

The Quest to Launch Regional Integration Processes in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula

by Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai

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ABSTRACT

Given the consequences that security issues yield for the Middle East and beyond and in spite of the failures to date, a regional security process where stakeholders can engage with one another remains a relevant and timely approach, which would be needed to move out of the region's current cycle of instability. Based on the ongoing *Tafahum* project, a first step is to establish a shared understanding of regional security issues and what they entail before taking steps towards building a security "architecture" or "system". In addition, regional cooperation must be framed around both conceptual and operational baskets. A broad agreement on principles of conduct, a focus on regional economic development and the development of civil society interactions are seen as essential elements around which such baskets can be put together.

Gulf countries | GCC | Regional security

keywords

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by Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai*

Introduction

The Middle East is plagued by the absence of a forum where regional stakeholders can engage with one another institutionally or informally to advance ideas on de-confliction, confidence-building and regional cooperation. What may sound like a utopian idea for the whole region, could at least have been established in a sub-region of the Middle East – such as the Persian Gulf. While institutions like the League of the Arab States or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) do offer venues where exchanges and discussions can take place, they are both restricted in their membership and thus do not offer a platform where all regional actors can interact with one another. The regional stakeholders of what will be referred to in this paper as West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (WAAP)¹ have sent messages that regional de-escalation is of utmost necessity. But these messages are hardly ever inclusive in nature, are often ad-hoc, lack any sort of institutional backing or follow-up procedure, and are mostly noncommittal in that they are devoid of guiding principles or agreed-on procedures to follow up. This applies to both the regional actors themselves and to the external parties that are deeply involved in the affairs of WAAP, such as the United States or some European countries.

As a result, the term “regional security” remains a misnomer, as there simply exists no common understanding among regional as well as external actors of what a security process or framework in the Middle East in general, and in WAAP in particular, could or should look like. Instead, more conflictual aspects of international relations are witnessed, ranging from a balance-of-power approach to ambitions of hegemonic power projection that seek to impose rather than create

¹ This sub-region includes the six members states of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar) plus Yemen, Iran and Iraq.

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a certain order. These approaches have not only completely failed to bring about a more stable regional environment, but have also manifested a military paradigm based on mutual antagonism and deterrence.

The perennial cycle of violence that dominates the region continues to increase in terms of both frequency and intensity. In 2020, arguably more than ever before, the Middle East clearly sits on the brink of a wider break-down and even complete deterioration of what remains of its current order. In addition to domestic political systems that have witnessed their control evaporate as seen in places like Syria, Libya, Yemen and even Lebanon and Iraq, the situation on the ground is further aggravated by shifts in the international system, where traditional concepts of power are being redefined and multilateralism hollowed out to the point that the post-World War II construct of international organisations is losing its effectiveness. Having been badly scarred by its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States, the key external security player, is no longer able and willing to impose and/or invest in some sort of balance and order among the regional stakeholders. Even in economic terms, stability is evaporating, as the future of the oil-producing states is no longer assured in the context of the profound transformations of the global energy landscape, possibly to the point that the model of the rentier state will be coming to an end in the near future.

Given the stakes involved and the consequences that security issues yield for the region and beyond and in spite of the failures to date, it is nevertheless essential to undertake renewed efforts at outlining a prospective regional security *process*, rather than an *architecture*, that could offer an alternative path forward. The costs of not doing so are simply too prohibitive in full recognition that the continued insecurity in the Middle East in general, and WAAP in particular, has widespread consequences for most of the globe. This new attempt at outlining security imperatives and initiating processes of regional cooperation has become even more important in light of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in WAAP. The multi-layered crises that come with the coronavirus do however at the same time offer an opportunity to revisit concepts of security and their applicability to the region.

Hence, this paper lays out some concepts and ideas about the prospects of initiating a process towards regional cooperation and security. It will focus specifically on WAAP as a sub-region of the Middle East in which multiple critical triggers for an all-out escalation of conflict have become eminently apparent in recent years. The concepts, hypotheses and thoughts presented here are the result of the ongoing *Tafahum* project, a three-year initiative that pursues the aim of developing a “Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula”, designed and implemented by the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF).²

² The *Tafahum* project is supported by a grant from the German Federal Foreign Office. More information on the project can be found in CARPO website: *Tafahum*, <https://carpo-bonn.org/?p=4189>.

1. Challenges and opportunities for regional security

The lack of a security system in the Middle East is not due to the absence of political or academic proposals.³ Some of the ideas pertaining to the WAAP region go back to UN Security Council Resolution 598 of 20 July 1987, which ended the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and “requests the Secretary-General to examine, in consultation with Iran and Iraq and with other States of the region, measures to enhance the security and stability of the region”.⁴ A more recent example of a state-led initiative is the Hormuz Peace Initiative (HOPE) put forward by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the 2019 UN General Assembly meeting.⁵ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had presented its very own Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region a few months earlier.⁶ Yet, despite all of these well-intentioned ideas, regional multilateralism has never been seriously attempted. In turn, the numerous initiatives for new regional cooperation concepts remain exclusively on the drawing board and are never followed up.

What has been missing in past approaches is a proper starting point around which momentum towards a potential security process can be generated. In this context, a look at other attempts at establishing security processes in other parts of the world is warranted. What such an analysis reveals is that the path-dependency of security-political arrangements that have been developed in other instances cannot be underestimated, be it the 1973–75 Helsinki Process that led to the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe and subsequently (in 1995) the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the 1967-founded Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its various multilateral forums in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These most prominent examples were developed according to specific procedures and shaped over time by particular political and strategic interests, institutional developments as well as cultural conditions. This made it possible that even at the height of the Cold War there was a willingness to adopt a different approach to relations through dialogue, multi-relationships, outreach and genuine deliberations on sensitive issues. The lessons from each of these experiences are thus invaluable when reflecting about the components of a regional security process in the WAAP region.

³ See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East. Issues and Options*, October 2011, <https://www.sipri.org/node/1828>; International Crisis Group (ICG), “The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown”, in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 212 (27 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832>.

⁴ See UN Security Council, *Resolution 598*, 20 July 1987, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/137345>.

⁵ President Hassan Rouhani’s full remarks can be found in UN General Assembly, *Official Records, 74th Session, 5th Plenary Meeting (A/74/PV.5)*, New York, 25 September 2019, p. 16-19, <https://undocs.org/en/A/74/PV.5>.

⁶ Full text can be found at: 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.

1.1 Developing a path forward

In the current regional context, it is seemingly impossible to find a way to translate past models and the current proposals mentioned above into concrete steps and to successfully operationalise their associated concepts. The lack of trust among regional and external parties combined with the overlapping ideological conflicts and the tremendous scope of domestic challenges, not least because of the COVID-19 pandemic, severely limit the capacities, capabilities and courage of decision makers.

Yet, there is broad recognition that the current state of affairs the region finds itself in is unsustainable. Not only does the region want a way out of its present dilemma simply because the trajectories of anticipated outcomes are so uncertain, but there is a growing awareness that competition among actors has at this stage produced no real winners and lots of losers. The latest initiatives, such as the Middle East Strategic Alliance or, more importantly, the Abraham Accords, a declaration presented in the light of “peace” and “normalisation” between Israel and a number of Arab states, are exclusive in nature and, therefore, beneficial to some while being directed against others – in this case Iran. Such arrangements can only serve short- to mid-term goals of actors involved while not contributing to inclusive long-term regional stability and peace. Given that continuing the current path weakens everyone in the end, there is a growing sense among stakeholders consulted by the authors of this paper that security is indivisible among regional neighbours. Within the context of such small glimmers of hope shaping a greater shared outlook of regional peace and stability, efforts must now be directed at defining the actual shape and practical means of turning this thinking into an actual cooperative process.

1.2 Linking domestic challenges with regional dynamics

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the numerous security challenges that exist in the region, which hold implications for peace and security beyond the region itself. On the domestic level, all of the states of the WAAP region are faced with issues related to economic development and growth, a large youth segment and associated employment issues, and weak governmental capacity in designing and executing state responses.⁷ While the member states of

⁷ For some insights into challenges related to economic development see the Baker Institute website: *Political Economy of the Arab Gulf*, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/political-economy-arab-gulf>; Karen E. Young, “Gulf Economic Policy Tracker”, in *AEI Multimedia*, 13 September 2019, <https://www.aei.org/?p=1008530334>; Bijan Khajepour, “Iran Turns to Bonds to Solve Budget Crisis”, in *Al-Monitor*, 3 June 2020, <http://almon.co/3d2v>; Robert Mogielnicki, “Oman’s Economic Reforms Struggle to Keep Pace with Mounting Challenges”, in *AGSIW Blog*, 22 October 2020, <https://agsiw.org/omans-economic-reforms-struggle-to-keep-pace-with-mounting-challenges>; Ahmed Tabaqchali, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Iraq’s Political Class’ Dilemma between Budget Realities and Protestor Demands”, in *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 11 March 2020, <https://wp.me/p3Khxv-2jj>; Rethinking Yemen’s Economy website: <https://devchampions.org>.

the GCC are in a better position economically compared to Yemen, Iraq and Iran, the uncertainty about the future of oil and the severe economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the need for widespread diversification processes that undoubtedly will challenge state–society relations and the current social contracts in place. In the meantime, Iran is suffering under the impact of the most stringent sanctions regime in place in history, Iraq is only slowly re-emerging from almost two decades of internal unrest and Yemen is mired in a devastating civil war that is further fuelled by external involvement. The bottom line in these cases is that domestic challenges cannot be resolved until sustainable and adequate levels of stability are assured and that such stability is unlikely if the present economic difficulties and inequalities remain. Any approach to a regional security process must therefore include ways in which access to sustainable economic development can be provided.

Much of the current difficulty arises as issues need to be solved at the national, regional and international levels concurrently. While tensions between regional forces have been a consistent theme for the past decades, the environment as of late has seen a further deterioration, evidenced by seizures of and attacks on tankers in spring and summer 2019 near the coasts of the United Arab Emirates and the strategic Strait of Hormuz,⁸ the September 2019 missile and drone strike against Saudi oil installations (all attributed to Iran or its proxies),⁹ and the killing by the United States of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in January 2020. In response, all parties further entrenched themselves in their positions, thus exacerbating the perennial cycle of violence, increasing the chances of more widespread conflict and endangering the region and its resources.

In the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic has begun to impact regional dynamics in WAAP. The predating lack of regional solidarity and limited cooperation was initially evident as each country became primarily focused on its own concerns closer to home. Despite the acknowledgement that the pandemic represents both a shared challenge and an opportunity across the region, the lack of widespread social capital to create a sense of “togetherness”¹⁰ among the people of the region and a willingness to fight the virus collectively has largely remained prevalent. This situation underlines the urgent need for a new mindset that reassesses the limited cooperation in place and focuses on better coordination in terms of creating new contingency plans in the region. As explained below, this basically means an agreement on a set of principles that can guide regional relationships in the near future. It is in this context that the region is very much at a crossroads in terms of the future direction towards a more unified or a more fractured WAAP.

⁸ See Patrick Wintour, “A Visual Guide to the Gulf Tanker Attacks”, in *The Guardian*, 14 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/bkt58>.

⁹ See Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, “Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran”, in *The New York Times*, 14 September 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2ZSGxbH>.

¹⁰ Messages of solidarity in the framework of the *Tafahum* project compiled in this thread on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CARPObonn/status/1240680988730105857?s=20>.

1.3 A vacuum of power or a vacuum of principles?

The above situation underscores the fact that regional actors in WAAP are clearly caught in a security dilemma – the situation whereby reciprocal expectations of each other’s malevolent intentions trigger self-perpetuating competition – and that given current conditions they are unlikely to find an escape on their own. The role played by a variety of external actors in regional matters, with the United States at the forefront, has made breaking out of the current dilemma even more difficult. As it stands, the United States under the administration of President Donald Trump has abandoned any efforts at promoting regional security and has instead adopted a confrontational zero-sum game approach vis-à-vis Iran. The decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the landmark nuclear deal agreed on by Iran and the US along with Europe, Russia and China in 2015, left the single recent attempt to resolve a critical regional issue hollowed out. In this context, the United States continues to re-evaluate its position in the Middle East and has begun to pass the baton to its regional allies.¹¹ Given that the GCC states are, however, unable to exert the kind of power and influence that can provide for security and stability, the WAAP region is witnessing intensified competition from other powers such as Russia, China and some European states, which further complicates the current situation. Ultimately, the role of external powers in regional affairs needs to be better regulated to ensure that regional states stay at the forefront in taking care of their security affairs.

In light of this complicated outlook, chances to consider a different approach appear to be relegated to the bin of wishful thinking. Yet, the year 2020 has provided some developments that could potentially be acted upon and open the path to a different and more positive way forward. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly underlined the need for more intense efforts at de-escalation combined with efforts at promoting greater regional cooperation. First, some steps have been taken and have included calls for easing tensions and lowering the belligerent rhetoric from regional parties at least temporarily as well as fostering the provision of humanitarian aid to Iran by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Kuwait. Second, the normalisation process between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other, further indicates a growing awareness of the unsustainability of the path that the region as a whole has found itself on and the need for new ideas and approaches.

What all of the above suggests is that given the current situation, the need for a regional security process remains urgent and an attempt for such a process should be launched sooner rather than later. The underlying thinking, development of concepts and initiatives, as well as outlining pathways towards this process are

¹¹ See Daniel Benaim, Kirsten Fontenrose and Becca Wasser, “The Future of the US Posture in the Gulf” (webinar), in *IISS Events*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/07/us-posture-in-the-gulf>.

tasks of scholars and researchers outside policy circles – so that when political leaders are ready for such process, concrete proposals to initiate the process are at hand. Without some form of regional mechanism to stem the current downward spiral, the strategic outlook will remain bleak, unpredictable and therefore worrisome. At the same time, it must be remembered that in the past de-escalation has worked and cooperation has existed as well, for example, during both the Iranian presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani or Mohammed Khatami and in terms of Iran–Saudi cooperation to mediate tensions in Lebanon following the country’s 2006 war.¹² It is in this context that the outline of a potential regional security process must be considered and put forward. Below is one possible approach to address these objectives.

2. Methodology: Developing a shared understanding (or *tafahum*)

The *Tafahum* project, implemented by CARPO and GRCF, has been designed with the core objective of outlining a roadmap towards a regional “understanding” (*tafahum*, an Arabic term that is also used in Farsi) regarding the core security concerns and interests of regional stakeholders in WAAP. We believe it is necessary to first establish this shared understanding on regional security and what it entails before taking initial steps towards a security “architecture” or “system”. In the current context, it is simply too soon to base current discussions on the outlines of a future system. Instead, the focus must be on initialising a process that brings regional parties together.

Yet, even a process is not simply a given or easily put together. It starts with engaging on more fundamental issues in terms of coming up with a sense of shared analysis. In that context, any form of regional dialogue can contribute towards establishing functional communication channels that lead to greater consensus about the understanding of the concepts of security and stability. A fundamental deficiency at the moment in the WAAP region is the virtual absence of interaction among all sectors of society especially among the regional stakeholders. Dialogue in this context must be seen as the core of the process. At the same time, avenues of dialogue must be guided by a structured approach. Dialogue for dialogue’s sake is a good start but unless given a sense of direction it can either lead nowhere or be counterproductive if certain expectations that are tied to the dialogue at the outset are not met. Dialogue must therefore be designed with the objective of reaching a broad agreement on the principles that should guide subsequent considerations.

These principles are considered the essential elements that form the structure of a successful approach. In the *Tafahum* project, such structuring principles include the following considerations:

¹² See Sara Masry, “Changing the Lens: Contemporary Saudi-Iran Relations and Potential Benefits of Détente”, in Maaïke Warnaar, Luciano Zaccara and Paul Aarts (eds), *Iran’s Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf. Common Interests over Historic Rivalry*, Berlin, Gerlach Press, 2016, p. 37-42.

- Security is a collective good based on interdependencies. Security must further be approached from multiple angles and incorporate political, social, economic as well as security and military perspectives. Ultimately, the objective must be to frame security around a consensus in which the parties themselves develop common views of regional challenges and solutions.
- Principles that need to guide a regional security process include such items as non-interference in political and territorial sovereignty; resolving disputes peacefully; no use of force or threat of the use of force (non-aggression pact); inclusiveness with equal status; and no preconditions for negotiations and talks.
- Effective security can only be accomplished by inclusion. It must bring together different levels of the regional states and their societies including government, the private sector and civil society. Overall, the “Common Security” concept developed by the Palme Commission on Disarmament and Security in 1982 applies in that neither side can achieve security at the expense of the other.¹³ There is a need to move from a zero-sum to a positive-sum mentality.
- Any process must recognise the need for the establishment of a system of regional dialogue. Ultimately, regional security requires that the process is led and owned by its regional actors. The process can only succeed if it brings in regional representatives, engages them in wide-ranging discussions and ultimately transfers ownership to them.
- Any process needs to be based on a multi-track approach with regard to actors and issues. At the actors’ level, three component parts must be included and their buy-in generated: officials/government (track 1/track 1.5), advisors and political influencers (track 2) and the societal realm in people-to-people relations (track 3) – the aim being a mix of professionals and practitioners. At the thematic level, numerous “hands-on” points of contact can be identified with an emphasis on functional and issue-oriented cooperation. The focus must be on a dual process with parallel efforts to create points of contact at the state and the civil society level. For a regional process of security coordination and cooperation to work, it simply cannot be solely top-down and must be interwoven in the three levels outlined above.
- The process towards regional security and cooperation has to be defined as a step-by-step one with sufficient flexibility to allow for changing dynamics and developments. Any such process should be designed as a long-term endeavour. The objective will be to work towards commonalities that incrementally promote cooperation, trust and transparency leading to a shared vision for the region. Where

¹³ Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, *Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1982. The commission was chaired by the former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme.

mistrust prevails, verification mechanisms and functional crisis-management and conflict-prevention measures can be set up.

- The ideational process is defined by combining short-term considerations as well as a long-term vision. The process should begin with deliberations on how to bring about an agreement on principles guiding the process, including the commitment to a peaceful resolution of disputes. This is a first step in order to tackle the existing mistrust between the two sides. The important element here is the need for such considerations to be gradually integrated into a wider system of collective security that creates interdependencies.

- External actors have a distinct interest in the security of West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, and thus should be accorded a role. While the process must be led by the regional actors, external players can (and should) act as conduits for establishing greater trust between the parties. If external parties cannot be won to support a process at the outset, they should be encouraged to show tolerance towards any effort and avoid direct interference. The role of key external actors such as the United States, European nations and the European Union, Russia and China must be seen as complementary to the idea of the process itself.

With the above principles in mind, *Tafahum* was designed to ensure several levels of impact:

- it works towards addressing, deconstructing and potentially changing existing threat perceptions and therefore introduces new approaches to regional security thinking;
- it initiates deliberations on the conceptual terms of the overall geopolitical debate over a regional security process in WAAP and the interaction between local, regional and external actors; and
- it strengthens the capacity and knowledge among policy makers and other sectors of the society about their respective neighbours and the region as a whole.

The outcome of the above is to build a process that focuses on moving towards common definitions where core motivations and key concerns are reflected in a framework of shared understanding and mutual interdependencies. Regional cooperation must be framed around both conceptual and operational baskets. While the leadership level is essential in order to get buy-in and eventual success, low-level politics is just as important as this fosters the essential debate around which actual cooperation is formed. In this context, any approach must also have transboundary partnerships and networks at its core as these play a key role in first reducing the current mistrust that exists and second fostering the necessary shared incentives to launch a regional security process and make it work.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The initial deliberations conducted in the framework of the *Tafahum* project suggest that a broad agreement on principles of conduct, a focus on regional economic development and the development of civil society interactions are essential elements around which a regional security process can be constructed. This means working on parallel tracks including the policy community (track 1/ track 1.5) and regional experts in different disciplines (track 2) as well as widening people-to-people contacts (track 3). The key is to try to find overlapping issues that can address both immediate security concerns while at the same time keeping long-term goals in mind. Some of the preliminary conclusions that can be mentioned here include:

Focus on comprehensive security: The globalisation process of the past decades has underlined the relationship that exists between the different levels whereby it is no longer possible to simply think of security from a narrow point of view. Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the common health threat, it has also stressed the fact that all countries in the region are exposed to an uncertain economic future, which stands at the heart of domestic instability. The same goes for climate change where solutions can only be found on a cross-border basis. While countries in the region are increasingly understanding these complexities and advancing some initiative on this front (for example, when it comes to renewable energy), more focus needs to be placed on the broader meaning of security in the 21st century.

Emphasise humanitarian cooperation: The region is facing a huge number of humanitarian challenges, particularly in existing conflict areas. The rising costs of conflicts and the uncertainty about the near-term future are starting to gain attention in the WAAP region. To mitigate some of these impacts as well as to combat the immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, an emphasis on the overall concept of human security as a common regional bond is thus seen as critical. Such a focus could not only alleviate immediate concerns and needs, it could also lead to fostering a common agenda in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

Use momentum and take advantage of opportunities: As stated above, the rising tensions in the region and the outbreak of the pandemic are both developments that actually open a few windows of opportunity that must be taken advantage of before they close once again. Rising tensions have led to various calls for de-escalation of current conflict situations, which can be used for further reflecting and for putting forward new concepts for regional interaction. There is definitely a need for a phased disentanglement from the current conflicts existing in the region. Similarly, COVID-19 underlines the necessity for forms of regional solidarity. One idea for getting a better handle on the pandemic is the establishment of a regional contact group in coordinating responses to the COVID-19 pandemic such as inter-regional and transnational cooperation of public authorities and the establishment

of regional economic integration mechanisms that could begin formulating coordinated responses to the ongoing economic crisis. In this context, another possibility is a regional fund for economic resilience. The key here is to be proactive and to use momentum when it presents itself. The failure to build on the nuclear deal with Iran in the immediate aftermath of its signing is an example of how quickly opportunities can dissipate.

Europe plays a key role: Europe continues to struggle to define itself as a serious geo-political actor – be it the European Union, the E3 or individual EU member states. At the same time, its lack of a pre-dominant military presence also provides Europe with significant credibility to promote a process of regional cooperation. In relation to a host of initiatives related to de-escalation, promoting economic development and integration, people-to-people relations and cultural exchanges – just to name the most obvious ones – Europe will be critical to outline some of the visions for a forward process. It also will be essential in producing levels of political momentum when it comes to convincing regional actors that a new approach to their interaction is required. Europe has to show the resilience needed for concerted and continued diplomatic engagement at all levels with regional actors. A regional contact group to foster multilateral dialogue in the region could be considered under European auspices – an idea that is currently fostered by the *Tafahum* project team – and should be complemented by other organisations. Europe here leads by example by showing the peace dividends that were able to be reaped after the devastating experiences of the two world wars. Europe also shows a path forward when it comes, for example, to putting the climate change challenge at the top of its agenda next to many other challenges that the European continent faces.

Education and capacity building are critical: While the region has made strides when it comes to educational development, there are still serious gaps. As such, education and capacity-building programmes are essential ingredients if regional actors are to be enabled to implement roadmaps to integration. Digitalisation, for example, is certainly a potential tool that could be utilised to support enhancing new forms of regional cooperation. Whether in the fields of encouraging greater cooperation to tackle environmental challenges, raising the expertise when it comes to post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes, promoting greater responsibility and integrity within the regional media environment, or encouraging interactions among start-up companies, the common thread that binds all these areas together is the need for continuous education and capacity-building. The more knowledge exists, the better this knowledge can be translated into forms of regional cooperation. This is also an area where Europe can play a determining role.

Elevate the role of women: The active involvement of women in the security sector debates in their entirety is still extremely limited. However, broadening the participation of women will allow for a wider and more accurate conceptualisation of the security challenges at hand. In order to increase women's involvement, capacity-building programmes to increase women's participation in the workforce

through the development of the necessary skills at the individual level should be considered within a process of changing attitudes and behaviours. If necessary, female quotas for participants in the various programmes could be introduced in order to ensure an appropriate involvement of female stakeholders. Particular focus should be given to training women in peace negotiations in order to enhance war prevention efforts. Important aspects to be considered in this regard include the need to involve women at the design stages of peace efforts for example in the development of a code of conduct or in terms of establishing the aforementioned capacity-building processes. The 20th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peace and security could serve as a point of departure for international outreach to female interlocutors in the region. Another key would be to create comprehensive political and legal frameworks that include national legislation, institutional guidelines, regional commitments and international norms to foster women's empowerment.

The above suggestions are initial elements that should be considered when approaching the issue of regional security in WAAP. A key is that competition itself must be framed as positive competition and that any issues of concern must be approached from the perspective of the benefits that inclusion can promote as opposed to the detrimental impact caused by exclusion. In this context, a multilevel and multilateral approach to regional security appears as the only way forward: it allows for overcoming existing forms of mistrust, it starts off the process of preventing a further downward spiral in regional relations and it establishes a basis upon which a more stable regional order can emerge. It is certainly not an easy endeavour. However, if structured correctly, it can go a long way towards launching and sustaining a regional security process in the WAAP region that thus far has continued to elude everyone.

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