a) force Iran to withdraw from the JCPOA and get a "better nuclear deal"; b) dismantle Iran's missile and aerospace programmes; and c) put an end to Iran's active presence in the region – or as Iran understands it, demolishing the axis of resistance, which has served as the main obstacle to US and Israeli ambitions to dominate the region. In fact, none of these objectives have been achieved, meaning that the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy should be judged a failure.⁴⁰

On the nuclear file, Iran has resisted multiple US attempts to push it to withdraw from the deal and to accept negotiations for a new agreement. Contrary to what Trump expected, Iran has followed a step-by-step policy of reducing its commitments, while remaining within the framework of the JCPOA.⁴¹ In the meantime, Iran has rejected any bilateral negotiation with the US beyond the parameters of the nuclear deal, which has indeed been the ruling principle for Iran in engaging in other parties' initiatives, including the ultimately failed effort by French President Emmanuel Macron that was assayed in August–September 2019.⁴² In fact, by losing its leverage embedded in the JCPOA, the US now has less opportunity to get what it wishes from the other signatory parties to the agreement.

³⁶ Michael R. Pompeo, "Confronting Iran", cit.

³⁷ Mike Giglio, "Trump's New Iran Strategy, Inspired by the Cold War, Calls for 'Maximum Pressure'", in *BuzzFeed*, 25 September 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/trump-officials-are-reading-a-book-about-the-cold-war-for>.

³⁸ Mark Dubowitz, "Confront Iran the Reagan Way", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 July 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/confront-iran-the-reagan-way-1499197879>.

³⁹ Vali Nasr, "A New Nuclear Deal Won't Secure the Middle East", in *Foreign Affairs*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125614>.

⁴⁰ Kori Schake, "Trump's Iran Strategy Isn't Working as Well as He Thinks", in *The Atlantic*, 2 February 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/trumps-iran-strategy-doesnt-work-as-well-as-he-thinks/605947>.

⁴¹ "Iran Takes Final Step by Abandoning JCPOA Restrictions", in *IRNA*, 5 January 2020, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83622509>.

⁴² David Sanger, Steven Erlanger and Adam Nossiger, "France Dangles \$15 Billion Bailout for Iran in Effort to Save Nuclear Deal", in *The New York Times*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/middleeast/iran-france-nuclear-deal.html>.

On the missile and aerospace programmes, Iran has remained adamant that it will not slow down development, as these capabilities are crucial to its defence and deterrence. In this context it is worth remembering that other major players in the region such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess billions of dollars of advanced and sophisticated military equipment including offensive American and European missiles with a range of more than 2,500 kilometres. It is worth noting also that despite efforts by the US and its allies to show a relation between Iran's defensive military programmes and its aerospace projects, these streams remain fully separated. Iran has pursued its scientific aerospace projects based on previous indigenously developed plans that are aimed at responding to its civilian needs, including the placement of low-orbit satellites by space launch vehicles such as Simorgh and Safir.⁴³

On regional issues, the situation is no better for the US maximum pressure policy. In spite of all the sanctions and provocations, Iran still plays a central role in the region, particularly by engaging in efforts to help put an end to the crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon. Although Iran has a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, it has been ready to use its political, religious and political influence to facilitate crisis-solving processes in the region. If it were not for Iran's mediation, it is most likely that there would have been no power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah to formulate a unified government. In Iraq, the new cabinet under Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi was elected with great support from Tehran. There are similar situations in Syria and Lebanon, despite huge US and Israeli pressure.⁴⁴ In fact, regionally speaking, the result of Trump's maximum pressure policy is more crises and confrontations.

Tehran's response to Washington's new assertive policies and provocations can be categorised under three major strategy lines, each enacted within a specific time period: a) maximum resistance and strategic patience: from 8 May 2018 to 8 May 2019, when Washington announced its policy of zero-oil export from Iran, withdrawing limited waivers for oil imports from Iran that it had granted to a number of countries; b) measured push-back: from 8 May 2019 to 3 January 2020, when US forces assassinated General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's top military commander, in Baghdad; c) full push-back and firm response to any moves taken by the US against Iran, which started on 8 January 2020 when Iran launched a retaliatory missile attack against the US at the Ayn Al-Assad military base in Iraq.⁴⁵

⁴³ Rasanah, *Iran's Space Program: Timeline and Technology*, 29 April 2020, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/?p=7883>.

⁴⁴ Sequence of unrest and turmoil in recent months in Lebanon, aiming to introduce Iran and Hezbollah as the main source of problem for the country.

⁴⁵ "Iran Launches Missile Attacks on US Facilities in Iraq", in *Al-Jazeera*, 8 January 2020, <https://aje.io/fvcxz>.

As the US crossed all of Iran's red lines, Tehran decided to push back. Just after the US assassinated General Soleimani, Secretary of State Pompeo claimed that the entire strategy has been one of "deterrence".⁴⁶ If restoring deterrence was the genuine logic behind Trump's decision to assassinate Iran's top general on the soil of another country, then it failed, as US forces were targeted by Iran's missiles in a retaliatory strike. Iran decided to respond openly to make the credibility of its threats of force crystal clear, and also to show that it has the capability and the will to target US vulnerabilities in the region.⁴⁷ On the other hand, instead of dominating the escalation, as the literature of deterrence suggests, the US called Iran's response calibrated and measured and even Trump tried to conceal the casualties in order to cool the situation.⁴⁸ This means that another round of escalations is quite probable, though from Iran's standpoint the retaliation to the US assassination of Soleimani helped restore Tehran's deterrence.

There are also those who argue that the US carried out the assassination based on an erroneous understanding that Iranian society is deeply divided, and that people and elites of Iran would not react to it. Trump and Pompeo's attempt to introduce General Soleimani as an enemy to the people of Iran, Iraq and the region was a bold attempt in this direction. To the contrary, however, not only did the assassination bridge the gaps inside Iran but it also showed to what extent Trump and his administration are isolated inside and outside of Iran. Unprecedented public funeral processions were held for General Soleimani, from Iraq to India and South America, and millions of people poured out in the streets in Tehran to say farewell.

Washington has implemented all these policies hoping to change Iran's strategic decision-making calculus or bring the Iranian people to revolt against their government. The US, however, has failed on all of these accounts. In fact, although the Iranian people have been suffering greatly and there have been isolated instances of social unrest and protests, mainly due to price hikes and economic problems, these never developed into a nation-wide, sustained uprising. The US also failed to change the strategic calculus of Iran's leadership, as Iran has not capitulated to US pressure, or abandoned its friends in the region.

Although US policies have harshly targeted ordinary Iranian people, as time passes and the economy absorbs the shock, Iran has become more self-confident,

⁴⁶ Michael R. Pompeo, *The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example*, speech at The Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Palo Alto, 13 January 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-restoration-of-deterrence-the-iranian-example>; "Pompeo Says Killing of Suleimani Is Part of 'Bigger Strategy' to Deter US Foes", in *The Guardian*, 14 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/d4yc4>.

⁴⁷ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Supreme Leader Says Missile Strike a 'Slap on the Face' for U.S.", in *Reuters*, 8 January 2020, <https://reut.rs/2T2wf4M>.

⁴⁸ Omar Ahmed, "The Truth about US Casualties in the Iran Attack Is Slowly Coming Out", in *Middle East Monitor*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200124-the-truth-about-us-casualties-in-the-iran-attack-is-slowly-coming-out>.

seeking to seize this opportunity to build a resilient and oil-free economy.⁴⁹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast for 2020 showed that Iran's economy not only has absorbed the shock imposed by US sanctions, but also has been able to exit recession: from -9.46 real GDP growth in 2019 to at least +0.5 GDP forecast for 2020. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has significantly changed this outlook, with Iran's GDP predicted to contract by -6 per cent in 2020, according to IMF forecasts from June 2020.⁵⁰

Iran was the second major country to be hit hard by the pandemic after China, and it soon developed into a major social, political and economic problem. Iran was able to tackle the pandemic thanks to its strong health network and infrastructure, but has been hugely affected by the economic implications, while the US maximum pressure campaign continued throughout the crisis, limiting humanitarian assistance Tehran needed the most.

What is quite obvious is this reality that the US has to learn how to deal with a new Middle East that it cannot dominate anymore as the sole hegemon. It has to either compete or cooperate with the rising regional powers such as Russia, China and Iran, and to accept the new balance of power. The political, economic and cultural East is a reality in the region that Washington should recognise. This is partly because of Washington's overuse of its hard and military power in the region, especially from 2001, but also due to a new awareness in the region that the time for hegemony, imposed by anybody or any country, is past. The US is no longer able to impose its will on the region unconditionally. The region now is a multipolar mess of conflictual and offensive balancing.

3.2 Russia: A rising power in the Middle East

Russia has always kept a certain level of interaction with countries in the MENA region. However, its 2015 decision to support the Syrian government in the fight against extremist groups, in conjunction with Trump's impulsive regional policies, has provided a golden opportunity for Moscow to regain its lost influence and leverage. Although Russia's policies in the Middle East have their own historical explanations and roots, it is clear that the Kremlin is playing high to advance its interests in different parts of the region – including the Persian Gulf, where Russia was a total outsider before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Syria was the gateway for Russia to re-engage in the strategic equilibriums of the MENA region. It was a miniature world war in which almost all major global and regional players were involved. In all likelihood most experts and probably

⁴⁹ "Rouhani's Government Broke Mosaddegh's Record in an Oil-free Economy" (in Farsi), in *IRNA*, 4 July 2020, <https://www.irna.ir/news/83843121>.

⁵⁰ IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update*, June 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>. See also "IMF: Iran Economic Growth to Reach 3.1 Percent in 2021", in *Financial Tribune*, 15 April 2020, <https://financialtribune.com/node/102866>.

even decision makers in Moscow were not anticipating that Russia's then modest involvement in Syria would bring such strategic triumphs for Russian policy in the region. Although Russia and Iran had cooperated to avoid the collapse of the Syrian state, the 2015 Syria operation soon became a strategic asset for Russia to show how reliable Moscow is in defending its allies.⁵¹

Since then, Russia has been able to successfully expand its reach in the region, both horizontally and vertically. It has access to all the capitals, most of which are involved in direct and indirect confrontations – a reality that no one could have imagined before 2015. Moscow has also played a relatively successful broker role in various regional crises, from Yemen to Syria. Its stable, working and expanding relations with all the major stakeholders, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and even Turkey, in spite of bilateral ups and downs, as well as non-state actors from Hezbollah to Houthis, have allowed Russia to position itself well in the region. Russia's regional role should not be exaggerated, but its growing influence is a fact.

The Persian Gulf region has long been a geopolitical attraction for Russia but the Cold War prevented Moscow from gaining access to this sub-region. Except for Iraq and to some extent Pahlavi's Iran, during Soviet times and even before, there were very limited interactions between Moscow and GCC littoral states, especially with the newly independent Arab states of Saudi Arabia, established in 1932, Kuwait in 1961, and Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Bahrain in 1971.⁵²

Even in the 1990s, relations remained cold as they were subject to highly political and national security issues such as conflicts over Saudi and Emirati financial support for the Chechen separatists or their involvement in the Balkan crisis. Trends have changed gradually since the 2000s, as Russia assumed a more reconciliatory tone and behaviour towards the US and its allies, including states in the Arabian Peninsula.⁵³ Relations increased in the wake of the Saudi King's official visit to Moscow in 2003 and Putin's response in 2007, followed by Russian visits to the UAE and Qatar. King Salman's 2017 visit to Russia and dozens of concluded bilateral agreements, including but not limited to a 3 billion dollars' arm deal, a 1 billion dollars' investment agreement in Russia and a 1.1 billion dollars' agreement on a petrochemical factory in Saudi Arabia undertaken by the Russian Sibir Energy⁵⁴ – all are indications of how Moscow is expanding its relationships in the region. Recent developments tied to the advent of COVID-19 and the Russian-

⁵¹ For more in-depth analysis see: Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria", in *CSIS Briefs*, July 2019, <https://www.csis.org/node/53383>; Michel Duclos, "Russia and Iran in Syria. A Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?", in *Atlantic Council Issue Briefs*, June 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=129994>.

⁵² Ali Akbar Jokar, "Russia's Relations with Persian Gulf Southern States: Focus on Saudi Arabia", in *IPIS Topics and Regions*, June 2020, <https://ipis.ir/en/subjectview/598115>.

⁵³ Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None", in *Carnegie Papers*, October 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/80233>.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Soldatkin and Katya Golubkova, "Russia, Saudi Arabia Cement New Friendship with King's Visit", in *Reuters*, 5 October 2017, <https://reut.rs/2xY6DcZ>.

Saudi disagreements on oil prices and outputs indicate that increased cooperation between Russia and states in the Arabian Peninsula, especially Saudi Arabia, may witness unexpected rifts due to diverging viewpoints on hydrocarbon issues and the US factor.

Russia's collective security concept for the region, presented in mid-July 2019, should be seen and explained in such a context of increased Russian interest in the region, but it is equally important to understand how Tehran perceives Moscow's new policies. Iran and Russia share not only borders but common interests and concerns at the regional and international levels. Russia has gradually but deeply turned into a strategic partner for Iran on significant issues directly related to Iran's national interest, from the nuclear file to resisting US unilateral sanctions imposed on both Tehran and Moscow and, more importantly, on number of regional issues including Syria and Afghanistan. Of course, bilateral relations have not been without challenges, but the two capitals have managed their differences to minimise divergence.

Against this backdrop, Iran supported Russia's initiative for security arrangements in the region when Moscow first introduced the proposal.⁵⁵ Russia announced its proposal in mid-July 2019, when tensions in the Strait of Hormuz had reached unprecedented levels. It soon became clear that this was an updated version of an older security concept for the area. In his remarks at the Valdai International Discussion Club in Moscow, Putin tried to distance his country from a perception advocated by some European and US experts that the Russian initiative is a time-serving and advantage-seeking measure. Instead, he argued that the initiative aims to launch a long-lasting, step-by-step and comprehensive process that would enable all parties, with no exclusions, to have their voices heard:

let me remind you that this [creation of an organisation to provide security in the Persian Gulf] was Russia's logic this July, when it presented the concept of providing collective security in the region. Western countries, Russia, China, the US, the EU, India and other interested countries could join as observers.⁵⁶

The Russian initiative⁵⁷ is inclusive and tries to include all stakeholders, even those who are not at the core such as India, but it is still mainly focused on the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.⁵⁸ Although supported by China,

⁵⁵ "Tehran Welcomes Russia's Concept for Persian Gulf Security - Iranian Foreign Minister", in *Sputnik News*, 2 September 2019, <https://sptnkne.ws/9C2P>.

⁵⁶ Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, *Dimensions of Russian Security Plan in Persian Gulf*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.scfr.ir/en/defense-security/113909>.

⁵⁷ For the text see: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

⁵⁸ Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", in *Valdai Club Expert Opinions*, 6 August 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/security-in-the-gulf-area-russia-s>

the initiative was not well received by most of Europe and the US.⁵⁹ As the United States and the United Kingdom had proposed their own plans for the Hormuz area, which were not embraced by other European countries, they tried to ignore the Russian proposal. EU members including France and Germany also failed to respond decisively. The littoral states by contrast either welcomed the proposal, as Iran and Oman did, or avoided rejecting it, as the Saudis and Emiratis did. In addition, it appears that, as the Russian initiative includes both national states as well as a few weak and divided regional organisations such as the GCC and the Arab League, the proposal does not reflect the new power relations and realities of such organisations.

It should be highlighted here that the Russian proposal was not fundamentally different from the comprehensive solution Iran was looking for, but Iran had decided to develop its own initiative to address the issue from a homegrown perspective, an initiative which it later introduced and coined as the Hormuz Peace Endeavour – HOPE.

4. Iran's neighbourhood policy: HOPE for a strong region

The notion that the only way to achieve peace and stability in the region is through the rule of "strongmen" is widely embraced by senior experts and intellectuals in and beyond the Middle East.⁶⁰ The region has for decades had different types of strongmen and yet peace remains distant and insecurity widespread. Based on this reading, Iran understood it was time to propose new approaches and frameworks, ranging from the concept of a "strong region", to Iran's "security networking" proposals and finally its most recent HOPE initiative.

The key ingredients of such frameworks are common knowledge. They first include a belief in inclusive political solutions to the region's problems, from Syria to Yemen; second, they embrace diplomacy and dialogue based on mutual respect and equality among participants; third, a recognition of mutual and collective rights and responsibilities; and fourth, the mobilisation of political will to reach mutually and collectively acceptable solutions based on a win-win approach, recognising that no party can gain security at the expense of the insecurity of others.

Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was the first to introduce the concept of a strong region in the Hormuz area and its immediate neighbourhood. In his remarks

new-initiative.

⁵⁹ Abhishek G. Bhaya, "China Backs Russian Plan for 'Collective Security' in Persian Gulf", in *CGTN*, 26 July 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-26/China-backs-Russian-plan-for-collective-security-in-Persian-Gulf-IDEJRWKHLy/index.html>.

⁶⁰ Sam Sasan Shoamanesh et al., "Whither Regional Security in West Asia?", in *Global Brief*, No. 24 (Summer/Fall 2019), p. 60-61, <https://globalbrief.ca/?p=17602>.

at the Raisina conference in New Delhi in January 2019,⁶¹ he elaborated on the characteristics attributed to a strong region: a) political and territorial stability, and also reliance on the populace as the source of legitimacy, security and prosperity; b) participation of all relevant regional countries in ensuring peace in the region through regional institutions, organisations or ad hoc arrangements; c) more confidence, more trade and more interaction between and among the countries in the region, than with external powers; d) economic relations and people-centred interactions, making any resort to war costly and untenable; and e) a regional culture that will place national security on a par with regional security.

Based on what was later described as a security network, all regional states (small or large) can interact on an equal footing, and jointly contribute to peace and stability for mutual and collective benefit. The concept of security networking ensures that diversity and differences – be they geographical, demographic, religious, cultural, developmental, human or natural resources – do not serve as a base for demonising “the other” or causing threat perception which itself can be used as a justification for exclusion. Those in the driver’s seat of this process should primarily be regional rather than extra-regional actors. The core of this concept is dialogue and the rejection of any form of dominance or hegemonic aspirations by any power.

These notions of security networking and a strong region were later incorporated into the idea of a Persian Gulf Regional Dialogue Forum under UN aegis⁶² and in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 598, which calls for a security arrangement among the littoral states of the region, and based on the Helsinki type of process that led to the establishment of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. During an interview at the Center on International Cooperation on 29 April 2015, Javad Zarif elaborated on the fundamental principles underpinning such processes in the Persian Gulf:

sovereign equality, independence, sovereignty, respect for borders, inviolability of international borders, non-interference in the internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes – you see the non-use (sic) of force that is unfortunately taking place. All of this would be the starting principles, as they used – in the Helsinki process they called them tickets; for you to enter this process, you need to accept these principles.⁶³

Yet, tensions kept escalating in the region. On 4 July 2019, the British Royal Marines forcefully stopped and seized an Iran’s oil tanker, the *Grace 1*, off the shore of Gibraltar. Iran called this a clear violation of international law and accused London

⁶¹ “Iran’s Zarif Offers Plans to Strengthen Region against West”, in *Tasnim News*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/01/09/1919362>.

⁶² Ayhan Simsek, “Iranian FM in Munich Proposes Regional Dialogue Forum”, in *Anadolu Agency*, 19 February 2017, <http://v.aa.com.tr/753652>.

⁶³ NYU Center on International Cooperation, *A Conversation with H.E. Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (transcript), New York, 29 April 2015, <https://cic.nyu.edu/events/conversation-he-dr-mohammad-javad-zarif-foreign-minister-islamic-republic-iran>.

of piracy and acting under US pressure. Two weeks later, Iran's navy detained the *Stena Impero*, a British-flagged vessel, in the Strait of Hormuz for "violating international regulations". It was the first time the UK was faced with such a bold response from Tehran. Iran released the British vessel after Gibraltar defied the US and the UK and released the *Grace 1*. Added to other incidents in the Strait of Hormuz, this confrontation turned into a new round of attempts by extra-regional actors such as the US, the UK and, as was previously explained, Russia to propose security arrangements for the Hormuz area.

Except for the Russian proposal, other initiatives, including the UK–US maritime effort in the area and even the French-led naval mission headquartered in Abu Dhabi, either directly or indirectly excluded Iran. The central problem of "othering" in this domain is the fact that none of these external actors can actually bring about an inclusive and comprehensive regional security arrangement for the area without regional buy-in.

As a country which has 1,500 miles of coastline, the Hormuz area and surrounding waters have always represented a red line for Tehran. For this reason, Iran has always rejected the heavy military presence of extra-regional powers including the string of US military bases as well as those of the UK and France. Iran, relying on its own resources, has always considered security and freedom of navigation in this body of water as a priority and an absolute responsibility.

Against this backdrop, and parallel to its efforts to defuse US threats and enhance its capabilities through military cooperation with countries such as China and Russia with which Iran held military exercises in December 2019, Tehran elevated its previous plans and concepts in order to introduce a homegrown endeavour for security in the Persian Gulf. As the only initiative originating from within the region, Iran's HOPE initiative represents a platform within which all stakeholders can be included and contribute to peace and stability of the region, while the role and interests of regional players remain central. In such a context, Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in his address to the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly officially introduced Iran's proposal as a coalition for hope: "I should like to invite all the countries directly affected by the developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the Coalition for Hope meaning Hormuz Peace Endeavor".⁶⁴

On 14 October 2019, President Rouhani sent a letter to all Arab littoral states outlining the main ingredients of the HOPE proposal, while officially inviting them to join the proposal. Countries such as Oman, Qatar, Iraq and Kuwait welcomed the initiative, while others, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, did not openly reject it.

⁶⁴ UN News, *At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'*, 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>.

Iran was smart to show its flexibility and prudence by naming its proposal the “Hormuz” initiative, sticking to a name which is shared by everybody inside and outside the region. The Hormuz Peace Endeavour was born in such an atmosphere. In the same speech, President Rouhani outlined very briefly goals, objectives, principles and actions for the HOPE initiative, which in the following months were detailed by his foreign policy team.

The main principles of the HOPE initiative were not very different from Iran’s previous proposals but were articulated in a way that reflects the urgency of developing a new cognitive map for the region, outlining key concepts such as good-neighbourly relations; the UN Charter; sovereignty and territorial integrity; inviolability of international borders; peaceful settlement of disputes; rejection of the threat or use of force or participation in coalitions or alliances against each other; non-intervention in internal or external affairs of each state; mutual respect, interest and equal footing; and respect for sanctities, historical, religious and national symbols of states and peoples of a newly formed Hormuz Community.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The history of different regional arrangements around the world shows that no proposal or architecture has been perfect or universally welcomed when it was first announced. The departure point, though, has always been a shared political will, boosted by one or two regional players as power engines, to address common concerns and threats. The HOPE initiative is not an exception. It needs a shared political will and a plan of action to translate this will into real achievements and to accumulate the regional capacities and capabilities for common goals and objectives. It needs small but practical steps such as establishing joint task forces to develop: a) conflict prevention measures such as hotlines and early warning systems; b) conflict management measures such as inter-governmental direct communications and agreed protocols in the case of conflict; and c) conflict resolution measures such as outlined procedures and processes within the framework of a joint regional arrangement.

There are many deep-rooted conflicts and crises in the broader Middle East region, most of which have remained unsettled. Although there is ample hope for more regionalism and cooperation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, prospects for de-escalation and a comprehensive security arrangement remain somewhat unclear, especially given the US presidential election in November 2020 which is likely to be a determining factor.

Trump is still in office and may be re-elected, and because of his personal characteristics and rather impulsive foreign policy team, it is hard to predict if

⁶⁵ Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *FM Zarif’s Al-Rai Article on Hormuz Peace Endeavour*, 10 October 2019, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/544114>.

the US will adopt a more balanced, inclusive and win-win approach toward the region or will follow his current line of unilateral policies. The US has taken steps supposedly against Iran but actually with adverse and disastrous consequences for the region and arguably even for its own interests.

The Hormuz Peace Endeavour is representative of a hope for diplomacy to triumph, helping establish a blueprint for broader arrangements, should it be embraced by the regional as well as international players and powers. A new inclusive and comprehensive security arrangement is more urgent than ever, but must acknowledge new realities of the Middle East and the world system. History will judge if this will be another missed opportunity or if the stakeholders will finally come to the conclusion that the only way out of this catastrophe is to start an inclusive dialogue and unconditional cooperation with one another.

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