STEPPING AWAY FROM THE ABYSS:
A Gradual Approach Towards a New Security System in the Persian Gulf

Edited by Luigi Narbone & Abdolrasool Divsallar

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Table of Content

Section 3: De-escalating Risks of Military Outbreaks

Section 4: Exploring the Potential of Non-Traditional Security Instruments

Conclusion

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INTRODUCTION

The Uncertain Future of the Security System in the Persian Gulf Region

Luigi Narbone & Abdolrasool Divsallar

A series of incidents have pushed the Persian Gulf region to the brink of war in recent years. In 2019, drones were used to attack Saudi Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia.[1] Although the Yemeni Houthi movement claimed responsibility for the attack, Saudi Arabian officials accused Iran of being behind it. In January 2020, the assassination of the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds force, Qasem Soleimani, by a US drone strike sharply escalated tensions in the region.[2] Tehran vowed revenge and Iranian missiles landed on US bases in Iraq. While tension remained high throughout 2020, actors exerted restraint and escalatory pushes were contained.

The US withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and pursuit of a 'maximum pressure strategy' between 2017 and 2020 had ignited the escalation. The US pressure resulted in the closure of diplomatic channels and in Iran increasingly relying on brinkmanship policies, as was the case of 2019 strikes on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. Iran also threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, which, given the importance of the strait to international oil supply, would have elevated the confrontation to a higher international level. In turn, the US has increased its naval presence in the Persian Gulf, making the risk of collision with the Iranian navy higher.[3] Although escalatory dynamics and inadvertent incidents have been reduced during the first months of the Biden presidency, the danger of war in the Persian Gulf remains high.

The instability deriving from the confrontational security system in the Persian Gulf goes well beyond the geographical sub-region. Conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Libya have evolved into regional and international battlefields, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Iran having played key roles in supporting non-state actors and taking advantage of opportunities to project influence. Through these actions, Middle Eastern conflicts have become intertwined with the security dynamics of the Gulf region[4] and a deteriorating Saudi-Iran relationship, US-Iran tensions and Saudi-UAE-Turkish competitions have become decisive fault lines. The geographical spread of Gulf politics to MENA and also to regions like the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa have fuelled sectarian identity politics, accelerated arms build-ups and threatened Western security interests.

While all the countries in the Gulf are wary of the catastrophic consequences that a war in the sub-region could have, they appear trapped in a highly risky vicious cycle of mutual suspicion, inflammatory rhetoric and tit-for-tat actions. These developments point to the urgency of setting up working regional security capable of managing these risks.

Key trends in the Gulf security environment

There is widespread consensus that the Persian Gulf security environment is fragile and incapable of ensuring peace and stability. The volatility that the region has witnessed over the past several decades is the result of several ongoing trends.

1   Hubbard, Ben, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed. "Two major Saudi oil installations hit by drone strikes, and US blames Iran." *The New York Times*, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html

2   Wemer, David A. "Soleimani killing threatens to break open US-Iranian conflict." *Atlantic Council*, 2020. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/soleimani-killing-threatens-to-break-open-us-iranian-conflict/

3   BBC. "Iran navy 'friendly fire' incident kills 19 sailors in Gulf of Oman." 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52612511

4   Gause III, F. Gregory. "Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war." *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, 2014. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/english-pdf-1.pdf

Three main factors should be highlighted: first, a systemic pressure caused by a changing balance of power, which in turn is the result of both shifts by external actors and the increasing weakness of some MENA countries; second, the conflicting threat perceptions and misperceptions of countries in the sub-region; and third, a changing geo-economic position of the region.

A new balance of power?

The most important factor in the changing role of external actors is widespread perceptions that the US role in the region is diminishing. For decades the US has acted as the key mediator and determining offshore balancer in MENA, together with being the main security provider for the Gulf Arab states. With the Obama administration, however, the US long-declared intention to gradually disengage from conflict-ridden MENA and to pivot to Asia started being actualised. The US has been unwilling to intervene to stop the war in Syria even when its own red line – the use of chemical weapons – has been crossed. It has also been reluctant to militarily support its regional allies in the face of perceived Iranian threats. The four years of chaotic transactional policies of the Trump administration did nothing but reinforce perceptions that gradual US withdrawal from the region was a reality in the making.

This process has been accompanied by change in the MENA balance of power. The vacuum left by the weakening of key Arab states – Iraq, Syria and Egypt – and the collapse of the traditional regional order after 2011 has led to a parallel growth in the roles of non-Arab powers: Turkey, Israel and Iran. At the same time, the MENA centre of power has increasingly shifted towards the Gulf region. The negotiation and signing of the historic JCPOA in 2015 was heralded by Rouhani's administration as a recognition of Iran's power, and the Gulf Arab countries have become increasingly conscious of the need to take security into their own hands. They have embarked on new proactive regional policies, moving away from traditional behind-the-scenes diplomacy and reliance on cash handouts, while espousing a fully-fledged anti-Iran power competition in MENA and beyond. In turn, Iran has increased its regional policies and strengthened its links with state and non-state allies, embarking on assertive brinkmanship policies.

These dynamics have provided new opportunities for international actors such as Russia and China to shape the balance of power. However, in the new emerging multipolar power system, no external or regional actor has shown itself to be capable or willing to mediate in local conflicts or to exert pressure on the main state and non-state players to reduce the level of violence. Meanwhile, the prospects of a regional hegemon emerging have become even more unrealistic.

Conflicting threat perceptions

Through the developments highlighted above, the intensification of Iran-Saudi rivalry has turned into a major driver of instability. The cold war between Riyadh and Tehran shows patterns similar to the US-Soviet Cold War and has been in existence since the Iranian revolution. In interacting with each other, both countries use foreign and defence policy tools, interference in internal affairs and inflammatory rhetoric to counter the moves of the other. They both pursue zero-sum policies to achieve balance-of-power goals. Classical sources of threats based on Iran's demographic and geostrategic superiority vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and on important imbalances in military capabilities between the two countries loom large in the background. However, it is the perception of threats to regime stability and the appeal of trans-border political identities and ideologies that play a significant role in fuelling the power competition.[5]

The 1979 revolution marked the beginning of a fundamental transformation of Iranian foreign policy. While Iran's regional role in pre-revolution times was characterised by being a centrepiece of US anti-Soviet strategy, Iran's post-1979

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5   Gause III, F. Gregory. "Threats and threat perceptions in the Persian Gulf region." *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2. 2007: 119-124.

interventions started to be defined by a mix of Islamic and nationalistic causes. Iranian leaders' calls to export the revolution posed an existential threat to the Gulf monarchies, whose leaders were depicted by Tehran as illegitimate, corrupt and stigmatised by being allied with the US. Shia Iran was also perceived to be a challenge to Saudi Arabia's traditional legitimacy as the protector of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. This resulted in an ontological insecurity for Saudi Arabia, leading the Kingdom to reposition its identity from being a leader of the Muslim world to focusing more on its Sunni identity.[6] It also reoriented Saudi regional policy towards opposing Iran. Strong anti-Iran objectives, for instance, prompted Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies to create the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organisation aimed at promoting regional integration in the Arabia peninsula.

Iran's policies toward Saudi Arabia fall to a large extent under the Islamic Republic's foreign policy principle of adjusting its power resources to shifting threats.[7] Since the revolution, Iran has been the target of regime-change threats, thus mirroring Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions. While Tehran may have provoked its Arab neighbours with attempts to internationalise the revolution, the Arab states' anti-Iran alliances and support for anti-revolutionary forces contributed to the Iranian threat perception. The trauma of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88) was one of the main episodes shaping Iran's feeling of insecurity. Iraq's attack on Iran resulted in one of the longest and bloodiest wars of the twentieth century, with Baghdad enjoying the support, both financially and with weapons, of many international players and of most Arab states, with a particularly important role played by Saudi Arabia.

More recently, the Saudi-Iranian confrontation has assumed stronger geo-political and geo-strategic connotations. The idea that the balance of power in the Gulf was tipping in favour of the other side has intensified threat perceptions in both capitals, pushing them to embark on policies to roll back the advances of the rival. In Riyadh, Iran's advances in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq have fostered a perception that Teheran is pursing aggressive policies aimed at encircling Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf countries.[8] The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which eliminated a traditional geopolitical competitor of Iran, allowed the emergence of a new source of threat: the pro-Iranian Shia political class. Saudi reacted by freezing its relationship with Iraq, which has only recently witnessed a gradual rapprochement. The uprising in Bahrain, where a Shia majority protest movement took to the streets to demand wider political participation, was again seen in Riyadh as an Iranian plot to overturn the Sunni monarchy there and allow Tehran to extend its influence in the Arabian Peninsula, an alarming prospect for Saudi Arabia given the possible contagion effects on the Shia communities in its eastern provinces. In Yemen in 2015, the Saudi-led coalition intervened militarily to counter what was seen as an Iranian-backed Houthi advance, which following a rebellion against the Sanaa government was gaining momentum in the country. The war in Yemen has been cast as a strong anti-Iran narrative, with Iran seen as masterminding the Houthi campaign to destabilise Saudi Arabia's southern borders.

Although with a different pattern, Iran has been perceiving similar threats arising from Saudi policies. In Tehran's view, Saudi Arabia has acted in agreement with Israel – the strongest supporter of regime change in Iran – to back the opposition diaspora, such as People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran, which is infamous for its terror operations inside Iran, and to run sophisticated propaganda campaigns in the cyberspace and on satellite TV channels. Tehran has also accused Saudi Arabia of financially and militarily supporting the jihadi groups in Pakistan which carried out clandestine operations in the south-eastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan and the

6   Darwich, May. *Threats and alliances in the Middle East: Saudi and Syrian policies in a turbulent region.* Cambridge University Press, 2019.

7   Divsallar, Abdolrasool. "Shifting threats and strategic adjustment in Iran's foreign policy: the case of the Strait of Hormuz." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1874873

8   Kausch, Kristina. "Competitive multipolarity in the Middle East". *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3. 2015: 1-15.

Sunni separatist movement in the Khuzestan province.[9]

Furthermore, Iran has been highly concerned about the volume and composition of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's arms imports. Tehran's feeling of isolation experienced during the war with Iraq has continued over the years and has been exacerbated by decade-long sanctions which made it difficult to upgrade its conventional capabilities. Since 2006 the gap in military expenditure between the GCC countries and Iran has been growing sharply and it reached its peak in 2016 with GCC spending of $113.722 billion versus Iran's $12.2 billion. As Anthony Cordesman puts it, the Gulf Arab states have had an overwhelming advantage over Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms.[10] This has marked how Iran has shaped its three-pronged asymmetric defence posture based on "nuclear hedging as a political leverage, ballistic missiles for current defence and deterrence, and a regional network of influence for strategic depth."[11] In particular the 'third pillar' of reliance on non-state actors provides Iran with significant deterrent capabilities and offers it the ability to extend its influence in the region and keep the fight with its enemies outside its borders."[12]

Complexity, however, emerges when Iran's asymmetric strategic approach fed by the threat perception arising from US and Saudi Arabian actions reinforces the threat perceptions of its rivals across the Gulf.

"*In a classic case of a security dilemma, what the US and the GCC states see as protecting their interests and balancing against Iran is seen by Tehran as a threat; and what Tehran sees as protecting its interests and balancing against the US and its regional allies is seen by Washington as a threat.*"[13]

These dynamics also play a role in intra-GCC relations and have fed disunity within the regional bloc. Not all GCC members share Saudi's threat perception of Iran. Therefore, the issue of how to deal with Tehran is a source of discord. While Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have adopted hard-line positions seeking to contain and curtail Iran, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar have sought to hedge between the main regional powers.[14] The UAE's position is more complex, switching between confrontation and consolidation.

The Qatar crisis and its three-year blockade, from 2017 to 2020, was the latest cleavage resulting from these dynamics. Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed on a resolution of the diplomatic crisis in early 2021, tensions remain high between Doha on the one hand and Abu Dhabi and Manama on the other. Furthermore, there are signs of potential rifts between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which appears more preoccupied with its power projection in MENA to counter Turkey than to push back Iran. This can further prolong Yemen's civil war.

A shifting geo-economic role

Finally, the negative systemic effect of mirroring threat perceptions is amplified by domestic legitimacy deficits in all the countries in the region and is heightened by the growing urgency to diversify their economies away from hydrocarbons in the face of the dual challenge posed by low oil prices and the upcoming energy transition. Regimes on both sides of the Persian Gulf struggle to provide adequate answers to the demands and aspirations of their populations and tend to use nationalistic rhetoric to blame 'the enemy' for domestic failures. Without independent media and oppositions to make rulers accountable, foreign policy choices have no check and balance mechanism to mitigate their effects. This explains why in Saudi Arabia the rise of nationalism is grounded on strong anti-Iran sentiments and has also been promoted

9   See, for example, Reuters. *Denmark charges three members of Iranian opposition group for financing terrorist activity*. 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/denmark-charges-three-members-iranian-opposition-group-financing-terrorist-2021-04-15/

10 Cordesman, Anthony. "Military and arms spending in the Gulf." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2015. https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-spending-and-arms-sales-gulf

11 Rouhi, Mahsa. "Responding to US-Iran Military Escalation," Chapter 5 of this ebook.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Bianco, Cinzia. "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics." *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2. 2020: 92-107.

by the rulers as a way to deflect attention from the socio-economic problems produced by fiscal contraction, delays in diversifying the economy away from hydrocarbons and opening up the country, and failures in the Yemen war.[15] Similarly, Iran's leadership has systematically attributed its economic and political failures to the US and its Gulf allies.[16] These common tendencies to externalise domestic problems is reflected in inflammatory rhetoric, which makes it difficult to silence or de-securitise issues.

The status of the security system in the Persian Gulf

Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, regionalisation accompanied by a functioning security system at the regional level has been a growing feature of world politics. This trend has never materialised in the Middle East and Persian Gulf and, as scholars have correctly observed, MENA is a region without regionalisation.[17]

Regional security institutions serve as frameworks for communication and dialogue among their members while by enhancing reassurances they reinforce conflict management and peace-building capabilities. They also favour efforts to contain the risk of confrontation through regional arms control agreements and military confidence- and security-building measures.

Collective security and cooperative security are the two main types of regional security systems. Collective security emerged to counter the ambivalent effects of balance-of-power politics and alliance-making and is defined as a group of states among which there is a "real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically but will settle their disputes in some other way," [18] and in some cases with a commitment to defend each other in the case of an attack by a third party. On the other hand, cooperative security is growingly becoming an important component of many regional security systems and is characterised by a process of integration and by willingness to tackle security issues and crises in a cooperative way. While the NATO and Warsaw Pact are classical examples of collective defence pacts, in Europe they have co-existed since Cold War times with complementing cooperative mechanisms such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which later became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In the MENA region neither cooperative nor collective security arrangements have been able to take hold and consolidate. Although the Arab League and the GCC have significant security dimensions, these organisations have not systematically contributed to conflict-resolution efforts and their member countries have never shown themselves capable of overcoming the tendency to pursue short-term self-interest goals.[19] Tensions and rivalries between nation-states have traditionally been at the centre of the many conflicts in the region, and to date the states lack a compelling rationale – like a threat of mutual assured destruction – for initiating cooperative behaviour in the security field. Furthermore, in the current environment the region lacks a regional hegemon capable of imposing regional order, or of acting as arbiter and provider of security guarantees to regional players. In this context, both regional and global actors privilege risk-taking behaviour, which is perceived as potentially more rewarding, at least in the short term.

While the issue of building a sustainable security architecture for the region has been on the

15 Wehrey, Frederic. "The Authoritarian Resurgence: Saudi Arabia's Anxious Autocrats." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2. 2015: 71-85.

16 Pollack, Kenneth. *The Persian Puzzle: Deciphering the Twenty-five-Year Conflict Between the United States and Iran*. Random House, 2004.

17 Aarts, Paul. "The Middle East: a region without regionalism or the end of exceptionalism?" *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 5. 1999: 911-925.

18 Deutsch, Karl W. "Security Communities." in Rosenau, James (ed.). *International Politics and Foreign Policy* 5. New York: Free Press, 1961.

19 Pinfari, Marco. *Nothing but failure? the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as mediators in Middle Eastern conflicts.* Crisis States Research Centre, 2009.

agenda for a long time, the ongoing structural transformations which mark all the countries in the region coupled with the widespread popular legitimacy deficits that characterise most regimes further complicate the path to cooperation and collective security. As Harrison says in his chapter in this ebook, for the leaders in the region, "spending political capital on cooperation today when the benefits will only materialise tomorrow is an inherently difficult circle to square."[20]

Even more importantly, there is no functioning structure to deal with either soft or hard security matters. The GCC is the only organisation in the region which has evolved in terms of integration and has created the ground for more active policy coordination between the Gulf Arab states. As we have seen, however, Gulf regionalism has historically been driven by perceptions of insecurity as the GCC has developed in tandem with its members' heightened threat perception of post-revolutionary Iran.[21] Different threat perceptions, Saudi Arabia's hegemonic stance towards the smaller members and diverging strategic cultures have constrained the GCC's capacity to become a venue for defence policymaking, and progress beyond declaratory politics is limited. Although various initiatives have historically emerged to promote regional cooperation and security arrangements among Gulf Arab states, they have often been internally fragmented and ineffective. Proposals for an integrated military and regional security policy have been presented at every annual GCC summit with little success (see Table 1). The GCC has thus failed to create an institutional framework that could contribute to the resolution of the current confrontational order. Given its structural features it is hard to imagine a possible enlargement of the GCC to other key countries of the region, such as Iraq or Iran, while the continuing rivalries and tensions will limit the possibilities of solving security issues at the regional level. Most recently, the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), which was

announced during Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017, aimed to build an alliance that would include all the GCC countries along with the US, Egypt and Jordan and was meant to assist in scaling back the US security posture in the Middle East while promoting regional consultative mechanisms on defence matters. However, the MESA project, or the "Arab NATO" as it has been called, is unlikely to fly given the lack of a common regional vision of collective security. The project also suffers from confidence gaps and countries' different expectations of any such alliance. It is also questionable whether a NATO-type security arrangement in the current security setting in the region would actually serve the purpose of tackling key security challenges and reducing tensions. Indeed, it could raise the level of tensions as it may potentially increase Arab-Iranian rivalry rather than eliminating its context and drivers or promoting cooperation. MESA responds to a US need to target Iran and reduce its regional presence without allowing China or Russia to gain influence, while disregarding the internal priorities and constraints of its Arab member states.[22] Countries like Kuwait, Qatar and Oman are indeed reticent about this approach.[23]

20 Harrison, Ross. "Cooperation in the Middle East: The Gordian Knot," chapter 2 of this eBook.

21 Hanau Santini, Ruth. "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited." *The International Spectator* 52, no. 4. 2017: 93-111.

22 Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", 2019.

23 Ibid.

Table 1. Current Security and Defence Structures in the Persian Gulf[24]

Name	Year Established	Objective	Operational Status
The Peninsula Shield Forces	1985	Rapid deployment against external aggression. To serve as the main security cooperation mechanism for the Gulf countries.	The force was deployed in 2003 in Kuwait in preparation for the U.S. intervention in Iraq. Its only major operation was its 2011 intervention in Bahrain to put down massive demonstrations against the monarchy.
The Cooperation Belt	1997	Create an early warning system.	Entered into effect in 2001 and provides better communication between air defence structures.
The GCC Joint Defence Agreement	2000	Transition from military cooperation to military operation and to create a GCC defence strategy, a formal pact according to which an attack on one member is an attack on all.	Operationalised as a reference for the Peninsula Shield Forces' deployment in Kuwait and Bahrain.
Istambul Cooperation Initiative	2004	To contribute to global and regional security by offering Middle East countries bilateral security cooperation with NATO.	In 2017, the initiative's regional centre in Kuwait was inaugurated to offer courses and conferences on security issues of common interest.
GCC Unified Military Command	2013	To support the interoperability of GCC militaries, post-conflict reconstruction and coordinate counterterrorism efforts.	Became operational in 2018 when the GCC appointed a Saudi military commander for it.

The objectives and structure of this eBook

From a security point of view, MENA is a transcontinental entity encompassing three subsystems: the Levant, North Africa and the Persian Gulf. Despite geographical proximity, the composition of security drivers, power distributions and political processes inside each subregion differs significantly. The Persian Gulf region enjoys higher levels of security and less political violence in comparison with the other two subsystems, while weak and failed states in the two other subregions are abundant, which makes them subject to power projections from Gulf actors. As a result, a model of hierarchical interdependencies has formed that facilitates the export of the Gulf region's internal insecurities to neighbouring sub-regions.[25] It is for this reason that the transformation of the Persian Gulf confrontational security system into cooperative security is a top priority and a pre-requisite for building a more peaceful Middle East. Given its confrontational features, the Persian Gulf region

24 Adapted and revised from: Farouk, Yasmine. The Middle East strategic alliance has a long way to go. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2019. https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/08/middle-east-strategic-alliance-has-long-way-to-go-pub-78317

25 Calculli, Maria. "Sub-regions and Security in the Arab Middle East: Hierarchical Interdependencies in Gulf-Levant Relations". Chapter 4 in Elizabeth Minier (ed), *Regional insecurity after the Arab uprising*, 2015.

seems to necessitate a specific path towards the regionalisation of security matters made of gradual, informal and incremental steps rather than broad formal initiatives.

This ebook reviews the Persian Gulf security environment and security system in order to propose a new approach to exiting from the current stalemate. It deals with several key questions. What are the key drivers and causes of current regional insecurity in the Gulf? How have the complexities of the region's security environment pushed previous efforts to tackle insecurity and reduce tensions into failure? What options exist in terms of security-building instruments in response to the unfolding crisis? Under what conditions can a new regional security-building approach emerge?

This ebook also seeks to offer a pathway to build a new security system in the Gulf region. Successful historical cases of functional security systems created in contexts of heightened tension – like the CSCE-OSCE during the Cold War – show the importance of small steps as part of long-term processes. Drawing on such historical cases, future diplomatic processes in the Gulf region need to include tailor-made steps with the potential to promote de-escalation in the region. To break escalatory cycles and contribute to the gradual formation of a future security system, these steps should include both short-term and long-term non-traditional security (NTS) and non-conventional diplomacy (NCD) instruments to help establish channels of communication and preliminary rules of engagement.

The Gulf region would have both the incentives and the structural features to benefit from regionalisation and from an active search for a regional security order that reduces tensions and permits countries to focus on economic development and the diversification of their economies. They could take advantage of regional mechanisms that allow them to tackle the many issues of common interest. Many NTS issues are crucial and impact countries on both sides of the Gulf. Many of these are transnational in nature, such as water pollution,

climate change-induced droughts, the impact of pollution-induced desalination on the region's maritime environmental security and on coastal development, and the prospects for economic diversification. These NTS issues could lend themselves to joint initiatives in search of solutions. For instance, collective climate-adaptive schemes and disaster preparedness would increase the effectiveness of national actions in these areas.[26] Unfortunately, the long-standing divisions and current tensions in the Gulf region make these collective security approaches unviable.

A gradual step-by-step process is what we define as a security-building continuum (SBC). The SBC should be seen as a number of context-specific and NTS-oriented steps aimed at raising the threshold for the outbreak of conflict, slowing down mutual threat formation and reducing the benefit of threat-balancing strategies. This ebook is an attempt to identify and articulate potential SBC policy options. It aims to debate small immediately workable measures which could help de-escalate tensions. It also seeks medium- and longer-term measures which could bridge existing gaps and gradually foster stability in the region. In doing so, the ebook explores the unexploited potential of the *Hajj* and of religious diplomacy, of investment and development diplomacy and of environmental cooperation to transform the security paradigms in the Gulf region and the challenges that such a change in trajectory faces. It also looks at the role that Track-2 and Track-1.5 diplomacy has played in the Gulf region context to draw lessons for future initiatives. Finally, the perspectives of the EU, the US, Russia and China on mediation and facilitation in the building of a new security architecture for the Gulf region are also explored.

The ebook is structured in four key sections. Section 1 lays the groundwork for the book by exploring why ambitious comprehensive approaches to regional security have limited

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26 Badawi, Tamer and Narbone, Luigi. "De-escalating Tension in the Gulf: Why Efforts to Facilitate Arab-Iranian Dialogue should be Intensified". *MEDirections Op-ed*, https://middleeastdirections.eu/new-op-ed-de-escalating-tension-in-the-gulf-why-efforts-to-facilitate-arab-iranian-dialogue-should-be-intensified-t-badawi-l-narbone/

chances of success. This section explores three critical questions. What are the systemic factors in regional insecurity in the Persian Gulf? What obstacles exist to cooperation and how could a cooperative rationale be strengthened? And what alternative approaches to security building should be adopted in the region?

In Chapter 1, Gawdat Bahgat explores the links between the domestic, regional and international systemic sources of insecurity: aggressive foreign policies and a lack of dialogue in the region. Bahgat explores the role of small steps at various levels to promote constructive dialogue among the regional powers. By simultaneously mapping these different levels, he explains that "proposed efforts at the national, regional and global levels overlap with each other and should be implemented in a coordinated manner."

In Chapter 2, Ross Harrison takes a deeper look at structural obstacles, such as domestic legitimacy deficits and the broad regional conflict system, that feed high levels of mistrust and make regional cooperation unpalatable. He also argues that short-term increased regionalisation can pave the way to long-term formal cooperation. Looking at cooperation as a continuum, Harrison explains that "addressing the problems of water, climate and health could help overcome some of the aforementioned legitimacy traps that prevent leaders from cooperating." He also maintains that conflict mitigation approaches can in time lead to greater formal cooperation.

In Chapter 3, Abdolrasool Divsallar identifies the causes of previous failures in building a cooperative security system in the Persian Gulf. The chapter introduces five factors: lack of equal understanding among actors about the urgency of security system revision; problems associated with an emergence of security gap between when policy shift takes place and new security system should emerges; spoiler effects of domestic politics on regional security building; scarcity of bottom-up demand for a cooperative security; and fights over security narratives and leadership among global and regional powers.

In Chapter 4, Andrey Kortunov discusses the underlying factors that lead to instability in the Gulf while arguing that, although it appears difficult at the moment, "the only plausible alternative to a hegemon-led regional order is a collective security model." Kurtonov emphasises the need for an inclusive model, while drawing lessons from the Cold War to explain the need to prioritise the establishment of lines of communication and to start arms control discussions. While he explains that external players can facilitate such a project, he argues that it is also urgent to reconcile the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian approaches in any attempt to build a functioning security system in the region.

Section 2 shows how great power politics and the pursuit of diverging objectives by international actors have hampered their power-brokering and mediation potentials, while lack of direct engagement among conflicting actors makes external mediation essential. On this basis, the section takes a deeper look at the EU's, the US's, Russia's and China's policies and interventions in the Persian Gulf.

In Chapter 5, Joost Hiltermann explores how European mediation can contribute to de-escalation in the Persian Gulf and what framework it should follow. Hiltermann explains that, while the EU can draw lessons from the Helsinki process, there are internal organisational limitations within the EU that hamper the effectiveness of its mediation efforts. In addition to the challenges involved in achieving unity of action and to reduce often contradicting interests with the US, Hiltermann argues that the lack of political will in Europe has been due to "inopportune timing, want of leadership and a lack of clarity about the process." To rapidly lessen tensions, Hiltermann argues that efforts should be directed at reaching an "agreement on shared principles governing inter-state relations."

In Chapter 6, Caroline Rose frames her analysis within the 2018 US National Defense Strategy (NDS) and addresses the question of how Washington should redefine its security strategy

in the Gulf. She argues that the US should be cautious in order to prevent the emergence of a major power vacuum and should therefore first seek to establish a short-term security framework among the Gulf Arab states and in the greater Middle East at large and constrain Iranian attempts to become a regional hegemonic power. In the long-term, however, US policies should aim to incorporate Iran as a constructive power in the regional security framework.

In Chapter 7, Maxim Suchkov, Artem K. Adrianov and Viktoria V. Yanina evaluate Russia's approach to regional security in the Gulf. In exploring the international reactions to Russia's recent initiative for the Persian Gulf security architecture, they analyse the reasons why the Russian initiative appeals to Iran but not to the GCC. They further show that the initiative promotes the interests of great powers over local actors. Finally, in prioritising energy security, the goals of the initiative focus more on "economic rather than political cooperation."

In Chapter 8, Liu Lanyu explores why China has not been proactively involved in the region's security-building despite its strong economic involvement and rising military presence in the region. Lanyu argues that, "China's main interests in the Gulf region are still energy, economy and trade." This explains why China punches below its weight as it seeks to position itself as a 'neutral friend' to avoid confrontation and secure its maritime energy transport routes. Lanyu concludes by offering recommendations to promote an active Chinese role in Gulf security-building.

Section 3 explores how incremental steps can lead to an institutionalised process of communication with dispute-resolution mechanisms. This section deals with two major fronts of rivalry in the region: US-Iran and Saudi-Iran. The authors in this section tackle these questions. How should a security-building approach be refined to make Saudi-Iranian competition less confrontational? What immediate steps should be taken by the US and Iran to reduce the risk of regional escalation?

In Chapter 9, David Roberts explores how strategies of de-securitisation can be applied to the Gulf region. Roberts borrows from well-defined theories of international relations to identify potential pathways for détente. By applying insights from the Copenhagen School, Roberts shows how concepts from securitisation theory can capture the dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the roles played by identification asymmetries in interests and by symbolism of actions. He further proposes a new perspective to reduce tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran based on de-securitising, altercasting and silencing issues that have a bearing on confrontation.

In Chapter 10, Mahsa Rouhi seeks to offer a roadmap for engagement between the US and Iran. Rouhi breaks down the security interests of Iran while showing how they conflict with US security objectives. She traces the Gulf dynamics to a "vicious cycle of conflicting objectives and security dilemmas." In exploring opportunities for immediate steps for de-escalation, Rouhi highlights the need for a crisis communication line and for indirect backchannels to limit inadvertent air and naval encounters. She argues that "without proper communication channels, the prospects of successfully navigating any future crises in the region diminish." Rouhi emphasises that "perhaps the most important takeaway from the JCPOA for resolving regional issues is the importance of incrementalistic approaches."

Section 4 explores how NTS instruments could become a new security-building toolkit and transform into the backbone of a new approach to regional security-building in the Persian Gulf. Among NTS instruments, this section introduces environmental, economic and Track-2 measures, while giving special attention to religious diplomacy.

In Chapter 11, Riccardo Redaelli critically evaluates the debate over the efficacy of Track-2 and Track-1.5 programmes. These alternative paths to formal dialogue have mostly been

perceived as the sole contact lines in times when official political contacts have proven difficult. However, serious questions remain about their success, impact and capacity to trigger Track-1 processes. Redaelli explores what can be learned from previous experiences to improve future Track-2 and Track-1.5 initiatives in the Persian Gulf and what practices should be adopted in the years to come to raise the effectiveness of these initiatives.

In the context of the Gulf, religious talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia over pilgrimages have been an indispensable part of bilateral relations and historically acted as barometers of tension. Despite interruptions in high-tension times, talks over the *Hajj* have continued and only stopped when relations were on collision course. Since 1943 the *Hajj* has only been interrupted on three occasions. In recent years *Hajj* diplomacy has acted as the only official diplomatic channel between the two countries. Mahjoob Zweiri, Ghadir Nasri, Simon Mabon and Lucia Ardovini explore the ways the *Hajj* has been politicised and whether it can provide an unexplored venue for de-escalation and facilitating initial political talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Despite the different views expressed in Chapters 12, 13 and 14 on the level of the positive impact of religious diplomacy in political de-escalation, the authors agree on the importance of broadening cultural connections and on their potential contribution to easing mutual threat perceptions.

In Chapter 15, Robert Mogielnicki shows how economic diplomacy can be used as leverage to strengthen the regional security system. During the 1997-2008 GCC-Iran rapprochement, growth in economic ties was an integral part of political de-escalation which constructively helped ease tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. However, in the last decade the US sanctions regime has undermined possible economic cooperation at the regional level and substituted it with economic disengagement as a way to gain leverage. This chapter explores how economic diplomacy can be restarted while disengagement at the political level is continued.

In Chapter 16, Tobias Zumbrägel discusses the role of environmental cooperation in fostering a future security system in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf region is faced with mounting environmental threats, like massive water pollution, climate change, desertification and challenges to biodiversity, which might turn into systemic risks for the individual countries and for overall regional stability. Zumbrägel proposes steps in order to facilitate the adoption of regional cooperation in the environmental field.

INTRODUCTION | Luigi Narbone & Abdolrasool Divsallar

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SECTION 1

FRAMING THE FUTURE REGIONAL SECURITY SYSTEM

Peace in the Persian Gulf: An Assessment[1]

Gawdat Bahgat

Executive Summary

In the last few decades, the Persian Gulf region has witnessed a number of military confrontations between regional rivals and between states and non-state actors. The region has also suffered from economic and political upheavals. This chapter examines the challenges the region faces at three levels: national, regional and global. The argument is that domestic insecurity leads to an aggressive foreign policy. After a brief review of the security landscape over the last few decades, the analysis focuses on domestic economic and political vulnerabilities. For almost a century, Gulf economies and policies have been shaped by the ups and downs of oil revenue. The need for serious economic reform cannot be overstated. Similarly, regional policies have been largely approached in zero-sum terms. The chapter suggests that geopolitics plays a bigger role than sectarian divisions in regional conflicts. At the global level, the competition between global powers (i.e. the US, Europe, Russia and China) has further fuelled instability in the Persian Gulf. Global powers have been more interested in promoting their short-term interests than long-term strategic objectives. The chapter provides recommendations on how to address these overlapping challenges and argues that regional players, supported by global powers, should engage in a strategic dialogue to promote cooperation.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Oil, Regional Dynamics, Security Architecture, United States, Europe, Russia, China.

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[1] The opinions expressed in this chapter are the author's alone and do not represent the views of the U.S. government of the policies of the Department of Defense.

Introduction

For several decades the Persian Gulf region has been one of the most volatile in the world. In the late 1970s a popular revolution in Iran toppled the Pahlavi regime and introduced new dynamics in the regional security landscape. Desperate to contain the religious zeal, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded his neighbour and in the following eight years the two nations engaged in one of the bloodiest and longest wars in the twentieth century in which chemical weapons were employed and more than a million people were killed. Two years after the war ended in 1988, President Hussein invaded and occupied another neighbour – Kuwait. In response, the United States led an international coalition that liberated Kuwait in 1991. This liberation did not bring peace to the Persian Gulf. Instead, for more than a decade global powers, in alliance with regional states, attempted to contain the Iraqi regime by diplomatic, economic and military means. These efforts did not succeed and in 2003 the United States toppled the Hussein regime and ended the decades-long Sunni rule in Baghdad.

Again, the 2003 war failed to restore peace and stability, and indeed it opened a sectarian Pandora's box. The rising Sunni-Shiite tension gave birth to the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). The fight against ISIS consumed the region in most of the 2010s. By the end of the decade ISIS had been largely defeated militarily and many of its leaders had been either killed or arrested. However, arguably, its extremist ideology is still alive and the resurrection of ISIS (or other extremist groups) cannot be ruled out. To sum up, the conflicts with Iran, the United States and ISIS dealt heavy blows to economic development and political stability in Iraq. It will take the country a long time to find its feet and re-establish itself as a major regional power.

In neighbouring Iran, the government has sought to focus on building its economy and enhancing its diplomatic standing since the end of the war with Iraq. However, since the early 1990s the United States and other countries have accused Tehran of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

Iranian leaders have categorically denied these accusations and claimed that their nuclear programme is solely for civilian applications. Despite this strong denial, the Islamic Republic has been under severe United Nations, United States and European Union sanctions regimes. The nation's adversaries staunchly oppose its growing missile programme and expanding regional influence. The four-decade-long confrontation with Washington has not succeeded in toppling the government in Tehran but has significantly weakened the Iranian economy. The Islamic Republic is not about to collapse, but the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' strategy (in place from May 2018) further aggravated the dire economic challenges and weakened the government's ability to meet its population's economic and social aspirations. The Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 made a bad situation much worse. Instead of providing medical assistance and approving a $5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Trump administration chose to double down on its efforts to topple the Iranian government.[2]

In response, the Iranian authorities have adopted an asymmetric warfare doctrine to deter any aggression by the United States and its regional allies. This strategy depends on ballistic missiles, cyber capabilities, small and speedy boats, drones and other weaponry. Other regional powers have either acquired or developed similar capabilities. The proliferation of these conventional and unconventional weapon systems has added to regional tension and instability. Since the early 2000s, several regional powers have been involved in economic, military and strategic confrontations in the so-called grey zone. In other words, instead of full-scale interstate wars, regional powers (particularly Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE) have used proxies and employed drones, missiles and cyber capabilities to weaken their adversaries.

Unlike Iraq and Iran, the GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) have not engaged in a prolonged military conflict (except the war in Yemen since 2015) and have not been under any international sanctions. Indeed, most of them enjoy good relations with the United States, Europe, Russia and China. Furthermore, all the GCC ruling regimes survived the Arab Spring. Changes in leadership in these countries take place when the ruler passes away or is replaced in a palace coup (i.e. a member of the royal family overthrows the sitting king). However, it is important to underscore the differences between durability and stability. Some of the GCC ruling families have been in power for hundreds of years. This should not be mistaken for stability. The term refers to an agreed-on mechanism for regular political change, among other things. The current leaders of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emerged as key players in regional crises.

Only Oman (from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s) and Bahrain (periodical uprisings by its majority Shiites against the Sunni ruling family) have experienced broad popular opposition in the last several decades. The underlying reason for the absence of such organised grassroots movements is the substantial financial resources the GCC states have accumulated from exporting oil and natural gas. They have established oil funds/Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) to address the fluctuation in oil prices and to ensure high incomes for many years to come. For decades, oil wealth has provided the GCC ruling families with the means to generously reward the majority of their citizens and to severely punish dissidents. It has also provided them with significant financial/political leverage at both the regional and global levels.

Despite these massive hydrocarbon and financial resources, the GCC states have failed to introduce badly needed economic and political reforms. Their economies are heavily dependent on oil revenue and foreign labour. For decades, the ruling families have been talking about nationalising the labour force, meaning replacing

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2   For a thorough analysis, see Divsallar, Abdolrasool, and Luigi Narbone. "A US-Iran zero-sum game on Covid-19 could threaten global health security" *RSCAS/Middle East Directions Policy Briefs*, 2020. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/66754

foreigners with nationals, and transforming their economies into 'knowledge-based' ones. The level of success varies from one state to another, but much more is still needed. Similarly, there is very limited tolerance of political opposition. Political parties are not allowed and parliaments have very limited power. Finally, some of the GCC rulers have sought to transform their financial power into political leverage. Since the early 2000s, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have adopted an assertive stance in several regional conflicts including in Syria, Yemen and Libya. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are the main backers of the Al-Sisi regime in Cairo. In other words, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE compete for regional influence with other regional powers (Iran, Israel and Turkey). Most conflicts in the broad Middle East reflect, and are driven by, these rivalries.

The ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen (among others) have had devastating impacts on the populations in these countries and have contributed to the depletion of financial resources in Tehran, Ankara, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Equally importantly, they have opened the door for meddling by global powers. The United States, Europe, Russia and China have taken advantage of these civil wars to boost their arms sales. Despite some domestic opposition, most European countries and the United States have been less interested in promoting democracy and transparency and more inclined to sell arms. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has been trying to regain the superpower status it had under the Soviet Union. Finally, China has been promoting its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This Chinese model is based on a combination of economic reform and an authoritarian political system.

Despite, or because of, this gloomy outlook, a consensus is emerging among strategic analysts that there is a dire need to stop the deterioration in socio-economic and political conditions and find a way to reach an agreement on a new regional security paradigm. This chapter examines these efforts at the domestic, regional and global levels. We argue that economically prosperous and politically stable states are likely to feel confident to contribute to regional stability. Regional powers need to renounce the zero-sum and winner-takes-all mentality, acknowledge each other's legitimate security concerns and agree on a 'win-win' approach to managing their rivalries. Finally, global powers have to balance their short-term gains (i.e. selling arms) with their long-term strategic interests (a prosperous and stable Gulf region). Efforts should be made to address these challenges at the national, regional and global levels simultaneously.

The domestic setting

The domestic and foreign policies of the Persian Gulf states can largely be explained in one word – oil. The discovery of oil first in Iran in 1908 and later in Iraq and the other Gulf states profoundly shaped almost all aspects of social, economic and political life.[3] Receiving substantial revenue from selling crude and petroleum products, Gulf states did not need to collect taxes from their citizens. Instead, they were able to provide generous public goods including free education, health care and guaranteed public employment. Enjoying these numerous benefits, most citizens until recently had few incentives to demand a say in how their countries were run, the so-called 'no taxation no representation' bargain.[4] There is no accurate data on exactly how much oil wealth the Gulf states have accumulated, but the price of oil can serve as an indicator.

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3 For more details, see Bahgat, Gawdat. *American oil diplomacy in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea*. Florida: University of Florida, 2003.

4 Beblawi, Hazem, and Giacomo Luciani. *The Rentier State: Nation, State and Integration in the Arab World*. London & New York: Croom Helm, 1987.

Table I Price of oil in US dollars per barrel 1970-2019

Year	Price	Year	Price	Year	Price	Year	Price	Year	Price
1970	01.68	**1981**	35.93	**1992**	19.32	**2003**	28.83	**2014**	98.95
1971	01.88	**1982**	32.97	**1993**	16.97	**2004**	38.27	**2015**	52.39
1972	01.90	**1983**	29.55	**1994**	15.82	**2005**	54.52	**2016**	43.73
1973	02.83	**1984**	28.78	**1995**	17.02	**2006**	65.14	**2017**	54.19
1974	10.43	**1985**	27.56	**1996**	20.67	**2007**	72.39	**2018**	71.31
1975	10.70	**1986**	14.43	**1997**	19.09	**2008**	97.26	**2019**	64.21[5]
1976	12.80	**1987**	18.44	**1998**	12.72	**2009**	61.67		
1977	13.92	**1988**	14.92	**1999**	17.97	**2010**	79.50		
1978	14.02	**1989**	18.23	**2000**	28.50	**2011**	111.26		
1979	31.61	**1990**	23.73	**2001**	24.44	**2012**	111.67		
1980	36.83	**1991**	20.00	**2002**	25.02	**2013**	108.66		

The figures underscore two important overlapping factors. First, oil prices have always experienced severe fluctuations reflecting economic and political changes. The Gulf states have articulated and implemented different strategies to mitigate the impact of these fluctuations.

5 British Petroleum. "BP Statistical Review of World Energy." 2020. https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2020-full-report.pdf

During low oil price times they increase spending and harness any remaining excessive rents acquired during booms and use them, along with expenditure cuts, to cushion the economy during busts. Downside risks are managed through decreases in expenditure (including eliminating some energy subsidies) and access to foreign financing. These familiar trends show that the economies are very sensitive to changes in oil prices and are not sustainable even if oil prices recover. Sustainability requires changes

in the GCC economic, labour, energy, regulatory and oligopolistic structures.[6] Without a major economic reform that would address all sectors, the GCC states will continue to be vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices. A report issued by the World Bank in mid-2020 concluded that their medium-term growth prospects are contingent on no amplification of regional conflicts or their spillovers, continuing structural programmes and sustained commitment to reform.[7]

The second factor is what many analysts call the 'energy transition.' This transition takes place when a new source of energy emerges, leading to a permanent structural change in supply, demand, the energy mix and prices. The energy transition currently underway is about a transformational switch from fossil fuels to renewable and clean sources of energy (solar, wind and water). Equally importantly, the term also refers to a more efficient use of energy.[8] In April 2020, analysts at the International Monetary Fund argued that measured in real terms (adjusted for inflation), oil prices had not been so low since 2001.[9] Since then, oil prices have moved a little higher. Nevertheless, nobody in the industry believes prices will go back to the $100 level. Instead, they are likely to fluctuate around a low level for many years. The growing interest in protecting the environment and containing pollution is the main driver behind the current and projected low oil prices. A long-term risk pertinent to GCC growth prospects is the global transition towards low carbon economies that will further reduce demand for hydrocarbons.

While most economic activity remains linked to the hydrocarbon value chain, recent developments signal a clear shift toward lower-carbon industries and sectors. Across the region, investments in renewable energy are helping meet rising domestic power demand while promoting environmental sustainability and gradually attenuating dependence on the oil sector.[10] The rapid expansion and increasing sophistication of financial services, coupled with high rates of technological adoption and innovation, are driving the creation of a robust financial-technology ecosystem. While the GCC countries have made important progress with their development agendas, several outstanding issues remain to be addressed. Further economic diversification will require deepening labour-market and education reforms to generate productivity gains and expand economic opportunities for the regional workforce. Female labour force participation rates remain low across the GCC and measures to improve the employability of women could more fully leverage the productive potential of the region's human capital. In addition, efforts to align education and training with employer demand could help narrow the persistent skills gaps observed in the regional labour markets. Immigration policies can do more to attract and retain skilled workers to support robust private sector-led growth.[11]

Regional dynamics

Some analysts focus on the Sunni-Shiite rivalry as the main driver of tension in the Persian Gulf and the broad Middle East. While sectarianism is

6   Shehabi, Manal. "Quantifying Dutch disease effects and asymmetry in economic responses to oil price volatility in Kuwait." *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies*, 2020. https://www.oxfordenergy.org/publications/quantifying-dutch-disease-effects-and-asymmetry-in-economic-responses-to-oil-price-volvatility-in-kuwait.

7   World Bank. "Global Economic Prospects." 2020. https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects.

8   Wood Mackenzie. "Everything You Need to Know about Energy Transition." 2020. https://www.woodmac.com/nslp/energy-transition-guide.

9   International Monetary Fund. "Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia." 2020. https://www.imf.org/en/publications/REO/MECA.

10 Al-Saffar, Ali, and Matthew Van der Beeuren. "The case for energy transitions in major oil and gas producing countries." *International Energy Agency*, 2020. https://www.iea.org/commentaries/the-case-for-energy-transtions-in-major-oil-and-gas-producing-countries

11 World Bank. "Gulf Economic Update." 2019. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/gulf-economic-monitor-december-2019

certainly a major driver, we argue that geo-policy is the leading reason. Iraq, a relatively medium-sized state with a large population and massive oil and water resources, has always seen itself as a major regional power. However, with only 58 kilometres of coastline the nation has never been satisfied with its geographical configuration. Since Iraq became a republic in 1958, its leaders have unsuccessfully sought to expand its maritime borders. The occupation of Kuwait in 1990 was a clear illustration of this ambition. It is not clear if the current leaders still harbour such an ambition.

Similarly, and more realistically, Iran has always perceived itself as a regional power. It is one of the largest and most populous countries in the region, holds the world's largest hydrocarbon reserves and has been a nation-state for thousands of years. Against this background, Iranian leaders both before and after the 1979 revolution have always called on foreign powers to leave the region and sought to build a consensus among their neighbours on regional security. These neighbours, however, have been suspicious of Tehran's intentions, not because of Shiism but due to the huge disparity in size, population and capabilities. The GCC states have always seen the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe) as their main protector against potential Iranian or Iraqi aggression. Gulf rulers are broadly convinced that the more weapons they buy from the United States, the more Washington is committed to their defence. This militarisation of the region and the heavy deployment of American troops have further fuelled Tehran's sense of vulnerability.

Security in the Persian Gulf cannot be understood without taking into account the rivalry between the other regional powers (i.e. Egypt, Turkey and Israel, among others). Having been rejected by some of its neighbours (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Qatar has allied itself with Turkey, another regional power. For a long time, Ankara has unsuccessfully sought to join the European Union. Turkish leaders claim that the EU has rejected them because they are Muslim. This might be one reason, but it does not tell the whole story. In response, Turkey has invested in expanding its influence in the Arab/Muslim world. Some Arabs are afraid of what they perceive as a 'neo Ottomanism' and President Erdogan's political ambition and support for political Islam.

For decades, the UAE (and other GCC states) have been working closely with Israel – another major regional power. In August 2020, the Trump administration brokered an official normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel, mainly for electoral reasons in both the US and Israel. Strategically, it is not clear if the agreement will have any value since the two sides have been working closely for years and have never been at war against each other. It is widely believed that a major driver behind this agreement was the UAE rulers' perception that Israel can defend them from the perceived Iranian threat.[12] Similar normalisation agreements were signed with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Creating a new axis against another regional power (Iran) is not likely to contribute to peace and security. Furthermore, the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli conflict still needs to be addressed before or in parallel with normalisation with the Jewish state.

The rivalry between some GCC states and both Iran and Turkey has extended from the Persian Gulf to the broad Middle East, including Libya, Syria, the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. Traditionally, Egypt, Iraq and Syria represented the three pillars of the Arab world. However, with more than 100 million people and limited natural resources, Cairo faces daunting economic challenges and has lost much of the political leverage it once had. Similarly, the wars against Iran, the United States and the Islamic State (ISIS) and sectarian and ethnic divisions have taken their toll on Iraq. The country may have become less authoritarian, but it has a long way to go to build a stable political system and a prosperous economy. Finally, Syria's President Assad seems to have survived the decade-long civil war and has captured most of the territories he initially lost.

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12 Bahgat, Gawdat. "What's next after the UAE-Israel deal?" *Responsible Statecraft*, 2020. https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/08/20/whats-next-after-the-uae-israel-deal.

However, like Baghdad, the future of Damascus is highly uncertain. This power vacuum has been largely filled by Gulf states, particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

With young leaders and massive financial resources, Doha, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have sought to transform their economic and financial power into political leverage. The wars in Syria (2011 -), Libya (2011 -) and Yemen (2015 -) reflect and are driven by the rivalry between these three Gulf states. Doha, in alliance with Ankara, supports political Islam, while Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in alliance with Israel are strongly against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. The lack of consensus and any strategic vision among these three rivals has brought huge destruction to the broad Middle East and is responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

Finally, for decades Iran and Israel have engaged in a strategic confrontation in the Persian Gulf, Syria, Iraq and indeed around the world. Since the fall of the Pahlavi regime, Iranian-Israeli hostility has been driven by both ideology and geo-politics. Iran is the largest and most populous country in the Persian Gulf region and, along with Egypt and Turkey, has always played a leading role in Middle Eastern/south Asian history and policy. In other words, given Iran's size, population and military and economic resources, the leaders in Tehran, regardless of their political orientation (imperial or Islamic) have always perceived a special role for their country in shaping Middle Eastern economic, military and political affairs.

Shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran sought to 'Islamise' the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead of approaching it as a dispute between the Arabs and the Israelis, the Iranian leadership saw it as a struggle to liberate holy Muslim sites and Muslim land. This perception is in line with statements Ayatollah Khomeini made before and after rising to power and also ones by his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. During his exile Khomeini supported all struggles against Israel throughout the world and accused the

Shah of allowing Israel a free hand in Islamic Iran. Indeed, the Shah's close cooperation with Israel and the United States was a major theme in Khomeini's opposition to the Pahlavi regime. Khamenei followed the same line, arguing that the Palestinian question and the ultimate disposition of Israel were an Islamic matter on which all Muslims, not just Palestinians, must have a say. In May 2020, Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "The struggle to liberate Palestine is a Jihad in the way of God and it is an obligation and an Islamic goal."[13] Despite this strong ideological orientation, the Islamic Republic has been guarded in its opposition to negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Iranian senior officials have repeatedly confirmed that they would accept whatever the Palestinians accept in their negotiations with the Israelis. Finally, Israeli military operations in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are seen in Tehran as an extension of US aggression against the Islamic Republic.

Meanwhile, Israel has sought to portray itself as "the West's first line of defence against the threat of both Sunni and Shiite Islamists."[14] In the last few decades the strategic landscape in the Middle East has strongly turned in favour of Israel. Domestically, the Israeli standard of living is similar to or higher than many in Europe. The economy is one of the fastest growing in the world and the nation has emerged as a major hub for foreign investment, particularly in the area of information technology (IT), earning it the title 'start-up nation.' Militarily, the country is the only nuclear power in the Middle East and its armed forces, the Israel Defence Forces or IDF, are by far the strongest in the region.

Globally, Israel has always enjoyed special relations with the United States. However, President Trump was proven to be the best friend

13 IRNA News Agency. "Leader offers 7 guidelines to liberate Palestine: continuing resistance and resisting normalization." 2020. https://en.irna.ir/news/83797090

14 Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Israel had ever had in the White House. Arguably, the Trump administration gave Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a carte blanche with almost no restrictions on his expansionist policies. At the same time, Netanyahu has developed close ties with other world leaders including Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China and Narendra Modi of India, among others. Additionally, Israel is building economic and diplomatic relations in Africa and Latin America.

This emerging landscape does not mean that everything is moving in the direction Israel likes. Certainly, Jerusalem faces serious challenges, including domestic corruption and political polarisation. The nation's peace treaties with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority have failed to initiate and nourish a comprehensive peace. Economic and cultural exchanges are at a very low level, mainly due to a broad and deep resentment of the Israeli stance on the Palestinian issue. Equally important, the Israeli leaders have not been able to reach a consensus on how to deal with the 'demographic bomb,' the large and growing number of Arab-Israeli citizens.

Despite these domestic hurdles, Israel has emerged as a major regional power. The nation faces two regional adversaries: Turkey and Iran. Like Tehran, Ankara perceives itself as a major regional power and the leader of the Islamic world. President Erdogan and Prime Minister Netanyahu do not trust each other, but, rhetoric aside, Israeli tourists are welcomed in Turkey and the two nations enjoy good economic relations. President Erdogan opposes Israel's control of Muslim holy sites and treatment of the Palestinians, but he sounds much more tolerant of Israeli policies than his counterparts in Tehran. This leaves Iran and Israel as the main contenders in the Middle East.

Global powers

Given its strategic location between east and west and its massive wealth, the Persian Gulf region has always been at the centre of global power competition. The United States, Europe, Russia and China seek to advance their interests and values while regional states try to take advantage of this rivalry and play off one global power against the others. In most regional conflicts, Washington and Brussels have adopted similar postures while Moscow and Beijing have taken a different approach. The policies of these four global powers have evolved in the last few decades, but they have always reflected, and been driven by, a combination of perceived national interests and ideological orientation/values.

American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf and the broad Middle East has been driven by five major objectives: stable oil supplies, the security of Israel, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, counter-terrorism and promoting democracy and the market economy. The priorities of these objectives have varied from one administration to another. With Britain's withdrawal 'east of Suez' in the early 1970s, the United States emerged as the leading global power in the region. Despite the fact that Washington is the main security guarantor for the GCC states, American leaders have always been against deploying troops for prolonged periods. Instead, the government and private companies have engaged in ambitious arms sales and training programmes. The United States also utilises its soft power and economic and financial muscles in pursuing its strategic objectives.

The nuclear deal with Iran (2015), negotiated and signed under the Obama administration, was promoted as a turning point in US-Iran relations and generally in regional security. However, the Trump administration's withdrawal (2018) and its 'maximum pressure' strategy produced the opposite results. Iran's nuclear programme has advanced and the Gulf region has become less stable. The election of Joe Biden as the 46th President signals a departure from the failed policy of his predecessor. It is important to neither exaggerate nor under-estimate the potential change in US foreign policy under the Biden administration. Under all administrations, Washington has maintained relations with authoritarian regimes in order to protect perceived

national interests and Israel enjoys strong support from both the Democratic and Republican parties. Against this background, US relations with the GCC states and Israel are certain to remain a major priority, although not as warm as they were under the Trump administration. Meanwhile, tension with Iran is likely to be de-escalated.

Some European countries shared similar concerns to the Trump administration, but European leaders have worked hard to prevent the nuclear deal from collapsing and tried to bring Washington and Tehran back to the negotiation table. Most European governments opposed Trump's extensive economic sanctions against Iran, but the majority of private companies adhered to the sanctions regime for fear of losing access to the American market. Most importantly, European leaders resented Trump's policy of little, if any, trans-Atlantic coordination. The Biden administration has confirmed its desire to work closely with US allies and partners. With some variation, European policy in the Persian Gulf and the broad Middle East is driven more by perceived financial and geopolitical interests and less by transparency, accountability and other liberal values. The Middle East is Europe's backyard. Preventing massive flows of refugees and immigrants is a key objective of European policy. Major European powers like Britain and France keep selling arms and supporting authoritarian leaders and only pay lip service to the need to end massive abuses of human rights.

Moscow's assertive approach to the Middle East since the early 2000s has been largely driven by strategic and economic concerns. First, in 2005 President Putin described the breakup of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century."[15] He has never hidden his ambition to "restore" Russia to the status of global power. The days when Moscow could entice allies through ideology

are over. Instead of attraction and persuasion, Russia has employed hard diplomacy, economic inducements, military force and other coercive measures. The country has established itself as a key player in Syria, Libya and in the negotiation with Iran. It also has extensive ties with Turkey and Israel. The so-called 'Arab Spring' after 2011 presented Russia with both significant security risks and geo-political opportunities. The Kremlin viewed the uprisings in several Arab countries as a re-play of the so-called 'colour revolutions,' i.e. the toppling of pro-Moscow governments in Eastern Europe. Russian leaders sought to block this bitter experience and stop what they consider a 'Western plot' against Russia's national interests. A close examination of the Russian role in regional conflicts suggests that Moscow might not be able to force a particular outcome, but it is likely to be able to raise the cost to the West of pursuing specific policy options that are not in line with its wishes.

Second, adopting an assertive foreign policy approach can serve to boost a shaky legitimacy at home. In the last several years Russia has been under European and American sanctions. Close cooperation with Middle Eastern countries can serve to offset the negative effects of these Western-imposed sanctions.

Third, Russia has a large Muslim minority and several countries in its near abroad, i.e. the Caucasus and Central Asia, are predominantly Muslim. Accordingly, Russian leaders have long perceived political Islam and Islamists as major enemies. In this context, warm relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East and elsewhere should enhance the Russian government's image among its Muslim population and enable Moscow to contribute to and shape the war against extremist groups in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

Fourth, like any country, economic interests are a major driver of Russian foreign policy. Although the volume of trade between the two sides is relatively low, particularly in comparison with other global powers such as the United States,

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15 Osborn, Andrew. "Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union Was Catastrophe of the Century." *The Independent*, 2005. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-was-catastrophe-of-the-cenutry-521064.html

the European Union and China, economic ties between Moscow and several regional powers have expanded since the early 2000s. Russia's major exports to the Middle East include military equipment, machinery, oil and gas, and petrochemical, metallurgical and agricultural products. The Middle East is the main destination for exports of Russian grain. In order to further boost trade relations, Moscow has occasionally offered to use national currencies as legal tender in bilateral trade instead of euros or US dollars and has invited its Middle East trade partners to form a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Fifth, both Russia and several Middle Eastern countries are major oil and gas producers and exporters. A long time ago, the two sides decided that cooperation rather than confrontation would serve their mutual interests. Major Russian energy companies, such as Rosneft, Lukoil, Gazprom, Surgutneftegaz and Tatneft, have made substantial investments in the oil and gas sectors in the Middle East. Russia is not a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but for several years has coordinated its production policy with the Vienna-based organisation. Generally, the two sides (Russia and OPEC) seek to maintain oil price stability and offset the growing volume of US oil production. Similarly, Russia, along with several Middle Eastern countries, is a founding member of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), which has similar goals to those of OPEC.

Sixth, arms deals have always been a cornerstone of Moscow-Middle Eastern relations since the time of the Soviet Union. Most regional powers prefer Western to Russian arms. However, at least two challenges have always complicated arms supplies from the United States and Europe: 1) concern about human rights and 2) maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge. As a result, some Middle Eastern countries perceive Western governments as unreliable sources of weapons. Russia, on the other hand, does not impose such restrictions on its arms deals.

Seventh, the growing relations between Russia and Middle Eastern countries reflect perceived benefits by the two sides.[16] On the basis of cost-benefit analyses, regional leaders are generally eager to do business with Moscow. At the end of the day, they do not want to be taken for granted by Washington. Russia is more or less seen as an alternative to the United States. Similarly, presenting Russia as an option can be used by Middle Eastern countries to pressure the United States to adopt a desired course. Moscow promotes its approach to the Middle East as secular, transactional and non-ideological.[17] When Middle Eastern leaders doubt Washington's commitment and obligations, they find a partner in Russia. This was clear under the Obama administration, and more recently when the US Congress denounced the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2019.

China's approach to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is similar to Russia's. Beijing does not seek to promote communism. Instead, since the Chinese leaders launched the BRI in 2013, the volume of trade and investment between Beijing and several Middle Eastern countries has substantially expanded. Indeed, the so-called 'Chinese model' is well-received in many Gulf states. This model advocates a combination of economic reform and political authoritarianism. Like Russia, China maintains warm relations with several regional adversaries like Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But, unlike Moscow, Beijing is heavily dependent on oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf. Despite this dependency, China is yet to play a major role in the region's maritime security.

16 For more detail, see Divsallar, Abdolrasol, and Kortunov Pyotr. "The Fallout of the US-Iran Confrontation for Russia: Revisiting Moscow's Calculus." *RSCAS/Middle East Directions & Russian International Affairs Council Research paper*, 2020. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69699

17 Wasser, Becca. "The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East." *Rand Corporation*, 2019. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE340.html

Conclusion: Peace in the Persian Gulf – the way forward

This chapter has not sought to provide a comprehensive and detailed proposal to make peace in the Persian Gulf. Instead, the aim has been to suggest a number of small steps at the national, regional and global levels that are likely to create and enhance the environment in which regional players can engage in a constructive dialogue about their common future.

First, domestically all states should increase their investment in human capital, particularly education, health care and gender equality. Economic reform programmes should be seriously implemented to diversify the economies and reduce the excessive dependency on oil revenue. Equally importantly, a higher level of transparency and good governance should be tolerated and accepted.

Second, regional powers should stop the arms races and instead engage in a dialogue to accept each other's legitimate security concerns and reach a consensus on a new regional security architecture. The example of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) should be followed and modified to meet the region's needs and aspirations. Given the historical and cultural differences between Europe and the Middle East, the OSCE model should be seen as an aspirational goal rather than a specific programme to be copied.

Innovative ways should be considered to contain Iran-Israel tensions and renounce intra-state and inter-state violence. For many years several Track-2 and Track-1.5 talks have been utilised to get all parties engaged in a constructive strategic dialogue. The lessons learned from these exercises should be analysed and utilised.

Third, global powers should take a long-term approach to the Middle East and stop their support for arms races between regional rivals. They should also support economic and political reform and prioritise promoting human rights. Some European countries such as Italy, Spain and Sweden are relatively free of colonial legacies and enjoy good relations with almost all the parties in the Persian Gulf. These European states should take the lead in promoting regional dialogue.

Finally, given the lack of trust between major regional players, Track-2 diplomacy should be considered, taking into account its limitations.

These proposed efforts at the national, regional and global levels overlap with each other and should be implemented in a coordinated manner. Regional players should take the lead in addressing the daunting socio-economic and political challenges they face at home and engage in a strategic dialogue with their adversaries. The goal of such dialogue should be to create a regional mechanism to promote cooperation. Finally, the Persian Gulf region is too important to be left alone. It would be naïve and unrealistic to expect non-intervention by global powers. However, it is reasonable to expect and demand that the leaders of the free world take a long-term approach to the Persian Gulf and prioritise human values over short-term economic interests.

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Cooperation: The Gordian Knot

Ross Harrison

Executive Summary

When it comes to the prospects for cooperation in the Middle East, expectations should be tempered, even with the likelihood that an incoming Biden Administration will make the US more supportive of such efforts. The questions this chapter unpacks are why cooperation has been so elusive in the Persian Gulf region. It will also tackle the question of what the prospects are for moving this tumultuous region toward a cooperative stance. There are several arguments this chapter advances. First, there are structural problems that militate against cooperation in the Persian Gulf region, and the Middle East more generally, such as domestic legitimacy deficits, a broad regional conflict system, and an unhelpful international community. Second, the region is in the midst of a powerful transformation that is stronger and more overwhelming than the impulses toward cooperation. Third, there is the absence of an urgent imperative, like mutually assured destruction, to give leaders a decisive, super-charged incentive to act cooperatively. Last the Middle East necessitates a different regional cooperation path than taken by other regions, focusing on gradual, informal, and incremental steps instead of large, formalized initiatives.

Keywords: Cooperation, Regional Conflict, Regionalization, Conflict Mitigation, Regional Integration

Introduction

Cooperation between states is in many ways an unnatural phenomenon, even when they have overlapping interests.[1] This is especially true in anarchic regional systems like the Middle East, where common interests in a vibrant peaceful region are not sufficient to incentivise states to cooperate.[2] In this conflict-riddled region, it is more instinctive for states to be in a permanent defensive crouch against real and perceived threats from adversaries than it is to work cooperatively. Cooperation with neighbouring countries is often perceived by leaders in the Middle East as potentially compromising their states' hard-won sovereignty and their freedom of action.[3]

This is not to suggest that regional cooperation is a global rarity. Beyond the Middle East, functioning regional cooperative frameworks have emerged such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU). As politically tricky and imperfect as these arrangements might be, they have helped mitigate conflict and facilitate economic growth for decades.[4]

However, when it comes to the prospects for cooperation in the Middle East, expectations should be tempered, even with the likelihood that an incoming Biden Administration will make the United States more supportive of such efforts. The Middle East is arguably the least integrated region of the globe despite the fact that there are institutional structures that hold the promise of cooperation, including the Arab League and the GCC. To the degree to which there is integration,

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1 Jervis, Robert. "Realism, game theory, and cooperation." *World Politics: A Quarterly Journal of International Relations*, 1988: 317-349.

2 Northam, Jackie. "Saudi Arabia Sought Dialogue with Iran then the US-Iranian Conflict Escalated." *National Public Radio*, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/01/09/794519810/saudi-arabia-sought-dialogue-with-iran-then-the-u-s-iranian-conflict-escalated.

3 For the realist perspective that states in an anarchic world tend to eschew cooperation, see Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

4 Jervis, Robert. "Realism, neoliberalism, and cooperation: understanding the debate." *International Security* 24, no. 1. 1999: 42-63.

it is built on a negative web of interwoven conflicts rather than an agreed upon set of common principles. Civil wars and tensions between regional powers have created a conflict vortex that casts a long and dark shadow over any prospects for cooperation.

The questions this chapter unpacks are why cooperation has been so elusive in the Persian Gulf region and why this deficit has almost become accepted as a truism about the Middle East. It will also tackle the question of what the prospects are for moving this tumultuous region toward a more cooperative stance to confront the profound challenges facing all countries, including human security, climate change, economic growth and public health.

There are several arguments that this chapter advances. First, there are structural problems that militate against cooperation in the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East more generally, such as domestic legitimacy deficits, a broad regional conflict system and an unhelpful international community. Second, the region is in the midst of a powerful transformation that is stronger and more overwhelming than the impulses toward cooperation. Third, there is an absence of an urgent imperative, like mutually assured destruction, to give leaders a decisive super-charged incentive to act cooperatively. While there is the threat of 'mutually assured degradation,' the spectre of this more gradual form of disintegration is not sufficiently jarring to pry open the political windows necessary for cooperation. And last, because of the aforementioned constraints the Middle East necessitates a different regional cooperation path than that taken by other regions. In the Middle East, regional cooperation strategies require systematically addressing the local, regional and international obstacles that have so far frustrated cooperation. Given the difficulty in doing this, strides toward cooperation are likely to be gradual and incremental in nature. What this means is that cooperation should be

thought of more as a process than a destination.[5] Prematurely trying to jumpstart a formalised regional architecture without seeing incremental progress toward regionalisation will be likely to lead to a frustration of effort.

Cooperation Deficit: A Network of Impediments

There is no region in the world where the need for cooperation is more dire but where the necessary preconditions for cooperation are so scarce. Another way of putting this is that at a time when demand for cooperation in the Middle East should be at its peak the available supply of cooperation is at its nadir.

What makes the Middle East unique in terms of the challenge of forging cooperation is not the presence of obstacles, for, as stated previously, it is an inherently difficult proposition. What makes this troubled region uniquely challenged is the way that national, regional and international obstacles to cooperation mutually reinforce one another. It is this confluence of challenges to cooperation that makes disentanglement tantamount to untying a Gordian knot.

Domestic Impediments

It is a fallacy to suggest that Persian Gulf states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia lack common interests in a vibrant, integrated and vital region. But having shared national interests is a necessary yet woefully insufficient part of what it takes to generate cooperative behaviour. What often stands in the way is that domestic politics intercede to blunt the political will of leaders to act on these compelling interests.[6]

5   Harrison, Ross. "Toward A Regional Framework for the Middle East: Takeaways from Other Regions." In Harrison, Ross, and Salem, Paul (eds.) *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2017.

6   See Harrison, Ross. "Regionalism in the Middle East: An Impossible Dream?" *Orient, German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture in the Middle East*, 2018.

This is particularly true of leaders who struggle with challenges to their own political legitimacy.[7] Leaders of most states in the broader Middle East, including the larger and more stable states like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, face challenges to their domestic legitimacy. Their inability to properly address the political, economic, climate and health-related grievances of their populations has thrown the entire region into an acute legitimacy crisis. What this translates into is jingoistic aggressive behaviour toward neighbouring states becoming a political expedient for leaders to distract their publics from these problems. The ultimate victim of this legitimacy deficit is the region itself, which is moving further away from, rather than closer to, cooperation.

However, is it not possible for regional cooperation to burnish the domestic legitimacy of leaders? In theory the answer should be yes but the reality is much more complicated. First, demonising the 'other' is a clearer and more effective device for distracting mass publics away from domestic failings than the hazier and more abstract images of cooperation. Moreover, the immediacy of the perceived threats emanating from the conflicts in the region has tended to crowd out the common interest in a stable, prosperous and secure region. The conflicts appear real and immediate while common interests are seen as remote, abstract and less urgent to act upon. Fear and threat perceptions are powerful motivators and are conveniently used to draw attention away from domestic troubles.[8]

Second, there is a poor incentive structure for leaders to cooperate at the regional level. The benefits of regional cooperation tend to materialise in the long term while the political costs are borne immediately. Spending political capital on cooperation today when the benefits will only materialise tomorrow is an inherently difficult circle to square, even for leaders in more stable regions unburdened with legitimacy deficits. It is even more difficult for leaders who are fighting for legitimacy in an unstable region. Cooperation endeavours are investments in the future, something that leaders facing domestic political constraints and legitimacy issues find difficult to justify.[9]

We see this pattern of domestic political issues acting as constraints on cooperation across several states in the Persian Gulf. The de facto leader of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), faced with international opprobrium over the war in Yemen and the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and trying to navigate his country through new political terrain such as shifting policies toward women, reducing the power of the religious 'ulama and shifting the economy, has to worry about challenges to his domestic (and international) legitimacy. These challenges have given MBS an incentive to use nationalism to stoke anti-Iranian sentiment as a way to draw attention away from difficult domestic issues.

This is not to suggest that there are not legitimate grievances that Riyadh has toward Iran. Iran's regional behaviour and projection of power into the Arab heartland strikes hard at Saudi political sensibilities and threat perceptions. But initiatives such as involvement in the war in Yemen, detention of the Lebanese Prime Minister in Riyadh and stepped-up diplomatic activity in Iraq are all part of a pattern of Saudi animus toward Iran, which must be seen in part in the context of Saudi domestic politics.[10] Domestic politics reinforced by legitimate concerns about Iranian behaviour have pushed Saudi Arabia into a non-cooperative stance.

Iranian leaders also externalise domestic politics

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7   For an analysis of the structural legitimacy deficit in the Middle East, see Hudson, Michael C. *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy. New Haven*: Yale University Press, 1977.

8   Harrison, "Regionalism in the Middle East: An Impossible Dream?", 2018.

9   Also see Acharya, Amitav, and Johnston, Alistair (eds.). *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017. and Harrison, "Toward A Regional Framework for the Middle East: Takeaways from Other Regions", 2017.

10   See Friedman, Uri. "What's the Saudi-Iran Feud Really About." *The Atlantic*, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/iran-saudi-sunni-shiite/422808/

into their foreign policy by deflecting blame for economic and political woes onto Arab neighbours and the United States. While Iran was given sufficient incentives to stoke animosity toward the United States during the Trump Administration, nonetheless the Islamic Republic has brandished anti-Americanism as a weapon to paper over its own domestic economic and political failures. In 2019, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed the United States for demonstrations over rising fuel prices.[11] And even during the Obama administration Iranian leaders tried to change the subject of the grievances of demonstrators protesting Iran's 2009 election imbroglio by blaming the United States.[12] Notwithstanding occasional comments about regional diplomacy from the office of the President and Foreign Ministry, the Iranian leadership remains defensive about overtures toward regional cooperation, portraying to Iran's population such efforts as a ruse by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel to subjugate Iran.

Beyond the Persian Gulf, Turkey is not resistant to using foreign policy to try to burnish tarnished domestic legitimacy credentials. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used military adventurism in Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and the eastern Mediterranean as a cudgel to solidify his political position and distract from some of his domestic policy woes, including an economic crisis. He has externalised Turkey's domestic Kurdish issue by entering the Syrian civil war and through military encroachments into Iraq.[13] Also, hostility to US support for the Kurds in Syria partly stems from Erdogan's domestic political exigencies. Turkey's domestic political issues plus the collapse of the region into multiple civil wars have pushed Turkey away from its cooperative 'zero problems with neighbours' foreign policy and toward a more aggressive approach toward the UAE and Egypt, as well as the United States.

Israel is more of a mixed bag. Domestic politics have pushed the country both closer to and further away from regional cooperation. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu actively fought against US efforts to pursue diplomacy with Iran, partially on the basis of domestic politics. As Netanyahu has become more challenged politically and embroiled in personal legal entanglements he has brandished the threat from Iran as a weapon.[14] Israel has legitimate concerns about Iran, including its missile programme, potential for a revived nuclear weapons programme and support for Hezbollah and Hamas, plus a history of holocaust denial and other hyperbolic and blatantly threatening rhetoric. Iran's stance goes deeper than just being opposed to Israeli policy, although the Palestinian issue is a particular grievance Tehran has latched onto. Iran's issue with Israel seems aimed more fundamentally at the legitimacy of the Israeli state and Zionism itself. That having been said, Netanyahu has become

11 Malekian, Somayeh, and Finnegan, Connor. "Iran's Supreme Leader Blames US for Protests over Fuel Costs as Mike Pompeo Voices Support for Demonstrations." *ABC News*, 2019. https://abcnews.go.com/International/irans-supreme-leader-blames-us-protests-fuel-costs/story?id=67342766

12 Sciutto, Jim, Ammu Kannampilly, and Stephen Splane. "Iran TV Accuses US of 'Intolerable' Meddling as Protesters Hit the Streets Again." *ABC News*, 2009. https://abcnews.go.com/International/irans-supreme-leader-blames-us-protests-fuel-costs/story?id=67342766

13 Van Veen, Erwin and Engin Yueksel. "Too Big for its Boots: Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East from 2002-2018." *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, July 2018, Chapter 2. https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/too-big-for-its-boots/

14 Arbell, Dan. "The Domestic Considerations behind Israel's support of Iran deal decertification." *Brookings Institute*, 2017. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/10/13/the-domestic-considerations-behind-israels-support-of-iran-deal-de-certification/; Also, see Kaye, Dalia Dassa, Alireza Nader, and Parisa Roshan. "Israel and Iran, a Dangerous Rivalry." *Rand Corporation*, 2011. https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1143.html

invested in his anti-Iran rhetorical flourishes to deflect attention away from his domestic political troubles.

However, Israel's fear of Iran has pushed it toward cooperation elsewhere in the region. It has normalised relations with the UAE and is on the cusp of doing the same with other Gulf Arab states, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. It is possible that eventually Saudi Arabia will follow suit. While this is a potentially positive development in terms of cooperative diplomacy, if it is used merely to create an anti-Iran phalanx and disincentives Israel to address the plight of the Palestinians it could undermine the cause of overall regional cooperation.

Regional Impediments

A central problem militating against cooperation in the Middle East is that the region is presently undergoing one of the most profound transformations in its long and troubled history. As I will document later, other regions of the world which have successfully forged cooperation have tended to do so at a decisive moment in which conflicts have abated, not in the midst of a chaotic change process like the Middle East is currently enduring. This is important as it forces us to consider that the impediments to cooperation are not just at the level of individual countries and their leaders but also at the level of the region.

To understand this we need a historical perspective. For centuries the Middle East was shaped by outside powers. In ancient times, much of it was swallowed by the Persian and Ottoman empires. Then, from the end of the First World War much of the Middle East was controlled by Great Britain and France, colonial powers which established many of the borders that survive to this day. And at the end of the Second World War the Middle East fell under the sway of Cold War geopolitics when newly independent countries in the region formed alliances either with the United States or the Soviet Union. And during the decades between the Soviet collapse in 1991 and the Arab Spring protests of 2010, the US with its dual containment and counterterrorism strategies

tried to impose a Pax Americana on the region.[15]

However, the Middle East is now spinning on its own axis and according to its own internal logic, as messy as that journey might be. The Arab Spring protests of 2010-11, which shredded leadership structures throughout the region, and the civil wars that hollowed out the Arab world sprang from homegrown movements that were influenced by, but did not originate with, outside forces. This ongoing transformation will shape the Middle East going forward, but it also makes it seemingly immune to attempts to forge cooperation.

Examining where on the continuum of change other regions of the globe have achieved a modicum of success in terms of cooperation will give us some clues as to why a Middle East in the midst of transformation could be impervious to such efforts. Most efforts at forging cooperation have gained traction after a major change had played itself out or a significant event had transpired. Cooperation has seldom occurred in the midst of rapid change. The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which was the seedling of the European Union (EU), was born on the heels of the destruction of World War II. This cooperative effort between France, West Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, which was envisioned by Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, occurred after the war. And further east, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in the 1960s in the aftermath of successful diplomacy to resolve the undeclared war between Indonesia and Malaysia, and in response to fear of the rise of communism.[16] While not as profound an event as the end of World War II, the diplomatic process of making peace between these countries and heightened threat perceptions were the catalysts for the formation of a cooperative regional framework in Asia.

What this context means is that the Middle East may not be ripe for cooperation because it fails to meet the preconditions that jolted other

15 Gause III, F. Gregory. "The illogic of dual containment." *Foreign Affairs*, 1994: 56-66.

16 Harrison, "Toward A Regional Framework for the Middle East: Takeaways from Other Regions", 2017.

regions into action. It is in the midst of a messy transformation process rather than at the decisive catalytic moments experienced by Europe and Asia. But it is also the precariousness of the regional transformation process in the Middle East that militates against cooperation. In a way the region is stuck in a repeating loop of chaotic change with no decisive end in sight. The region has become a conflict trap that has ensnared all of the major regional actors, and for which there is no obvious exit path or strategy. This conflict trap is multi-layered and exists both within states and between states. In terms of intra-state conflict, Yemen, Syria and Libya are mired in civil wars. Moreover, these wars have morphed into proxy wars, drawing in regional powerhouses: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, the UAE and Qatar. These civil wars and proxy battles have over time turned into regionalised and international conflicts, with the Persian Gulf states at the centre. What this means is that the countries necessary for de-escalation of the civil wars and eventual cooperation, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar, have themselves become protagonists in a region-wide conflict system.

But why have these regional powers, which in theory should become part of the solution to the civil wars, instead become part of the problem? Once drawn into civil wars, the murkiness and ambiguity of the conflicts have created security dilemmas for the regional powers, making them feel less secure and more resistant to cooperation. The complexity of and poor visibility in these conflicts makes it difficult for the regional powers to assess their own comparative power positions vis-à-vis one another, instilling fear that de-escalation will merely encourage others to become more aggressive.[17] Because of this, in a perverse sort of way de-escalation can be seen

as less rational than escalation.[18] And without working towards de-escalation first, cooperation to end the conflicts remains elusive.

Yemen since 2015, when Saudi Arabia entered that conflict to prevent Iran from gaining a beachhead on the Arabian Peninsula, exemplifies how corrosive these security dilemmas can be. The shadow-boxing effect of Saudi Arabia and Iran competing against one another amidst ambiguity has fuelled the conflict. The ambiguity stems from the fact that Iran is supporting its Houthi allies in Yemen but is not directly engaged in the fighting. This asymmetric dynamic of Saudi direct involvement and Iranian indirect involvement has intensified the threat perceptions of the Saudis about Iran. Questions such as whether gains by the Houthis are indicative of Iranian escalation or merely the result of lone actions taken by the Houthis remain difficult to answer. In this situation, the logic of escalation has prevailed over the logic of de-escalation, keeping the Saudis mired for the past five years.

But the damage done to the Middle East by the regional powers engaged in a proxy war in the civil war zones extends beyond the countries in the midst of internal conflict. The civil wars have engulfed the major regional powers in a battle for influence that has propelled them even further away from cooperation. Although Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Israel were rivals before they entered the civil wars, competing inside these conflicts has significantly widened the cracks that already existed in the relationships between these countries. In other words, the civil wars at the country level are now blowing back into the region. Civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya have spread vertically, up the food chain to the major regional powers, sparking a dangerous battle for regional influence and creating 'bad

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17 Jervis, Robert. "Cooperation under the security dilemma." *World Politics: A Quarterly Journal of International Relations*, 1978: 167-214.

18 Harrison, Ross. "The GCC versus Iran: Low Intensity War, High Intensity Conflict." *Gulf Studies Forum*, 2020.

neighbourhood effects' that prevent cooperation.[19]

In sum, the prospects for cooperation have been torn asunder by a regional transformation fuelled by civil wars, regional rivalries and security dilemmas.[20] This has created a regional conflict vortex that blots out the ability of the major regional powers to act as co-stewards of the health of the region. The combination of conflict at the substate and interstate levels makes the conflict system a Gordian knot that prevents states from acting on their common interests.

International Impediments

The Middle East is in the midst of a transformation based on regional and local dynamics. Civil wars and struggles for regional dominance, as messy and violent as they are, suggest that the region is finally coming into its own. But that does not mean that the international system is irrelevant to the propensity for cooperation in this fraught region. International politics, while far less determinative of outcomes in the Middle East today than in previous periods, still has influence. The question is how does this influence get used to either enhance or detract from cooperation?

Political theorists of the realist persuasion tend to see this influence through a lens of pessimism, given their wariness about what they see as power-maximising states ever having sufficiently

common interests to cooperate in a region like the Middle East.[21] It is tempting to say that theory has little relevance to how the real world works, and to write realism off as an anachronism of the Cold War period. But Russia, the EU and the United States working at cross-purposes with one another over the past several years in the Middle East seems to suggest that realism is still relevant. It should also temper our expectations that international powers can work cooperatively to mitigate regional conflicts. What has happened is that the international powers, which in theory should be sitting above the conflicts and encouraging the regional actors to act cooperatively, have themselves become protagonists in the conflicts of the Middle East, adding to what has become a multi-layered conflict vortex.

Adding fuel to this is a United States which has tried (unsuccessfully) to apply realist principles, not just against international rivals like Russia and China but also against regional powers in the Middle East. In this regard, offshore balancing is often touted as a way to operationalise realist theory in the practice of international relations. And it has been used in the Middle East context as a way to project American power without committing massive numbers of boots on the ground. Offshore balancing leverages American allies on the ground, deploying American power directly only as a measure of last resort. But it can also be thought of as a way to create regional stability where cooperation between regional powers is either implausible or politically inexpedient. The idea is that stability can come from using American power to counterbalance a regional hegemon which is resistant to cooperation.[22] The United States, particularly during the Trump Administration, has tended to see Iran as such a hegemon, operationalising the belief that stability can be created by doubling down in support of allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel to create a countervailing wall of power

19 For vertical conflict contagion see Salem, Paul, and Ross Harrison. "Building for Peace: Reconstruction for Security, Equity and Sustainable Peace in MENA." *World Bank, 2020*. 14, and Harrison, Ross. "The Global and Regional Geopolitics of Civil War in the Middle East. in Salem, Paul and Harrison, Ross (eds.), *Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East*. Washington D.C.: Middle East Institute: 2019: 61-62. For bad neighbourhood effects, see Weiner, Myron. "Bad Neighbors, Bad Neighborhoods: An Inquiry into the Causes of Refugee Flows." *International Security*, 21, no. 1. 1996: 5–42. www.jstor.org/stable/2539107. Also, see Harrison, "The Global and Regional Geopolitics of Civil War in the Middle East", 2019.

20 Harrison, Ross. "US Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air into a Punctured Tire." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 2019. Presented at the Gulf Studies Forum, Doha, Qatar.

21 Walt, Stephen M. "Alliance formation and the balance of world power." *International security* 9, no. 4. 1985: 3-43.

22 Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy." *Foreign Affairs* 95, 2016: 70.

against Iran. In other words, when conditions are not ripe for cooperation, stability can still be achieved by creating a balance of power against Iran.

But what has happened instead is that US application of power has neither created a balance of power nor has it engendered stability or cooperation. There is a reason for this. In the absence of cooperation, offshore balancing can work to create stability under certain conditions, none of which are manifest in the Middle East today. One precondition is state-centricity, meaning a region populated with intact sovereign states. A second is that rivalry takes place along traditional economic, political and military lines. The third condition is an imbalance of power and the presence of a regional hegemon posing a direct military menace to surrounding states. Under these conditions, the United States working through its regional allies could serve as a force multiplier to create a stabilising balance of power.

But unlike in East Asia, where China is in fact a hegemonic power reigning over smaller states, none of these preconditions exist in the Middle East today. With three ongoing civil wars, several failed states and the presence of non-state actors like al-Qaeda and ISIS, the region is a degraded state system not a state-centric system. The Arab world has been hollowed out by civil wars and regional power penetration into these conflicts, challenging the notion of independent sovereign states. In addition, the region lacks a regional hegemon, despite Iran's attempt to extend its tentacles throughout the Arab world and regional power projections by Turkey, the UAE, Qatar and Israel. Certainly, Iran has been the most successful of all of these in prosecuting its agenda in the civil war zones, taking advantage of the degraded state system the region has become. But it is not a regional hegemon. Iran lacks the capacity to directly overpower its rivals in the region, either economically or militarily. Iran is more menacing within failed states of the region than it is threatening to its stronger rivals. In terms of conventional military power, the Gulf Arab

states and Israel top Iran by a significant margin.[23] All fears about Iran aside, the region has become a tripartite system consisting of Arab, Turkish and Iranian centres of power, with none being able to impose a hegemonic reign over the others.

The United States has built its policy on a fallacious set of premises, thereby undermining stability and regional cooperation in the Middle East. By abandoning the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018 and waging what is tantamount to economic warfare against Iran, Washington has given Tehran an incentive to sink its tentacles more deeply into the civil war zones in the Middle East. The civil wars have also increased state-to-state tensions among the regional actors. Like pumping air into a punctured tyre, which just makes the leak worse, Washington is exacerbating regional tensions by causing instability and conflict to seep out of the civil war zones and across the broader region.[24] It has increased the polarisation between states aligned with the United States, such as in the GCC dispute with Qatar.

In addition to failing to create stability, Washington under Trump also actively discouraged cooperation. It disincentivised Saudi Arabia and Israel from changing their stance towards Iran and it convinced the Iranians that the US and its allies pose an existential threat intent on regime change, moving Tehran further away from cooperation.[25] It also gave Iran an incentive to deepen its ties with Russia and China, which makes the international system that much more

23 Cordesman, Anthony H. and Harrington, Nicholas. "The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization and the Shifting Military Balance." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. https://www.csis.org/analysis/arab-gulf-states-and-iran-military-spending-modernization-and-shifting-military-balance

24 Harrison, Ross. "US Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air into a Punctured Tire." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 2019. https://mei.edu/publications/us-foreign-policy-towards-middle-east-pumping-air-punctured-tire

25 Salem, Paul and Harrison, Ross. "The Layers and Limits of Diplomacy with Iran." *Middle East Institute*, 2020. https://mei.edu/publications/layers-and-limits-diplomacy-iran

resistant to encouraging cooperative behaviour among the regional actors.

Certainly, the United States is not the only culprit disincentivising cooperation in the Middle East. Other global powers such as Russia and China have failed the region as well, using it as a venue for superpower competition and to achieve economic primacy. The EU failed to sufficiently counter US efforts to marginalise Iran during the Trump era. That having been said, most of the responsibility for disincentivising cooperation falls on the United States, since it has deeper military, political and diplomatic investments in the region and a history of countering Iran at the expense of regional cooperation. Not alone, but surely with a big hand, the United States has reinforced all the worst tendencies of both its allies and its adversaries, neither creating a balance of power nor fostering cooperation.

Cutting the Gordian Knot: Is Cooperation Possible?

Up to this point, I have focused on all the significant impediments to regional cooperation in the Middle East. This has not been to cast a pall of pessimism or hopelessness about the prospects for eventual cooperation in the region. Instead, it is designed to lay a realistic foundation for thinking constructively about what the obstacles are so that strategies for trying to circumvent them can be devised.

One way of thinking constructively about cooperation in the Middle East is to consider it as a gradual process rather than as a final destination culminating in formal agreement.[26] The reason for this is that there is little political appetite in the region today for formalised cooperation. As degraded and unstable as the

Middle East is today, states in the region are not faced with the spectre of mutually assured destruction or a similar decisive event that could jump start a process toward formal cooperation. Instead, the region can be thought of as facing 'mutually assured degradation,' which is a sort of slow-motion destruction around which states can develop adaptative strategies that allow them to eschew cooperation. A strategy for moving towards cooperation needs to take these realities into account.

In the absence of a decisive moment in the Middle East, there are prospects for advancing toward a more stable and cooperative future for the region, even if the day when these efforts come to full fruition is further in the future than is optimal or desired.[27] Intermediate steps that move the region closer to, or at least not further away from, cooperation are worthwhile even in the current depressing environment.

Focus on Regionalisation

Alongside a long-term quest for formalised cooperation should be a shorter-term focus on increased regionalisation. If we think about cooperation as a continuum, steps can be taken to build a web of linkages in this broken and atomised region. Addressing the problems of water, climate and health could help overcome the aforementioned legitimacy trap that prevent leaders from cooperating.[28] These are issues where the benefits of cooperation can come in the short to medium term with minimal political risk for leaders. Moreover, cooperation on these issues does not necessarily need the direct

26 Harrison, Ross, and Paul Salem (eds.). *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East.* Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2017: 208-209.

27 See the scenario development in Kenney, Steven, and Ross Harrison. "Middle East Conflict and COVID-19: A View from 2025." *Middle East Institute*, Policy Paper 8, 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/middle-east-conflict-and-covid-19-view-2025

28 See Harrison, Ross. "Regionalism in the Middle East: An Impossible Dream?" *Orient, German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture in the Middle East* 95, no. 1. 2018: 7-9.

involvement of senior government leaders. Technical cooperation can take place in Track-2 settings or directly between scientists, business elite members and university scholars. The spread of best practices on climate change, for example, can be achieved without formal cooperation. Iran and the Arab Gulf countries have common interests in the area of water shortages, drought, desertification and rising temperatures, which threaten to make swathes of the area uninhabitable. They also have common interests in improving the health of the waters of the Persian Gulf, which due to desalination over the years have become more laden with brine salts, which threaten fisheries and the general habitability of the area.[29] While governments may not cooperate directly, the demonstrable effects of climate change mitigation can be diffused to neighbouring countries through low level exchanges at conferences and through scholarly interaction.[30] While more technical, less politicised forms of cooperation will not necessarily create a tipping point toward broader forms of cooperation, they can help increase the linkages and interdependencies between countries, which can be exploited later when (and if) the political will for broader forms of cooperation materialises.[31]

Watch for Signals

Policymakers and analysts need to be sensitive to signals that might suggest a shift in political will toward cooperation among the actors in the region. Wildcard events, such as Covid-19, could lead to shifts in how populations prioritise the issues on which they accord or deny legitimacy to leaders.[32] From where we sit right now, that does not seem to be the case with the health and economic shocks of Covid, but it is early in the cycle. Even after the virus is no longer a health threat, the economic and social aftershocks are likely to linger.[33] Early in the crisis, the UAE sent medical supplies to Iran, which could presage further forms of cooperation in the future.[34]

Other signals to look for are possible leadership transitions in Iran, Israel, Turkey or Saudi Arabia, something that could change the tone of relations between these regional powers. Joe Biden as US president might engender fresh political processes that could push in the direction of more cooperative behaviour among the players in the Middle East.

A Focus on Conflict Mitigation

It is probably a bridge too far to go directly from conflict to cooperation, so it will probably need to happen in stages. Conflict mitigation approaches can nudge the needle closer to more formalised cooperation. Of course, to end a civil war or even mitigate the hostilities in Libya and Yemen requires a modicum of cooperation between international and regional powers. However, even intermediate steps, like modest reconstruction efforts and restoration of transport and distribution services to communities torn asunder by war, can be a step in the right direction. At the very least, attenuation of civil war hostilities could create an exit lane for regional powers to escape the vortex

29 Bashitialshaaer, Raed, Lena Flyborg, and Kenneth M. Persson. "Environmental assessment of brine discharge and wastewater in the Arabian Gulf." *Desalination and Water Treatment* 25, no. 1-3. 2011: 276-285.

30 See Spinesi, Luca. "Knowledge Creation and International Transfers." In Hveem, Helge, and Lelio Iapadre (eds.) *The Global Governance of Knowledge Creation and Diffusion: Education, Research, Innovation and International Cooperation.* New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2011.

31 See Harrison, Ross, and Paul Salem (eds.). *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East.* Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute: 2017.

32 See Gaub, Florence. "Arab Futures 2.0: The Road to 2030." *European Union Institute for Strategic Studies (EU ISS) Chaillot Papers*, no. 154. 2019. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Chaillot_154%20Arab%20Futures.pdf

33 Kenney, "Middle East Conflict and COVID-19: A View from 2025." 2020.

34 Al-Monitor Staff. "UAE Sends Medical Aid to Iran as Coronavirus Outbreak Intensifies." *Al-Monitor*, 2020. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/03/uae-iran-medical-aid-coronavirus-outbreak.html

of conflict.[35]

Aside from focusing on conflict mitigation in the civil wars, one of the golden keys in terms of broader forms of cooperation is defusing the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given the stakes, the relationship is too big to fail.[36] Conflict between these two regional titans has deepened conflict patterns across the region. It has widened the gap within the GCC between Qatar on the one side and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the other. It has also intensified instability in Lebanon and Iraq. And of course, it has added fuel to the civil wars in Yemen, Syria and even Afghanistan. The Biden Administration could help tone down this conflict, which is a first step toward a possible modus vivendi for these consequential regional powers.

One question is whether the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel represent a conflict mitigation step toward broader forms of regional cooperation. While this agreement is certainly not good news for Palestinian aspirations, we should also be wary of analysis that completely writes off the agreement as a step backward for the overall region. If the United States continues to see the emerging alignment between Israel and the Arab world as central to an anti-Iran phalanx, then the naysayers will be right that the accords will undermine rather than advance the cause of regional cooperation. But if under President Biden the United States sees the accords as an opportunity to forge cooperation on energy, trade, climate and health, then this could be the tip of the spear toward more inclusive cooperation. In fact subregional cooperation can be a step toward broader forms of regional cooperation that could ultimately bring in more Arab countries, Turkey and even Iran.[37] However, again, this will depend on whether the United States, Israel and the UAE use the agreement as a cudgel against Iran or whether they use it as a platform for broader forms of cooperation.

Focus on the Region as a Whole

Historically, the United States and Russia saw the Middle East as a venue for competition, particularly during the Cold War, when alliances with local powers became the currency of superpower rivalry. This may have worked well when what was sown by great powers in the Middle East did not blow back and create liabilities in the international system. But today, when the civil wars in the Middle East are spawning terrorism and creating refugee flows into the west, the international powers have a strategic interest in stability in the region. What this means is that in order to encourage the main regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey toward cooperation, Russia, China, the EU and the United States need to do the same. They need to give up 'great game' thinking and look at reinforcing the best behaviour of the actors in the region rather than incentivising the worst.

It is easy to dismiss this as quixotic pie-in-the-sky thinking. But if we harken back to 2015, this kind of cooperative behaviour among the global powers happened. The United States, Russia, China, Germany, the UK and France came together to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran. While the JCPOA was not a panacea for regional troubles or even a guarantee of broader forms of cooperative behaviour, it was a step toward defusing conflict. And it offered Iran a pathway away from being a regional spoiler and toward being a more constructive actor. But we were not able to test out the theory. Once the United States withdrew from the agreement, old behaviours snapped back very quickly. Russia and China backed Iran, while the United States applied maximum pressure on Iran through a resumption of sanctions and doubling down in support of Israel and Saudi Arabia. The region lurched further away from cooperation as a result. To stop this slide backwards, international diplomacy needs to be rehabilitated under President Biden.

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35 See Salem, Paul, and Ross Harrison. *Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East.* Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2019: 203-213.

36 See Harrison, Ross. "Too Big to Fail: The Iran-Saudi Relationship." *Middle East Institute*, 2016. https://www.mei.edu/publications/too-big-fail-iran-saudi-relationship

37 Harrison, Ross, and Paul Salem (eds.). *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East.* Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2017: 208-217.

Conclusion

There are plenty of reasons to be wary about the prospects for cooperation among regional powers in the Middle East. Few obvious paths exist for the region to transition from the conflict-fraught state of today to a more cooperative future tomorrow. There are headwinds and obstacles at the national, regional and international levels which make cooperation a difficult enterprise. From domestic legitimacy problems to conflict traps ensnaring regional actors in a rivalrous international political system, cooperation has little going for it today.

But if someone living in Europe in 1945 had been told that by 1993 there would be a Maastricht Treaty that codified the European Union, one of the finest examples of regional integration ever designed, they would probably have been incredulous. But there were leaders like Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet who had the drive, vision and temerity to imagine a better future for a European continent devastated by war. In a similar fashion, getting from where the Middle East is today to a more cooperative stance is possible, even if that path seems elusive.

Frankly, if the region is going to have a positive future economically, socially or politically, there are not many alternatives to cooperation. With the challenges of the lingering economic and health aftershocks of the Covid-19 crisis, multiple civil wars, civil protests and an increasingly uninhabitable region due to rising temperatures and water shortages, thriving and even surviving in the Middle East will eventually require cooperative frameworks.

Taking the steps outlined above should help advance us toward this goal. Or at the very least it will make sure that cooperation is not set back even further. In a region that is now spinning on its own axis and is less susceptible to control from the outside, the best the United States, the European Union, Russia and China can do is support positive steps and send strong signals against behaviour that sets the region back further. Cooperation is a Gordian knot that only regional actors acting on behalf of regional agendas can untie. But international actors, including the United States under President Biden, can support this and not make the knot tighter and harder to unravel.

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Why do regional security plans fail?

Abdolrasool Divsallar

Executive summary

Awareness of the causes of failure of previous plans to build a cooperative security system in the Persian Gulf is fundamental for any future design of such a plan. It is also important to understand why Gulf states choose to compete when the losses they incur from the confrontational order are relatively high. This chapter divides past security building plans into two groups: those which identified a bad regional actor and sought a revolutionary change in that actor's policy; and those which aimed for a grand bargain among dozens of actors through sudden comprehensive policy shifts. The chapter explores five factors that contributed to the failure of these approaches: a lack of equal understanding among actors about the urgency of revising the security system; problems associated with a security gap between when a policy shift takes place and when a new security system should emerge; spoiler effects of domestic politics on regional security building; a lack of bottom-up demand for cooperative security; and disagreements over security narratives and leadership among global and regional powers. These factors highlight the need for a change in the security-building approach in order to address these issues.

Keywords: Domestic politics, Security urgency, Grand bargain, Rogue states, Persian Gulf, Confrontational order, Regional security plan

Introduction

With the exception of a few examples which produced relatively positive results, such as the 1990s Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group, the history of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region is marked by failed initiatives to build working regional security. Most of the past initiatives have followed two main approaches.

The first approach identifies so-called *rogue actors* as a key systemic anomaly and a cause of the existing destabilising dynamics. Accordingly, stabilisation of the regional security system will only take place through regime changes or profound transformations of such actors' policies. External interventions in the region have been based on this logic. In his speech to Congress prior to the first US strike on Iraq in 1990, George W. Bush argued that the "crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward a historic period of cooperation."[1] Trump's Iran policy followed a similar path, believing that a better security system could only be brought about with a radical change in Iran's regional policies. Pompeo's twelve demands[2] on Iran in 2018 were essentially calling for a rapid transformation of the Islamic Republic's key foreign policy tenets of the previous forty years. The increases in regional insecurity after both the war in Iraq and Trump's maximum pressure policy proved the unhelpful nature of this approach.

The second approach is based on a similar revolutionary policy review, but this time a broader number of actors are expected to make a sudden comprehensive policy shift and achieve a 'grand bargain.' In May 2004, former Saudi foreign minister Saud al Faisal asked for comprehensive reform at three levels – local, regional and international – to create a framework that included all the countries in the region. The 2019 HOPE initiative was the Iranian version of a grand bargain which should produce improvements in the Gulf security system through parallel revisions of Saudi and Iranian security policies towards each other. Even expert proposals like that by

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1 Bush, George H. W. "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress." Speech, Washington, DC, Sept. 11, 1990. Available at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress

2 Gordon, Michael R. "U.S. Lays Out Demands for New Iran Deal." *The Wall Street Journal*, 2018. https://www.wsj.com/articles/mike-pompeo-lays-out-next-steps-on-iran-1526909126

Sager and Mousavian,[3] which stressed the need to focus on agreed guiding principles as a starting point for further dialogue, involve major changes in critical polices of two countries that have been in competition for a long time.

Both the above approaches have so far failed to produce a path forward. These failures raise several key questions which this chapter will attempt to shed light on. What factors contributes to these failures? Why, despite the risk of raising tension, do regional and global actors accept the continued risks of collision and refrain from de-escalation?

The challenge of urgency

A recent Chatham House study shows overwhelming support among experts and politicians for building a regional security framework for the Middle East.[4] The underlying assumption is that the current scenario of tension has convinced all stakeholders of a need to urgently start building a functional security system. However, this urgency is not shared by all actors because of their different strategic assessments of the costs and threats of tension. As a result, divergent perceptions of urgency have prevented the emergence of common priorities to initiate restructuring regional security.

At the international level, actors' conflicting assessments of the costs of continued tension are evident. For the US, its geographical distance from the region makes tension in the Gulf a lesser national security priority and allows it to limit its attention to selected issues like Iran's nuclear programme. Even in the case of the JCPOA, the Biden administration is following a "no rush"

policy,[5] indicating a lack of urgency. For the EU, reaching a consensus on priorities is made difficult by the number of crises in its neighbourhood, by constrained resources and by a lack of consensus on foreign and security policy objectives. As one report observes, prioritisation of the European Union's engagement in its southern neighbourhood and on issues on which the Union has the highest stakes and could truly make a difference, would see Libya, the eastern Mediterranean, Turkey and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the first positions, but perhaps only marginally the Gulf.[6] In any case, Europe's engagement remains limited and is confined to ad-hoc actions and hopes for future breakthroughs. Furthermore, Russia seems to benefit from the status quo, as controlled tension in the Persian Gulf which has not yet evolved into an all-out war helps it to increase its leverage.[7] Barring a major change in the current balance of power, the existing situation is not perceived as a threat to Moscow's interests.

Regional actors also have conflicting assessments of the need to rapidly exit from the current negative scenario. While smaller Gulf states feel directly threatened by escalating tension, regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have remained mostly confident of the effectiveness of their security and defence policies and prefer to invest in absorbing shocks in order to remain resilient for longer term competition. The 2019 Aramco attacks, for instance, created panic in Riyadh yet they were not sufficient to incentivise the Saudi leadership to initiate regional de-escalation. The US security umbrella and the

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3   Sager, Abdulaziz, and Hossein Mousavian. "We can escape a zero-sum struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia – if we act now", *The Guardian*, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/31/iran-saudi-arabia-joe-biden-cooperation

4   Vakinl, Sanam, and Neil Quilliam. "Steps to enable a Middle East regional security process." *Chatham House Research Paper*, 2021: 24. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/steps-enable-middle-east-regional-security-process

5   Irish, John, and Arshad Mohammed. "U.S. open to discussing wider nuclear deal road map if Iran wishes", *Reuters*, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-idUSKBN2BM39G

6   Colombo, Silvia, and Andrea Dessì. "Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy", in Silvia Colombo And Andrea Dessì, *Fostering A New Security Architecture in The Middle East*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2020: 236.

7   Divsallar, Abdolrasool, and Pyotr Kotonuv, "The Fallout of US-Iran confrontation for Russia: revisiting factors in Moscow's Calculus." *RSCAS/Middle East Directions and Russian International Affairs Council Research Paper*, 2020: 18. https://doi.org/10.2870/678655

Trump administration's growing pressure on Iran made the Saudis hopeful that a future political victory over its adversary was possible. In Ktulis's words "there is an unhealthy security dependency of Washington partners in the region that makes cooperation a less urgent and attractive proposition."[8] On the other hand, Tehran responded to the US 'maximum pressure' with a 'maximum resilience' policy. This means that Trump's policy failed to create a strong enough *fear of loss* to convince the Iranian leadership to start talking to the US.

The Persian Gulf security environment is different from cold war experiences, when fear made political détente an urgent matter. In the cases of the CSCE and ASEAN, dialogue between adversaries was facilitated by widespread fears of extensive losses and mutual destruction among stakeholders. At its peak, during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, fear of mutual destruction was fundamental in determining a mutual interest in *not incurring big losses*.

The transition period problem

Proposals based on a fundamental revision of the Gulf countries' security and defence policies often fail to provide reliable alternatives and guarantees for the transition period between the time when policy changes should be adopted and that of the emergence of a new regional security system. This situation heightens the security risks arising from policy shifts which states assess to be higher than continuing with the current hostile environment. Such assessments lower the motivation to enter into talks. In the few historical cases in which such a trade-off has occurred, the end results for those who entered such agreements have not been particularly fruitful. Qadhafi's decision to terminate Libya's missile and WMD programmes in 2003 showed that reversal of a defence policy in the hope of greater security benefits deriving

from closer ties with the adversary[9] could be a fatal choice. Therefore, both Saudi Arabia and Iran believe that *rapproachment* should only be achieved when their preferred security policies continue to work effectively.

However, a challenge arises when each side does not recognise a similar aspiration in its competitor. For example, Iran's HOPE initiative remains silent on how Saud Arabia should tackle the risk in abandoning the US security umbrella, and on why it should trust Iran-promoted talks in the absence of its security guarantor, the US. Both the Russian and Iranian regional security proposals have overlooked the strategic importance of existing institutions like the GCC for Saudi Arabia.[10] The security risk that Saudi Arabia would run when dismantling or modifying its existing security ties with the US is immense and this makes it an irrational choice for the Kingdom. As a result, none of these proposals triggered the political reaction in favour of reconciliation that their designers wished for. The US and Saudi demands on Iran are subject to a similar critique. If it halts its missile programme and ends its support for Shiite proxies, Tehran will face a huge security void as a result of dismantling its asymmetrical military doctrine. These calls do not develop clear criteria for what would be an acceptable conventional deterrence for Iran, one with which Tehran could satisfy its legitimate security concerns.[11]

The risk of undertaking a revision of a country's security policy is higher when a lack of reliable alternatives is coupled with a deep mistrust between actors. Moreover, in the case of the Persian Gulf, trust in the end result of regional

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8 Ktulis, Brian. "too important to give up", chapter 8 in Hanna, Michael Wahid, and Thanassis Cambanis (eds). *Order from Ashes*, A Century Foundation, 2018: 131.

9 Hochman, Dafna. "Rehabilitating a Rogue: Libya's WMD Reversal and Lessons for US Policy." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, no. 36. Spring 2006. https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol36/iss1/8/

10 Al-Saud, Abdullah K, And Joseph A. Kéchichian, "The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula: A Saudi Perspective", in Colombo and Dessì. *Fostering A New Security Architecture in The Middle East*, 2020: 164.

11 Divsallar, Abdolrasool. "Why Biden shouldn't seek to deprive Iran of conventional deterrence", *Middle East Institute*, 2021. https://www.mei.edu/publications/why-biden-shouldnt-seek-deprive-iran-conventional-deterrence

talks is necessarily low, as regional organisations have never been efficient security providers[12] and over time have proven unable to substitute the states' security strategies. These perceptions further harden regional actors' positions and increase confidence in existing policies, while the trust deficit prevents any alliance of good will between the stakeholders.

Domestic politics: the missing factor

Most regional security proposals have underestimated the role of domestic politics in attempts to bring about a transformation of the regional order. The extension of internal crises to the regional level has been taken into consideration in earlier studies, e.g. by the SIPRI working group.[13] More importantly, however, the security system in the Persian Gulf is under the influence of undemocratic political structures, elite rivalries and threat perceptions. The states tend to externalise their domestic norms. In the case of authoritarian regimes this tendency is presented by a domestic coalition which favours coercive external options.[14] The Saudi Arabian policy toward Yemen entails factors showing how the Kingdom's domestic politics impact its regional policies. Developments in Yemen have had a twofold impact on Riyadh's threat perceptions. Saudi Arabia had misgivings about the presence of a functioning parliamentary democracy in the Arabian Peninsula after unification of North and South Yemen in the 1990s.[15] It was also concerned about the impact of the rise of the Houthis as Iran-backed Shite forces on the grievances of the Shiite minority in the Kingdom. The Yemen

war was seen as a way to defuse these domestic threats while seizing some opportunities too. The war was beneficial to King Salman's legitimacy by assisting his administrations' realignment with Sunni Islamists.[16] He was able to grab the unanimous support of Islamic clerics when they were perceiving Saudi's post-2011 foreign policy toward Egypt and IS badly.[17]

In Iran too, elite competition has regularly been a source of regional and foreign policy decisions. The IRGC's missile tests and military manoeuvres in the region after the signing of the JCPOA were partly a reflection of the competition between conservatives and reformists, while Iran's Syria policy has been used by the Islamic Republic to project an image of a strong regional power with a properly functionating country to its internal audience. This image of being a regional power helped to reduce the state's legitimacy crisis caused by corruption and economic mismanagement. This is in line with the observation that often non-military forms of internal threats are responded to by states in a militarised manner beyond their borders.[18]

Recent complications in negotiations over the US return to the JCPOA caused by both US and Iranian domestic political dynamics are by far the most important example of domestic factors complicating the building of a regional security system, showing another dynamic in which a confrontational regional system creates value for domestic political forces. Indeed, de-escalation could deprive certain political groups of their leverage and the mobilisation of their supporters. The vulnerabilities of regional security proposals to various forms of domestic influence have largely contributed to regional security reforms.

12 Louise Fawcett, "Regionalizing Security in the Middle East in the Middle East: Connecting regional and Global", Chapter 3 in Elizabeth Monier (ed), *Regional insecurity After Arab Uprising*. Palgrave, 2015: 40.

13 Jones, Peter. "Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options." *SIPRI*, 1998.

14 Levaggi, Ariel Gonzalez. *Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders: Managing Regional Security in World Politics*. London: Routledge, 2020: 30.

15 Johnson, Gregory D. "Foreign actors in Yemen: The history, the politics and the future." *Sana's Center for Strategic Studies*, 2021: 11. https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_History_the_Politics_and_the_Future_en.pdf

16 Trofimov, Yaroslav. "New Saudi King Brings Major Change at Home and Abroad." *Wall Street Journal*, 2015. https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-saudi-king-brings-major-change-at-home-and-abroad-1430310152

17 Matthiesen, Toby. "The domestic sources of Saudi foreign policy: Islamists and the state in the wake of the Arab Uprisings", *Brookings Institution*, 2015: 8. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia_Matthiesen-FINAL.pdf

18 Bilgin, Pinar. "Region, security, regional security: Whose Middle East revisited?" Chapter 2 in Monier, Elizabeth (ed). *Regional insecurity After Arab Uprising*. Palgrave, 2015: 19.

Leadership deficits and fights over narratives

The JCPOA is a unique multilateral non-proliferation deal and it was reached thanks to a common agenda among the US, Russia, China, the EU and other regional actors, which together shaped a 'coalition of concerned powers.' Other past initiatives had so far lacked an agreed agenda and common goals among stakeholders, which had made the creation of a leading coalition of actors difficult.

At the regional level, there is no country which can assume leadership and set an agreed agenda. Iran and Saudi Arabia would be the two natural candidates for this task but they are at the core of the regional confrontations, lack political leaders who strive for collective action and suffer from internal and external legitimacy deficits. Smaller actors might have a limited early-stage role, but they can hardly frame a leading coalition.

At the international level, the situation is no better. As Lewis Fawcett puts it, "the external actors' regional security terms are disconnected from internal actors' expectations, while internal actors' expectations vary across nations and states."[19] Under the 'Pax Americana' the US aims at stronger regional penetration and to contain regional actors like Iran which seek to achieve greater autonomy in their neighbourhood. This competition is at the centre of the dispute over the agenda. Other actors like the EU, Russia and China have far less clear agendas and many more constraints that limit their interest and willingness to embark on the long-term engagement that would be required. Therefore, their actions are based on short-term reactive ad-hoc initiatives that respond to emerging opportunities and immediate threats.

In addition, international actors lack a shared narrative and common objectives to frame a true multilateral action. The US and the EU have different views on soft and hard engagements with the region and at times they compete to set the agenda. With limited chances of co-sponsorship and cooperation between global actors on the region, the possibility of a grand bargain appears even dimmer.

No bottom-up demand

Proposals for grand bargains and calls for sudden policy shifts also fail to find the public support that would be necessary. State-centric approaches to resolving regional security issues neglect the potential role of people and civil societies. The CSCE experience showed that prospects of improvements in the daily lives of Europeans created a bottom-up demand for de-escalation and for moving towards a cooperative security system.[20] The UAE-Iran relation is an important example in this regard. The UAE enjoys a close security partnership with Saudi Arabia by seeing Iran's regional influence as a threat and it has strengthened security relations with Western powers in this regard. But at the same time links with Iran have been preserved because of historical community ties and economic interests at the individual level, together with the federal nature of the UAE.[21] Indeed, these factors were behind the lack of deep-rooted obstacles.[22]

The general trend in the Gulf shows limited pressure from 'below' for a more cooperative region. The weakness of civil society organisations, state-sponsored misinformation campaigns and a lack of public representation in foreign policy decision-making due to the authoritarian nature of the political regimes have constrained any social demands for peaceful interactions in the region. Instead, as Levaggi

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19 Fawcett, "Regionalizing Security in the Middle East" 2015: 54.

20 Romano, Angela. "The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: A Reappraisal", in Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014: 230.

21 Almezaini, Khalid. "The UAE's Security Perceptions in the Middle East: Regional Challenges, Alliances And the Diversification of Partners", In Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì Fostering A New Security Architecture In the Middle East, IAI And FEPS, November 2020: 216-217.

22 Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates. "Iran-UAE Relations", in Gawdat Bahgat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Neil Quilliam (eds), *Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 225.

rightfully observes, "the combination of nationalist political-economy coalitions framed within a weak democratic environment acts as a pushing factor for regional conflict when combined with the extra-regional hard engagements."[23] On the other hand, regional actors have politicised and weaponised socio-cultural divides such as the Arab-Persian and the Shiite-Sunni cleavages. This dynamic not only reduces the chances of social demand for a cooperative system but also leads to nationalist and conservative narratives which depict de-escalation as a threat. This may lead to social resistance against a cooperative security system.

Conclusion: A need to revisit the approach

The failures of past regional security plans have been caused by a combination of factors, including conflicting perceptions of urgency, immediate risks of policy changes, narrative and leadership deficits, spoiling effects of domestic politics and scarcity of bottom-up demands. In this situation, neither is a revolutionary peaceful change in one actor's policy feasible and nor can a grand bargain take place, meaning expectations of sudden concessions among key countries to substantially transform their policies and set back their objectives will not work in the Persian Gulf. Past experiences have highlighted a need for a thorough review of the approaches practised and a search for a new perspective. The complexities associated with responding to the above factors require adopting a long-term approach in which parallel incremental changes in separate areas, from the individual, societal, state and regional levels to the international level could eventually generate motivations for policy change. This could happen by moving beyond confined state-based and project-oriented approaches. Building a more convincing rationale for cooperation, widening security-building tools and audiences,

and diversifying processes are needed to frame a new approach to building regional security.

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23 Levaggi, *Confrontational and Cooperative Regional Orders*, 2020: 33.

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Meeting Security Challenges in the Gulf: Ideal Solutions and Practical Steps

Andrey Kortunov

Executive summary

This chapter argues that for a number of reasons the Gulf area is and will continue to be a zone of political and military instability with high risks of inadvertent escalation. The main contributing factors are the institutional weaknesses of most of the region's states, interconnections between various regional conflicts, the presence of multiple autonomous non-state actors, the relative wealth of the region, turning it into a generous buyer of modern arms, and domestic instability and modernisation challenges in many Gulf countries. Traditional security arrangements requiring a regional hegemonic power or an external security provider are unlikely to work efficiently in the Gulf. There is no benign legitimate regional hegemon and the traditional external security provider (the United States) is limiting its engagement in the region. A collective security model, despite looking attractive and desirable, turns out to be unattainable under the current political circumstances. There is no common vision of the Gulf area's future and there is no consensus on basic values and principles that constitute a foundation for such a system.

The chapter concludes that today it would make sense to start with relatively modest incremental confidence-building measures, particularly between Iran and the major Arab Gulf states, including communication lines between the military, information exchange including advance warnings of naval activities, and Track-2 dialogues on military doctrines and procurement policies. Gradual steps that are more ambitious could complement these modest measures. It is possible to envisage some form of arms control in the Gulf, setting local demilitarised zones, prohibiting states from the destabilising activity of accumulating conventional weapons including sophisticated missile systems and so on. At some point, even plans to turn the region into a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone could be revisited, even if it would take much effort to put these plans into practice.

The Gulf security agenda will be incomplete if it does not embrace non-traditional threats: international terrorism, illegal drug and arms trafficking, organised crime and illegal immigration. Each of these areas should have its own international regime with established procedures and participants.

Keywords: The Gulf, Inadvertent escalation, Regional hegemon, External security provider, Collective security, Confidence-building measures

Introduction

One of the most disturbing trends in international politics today is the continual instability in the Persian Gulf area, a region which remains a critically important hub of the global economy, finance and transport. Foreign military involvement in the civil war in Yemen, which has already resulted in a humanitarian disaster in the country, the political pressure on Qatar from a number of neighbouring Arab states and the never-ending tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia are just the most graphic illustrations of this dangerous situation.[1] In addition, many Gulf countries are becoming increasingly vulnerable to domestic social and political unrest due to increasing volatility in the global oil market and to in-house reform efforts with so far unclear results.

The GCC is in a state of paralysis and its future remains unclear with many implications of the

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1   Malley, Robert. "Gulf Tensions Could Trigger a Conflict Nobody Wants." International *Crisis Group*, 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/gulf-tensions-could-trigger-conflict-nobody-wants.

Qatari crisis still present.[2] The Arab League is weak, deeply divided along many lines and indecisive. The United Nations Security Council, including its permanent members, shows little appetite for any meaningful action and is taking the deplorable position of an idle bystander. When and where external actors are involved in Gulf security matters, these actors turn out to be part of the problem rather than of the solution. Moreover, it seems that external actors tend to accept the regional security problems as a 'new normal' – something not necessarily desirable but generally affordable and therefore acceptable. However, the idea of a 'new normal' applied to the Gulf area looks dubious and irresponsible, to say the least.

The challenges of growing instability

It is true that the Persian Gulf region is not the only volatile and highly unpredictable region in the world. Crises might break out elsewhere – in the Sahel, in Latin America, in northeast Asia or in the post-soviet space. However, there are a number of specific reasons for security uncertainties and the subsequent risks being particularly high in the Gulf.

First, most of the political regimes in the Gulf area, and in the MENA region at large, combine weak institutions with highly centralised personal power, which makes the decision-making process quite dependent on personal perceptions and misperceptions, and also on emotions and improvisations. With a clear deficit of appropriate checks and balances, without political oppositions and an independent media playing a mitigation role in foreign policymaking, the risk of an inadvertent escalation due to miscalculations and human errors appears particularly dangerous.[3] Although in the 1990s and 2000s in a number of the region's states a growing role of institutions could be observed, particularly in the security domain, this growth was not accompanied by more transparency or decision-making clarity. For instance, multiple security-related agencies in today's Syria engaged in institutional rivalry with each other, contributing to unpredictability and a potential instability of the Syrian regime.

Second, many conflicts and tensions in the region are interconnected and are often mutually reinforcing. This means that any escalation there may not be only vertical but also horizontal, involving many hotspots at the same time or leading to a chain reaction of multiple conflicts. For instance, escalation might take place simultaneously in Yemen, the Strait of Hormuz, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, etc. The negative cumulative impact of multiple escalations on regional stability at large might significantly exceed even the worst-case repercussions of isolated local crises.

Third, escalation can result from unauthorised actions by proxies and other 'loose cannons,' which exist in abundance in the region. Regional state actors can use non-state institutions as their foreign policy tools. At the same time, the latter can act on their own or they can cross red lines assigned to them by their patrons and funders. Among other things, the activities of non-state actors often seriously complicate the problem of attribution – we have already observed many such complications in the recent past. One of the most recent examples is Iran's Shiite proxies making unauthorised provocations against the US in late December and early January before Trump left office, which resulted in fears of a US response. Such 'loose cannons' often have institutional interests in keeping regional tensions high and in sabotaging efforts at de-escalation and political reconciliation.

Fourth, many of the Gulf countries are relatively rich. The oil- and gas-generated wealth allows them to obtain some of the most sophisticated modern weapons, which they often fail to properly keep under control. Among other military means, they possess substantial means of cyber warfare that are capable of inflicting critical damage on the command, control, communication and

2   Vakil, Sanam. "Qatar Crisis: A Beginning to the End?" *Chatham House*, 2021. https://tinyurl.com/yny38xmb

3   Dorsey James. "Transition in the Middle East: Transition to What?" *National Security*, 2018: 84-108: https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/aug-2018-national-security-vol-1-issue-1-JDorsey.pdf

intelligence capabilities of their adversaries. For a number of reasons, the critical defence and economic infrastructure in the Persian Gulf region looks especially vulnerable to futuristic cyber wars.

Fifth, international escalation might emerge as a side effect of unforeseen disruptive domestic developments in one of the Gulf countries. Many bad things can happen in the Gulf area – ranging from attempts at violent regime change to complete state implosions. Political leaders might look for more regional escalation as a way to distract popular attention in their countries from mounting domestic challenges. In the West, there is often reference to the potentially detrimental regional security implications of the mounting economic and social problems in the Islamic Republic of Iran, including a more assertive Iranian brinkmanship policy. However, leaders of other regional players – including Israel and Saudi Arabia – are also facing significant domestic problems and might also yield to the temptation to provoke a regional escalation to consolidate their domestic power bases.[4]

Under these challenging circumstances, the prospects for creating a new and stable security system in the Persian Gulf look vague and unrealistic. If the current trends prevail, the region will inevitably continue to be nothing but a battleground for 'regional superpowers' (Saudi Arabia, Iran and to some extent Turkey and Israel), which will compete with each other for the right to create spheres of influence, using the support of their smaller and weaker clients to the detriment of regional stability.

It is easy to predict that in this scenario external (non-regional) actors will be concerned not so much about how to prevent instability in the Gulf as about how to limit the inevitable damage and to stop the negative consequences of Middle East instability from spilling over into the rest of the world. In fact, much of what happens in the MENA region today reflects exactly this approach. For instance, the main justification

for external involvement in Syria has been the stated intention to defeat terrorism overseas to prevent it from reaching home. The commitment of the great powers to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (efforts at eliminating chemical weapons in Syria, finding a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue) reflects the same logic. The presence of weapons of mass destruction in an unstable region creates potential threats not only for the region itself but also for the entire world.

However, will the containment approach work? To what extent is it possible to minimise the negative consequences that instability in the Gulf or in the MENA region generates for adjacent parts of the world? Can bombing Syria and Iraq really prevent new terrorist attacks in Europe? Can the migrant flow from the Middle East be stopped without restoring stability to the region? How can a cordon sanitaire work in a modern global and interdependent world?

If containment is not a realistic option, it seems that there is no real alternative to 'fixing' the Gulf region. If the region is not 'fixed,' we expect to observe an even deeper disintegration of the region, more military hostilities, an emergence of 'failed states' on the Gulf map, dangers of violent social and political transformations, regime changes and spill-overs of political extremism and international terrorism to other parts of the world.

What should the past crises in this area teach us? The most evident observation is that the unravelling instability and the rise of insecurity in the Persian Gulf demonstrate multiple deficiencies of traditional models of providing regional security. These models simply do not work in the twenty-first century. Let us outline some of them.

Seeking hegemony versus a quest for a security guarantor

The most natural and historically the most common regional security model since the time of the Roman Empire is one that relies on a regional hegemonic power that can take responsibility for stability in its 'natural' sphere of influence. After

4   On the mounting economic problems in Saudi Arabia, see Young, Karen. "Saudi Arabia Braces for Economic Impact." *Al Monitor*, 2021. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/saudi-arabia-economy-oil-coronavirus-covid19-kuwait-jadaan.html#ixzz6LhSVx6r9.

the demise of the caliphate in the eighteenth century, the Arab world became a playground for competing Persian and Turkish imperial ambitions which are still present in the region today. The weakening of traditional hegemonic powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opened the door for the hegemonic aspirations of European powers and after WW2 for the regional outreach of the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, there have been no shortage of attempts by major local Arab players to position themselves as regional hegemonic powers. Historically, Egypt claimed this role after the Suez crisis of 1956 and later on Iraq under Saddam Hussein tried hard to position himself as the regional leader and rule-setter. From the 1970s, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became more active on the regional MENA scene, particularly in the Gulf area itself. A regional hegemon helps to keep the balance of power between smaller neighbouring players, prevents them from building anti-hegemonic coalitions and mobilises regional clients and allies to confront common adversaries. In the Gulf case, the role of the regional hegemon can be claimed jointly by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the Saudis providing most of the 'hard' power while the Emirates contribute their political ideology and strategic vision. Lately, with various rifts between the two counties emerging, the UAE could be observed upgrading their own 'hard' power capabilities and demonstrating foreign policy ambitions not necessarily closely coordinated with Riyadh.[5]

However, if we look at current developments in the Gulf area, we have to question the applicability of this model to this particular situation. Even putting aside the moral and legal deficiencies of the model, both the Yemen and Qatar cases question the feasibility of a 'regional uni-polarity.' Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE seem to be capable of successfully 'managing' arguably much less powerful regional players. On the contrary, political

divisions in the region are becoming deeper and the prospects of a regional reconciliation are becoming more and more remote.

The region is too diverse and the power of the potential hegemon(s) is too limited to provide a stable security system. It also seems that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be getting weaker not stronger in the near future and its capacity to play the role of a regional hegemonic power – even together with the UAE – will not increase but is more likely to decrease. On a more general note, one can justifiably question the applicability of old hierarchical models to regional settings in the twenty-first century.[6]

Another traditional regional security model entails the leading role being played by an out-of-area hegemon, which acts as an external security provider and an honest broker in regional disputes. For a long time, the Gulf area states (except for Iran) and most of the MENA region states at large were not security providers – they were not completely self-sufficient in terms of guaranteeing their own security. The Gulf States were instead security consumers: security guarantees tended to be a kind of regional import provided by external powers.

Historically, between the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the 'Desert Storm' operation to liberate Kuwait in 1991, the MENA region was a focal point of the Soviet-American confrontation, one of the major components of the Cold War bipolar world, a playground for competition and limited cooperation between the two superpowers. After the Soviet disintegration and Russia's subsequent withdrawal from the MENA region and up to the beginning of the so-called 'Arab Spring' in 2010–2011, the region experienced almost two decades of US unilateral hegemony with consistent US attempts to play the role of the indispensable external security provider.

Despite significant differences between the bipolar and the unipolar arrangements, the two

5   Steinberg, Guido. "Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner." *SWP Research Paper*, 2020. https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2020RP10_UAE_RegionalPower.pdf

6   Kortunov, Andrey. "What Should the Gulf Crises Teach Us?" *Russian International Affairs Council*, 2017. https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/what-should-the-gulf-crises-teach-us/

sequential regional security frameworks that lasted altogether for about half a century had a number of important common features. First, the nation-states in the region remained the main elements in the system, and the most significant threats to security resulted from tensions and conflicts between these nation-states. Accordingly, the system involved primarily maintaining delicate state-to-state regional balances – between the Arab countries and Israel, between Iran and Iraq, etc. When significant imbalances emerged (or when specific regional actors concluded that such a change of balance had indeed taken place), they led to growing risks of armed conflicts. Regional wars were tolerated by the external hegemonic powers, but these wars were constrained to avoid excessive disruptions of the regional system.

Second, authoritarian regimes in most of the countries in the region turned out to be surprisingly stable and resilient: the very same leaders (or narrow family or clan groups) stayed in power for decades. They successfully prevented or suppressed violent social protests and political dissent, and overt threats to the statehood of these countries only arose in exceptional cases. Overall, the foreign policy direction of the countries in the region also remained more or less stable. When they changed (Egypt's sudden turn from the USSR to the United States in the mid-1970s and Iran's move away from US influence after the fall of the Shah's regime in 1979), the external guarantors managed to maintain the overall regional stability by adjusting bilateral and multilateral balances within the system.

At the beginning of the 2010s, the once immutable foundations of regional security provided by an external hegemon became fragile and unstable. The 'perfect storm' arrived in the countries and practically all the features of the regional system mentioned above stopped properly functioning. The seemingly unbreakable stability of a whole range of authoritarian regimes collapsed under the pressure of the Arab Spring. It should be noted that as a rule the authoritarian regimes in the region were not promptly succeeded by any stable democratic political systems. Instead,

many countries in the region entered a protracted period of state institutional crisis.

The main threats to security in the region are now more likely to come from within individual states rather than as a result of hostile relations between states. Radical social and political movements and groupings have become the main destabilising factor, even though they rely on support from individual countries in the region and external forces. The old security system was not prepared for this fundamentally new challenge.

Until the end of the twentieth century, external security providers – originally the Soviet Union and the United States and later the United States alone – attached great importance to the region. In many ways, the MENA region was a top geopolitical priority for overseas hegemonic powers, which justified them having a strong economic, political and military presence. Since the MENA remained a priority, these external guarantors were prepared to invest significant material and political resources in the region. For the United States in particular, after the oil embargo of 1973 the region also emerged as an indispensable source of hydrocarbons for the global economy and a guarantor of global energy stability.

Over time, however, the interest of the last external hegemon in maintaining its large-scale security commitment to the region, which many local elites had for a long time taken for granted, has become questionable. The US political and intellectual elite have clearly developed 'Middle East fatigue' and doubts have arisen about the ability of the United States to change the overall negative trajectory of the region's development. Against the background of the 'shale revolution' and the fact that the United States has achieved energy self-sustainability, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify the Middle East being a priority in Washington's foreign policy. And because an alternative external hegemon is unlikely to appear any time soon, the United States leaving the region, even if only partially, would mean the inevitable end of a regional security framework

that has been in place since the early 1990s.[7] The decline in oil prices has come at a time when the region's role in global energy pricing has become less significant, with producers from other regions aggressively fighting for their shares of the global market. The golden days of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Gulf states manipulating oil prices are now long gone.

The United States appears to have no coherent MENA strategy these days. The concept of a 'greater Middle East' popular with the G.W. Bush Administration at the beginning of the century envisaged building various military and political alliances in the Middle East and North Africa under the US security umbrella. This concept, however, turned out to be stillborn — not only because it was conceived by DC-based analysts and bureaucrats with questionable knowledge of the region but also because it implied the idea of division. The intention was to mobilise the Arab world for a joint struggle against US opponents and foes in the region.

It is too early to make any judgements about the Biden Administration strategy in the Gulf region but there are grounds to suspect that the United States might repeat its past mistakes. The concept of an 'Arab NATO' backed by the US and targeted against Iran might remain popular in Washington despite Donald Trump having left the White House. However, the odds are that this concept will be no more successful than that of a 'greater Middle East.' The Arab world, including the Gulf region, is very complex and highly diverse. The interests and priorities of the various Arab states are in no way identical. An attempt to create a defence alliance similar to NATO in the Persian Gulf does not seem realistic or even desirable.[8]

Nevertheless, let us imagine that such a military bloc could indeed emerge in the region. What security problems would it be in a position to resolve? In the best-case scenario, this arrangement would freeze the current conflicts in the Gulf in the form of a regional cold war with most of the Gulf Arab States being much less stable and committed to democracy than the US and European allies in NATO.[9]

As we know from the European history of the second half of the twentieth century, this form has many negative strings attached, including mutual mistrust and suspicions, a continual arms race and political tensions and, most importantly, an inherent risk of the cold war turning into a real 'hot' war. It should not be forgotten that that if the Gulf area follows the European experience, it will replicate not the 'mature' Cold War period with arms control and confidence-building mechanisms but instead the 'early' Cold War era when there were no agreed upon rules of conduct and the risk of an inadvertent escalation was particularly high.

A collective security dream

Where should we look for alternatives to these antiquated and deficient models? It seems that the only plausible alternative to a hegemon-led regional order is a collective security model applied to the Persian Gulf region and the Middle East at large. Nobody would argue against such a system in principle and many roadmaps leading to various forms of collective security have already been put forward.[10] Unfortunately, none of these

7   Dorsey, James. "US Military Drawdown in Saudi Arabia Threatens to Fuel Arms Race." *Inside Arabia*, 2020. https://insidearabia.com/us-military-drawdown-in-saudi-arabia-threatens-to-fuel-arms-race/

8   Dolgov, Boris. "Gulf Cooperation Council Summit: Why 'Arab NATO' Is Still a Project." *Valdai Discussion Club*, 2018. https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/gulf-cooperation-council-summit-why-arab-nato/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=101&utm_medium=email

9   Lear, Kerry. "Is Trump's "Arab NATO" What's Needed to Get Iran in Line?" *The Puncing Bag Post*, 2018. https://punchingbagpost.com/is-trump-arab-nato-what-needed-to-get-iran-in-line/?pb_list=pb_list

10 For the official Russian position on the collective security system in the Gulf, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area." 2019. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&_101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB

roadmaps has so far had any practical impact on the situation in the area. The dream of a collective security system in the Gulf often seems a pipedream completely detached from reality. Let us consider the most apparent obstacles on the way to collective security in the Persian Gulf.

Above all, an effective collective security system should be comprehensive. That is, regional military and political problems should not be separated from social, economic, energy, religious and humanitarian issues.[11] The 'three baskets' (security, economics and humanitarian cooperation) that were the basis for the Helsinki Process in Europe 40 years ago should be the foundation for a new collective security system in the Gulf region. The basic principles of the Helsinki Process included refraining from threatening or using force to resolve contentious issues, respect for sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states in the region, peaceful settlement of territorial and border disputes and fulfilment of obligations in good faith under international law. They are no less relevant for the Middle East today than they were for Europe in 1975.

However, the military situation in the Middle East is decidedly more complicated than that of 1970s Europe. The region does not have two opposing military and political blocs, or even a comprehensive system of nation-states. Under the current challenging circumstances, it would be extremely difficult to take a comprehensive approach to security – for example, intra-regional trade in the Gulf area is much more limited than it was in Europe in the 1970s and Gulf economies do not complement each other but instead compete with each other for clients and partners overseas.

Furthermore, moving toward a collective security system in the Gulf would be an extremely long, precarious and bumpy road with very unclear prospects of getting to the final destination anytime soon. Even in Europe, it took fifteen years to move from the Helsinki Act of 1975 to the Paris Charter of 1990. The Charter was only signed when it became clear that one of the blocs opposing each other was already in the process of disintegration. Although the text of the Charter did not refer to 'winners' and 'losers' in the Cold War, it was apparent that the new European security system did not imply a convergence between the two blocs but instead stipulated the terms for an inevitable absorption of one block by the other.

Moreover, as it turned out later, the participating states have never succeeded in implementing the Paris Charter in full. The OSCE has never become the cornerstone of European security. In fact, the opposite is true – over the last thirty years Europe has been moving away from a collective security system, not towards one. Today the continent is arguably much more divided than it was back in 1990. There are absolutely no reasons to believe that one can successfully implement in the Gulf region, not to mention the MENA region at large, a model that has failed in a most spectacular way in Europe.

One of the fundamental principles of any international collective security system is inclusiveness. It is clear that the leading Arab nations - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and others - have to play a decisive role in building such a system. However, as the recent Qatari crisis has demonstrated, it is not always easy to reach consensus even among generally like-minded Gulf monarchies. Despite a recent rapprochement between Qatar and the KSA/UAE coalition, it would be premature to argue that the integrity of the GCC has been successfully restored.[12] It is still more difficult to agree on a 'legitimate' role for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although some scholars entertain the idea of a GCC+2 (adding Iran and Iraq to the existing GCC group[13]), it is clear that such a geographical enlargement of the GCC, even if doable, is not

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11 Ivanov, Igor. "Is a Collective Security System Possible in the Middle East?" *Russian International Affairs Council*, 2016. https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/tri-korziny-dlya-blizhnego-vostoka/

12 Fakhro, Elham. "Resolving the Gulf Crisis outside the Gulf." *International Crisis Group*, 2021. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/resolving-gulf-crisis-outside-gulf

13 Makhmutov, Timur, and Ruslan Mamedov. "Proposals on Building a Regional Security System in West Asia and North Africa." *Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper* 38, 2017. https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/workingpapers/Proposals-on-Building-a-Regional-Security-System/

likely to make the Council more efficient.

If we take a broader geographical perspective, we cannot exclude from the list of potential participants Turkey and Israel. These nations are no less interested in a stable, predictable, prosperous and vibrant Middle East than their Arab neighbours are. It would be not only unfair but also highly short-sighted to exclude either of these states from the regional arrangement. To exclude just a single major player would make the whole system extremely fragile and unreliable. Paradoxically, including everybody would mean paralysing the system by making it fully dependent on the lowest common denominator.

A regional collective security system should incorporate universal international law principles, including respect for national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the member states, and protection of basic human and minority rights, etc. It is not clear who would enforce these principles and make sure that no double standards are applied. The existing experience (Syria, Libya, Yemen) demonstrates how difficult it is to reach an agreement on some of these very sensitive and highly controversial matters. Can the United Nations Security Council in its current shape provide any credible guarantees of enforcement of the new arrangements? Is it ready to launch an efficient international monitoring mechanism for the Gulf area? Unfortunately, the chances of success remain low – at least for as long as the global powers remain divided on fundamental problems of contemporary international relations.

All these questions, regardless of how disputed and controversial they might seem, can be successfully dealt with if one indispensable precondition is met. This precondition is that major regional and non-regional actors should fully understand the real scale of the challenge they have to confront and act accordingly. A collective security system could come as a spin-off of a long-term regional modernisation project. Such a project, which is clearly lacking now, should imply an agreed strategic vision of the desirable future, a number of detailed roadmaps in various areas and, above all, a common understanding of the fundamental values and principles guiding the regional integration. It would require intellectual and political leaders with the ambitions of Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet and Konrad Adenauer. Finally, it would require a consorted position of external players willing to provide political and economic support for the regional project.

To rise to the challenge, national elites in the Gulf area and their foreign partners should muster a sense of historic responsibility, not only in restoring regional stability but also in securing sustainable regional development. Unfortunately, such a sense is clearly absent today – these elites seem to be guided primarily by their situational interests and tactical opportunities/challenges. A regional identity has not yet emerged in the Gulf area.

Quick fixes instead of long-term solutions[14]

If the great collective security dream remains a pipedream for the time being, the focus should be on something modest, less comprehensive and more practical. There is more than ever a need for some crisis-management mechanism able to mitigate the potential consequences of new incidents, miscalculations, risks of escalation and so on. The absence of such a mechanism is already a significant instability factor since it constantly generates mistrust and raises suspicions about the intentions of adversaries. The immediate goal is not to resolve all the existing security problems in the region but to provide more predictability and mutual confidence in dealing with unavoidable micro-, mini- and mega-crises which are already looming on the horizon. In that spirit, I offer the following suggestions.

Iran and the Gulf Arab states have an immediate interest in taking care of their security interests by themselves, at least in terms of crisis prevention

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14 This section is based on an earlier co-authored piece: Duclos, Michel, and Andrey Kortunov. "A Crisis Management Mechanism in the Middle East Is Needed More Than Ever." *Institut Montaigne*, 2020. https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/crisis-management-mechanism-middle-east-needed-more-ever

and crisis management. Let us elaborate a little on this point. If 'deterrence' has been partially 're-established' for American interests in the region (regarding a challenge posed by Iran and its allies), nothing has been done to enhance the security of the Gulf countries in the same way. They remain vulnerable and the reaction of the US to an attack on their interests remains unpredictable. At the same time, Iran is engaged in a direct confrontation with the US, which has the strongest military force by far in the region, and it is definitely not in the interests of Iran to antagonise its immediate neighbours.

The first important starting point in that direction should be to establish lines of communication, crisis calls able to exchange early warning and information, if possible based on reliable technical monitoring instruments. Mil-to-mil contacts are particularly important now, when the political role of the military appears to be growing in most of the Arab Gulf countries.[15]

Even such a limited aim will need courageous decisions. Maritime security in the Gulf could provide a potentially fruitful ground for exploring the idea of such confidence-building measures. All the regional players have an obvious interest in the freedom of the sea being preserved. It also noticeable that the Iranian 'HOPE' project has not been totally rejected by the Gulf countries.[16]

However, the main risk for the Arab states in the Gulf is that the Iranian proposal leaves no room for any external military presence in the area and most importantly calls for a US withdrawal from the region. Without the United States, Iran would become the de facto regional hegemonic power with no credible balance in place.[17] A coordinated approach by the GCC making a counter-offer on the basis of a limited crisis management mechanism specifically focused on maritime security in the Gulf would probably be a more appropriate basis for a fruitful discussion.

The proposed mechanism would be somewhat similar to the pattern of interaction between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation back in the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. during the 'mature' Cold War period). There are clear limitations to what this mechanism can do. For instance, it cannot become a viable alternative to legally binding arms control agreements. It cannot address such fundamental problems as the geography of deployments, defence-offence balances, the evolution of military doctrines and so on. Moreover, the crisis management mechanism can only deter an unintended (inadvertent) escalation; it cannot help in the case of an intended (advertent) escalation. If one side in the conflict considers 'strategic ambiguity' to give it a comparative advantage or pursues the strategy of 'escalating in order to de-escalate,' no crisis management mechanism is likely to work.

In sum, no crisis management mechanism is a panacea for the security challenges in the region. Nevertheless, this mechanism should not be underestimated if the only alternative in the near future is a complete vacuum of de-escalation instruments that regional players could rely on in times of crisis. Once this mechanism matures and the trust among key actors gradually grows, there could be a return to proposals that are more ambitious, gradually moving the area closer to an enhanced security system.

15 Roberts, David. "The Gulf Monarchies' Armed Forces at the Crossroads." *French Institute of International Relations*, no. 80. 2018. https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/focus-strategique/gulf-monarchies-armed-forces-crossroads

16 Zweiri, Mahjoob, and Suleiman Muyassar. "Iran Hormuz Peace Initiative and the Neighboring Countries: The Helsinki Model." *Gulf Insights,* no. 11. 2019. https://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Hormuz%20Initiative%20-%20No11%20gulf%20insight%20english%20version.pdf

17 Manqarah, Abdulmajeed Saud. "Competing Models in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran." *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, 2019. http://kfcris.com/pdf/0b493090ebda6e2b130a4ae5970a4af15d394fa11e308.pdf

At a later point, arms control discussions could start in the Gulf, which is becoming one of the most militarised regions in the world. The first steps in this direction could be establishing demilitarised zones in the Gulf, prohibiting states from the destabilising activity of accumulating conventional weapons, including anti-missile systems, and a balanced reduction of the armed forces of the major military powers in the region and the surrounding area. Perhaps, the time will come to revisit plans to turn the region into a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone, even if it will take much effort to put such a plan into practice.

The regional security agenda will be incomplete if we do not include non-traditional threats – international terrorism, illegal drug and arms trafficking, organised crime and illegal immigration. Each of these areas should have its own international regime with established procedures and participants.

Obviously, the first step to create a new security system in the region should be to consolidate all the powers that are interested in eliminating the real danger presented by the hotbed of international extremism and terrorism that the MENA region is. The war against international terrorism is the very foundation on which other more systemic and complex structures of regional security can be built. This would at the same time serve as a mechanism for restoring trust among the states in the region, for without trust there is no hope of building a security system in the first place. We need to shift the war against international terrorism from its current form of isolated operations to one that has a unified strategy and is spearheaded by the UN Security Council. It is extremely important to build a solid international legal framework for the fight against terrorism, one that is free from double standards.

Although regional players should be in the lead – and probably only regional players can be in the lead for such a project – there is room for some external players interested in security in the Persian Gulf to make contributions. Previous experiences in adjacent areas might offer models

for a positive involvement of out-of-area actors.[18] A 'coalition of the willing' ready to come up with a consolidated position and to encourage local partners to take the first steps toward a crisis management mechanism is needed. Maybe, such a coalition can be based on the JCPOA 'P5+2,' or 'EU3 +4,' adding India with the European Union taking the lead.[19] China as a major importer of Gulf oil should also be more active than it has been in the past.[20]

The most challenging task would be to reconcile the approaches of the Euro-Atlantic members of the group (in particular, the US, France, the UK and Germany) with those of the Eurasian members (Russia, China and India). Another complication is that neither the Euro-Atlantic nor the Eurasian powers are united either in their overall assessments of the security challenges in the region or in their perceptions of de-escalation priorities. It is also important to link any 'P5+2' proposals to the Iranian Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) in order to incentivise Tehran to take a positive view of these proposals.

Conclusion

There seems to be no ideal Gulf security model for the time being. Divisions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Arab neighbours are too deep and their views on the future of the region are hardly reconciliable. The Arab Gulf states, in their turn, often fail to reach consensus even on very basic security questions. External players present in the Gulf area often pursue their own

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18 Kortunov, Andrey. "The Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden." *Russian International Affairs Council*, 2019. https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-strait-of-hormuz-and-the-gulf-of-aden/

19 An interesting outline of the EU role in promoting confidence-building measures in the Gulf can be found in Colombo, Silvia and Dessì, Andrea. "Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy." *Istituto Affari Internazionali Papers*, 2020. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2037.pdf

20 Graham, Euan. "Should China help secure the Strait of Hormuz? The Strategist." *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2019. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/should-china-help-secure-the-strait-of-hormuz/

geopolitical interests and do not come with a consorted position on security matters.

This challenging environment calls for modest incremental steps targeted not at 'solving' the security problems of the Gulf but instead at managing these problems in such a way that would reduce the risks and cut the costs of the ongoing confrontation. If these steps turn out to be successful, they might ultimately lead to more ambitious and far-reaching undertakings with the ultimate long-term goal of erecting a robust collective security system in the Gulf area.

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SECTION 2

ENHANCING MULTILATERAL APPROACHES TO THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE SECURITY SYSTEM

What European Mediation in the Persian Gulf Should Look Like

Joost R. Hiltermann

Executive Summary

Particularly turbulent since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Gulf region saw a dangerous rise in tensions during the Trump administration. While the arrival of a democratic administration could be a game-changer, a path toward de-escalation in the Gulf is not obvious. Over the past few years, the Middle East has seen an alarming increase in the number of armed conflicts, a proliferation of (primarily non-state) conflict actors, intervention by assertive regional and extra-regional powers, and a growing intertwining of conflicts that is complicating any prospect of successful mediation, much less resolution. De-escalation in the Gulf must come through a process that envisions a new security architecture but acknowledges that such an outcome remains a distant possibility. More immediately, it should be designed to rapidly lessen tensions by opening new communication and dialogue channels between adversaries and tackling discrete issues of common concern. While locally led, such a process would need international support. This paper focuses on Europe's role. The European continent has a positive memory of the Helsinki process, which significantly lowered Cold War tensions in the 1970s. Some of its participants could draw on this experience to encourage a similar effort in the Gulf. The EU may be too unwieldy and too beholden to lowest-common-denominator member states consensus rules to be an effective mediator. European states should therefore form a core group that, in coordination with the EU High Commissioner and with explicit U.S. backing, formulates a joint approach toward Gulf actors – Iran, Iraq and the six Gulf Arab states – to indicate their active diplomatic and material support for a Gulf-based Track-1 dialogue. NGOs with extensive experience in guiding dialogues in the Middle East should mobilise efforts to nudge European governments in this direction, provide them with expertise gleaned from their own work, and monitor progress.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Security dialogue, European Union, European states, Gulf Cooperation Council, Iran, Iraq

Introduction

Rising tensions between the littoral states of the Persian Gulf, which Arabs call the Arab Gulf (*al-Khalij al-Arabi*), have given new urgency to calls for a de-escalation mechanism that could help avert armed conflict. Relations between these states have been guided for the past four decades by the fallout from the 1979 Iranian revolution, which set off an intense cycle of regional conflicts and near conflicts that has yet to exhaust itself. The Islamic Republic may have become institutionalised, dampening its revolutionary fervour, but tensions between Iran and its Gulf neighbours have only grown in recent years.

The Gulf Arab monarchies in particular see the Iranian leadership as inveterate revolutionaries intent on overthrowing them. Iran, in turn, sees these states, along with Israel, as part of a U.S.-led alliance arrayed against it to snuff out the political order it erected. Iran's own support for and reliance on local allies, both state and non-state, to bolster its regional power has further raised the risk that a conflict in one location may trigger something larger, as the Middle East's various battlegrounds have become politically intertwined through the ambitions and fears of both regional and extra-regional players, each seeking to protect and, when possible, advance its interests.

Neither side appears to want a direct confrontation, but the risk of inadvertent war is real in the absence

of reliable communication channels, be it a hotline for moments of acute danger or structured high-level conversations between adversaries that could help clarify intentions and motivations. This makes the establishment of such channels a top priority for stakeholders in the region's stability. These are many, given the world's dependence on Gulf oil. However, persuading the primary actors – the six Gulf Arab states, Iran and Iraq – to engage in a sustained dialogue aimed, minimally, at reducing the risk of accidental conflict has so far proved an insuperable challenge.

In this chapter, I argue the case for an inclusive Gulf-based security dialogue and suggest the role European states could play in promoting it. It is loosely based on a report by the International Crisis Group to which I was the primary contributor.[1]

The Need for a Collective and Inclusive Security Dialogue

Ever since the eight-year Iran-Iraq war – which Iran saw as a Western-backed Arab attempt to dam in the Islamic revolution – the need for a mechanism that would help prevent the outbreak of new violence in the Persian Gulf has been evident. The war itself ended, after a year's delay, with UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987), in paragraph 8 of which the Security Council requested "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."[2] Iran has frequently invoked this clause to trigger international diplomatic action, but in doing so and

offering to take the lead[3] has merely encouraged the view in the Gulf Arab states that it is trying to establish its regional hegemony by diplomatic in addition to military means.[4] Therefore, just as frequently, its invitations to engage in dialogue have fallen on deaf ears, interpreted as having been offered in bad faith.[5]

The lack of progress between the primary actors has stirred outside players to launch their own initiatives. Often these were think tank studies and Track-2 workshops funded by the European Union or European governments that promoted

3   Iran launched its Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) at the UN General Assembly in September 2019 and invited the Gulf Arab states to join it in a collective exercise. It sent the text in a letter to the UN Secretary General on 10 December 2019. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif summarised the initiative in an article in the Arab media. The English translation is available on the Iranian Foreign ministry's website. Tehran's diplomatic offensive echoed earlier such efforts. At the Manama Dialogue in 2004, Iran floated a plan for a 'Persian Gulf collective security framework.' International Institute for Strategic Studies. "*A Decade of the IISS Manama Dialogue*". 2014: 14. https://issuu.com/iiss-publications/docs/a-decade-of-the-iiss-manama-dialogu. In addition, at the 2007 World Economic Forum it offered a ten-point proposal for promoting cooperation, security and development in the Persian Gulf region. Afrasiabi, K.L. "Iran unveils a Persian Gulf security plan," *World Bulletin*, 2018. https://worldbulletin.dunyabulteni.net/iran-unveils-a-persian-gulf-security-plan-makale,475.html

4   See, for example, the comment by Ebtesam El Ketbi, president of the Emirates Policy Centre in Abu Dhabi, in International Crisis Group. "The Middle East." 2020: 12.

5   Likewise, in July 2019 Iraq proposed convening a regional security conference focused on Iraq, receiving EU backing. European External Action Service. "Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at joint press event with the Foreign Minister of Iraq." 2019. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/65414/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-joint-press-event-foreign_sr. The proposal failed to elicit a response from Saudi Arabia, however.

1   International Crisis Group. "The Middle East: Between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown." 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/212-middle-east-between-collective-security-and-collective-breakdown

2   UN Security Council. "Resolution 598". 1987. http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/598

dialogue between experts from academic and policy circles in the region.[6] Over the years, these exercises have produced rich knowledge and extensive networks that could undergird Track-1 dialogues once political conditions ripen. In 2019, Russia presented its own plan to gather Gulf actors around a security concept for the region and followed up with a diplomatic push.[7] However, as of late 2020, no Track-1 dialogue had taken place in the Gulf and neither has there been tangible evidence that outside actors would move in support of one.

The reason for the lack of action may be a combination of three factors: inopportune timing, want of leadership and a lack of clarity about the

process, from the initial steps to the substance to the question of sequencing.[8] Together, these factors have contributed to an absence among the principal players of political will to make the first move.

It is unclear what opportune timing would be. It may be that an ambitious endeavour such as launching a regional dialogue requires a leap of faith. But what is clear is that the last decade did not provide an occasion as neither of the last two U.S. administrations were on board. Despite his willingness to bring Iran into multilateral talks, for tactical reasons President Barack Obama prioritised negotiations toward a nuclear deal, which he deemed achievable, before discussing regional tensions. This reflected growing non-proliferation concerns shared by other major world powers. By the time the JCPOA was firmly in place, the Trump administration arrived to torpedo it. Its 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran reassured the Gulf Arab states of U.S. support and actively frustrated diplomatic openings toward Iran. Given the U.S.'s preponderant influence in the region, it is unlikely that any significant dialogue process could get underway without at least tacit support from Washington.

A successful dialogue process would require champions persuaded of the odds and willing to risk burning their diplomatic fingers. In the current circumstances, who would be prepared to launch an initiative that, in the absence of U.S. support and probably facing active U.S. obstruction, would anger Washington and/or receive the cold shoulder from the Gulf Arab states and therefore be stillborn? The JCPOA's E3 signatories – France, the United Kingdom and Germany – may have stood up to the Trump administration's attempts to deal the nuclear accord a final blow, but protecting something of great value, something that exacted such substantial diplomatic investment, can hardly be considered

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6   See International Crisis Group. "The Middle East." 2020.; Aaltola, M., Hägglund, M. and Wigell, M. "The Helsinki Process and Its Applicability: Towards Regional Security-Building in the Persian Gulf." *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, 2020. http://www.tepsa.eu/the-helsinki-process-and-its-applicability-towards-regional-security-building-in-the-persian-gulf-mikael-wigell-mika-aaltola-and-mariette-hägglund-fiia-finland/; Adebahr, C. "Europe Needs a Regional Strategy on Iran," *Carnegie Europe*, 2020. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Adebahr-EU-Iran.pdf; Koch, C. and Tabatabai, A. "Tafahum: An Ideational Fundament on Which to Build a Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula." *CARPO and the Gulf Research Center Foundation*, 2019. https://www.grc.net/grc-front-assets/upload/13_carpo_brief_17-07-19.pdf; Esfandiary, D. "Bridging the Divide between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula." *The Century Foundation*, 2019. https://tcf.org/content/report/bridging-divide-iran-arabian-peninsula/?agreed=1; Dassa Kaye, D. "Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East." in Hanna, M., and Cambanis, T., eds., *Order from Ashes: New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018; Wehrey, F., and R. Sokolsky. "Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP256_Wehrey-Sokolsky_final.pdf; Hanelt, C.-P. and Koch, C. "A Gulf CSC Could Bring Peace and Greater Security to the Middle East," *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2015. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/spotlight_02_2015_ENG.pdf; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "Toward a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options." 2011. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRI2011Jones.pdf

7   Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area – Countering terrorism" 2019. https://russianembassyza.mid.ru/international-security/-/asset_publisher/eXdnziuBUxKF/content/russia-s-security-concept-for-the-gulf-ar-1?inheritRedirect=false

8   Adapted from Jones, P. "Civil society dialogues and Middle East regional security: The Asia-Pacific model." in Kane, Chen, and Egle Murauskaite, eds. *Regional security Dialogue in the Middle East: Changes, challenges and opportunities*. New York: Routledge, 2014: 201. Jones cites David Capie's work on civil society dialogues.

equal to starting an enterprise that might well fail even if it enjoyed full U.S. cooperation.

The U.S. presidential elections will point the way forward: more of the same under a second Trump term, with all the attendant dangers and a zero-sum outlook; or a gradual reduction in tension as a Biden administration returns to the JCPOA and negotiates further de-escalatory steps with Iran while continuing to extend the protective U.S. military umbrella over its regional allies. In the first scenario, the chances of a Gulf-based dialogue would remain low, if not absent; in the second, they would increase, with the U.S. pursuing a balanced approach toward Iran and its Gulf adversaries. There might be support for such an approach in the U.S. Congress: while the lawmakers' enmity toward Iran is long-standing, relations with Saudi Arabia now have deteriorated as a result of the Saudi government's murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and its war in Yemen.[9] What better way to deal with two governments in the Gulf – one an imperfect ally, the other an intransigent adversary – than to press them into a mutual dialogue aimed at lowering tensions?

Once there is a realistic prospect of a structured dialogue, external actors should offer their encouragement by initiating a discussion about the contours of the process. De-escalation in the Gulf must come through a process that has a vision of a new security architecture but also acknowledges that such an outcome remains a distant possibility. To be meaningful, therefore, the process would need to be designed to enable such an outcome but also, most importantly, to rapidly lessen tensions by its very dynamic, namely by opening new communication and dialogue channels between adversaries and tackling discrete issues of common concern. The process itself should serve as a "safety valve for the hot-pot" of regional relations and tensions, as a Soviet negotiator memorably put it with reference

to the Helsinki process in the early 1970s.[10]

The effort could start by trying to reach agreement on shared principles governing inter-state relations, such as non-interference (directly or via local proxies – arguably the central concern in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh vis-à-vis Tehran) and respect for each state's territorial integrity, and trying to identify each side's motivations, core concerns and threat perceptions. It could then evolve toward concrete confidence-building measures. Initially, these could include modest steps: reducing inflammatory rhetoric; issuing unilateral statements in support of dialogue and joint statements outlining shared principles and interests; or opening direct communication channels, such as a de-confliction hotline among Gulf states and with outside actors whose military assets are deployed in the Gulf.[11] The various sides could also initiate technical discussions on matters of shared concern, such as cross-border adverse effects of climate change, deteriorating water quality, disaster preparedness, the spread of Covid-19, maritime security and religious tourism and pilgrimages.[12]

A European Role

The European governments are keenly aware of the need for mechanisms to reduce tensions in the Middle East, and especially in the Gulf, given the dangerous standoff between the U.S. and Iran. Each incident that has appeared to bring the sides closer to the edge – unclaimed attacks on

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9   Author interview with a former senior UN official, Washington, October 2019.

10 Quoted in Crump, L. "Forty-Five Years of Dialogue Facilitation (1972-2017): Ten Lessons from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe." *Security and Human Rights,* no. 27. 2016: 505. https://brill.com/view/journals/shrs/27/3-4/article-p498_498.xml?language=en

11 See, for example, International Crisis Group. "The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline." 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/b77-urgent-need-us-iran-hotline

12 See International Crisis Group. "The Middle East," 2020.; and speech by Rob Malley, the Crisis Group's president & CEO, to the UN Security Council. "Gulf Tensions Could Trigger a Conflict Nobody Wants." 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/gulf-tensions-could-trigger-conflict-nobody-wants

shipping in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman; the missile strike on the Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia, claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels but generally attributed to Iran; and the killing of the senior Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani in Iraq by the U.S. – has provoked a flurry of backroom diplomatic activity in European capitals uncertain as to how to deal with an Iran bent on countering the U.S. 'maximum pressure' campaign and a Trump administration that appeared increasingly rash and unpredictable in its foreign policy.

For the Europeans, especially the EU and the E3, preserving the JCPOA has been paramount. This has required a redoubled effort to salvage the 2015 nuclear agreement, even as U.S. sanctions deprive Iran of the promised economic dividends it expected as quid pro quo for upholding its end of the deal. However, the UK and France are also Europe's largest arms suppliers to Saudi Arabia and, while critical of the Saudi military role in Yemen and angry about the Khashoggi murder, they tend to defer to Saudi sensibilities at the diplomatic level.[13] Maintaining brittle relations with all players – both Iran and Saudi Arabia, together with other GCC members and Iraq – European powers may not be in the worst position to approach them in pursuit of an inclusive Gulf-based dialogue process.

European capitals have been wary of directly contradicting U.S. policy in the Middle East, which they see as unhelpful and often counter to European interests, while grumbling in private and increasingly in public as well. Instead, they have taken steps that ran counter to the Trump administration's approach without precipitating a breakdown in diplomatic relations and the transatlantic alliance. These include criticising Washington for leaving the JCPOA; refusing to join its 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran; establishing a trading mechanism – INSTEX

– that seeks to circumvent U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran by avoiding the U.S. dollar system; seemingly tolerating Iranian violations of the JCPOA in response to the perceived inadequacy of European actions in support of the JCPOA; and holding firm against the U.S. attempt to snap back UN sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council. In the process, Europe has increasingly carved out a foreign policy autonomous of the U.S. that contains the possibility of being reversed in the case of a Democratic victory in November.

Even in the latter scenario, Europeans are keenly aware of a continuum in U.S. foreign policy from the Obama to the Trump administration that suggests a gradual U.S. retreat from being the predominant actor on the world stage and effective arbiter of global and regional disputes. They surmise that a Biden administration would not be inclined to execute a sudden U-turn. This points to a continued need for a more autonomous and assertive European foreign policy, including in the Middle East, regardless of who sits in the White House. The only difference for Europeans keen to encourage a Gulf-based dialogue is whether Washington will give the go-ahead, and hopefully more, or shoots it down.

Achieving European unity in foreign policy has proven a real challenge, and appears most successful when the main powers agree with one another, as they did vis-à-vis nuclear negotiations with Iran. The European Union may be too unwieldy and too beholden to lowest-common-denominator member-state consensus rules to be an effective mediator. The negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal showed that smaller groupings, such as the E3, may be more suitable for an effective mediating role. The E3 model therefore bears repeating in pursuit of a Gulf-based dialogue.

However, it might be more opportune if smaller European states with no relevant historical baggage and decidedly lower profiles in the Gulf than the UK, France and Germany, such as the Nordic countries and Switzerland, were to take the diplomatic initiative. Finland and Switzerland in particular have pertinent experience in having

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13 Germany was Europe's fourth-largest supplier after Spain in the period 2015-2019. It suspended exports to KSA after the Khashoggi murder. SIPRI Factsheet. "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019." 2020. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf

guided the Helsinki process that led to the 1975 Helsinki Accords and the creation of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).[14] They were not in the forefront of Cold War rivalries but feared falling victim to a breakdown in superpower balancing. The European heavyweights (the E3 with the EU High Commissioner's office, as was the case in the Iran nuclear talks) would need to back the effort.

The first step would be for the smaller European states to form a core group that, in coordination with the EU High Commissioner's office, formulates a joint approach to the Gulf actors to indicate their active diplomatic and material support for a Gulf-based Track-1 dialogue and which would serve as the diplomatic interface with Gulf governments. They should start preparing the ground now, but an actual approach should await a change of administration in Washington. Simultaneously, non-governmental organisations which have extensive experience in guiding Track-1.5 and Track-2 dialogues in the Middle East should mobilise efforts to nudge European governments in this direction, provide them with expertise gleaned from their own work, and monitor progress. Such efforts were underway in 2019 and 2020.

Conclusion

An ideal dialogue process in the Gulf would be locally led and owned but externally inspired, sponsored and perhaps facilitated. Its principal objective should be to reduce the risk of inadvertent conflict by opening stable communication channels, and over time turn Gulf security "from a zero-sum game into a joint venture" – a collective enterprise.[15] The Helsinki process led to concrete agreements and a permanent mechanism, the OSCE, which have mostly helped keep the peace

in Europe and between the OSCE member states since the 1970s.

This essay has looked at a European role for jump starting a Gulf-based dialogue. But there is a downside to over-emphasising a European role and the Helsinki model, as Peter Jones has rightly pointed out.[16] This is because the best-fitting model for the Gulf region would need to be a mechanism of strictly local manufacture to be effective and sustainable, even if it draws on various international experiences and receives external support. European advocates of a Gulf dialogue should be careful not to do too much – not to prescribe or provide content unless expressly invited by the dialogue participants to do so.

Moreover, the Helsinki process is sometimes associated with the notion that it was designed by Western states to destroy the Warsaw Pact by targeting its members' non-democratic systems.[17] This means that while European states have a vital interest in the stability of the Gulf region, they should proceed with caution lest they step on local sensibilities. They should moreover reach out widely to non-European states that also have interests in the Gulf and may have useful ideas and experiences of their own.[18]

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14 On the Helsinki negotiations and their outcome, see Morgan, M.C. *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.

15 Terminology used by Crump, 512, with reference to the Helsinki process.

16 Email exchange with the author, 5 May 2020.

17 Morgan, "*The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*", 2018 discusses this.

18 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comes to mind. See Jones, "Civil society dialogues and Middle East regional security: The Asia-Pacific model." 2014.

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The US Strategy in Building a Persian Gulf Security Framework

Caroline Rose

Executive Summary

As the US seeks to gradually disengage from the Middle East and focus on more conventional great-power rival conflicts in Europe and Asia, it leaves a weak and fragmented security framework in the Persian Gulf in its wake. While the US's Arab Gulf partners in the GCC have a shared threat perception of Iran, existing political and economic rivalries, tribal disagreements and lack of consensus on threat levels and countermeasures curb any effective security framework. And while Iran continues to build its ballistic missile arsenal and embolden its proxy forces in the Levant, Gulf and Middle East at large, the risk of large-scale confrontation between Persian Gulf actors continues to increase. To prevent increased instability in the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East, it is in the US's national interest to strengthen the weak security architecture among the existing GCC alliance in the short term and improve advisory capacity, operational support, intelligence exchange and security dialogue among Arab Gulf neighbours. If the US can successfully moderate Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional behaviour, it is among the US's long-term aims to incrementally incorporate Iran into a larger Persian Gulf security framework in an effort to protect trade routes, commercial interests, natural resources and alliances that are vital to the US and its allies' geopolitical interests.

Keywords: US, GCC, Security architecture, Geopolitics

Introduction

The US finds itself at a strategic planning crossroads in the Persian Gulf region. Evolving alliance structures, increased risk of military conflict and a shifting regional balance of power have compelled it to adjust its region-wide policy and reassess its imperatives in the Persian Gulf. The militarised threat posed by one of the region's foremost powers, Iran, continues to threaten stability and lower the threshold of military escalation with its regional peers and foreign powers. While Iran has become a more emboldened actor in the Persian Gulf, its Arab peers have been consolidating an informal coalition directed at containing Iran's malign behaviour in the region. Gulf Arab powers have sought to mend political divisions within the GCC and engage in limited cooperation with non-Arab powers that were former rivals, such as Israel, Turkey and members of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). The combination of an aggressive Iranian foreign policy and a more unified anti-Iran alliance between Arab and non-Arab regional powers raises the risk of military confrontation.

When calculating a future strategy for the Persian Gulf, the US looks to its National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in 2018 as its primary blueprint to shift its defence strategy to more conventional theatres in Eastern Europe and the Pacific to counter great power competitors, Russia and China, and incrementally reduce its long-term burdens in the Middle East. While the US will look to pivot from the Middle East theatre as a result of the 2018 NDS, expected defence budget cuts and accumulating domestic political pressure to withdraw from costly Middle East conflicts, it continues to retain an imperative to keep the Middle Eastern security landscape for the most part stable. The region's proximity to important trade routes, its wealth of energy resources and its ability to affect continental and transcontinental security collectively create an incentive for the US and its allies to achieve a level of relative stability in the region. It is a paramount

imperative for Washington to not undertake a hasty immediate withdrawal and disengage from the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East region and subsequently leave a security vacuum in its wake where powers seeking regional hegemony have the potential to exploit trade routes, freedom of navigation, exports of energy sources and the regional balance of power.

In the interest of preserving regional stability and averting a security vacuum in the Persian Gulf, it is in the US's interest to create a durable permanent formal framework for collective security among the region's states and construct a proper security model for them to defend themselves against potential local and foreign threats.

When approaching the current political and security conditions in the Persian Gulf, the US has two desired structures to implement to design and achieve an effective security architecture in the region, building on an existing loose security system based on the collective defence model to construct a more permanent structure anchored on this security model.[1] It first seeks to establish a short-term security framework among the Gulf Arab states – the current members of the GCC – and the greater Middle East at large as a way to defend against Iranian malign behaviour and constrain Iranian attempts to become a regional hegemonic power. Long-term American designs, however, are likely to aim to incorporate Iran in the regional security framework as a constructive power on the condition that the US and its allies can successfully curb Iranian malign behaviour and political will among Iran's Arab Gulf counterparts in the region. The US strategy ultimately seeks, through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal process and other regional mediation efforts, to moderate Iranian aggression and ultimately avert a major military conflict that would both threaten US geopolitical interests and probably increase US defence burdens in the Persian Gulf region in the long term.

Existing Vulnerabilities in the GCC

While the GCC states are united by a common threat perception and a desire for a collective security model,[2] there are a series of political divisions, tribal rivalries and commercial competition among them that have fragmented inter-GCC cohesion and levels of threat perception[3] and have contributed to a loose fragmented security alliance. Fragmented GCC relations have greatly affected the Persian Gulf's security landscape. Divergences have undermined both the collective effort to constrain Iranian malign behaviour and the GCC's effort to construct a common defence mechanism.

GCC Division

Despite recent initiatives to normalise inter-Gulf relationships, the GCC members remain polarised and politically disjointed. While distrust among Arab Gulf countries had always been a historical constant, inter-GCC fragmentation became irretrievably evident in 2011 when the Arab uprisings and the rise of political Islamist organisations compelled many Gulf governments to become more defensive regarding regime continuity.[4] Tensions stemming from the 2014 and 2017 eruptions of inter-GCC tensions between Qatar and GCC leaders, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, continue to ferment beneath the surface of Gulf engagement and reveal a regional divergence over how to address Sunni political Islamism.[5]

1   Hunter, Robert E. "Building Security in the Persian Gulf." *RAND Corporation*, 2010. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG944.pdf

2   Wright, Steven. "Foreign policy in the GCC states" *International politics of the Persian Gulf* 2011: 89.

3   Bahgat, Gawdat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Neil Quilliam. "Security and Bilateral Issues Between Iran and Its Arab Neighbours", *In Security and Bilateral Issues between Iran and its Arab Neighbours*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017: 1-10.

4   Bianco, Cinzia, and Gareth Stansfield. "The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011," *International Affairs* 94, no. 3, 2018: 615. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy025

5   Dihstelhoff, Julius, and Alexander Lohse. "Political Islam as an Ordering Factor? The Reconfiguration of the Regional Order in the Middle East Since the Arab Spring", chapter 1 in *Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020: 29-59.

Additionally, there remain ongoing tribal divisions, contestations over territorial control and maritime boundaries, and political distrust between Gulf countries that have placed obstacles in the way of greater inter-GCC political unity and ultimately an effective security framework in the region.

The ongoing clash among the GCC states over the issue of political Islamism is a key disrupter of Gulf consensus.[6] Most GCC members, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and neighbouring allies such as Egypt, have historically taken a more hard-line stance against political Islamist organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood. These states perceive political Islamism as an existential threat to the Gulf's governance system, threatening monarchical power structures and compelling most GCC states to counter political Islamist groups as a means of survival.

Disputes between Gulf Arab countries over land, maritime zones and natural resources also continue to exacerbate inter-GCC fragmentation.[7] The Arab Gulf states have largely avoided addressing territorial disputes directly through the forum of the GCC and prefer third party dispute mechanisms or inaction altogether. Many existing territorial and maritime disputes are perpetuated either by local tribal entities, divergent legal interpretations or historical rivalries.[8] Additionally, there exist some conflicts that were rectified by law or bilateral agreement but continue to exacerbate existing discord and competition between the GCC states. While their territorial dispute was technically resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2001, Bahrain and Qatar have ongoing tensions over the Hawar Islands' shoals of al-Jaradah and al-Dibal in the Persian Gulf.[9] One of the largest territorial disputes is over the Al Buraimi Oasis between Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with multiple tribal claims to the oasis's

one settlement. The territorial dispute between Omani and Emirati tribes and Wahhabi religious followers intensified after the discovery of oil in the early 20th century, and the dispute culminated in the1974 Treaty of Jeddah, which recognised both the Emirati and Omani claims. However, tensions over the Al Buraimi Oasis continue to flare with disputes over energy projects in the area and tribal settlements. The UAE and Saudi Arabia also have an ongoing dispute over maritime boundaries and coastline limits, with the UAE claiming that Saudi Arabian eastward waters infringe on its maritime borders. This dispute between the GCC's two greatest power brokers has been a factor driving weak Arab unity and consensus-building.

At the forefront of GCC fragmentation, however, is a common fear of disruption of the Persian Gulf's balance of power with the emergence of a regional hegemon. This fear has been a driver of Arab Gulf state behaviour throughout history, with anxieties over the Persian empire, the Ottomans, a strong Iraq and modern-day Shi'ite power in Iran after the 1979 revolution. While GCC states are unified by a common threat perception of Iran, smaller Gulf states are fearful of Saudi Arabia and consolidation of power in the GCC that would reduce its GCC partners' individual state agency.[10] Saudi Arabia's regional clout has been lessened in recent years. The effect of the Covid-19 global pandemic on the energy market has reduced Riyadh's weight as the OPEC+ de facto leader and has taken a toll on the Saudi Arabian economy, and ongoing pressure over Saudi Arabian human rights policies have created distance between Riyadh and Washington. However, Saudi Arabia's GCC peers' anxieties persist over Saudi designs for greater control over the Arabian Gulf's foreign policy and economic and defence apparatuses, and remain a primary roadblock to inter-GCC harmony.[11]

6   Hunter, "Building Security in the Persian Gulf", 2010.

7   Wiegand, Krista E. "Resolution of Border Disputes in the Arabian Gulf," *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 1, no. 1. 2014: 33-48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26664097.

8   Hunter, "Building Security in the Persian Gulf", 2010.

9   Wiegand, Krista E. "Bahrain, Qatar, and the Hawar Islands: Resolution of a Gulf Territorial Dispute," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 1. 2012: 79-96.

10 Hunter, "Building Security in the Persian Gulf", 2010.

11 Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. "Saudi Arabia as a resurgent regional power," *The International Spectator* 53, no. 4. 2018: 76. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1507722

Disjointed GCC Security

The GCC was established in 1981 among Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Oman. The creation of the Council followed the 1979 Iranian revolution and the emergence of a perceived Shi'ite militia threat in many Gulf states, adding a security dimension to the GCC. However, despite security imperatives and a commonly shared threat perception of Iran, the GCC has not served as an effective deterrence framework or guarantor of Arab Gulf security.[12] Furthermore, Gulf disunity has prevented any consolidated security framework from being established. Despite Saudi Arabia's proposal to tighten inter-GCC economic, political and defence cooperation in 2011, its counterparts rejected the proposal on the basis of distrust and suspicion of Saudi Arabian hegemonic intentions, despite a collective imperative to counter Iran.

Ensuing political disunity among GCC countries along staunch ideological lines has consequently disrupted efforts to build a coherent unified regional security structure or common defence model in the Persian Gulf. Despite a shared concern to protect the GCC states' monarchical systems of rule – ensuring regime survival – against threats and countering Iran's Shi'ite Crescent campaign, there exist a series of religious-ideological cleavages in the GCC's political landscape.

Fears of a Saudi Arabian regional hegemony campaign have affected the behaviour of smaller Gulf states, such as the UAE and Qatar, creating hesitancy among GCC members over further interoperability and an integrated defence system. Continued anxiety over Riyadh has made a group of GCC states sensitive to any decision that could be perceived to tip the scales of the regional military balance of power and consequently defensive regarding their national security and defence sectors. This dynamic has been made evident by increased competition between GCC neighbours over armaments, equipment procurement and defensive partnerships with

outside partners, particularly with the US. For example, despite a shared interest in regime preservation and countering political Islamism, the UAE seeks to compete with Saudi Arabia for the qualitative military edge (QME) in the region, engaging with the US and allies for F-35 fighter jets and other advanced technological military equipment. The UAE has positioned itself to take a leadership role in the changing regional order of the Middle East, taking de facto leadership of a coalition of Gulf, eastern Mediterranean and north African governments that oppose Qatar, Turkey and Iran in an effort to compete for Saudi Arabia's de facto political leadership of the Gulf's foreign policy agenda. Additionally, many of the Gulf states compete with each other for increased American security assistance, with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE hosting US personnel and private contractors on their soil, in addition to US-Saudi Arabian cooperation on establishing future alternative joint bases at a number of Saudi Arabian airfields and ports.[13] Recent moves by the US to set up a series of alternative basing options in Saudi Arabian ports and air bases have threatened neighbouring Gulf states, creating anxiety over lessened direct US security support.

As a result of the sensitivity of GCC states' security systems, they lack a harmonised procurement and defence framework.[14] While the Peninsula Shield Force, established in 1984, is the militarised arm of the GCC, inter-Gulf defence cooperation remains stagnant. The lack of GCC joint operational training, a common armaments programme and general interoperability has disjointed Gulf states' defence systems and has only increased their reliance on foreign powers to deter Iranian aggression, particularly the US. In an assessment of existing GCC defensive capabilities in a Foreign Policy Research Institute report entitled 'GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving towards Unity,' Brahim Saidy assesses

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12 Saidy, Brahim. "GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity." *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2014. https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/10/gccs-defense-cooperation-moving-towards-unity/

13 Lubold, Gordon. "U.S. Forces Expand Reach in Saudi Arabia." *The Wall Street Journal*, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-forces-expand-reach-in-saudi-arabia-11611611393

14 Ellison, Riki. "First Steps: GCC Missile Defense Integration." *Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance*, 2015. https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/alert/first-steps-gcc-missile-defense-integration/

that their effectiveness is not proportionate to cost, with few initiatives in place with "little regard for interoperable forces or common doctrine."[15] The GCC's wealth and mass investment in different sophisticated high-technology weapons systems has also created a major divergence between the Arab Gulf partners. The GCC states have mixed equipment, creating difficulty in joint training and operations given the differences in weapons platforms.[16] The lack of interoperability between GCC forces has prevented long-term defence cooperation between Gulf Arab countries and has stunted good faith measures between their armed forces.

Consolidated Iranian and Iran-Aligned Proxy Influence

One of the greatest threats to Persian Gulf regional security and efforts to achieve stabilisation is a steady increase in Iranian military and political influence. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Tehran has sought to construct a Shi'ite Crescent of political and religious influence in the region, using proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine in order to embed Iran in the local power structures and security landscapes of its neighbours.

Iran's geography can explain its behaviour in the Persian Gulf. Iran's location along the narrow Strait of Hormuz has constrained its ability to act as a mercantile power and maritime heavyweight in the region. While Iran seeks to project power in its east, it has historically perceived threats to its west, with perceived territorial integrity and regional power status emanating from the Mediterranean Sea. By consolidating influence in its west, Iran has used proxy forces in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine to gain leverage over its Sunni Arab and Israeli rivals. The accumulation of Iranian influence in Persian Gulf countries among non-state proxy actors has directly threatened both short-term and long-term American and GCC interests in the Persian Gulf, and has undermined US efforts to gradually disengage militarily from the region and encourage a reliable regional security framework.

Iran has posed a threat to Arab Gulf state territorial integrity, with historical claims to Bahrain and a number of islands and maritime zones in the Persian Gulf. Iran's historical perception of Bahrain includes it within Iranian state territory. For centuries, areas of Bahrain were considered Persian Safavid imperial territory in the empire's system of taxation. During the Shah's era, Iran sought to annex Bahrain, a pursuit that was only concluded with a United Nations (UN) referendum in 1970 that established Bahraini independence. Following the Iranian Revolution, Iran's Islamist government began to sow seeds of revolutionary discord in Bahrain by using the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain as a proxy force, but it failed to topple the Bahraini monarchy.[17] Since the 1980s, Iran has flared tension by reaffirming Iranian claims to Bahrain and backing Shi'ite political opposition parties to embolden sectarian tensions and pro-Iranian sentiment.[18] For decades, Iran has argued that the three islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs should be considered Iranian state territory, and it has militarised the islands since 1971 as a deterrent to its Arab Gulf rivals. Iran has additionally challenged Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for decades over maritime borders and a portion of the Persian Gulf continental shelf that includes the Dorra gas field, where the recoverable reserves are estimated to be ten to eleven trillion cubic feet of gas and 300 million barrels of oil.[19] Technical talks on territorial and maritime boundaries have so far proven inadequate, particularly as Iran has become a more emboldened actor in the region and has

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15 Saidy, "GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity." 2014.

16 Ibid.

17 Rubin, Michael. "Iran's Khamenei threatens Bahrain." *American Enterprise Institute*, 2016. https://www.aei.org/articles/irans-khamenei-threatens-bahrain/

18 Rubin, "Iran's Khamenei threatens Bahrain." 2016.

19 "Saudi Arabia and Kuwait hire consultant to assess Dorra gas field: Kuwaiti paper," *Reuters*, 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-saudi-gas-dorra/saudi-arabia-and-kuwait-hire-consultant-to-assess-dorra-gas-field-kuwaiti-paper-idUSKBN1Z60YS

increased its escalatory military actions towards its Arab Gulf counterparts through its proxies in Yemen.

Additionally, Iran's advancing ballistic missile weapons programme, which is now the largest arsenal in the region, poses a threat to regional stability. The range of Iran's guided ballistic missile arsenal has increased drastically in the last two to three years, particularly as Iran has converted its Shahab-2 500 km missiles into Qiam missiles with a range of 700 to 800 km for Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia.[20] More broadly, Iranian missile accuracy has increased and Iran's arsenal of medium-range missiles has improved its range up to 1,000 km to 1,400 km, according to an assessment by the United States Institute of Peace.[21] Moreover, Iran has demonstrated it is not only intending to use its missile stockpile as a deterrent but has also proved that it is willing to use these advanced weapon systems when threat levels are high.[22] In January 2020 after tension arose between the US and Iran after the American strike that killed IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, Iran launched a ballistic missile strike on the Ain al-Assad base in Iraq, which hosted US and coalition armed forces, a pivot from Iranian use of unguided rocket strikes through proxies in Iraq. In March 2021, Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen launched a series of ballistic missile and precision rocket strikes on Saudi Arabian infrastructure and oil refineries,[23] confirming a spike in ballistic missile use both directly by Iran and by Iran-aligned proxy forces operating in the region. While Iranian proxies have continued to primarily use unguided shoulder-projected missiles against US and allied

partners in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the region, Iran has selectively used precision-guided missile strikes on Arab Gulf targets, creating a cause for concern and an interest in a strengthened collective defence security framework among GCC governments.

A Prospective US Strategy

It is important to define US interests, imperatives and constraints in the Persian Gulf before identifying the US strategy for a common security framework in the region. The US is driven by a key interest in reducing its defence burdens in the Middle East and Central Asia in order to prioritise conventional theatres against Russia and China and pivot from its ongoing asymmetrical conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. At home, there has been a rise in domestic scepticism about ongoing conflicts – popularly termed 'forever wars' – and related US burdens in the Middle East and North Africa, adding further pressure for eventual American disengagement from the region.[24] However, the US simultaneously wishes to avoid creating a power vacuum in its absence. The collective memory of the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Levant and North Africa and the subsequent migrant crisis that stemmed from the sudden disruption in the region's security landscape following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 has shaped the US's imperative to balance a potential withdrawal with a permanent security framework in the Persian Gulf, Mediterranean and Middle East at large. If the US can reduce its allies dependence on American defence and arms supplies by supporting a regional forum for dialogue and security cooperation that would enable individual states' independence, Washington will become more empowered to prioritise more pressing

20 Elleman, Michael. "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," The Iran Primer. *United States Institute of Peace*, 2021. https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program

21 Ibid.

22 Rafique, Muhammad Umair, Syed Amir Hussain Shah and Sajjad Rasol. "Dynamics of Iran's missile program and its implications on the region." *Walia Journal* 36. 2020: 26-3.

23 Houthi ballistic missiles target Saudi Arabia, says coalition," *Al Jazeera News*, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/16/houthis-fire-ballistic-missiles-at-saudi-arabia-coalition-says

24 Feltman, Jeffrey, Samantha Gross, Martin Indyk, Kemal Kirisci, Suzanne Maloney, Bruce Riedel, Natan Sachs, Amanda Sloat, Angela Stent and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region," *The Brookings Institution* 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-geopolitics-of-the-middle-east-americas-role-in-a-changing-region/

conventional theatres in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, central Asia and eastern Europe.

The US aims to implement two strategies in the Persian Gulf: to achieve a collective defence model among the GCC states as a short-term strategy to defend against Iranian aggression while seeking to achieve a more inclusive cooperative security framework for all the Persian Gulf states in the long term. Cognisant that the existing political relations among Gulf countries do not allow for full-scale defence cooperation, the US's aim is to incrementally build the necessary institutions and security architecture, what Robert E. Hunter calls in the RAND report 'Building Security in the Persian Gulf' a "building block approach," which will erect proper parameters for a framework that will reinforce inter-regional collaboration, build trust, reduce existing political tensions and serve as a long-term defensive system that can reduce US security burdens in the Persian Gulf.[25]

The US will seek to achieve goodwill between Persian Gulf actors and a formal institutional architecture to ensure that all regional actors are active stakeholders and contributors in a future regional security framework. It is in the US's interest that Persian Gulf countries can calculate their self-interest within this framework, creating a series of confidence-building measures to develop the existing vulnerable security system in the region into an effective reliable institutionalised security framework.[26] However, the US will have to incrementally build this security architecture while overcoming the existing anxieties, mutual suspicions, economic competition, jealousies, disputes and ideological divergences that exist among its GCC partners.

Short-Term Strategy

In an effort to achieve a defensive strategy among GCC states to constrain Iran, the US will look to deepen inter-GCC security integration and establish an institutional basis for regional cooperation. The US will seek to encourage GCC states to coordinate around existing regional

shared threat perceptions and improve battle concept management, enforcement mechanisms, shared awareness capabilities, coordinated procurement strategies and defence systems to build an effective sustainable foundation for a Persian Gulf security framework.

One of the first milestones in establishing a short-term Persian Gulf security strategy for the US will be supporting Gulf governments in integrating their missile defence systems. In an effort to curb Iran's expanding ballistic missile arsenal – the largest and most dangerous in the Middle East[27] – the US will seek to encourage its GCC counterparts to update their existing missile defence systems and establish an integrated GCC missile shield. The US has an interest in streamlining Gulf states' existing missile defence systems, giving them low-end and high-end atmospheric interception capabilities and establishing enhanced methods of early warning system communication, data-sharing and eco-atmospheric interception capabilities under one command in order to meet advancing Iranian ballistic missile ranges of over 2,500 kilometres.[28] By increasing states' defensive capabilities at the collective multilateral level, the US initiative will not only reduce inter-GCC competition over the procurement of US military technology[29] but also better protect major population centres, infrastructure, strategic military assets and commercial hubs against projectile attacks that would potentially be launched by Iran and its proxies in the region.

In accordance with constructing an inter-GCC ballistic missile shield system, the US also strives to harmonise Gulf state military equipment, procurement and operability to achieve a common armaments programme and improve

25 Hunter, "Building Security in the Persian Gulf", 2010.
26 Ibid.

27 Missile Defense Project. "Missiles of Iran," Missile Threat, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/.
28 Ellison, "First Steps: GCC Missile Defense Integration." 2015.
29 Elleman, Michael, and Wafa Alsayed. "Ballistic Missile Defense Cooperation in the Arabian Gulf." In Kelleher, Catherine McArdle, and Peter Dombrowski. *Regional Missile Defense from a Global Perspective*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020: 160-179.

Gulf interoperability.[30] In the event of an attack by Iran against Arabian Gulf States, the US would rely on a unified capable militarised response by sea, land and air from Gulf states as the first line of defence – enough to hold onto strategic assets and stave off enemy advances prior to American resupply and support. The US will seek to create greater interoperability between GCC major platforms and weapons systems, seeking to mitigate differences in equipment with future procurement. The US will also seek to advise Gulf command structures to coordinate with their counterparts on equipment acquisition and partnerships with Western allies.[31]

Furthermore, the US will strive to construct a security framework beyond just military cooperation, focusing on other aspects of security such as law enforcement, dispute settlement, crisis management, counter-terrorism initiatives, disaster relief and human security that can provide a sustainable long-term foundation for effective inter-regional cooperation. One route the US and partners will look to is strengthening the existing Istanbul Cooperation Initiative between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and GCC members.[32] The US may look to encourage Gulf states to build on the Gulf Centre for Criminal Intelligence (GCCI), a joint organisation that coordinates between Bahraini, Kuwaiti, Omani, Saudi and Emirati law enforcement systems on issues of cross-border trafficking, border security and migration. While the institutional structure of the GCCI allows for it to communicate and jointly cooperate on border matters, rampant distrust among members has caused it to suffer from an information exchange deficit. In the short-term, as a mechanism to sow seeds of trust and goodwill within the Persian Gulf security landscape, the US will push for GCC states to strengthen national law enforcement cooperation as Iran directs its proxies to act on its behalf through the smuggling of products such as equipment and arms, together with fighters, which collectively impacts the Gulf's

trafficking and consumer markets.

Long-Term Strategy

While the US seeks to establish a temporary collective defence model among Arab Gulf GCC states, it will look to carefully and incrementally engage Iran in the region and support the establishment of a long-term collective security model in the Persian Gulf.[33] This framework would ultimately seek to provide a forum for dispute settlement and defence cooperation between all the regional state actors that would stabilise the precarious balance of power in the Persian Gulf. Such a framework would require a formal institution for conflict management, ideological debates and political divergences to counter piracy and ensure counter-terrorism efforts, freedom of navigation, humanitarian assistance, law enforcement coordination, defence sector collaboration, harmonised equipment procurement strategies and a broad-based collective regional security strategy.

Ideally, the US seeks to moderate Iran's malign behaviour and incrementally incorporate it in the long-term security architecture of the Persian Gulf, paving the way for a greater American withdrawal from the region. The US will primarily explore opportunities for engagement with the Biden administration's expected revisitation and renegotiation of the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran, which was halted under the preceding Trump administration. With re-exploration of nuclear discussions, Washington perceives an opportunity to not only engage with Iran on its nuclear programme but also to address Iranian malign behaviour in the Middle East and its hostilities with its rivals in the region, which are all allies of the US: Israel, Turkey and the GCC countries.

If discussions with Iran prove successful, the US will seek to gradually incorporate Iran in an existing Persian Gulf security framework, using the GCC collective defence model as a foundation for an eventual more inclusive

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30 Saidy, "GCC's Defense Cooperation: Moving Towards Unity." 2014.

31 Ibid.

32 Hunter, "Building Security in the Persian Gulf", 2010.

33 Ibid.

collective security model. As is the case with constructing a collective defence model among the GCC states, the US will face large obstacles in identifying points of consensus and shared interests between Persian Gulf governments. Existing sectarian divergences between Sunni and Shi'ite identities, drastically different foreign policy agendas and geopolitical competition will make incorporation of Iran difficult. However, the US and its allies will probably seek to introduce a series of confidence-building measures (CBMs) in the form of negotiations over maritime access, infrastructure and commercial cooperation, and cultural exchange among Persian Gulf countries in order to gradually construct a regional security framework.

a durable permanent security structure in the region, the US can achieve a large-scale military withdrawal from the region while preventing the emergence of a major power vacuum. However, the road to a sustainable security framework in the Persian Gulf is long, given the existing fractures among GCC states, ongoing tensions between Arab Gulf states and Iran, and the battle for hegemonic power in the region. The US will have to address the many vulnerabilities in the GCC's existing weak security infrastructure and pivot from a defensive model to a collective security model, while attempting to curb Iranian aspirations for Middle East dominance and incorporating it into a broader security framework.

Conclusion

It is squarely in the US's interest to support Persian Gulf states in constructing a security architecture that incorporates their mutual interests and defends against malign influence as a mechanism for long-term stability in the region. A proper framework based on a collective security model will help the US reduce its long-term commitments and forward defensive footprint in the Middle East, subsequently allowing it to pivot its attention to conventional great-power conflicts with its peers in east Asia and eastern Europe.

The imperative to construct a viable sustainable security framework in the Gulf has been an ongoing strategy in Washington for multiple presidential administrations. However, the Biden administration's revisitation of the JCPOA nuclear deal, prioritisation of the 2019 NDS to counter its conventional great power rivals, Russia and China, and a continued military draw-down in the Middle East offer the US a greater imperative to reduce its Gulf allies' dependence on US force projection, diminish threats to US interests and regional security, and construct a long-term, sustainable security architecture in the Persian Gulf. By building on the existing Gulf security system and helping regional players construct

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Russia, the GCC and Iran: Moscow's Approach to the Regional Security Architecture

Maxim A. Suchkov, Artem K. Adrianov and Viktoria V. Yanina

Executive Summary

In summer 2019, Russia proposed an initiative for a Persian Gulf security architecture. The initiative, although not new in essence, was the most comprehensive project that Moscow had ever come up with. Based on three principles, the document had a vision of what an all-inclusive multilateral security framework for the region may look like, and it proposed concrete steps to implement it. For Moscow, the initiative was meant to serve as a prototype of a broader Middle East security architecture a few years later should the parties be genuinely interested in pursuing peaceful co-existence. At the same time, the Kremlin was seeking to strengthen Russia's standing in the region with an image of a strong, responsible and reliable security stakeholder and partner. This chapter will examine the basics and the intricacies of the Russian vision of security in the Persian Gulf, discuss how it was received by regional and major international players and whether it has prospects of being embraced as a solid foundation for any future discussions on regional security.

Keywords: Russia, Gulf, Arab monarchies, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, US, Security

Introduction

Russia's overall interest in Gulf regional stability is rooted in a variety of factors. First, Moscow has historically sought to secure its southern strategic frontier, traditionally seen as its 'soft underbelly.' In the Tsarist era this primarily concerned the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian and central Asia. In Soviet times it stretched further down to the Middle East and what is now seen as south Asia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia had to scale back its security outreach to its 'near abroad,' but from the mid-2000s it apparently came to perceive its southern strategy as involving a large landmass that comprised both the areas of former Soviet republics in the south Caucasus and central Asia, the eastern Mediterranean and most of modern day Middle East.

Second, Russia's desire to move into the region was in part driven by the pursuit of an expanded network of partnerships 'beyond the West.' Given the dynamic relationship between the Soviet Union and many Middle Eastern countries, this 'return' to the region seemed only natural. Finally, Russia's pursuit of a greater de-Westernisation of the international system and its complicated relationship with the United States, on the one hand, and America's own move toward greater retrenchment from the region created a set of incentives for Moscow to establish itself as a new offshore balancer in the region. The idea was that this would provide regional powers with more opportunities and free them to take initiatives to make the region a better and safer place.

In the last few years, the Persian Gulf region has seen a number of disturbing trends. Serious disagreements have plagued relationships between major regional stakeholders. Their reluctance to make compromises, respect each other's interests and consider mutual concerns has contributed to the region's conflict potential. Further escalation is a real possibility and there is potentially the danger of open hostilities, if not an all-out war.

Russia, the regional profile of which has risen since the beginning of the military campaign in Syria in autumn 2015, has come to see these trends as potentially detrimental to regional security

and its own interests. Over the course of thirty years since the collapse of the USSR, Russia's relations with the Arab monarchies of the Gulf have been a mixed bag of mutual accusations, large-scale suspicions and limited cooperation. Swift regional transformations in the wake of the Arab spring and Russia's re-emergence in the region as an influential actor have, on the one hand, moved Moscow and Tehran closer and, on the other, pushed Russia and some Arab monarchies to seek a fresh start.[1] This approach of building cooperative yet moderately distant relations with all the stakeholders is coupled with Russia's vision for the region. Moscow has long held the belief that a genuinely inclusive 'peace and security architecture' could shape a positive regional agenda and serve as the only basis for a stable future for the region's states. This belief largely hinges on a Russian perception of a threat of disastrous consequences of a regional war for Russian security and other national interests.[2]

The making of Russia's Gulf security architecture proposal

The drawing up of Russia's proposal for collective security in the Persian Gulf began in the late 1990s. At the time, the state of affairs in the region and Russia's position were remarkably different from what they are today. After the fall of the USSR and its communist allies in the region, Russia's role in the Middle East declined significantly. In the 1990s and early 2000s the US enjoyed unchallenged supremacy in the region with Washington being heavily involved in

regional developments, leaving virtually no space for any other third party to try to bring something meaningful to the table. At the time, however, Russia's ideas on re-structuring the region were not formalised in any form.

Another Russian proposal for a comprehensive security architecture in the Persian Gulf came in 2004, shortly after the American invasion of Iraq, which, as Moscow expected, would soon upset the regional status quo. This time the proposal came in written form but it was meant for internal use and was never presented to the outside world. The Russian leadership made another round with a proposal in 2007. Both proposals fell flat as the rift between Russia and the United States continued to grow. The 2007 proposal[3] was not very different to the one unveiled in 2019 except the latter put particular emphasis on the fight against terrorism. This suggests that the previous proposals failed not because of the content of the initiatives but instead due to Russia's standing and overall image as a declining power at the time.

Since then, however, Russia's role in the Middle East region has grown immensely. It is now a key player in the Syrian conflict, has a presence in Libya and maintains good and well-balanced relations with most countries in the region. It has also worked to build a reputation as an impartial negotiator trying to maintain ties with all the major stakeholders. This provides Moscow with new confidence that it is now in a more attractive position in the Gulf, especially since it is in stark contrast to the 'maximum pressure' campaign on Iran that the US has been pursuing in recent years. This US approach is more confrontational since it virtually impedes any attempts to reconcile US's regional Arab allies with the Islamic Republic.

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1 Suchkov, Maxim. "Contemporary Russia-Saudi Relations: Building a Bridge of Cooperation over the Abyss of Discrepancies." *Iran and the Caucasus* 20, no. 2. 2016: 237-251.

2 Divsallar, Abdolrasool, and Pyotr Kortunov. "The fallout of the US-Iran confrontation for Russia: revisiting Moscow's calculus." *RSCAS/Middle East Directions and Russian International Affairs Council Research paper*, 2020. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69699/QM-01-20-780-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

3 "Rossiajskaya konceptsiya bezopasnosti v zone Persidskogo zaliva" [Russian Conception of security in the Persian Gulf area]" Russian Embassy in the UAE, https://uae.mid.ru/koncepcia-bezopasnosti-v-zone-persidskogo-zaliva

In this context, the Russian initiative[4] unveiled on 23 July 2019 aimed to redirect international attention away from the US concept of security in the Gulf and towards the Russian proposal. The timing of the presentation of the Russian initiative was rather well-calculated: explosions in the port of Fujairah in May 2019 and an attack on two oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz in June clearly showed that in the event of military conflict Arab Gulf monarchies would be the first target and that the US umbrella might not be as efficient as it was assumed to be. All of this, in Russia's view, would create incentives for the Gulf Arab monarchies to embrace Russia's proposal and create an environment more conducive for talks on a comprehensive security architecture.

The essence of the Russian approach to regional security in the Persian Gulf

Ensuring security in the strategically important Gulf area is one of the major regional challenges of our time. For decades, tension in the Gulf area has persisted and new hotbeds of tension are being added to the existing ones. Military and political shocks and outbursts of terrorist activities in recent years in this region of the world abounding with hydrocarbon resources have disastrous consequences for the system of international relations and global economic and, first and foremost, energy security. A major transnational terrorist network centre has sprung up near the Gulf area. This negatively impacts security and political and economic stability in the region and in the world.

The above ideas have been outlined in Russian official foreign policy documents over the past few years. These give a clear sense of how the Russian leadership maps security challenges in the region and sets priorities for dealing with

them.

Even before the Russian Foreign Ministry officially presented its security proposal, it stated two important caveats. First, the Russian proposal involves a phased movement towards a settlement of conflicting issues on the basis of equal and fair participation by all interested parties, and through the implementation of trust-building measures with the end goal of creating institutions that would ultimately sustain the regional security architecture. This should serve as a prologue to a larger 'post-crisis' security architecture for the entire Middle East. Second, the Russian proposal is not definitive and should instead be viewed as both a draft proposal and an invitation to a constructive dialogue on ways of reaching a lasting security solution in the Persian Gulf.

The Russian proposal is guided by eight principles, which can essentially be grouped in three categories. First, the security architecture should be of a multilateral format and aimed at tackling common threats, not "appointing enemies." Second, in order for the initiative to be successful its particular provisions should be implemented in a phased manner and with due commitment on the part of the interested parties. Third, the security architecture should be based only on international law, not abstract 'rules' made by some actors against others.

Despite the fact that the new proposal was unveiled and promoted by the Russian Foreign Ministry, it was a product of many other government agencies and the larger policy-making community. The military aspect of the proposal received particular attention.

The first step, as Moscow sees it, should be a convention of representatives of all the regional countries to form an action group tasked with organising a conference on security and cooperation in the Gulf area. The group is to be responsible for "agreeing on the geographical coverage of the future security system, its range of participants, agenda, representation level, forum venue, as well as with preparing draft decisions, including identification of security, confidence-

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4 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area." 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575

building and control measures."[5] Therefore, much attention would have to be paid to developing complex mechanisms for transparency and forging mutual trust that later would become a basis for cooperation. This is one of the ideas that can be traced back to the 2007 proposal.

According to the Russian viewpoint, in order for competition not to grow into conflict one needs a solid institutional base that can be activated when tensions rise. This would require the creation of a Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organisation (PGSCO).[6] In this regard, when commenting on the initiative Russian diplomats and pundits cite the OSCE as an example of an organisation that helped reduce tension between the US and the USSR during the Cold War.

During the UN Security Council virtual meeting on 20 October 2020, Robert Malley, CEO of International Crisis Group, highlighted that "the absence of any institutional mechanism to air the parties' grievances and attempt to narrow gaps" only exacerbated the current crisis.[7] In this regard, an OSCE-type organisation may provide both a vital channel of communication and instruments to ease tensions. The UN Secretary General also noted that the concept of the Helsinki process that preceded the creation of the OSCE may be useful.[8]

Such an organisation should have at its disposal a set of confidence-building mechanisms, which the initiative also provides for. A wide range of confidence- and transparency-building measures is proposed, among them the creation of de-confliction communication hot-lines, continual consultations on military doctrines, exchanges of military delegations, exchanges of information

concerning arms procurement and armed forces, and preliminary notifications of military exercises and military flights. All these measures should contribute to building trust between the parties and provide them with more knowledge of their opponents.

In addition, the initiative is concerned with the issue of huge stocks of conventional weapons in the region. To curb the unfolding arms race in the Gulf region, the initiative document proposes signing arms control agreements "which would include the establishment of demilitarised zones, prohibition of destabilising accumulations of conventional weapons, including missile defence weapons and a balanced reduction of armed forces by all parties."[9] These measures can be seen as independent of each other or implemented one after another, starting with demilitarised zones, and can help shorten the list of mutual concerns and help countries to focus on core issues.

Russian diplomacy puts special emphasis on ensuring the renouncing of permanent deployments of troops by extra-regional states in the territories of the Gulf states. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has more than once highlighted the need to gradually remove foreign forces from the region. According to Lavrov, this would create the necessary conditions for the regional actors to assume responsibility for security in the Gulf.[10]

The only way in which non-regional actors should be present in the Gulf is with the status of observer in the proposed PGSCO. At the same time, non-regional powers should contribute to helping regional actors create the much needed de-conflicting mechanisms by encouraging an

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 United Nations. "Concerned about Lasting Conflicts, Terrorism, Sectarian Tensions Plaguing Persian Gulf, Speakers in Security Council Stress Need for Coherent Approach to Collective Security." 2020. https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14333.doc.htm

8 Lederer, Edith. "UN chief isn't giving up trying to get Gulf nations to talk." *AP News*, 2020. https://apnews.com/article/cold-war-helsinki-persian-gulf-tensions-soviet-union-finland-d1f13764d4e6f3a8075c0050750d750f

9 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area." 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575

10 "Lafruf li 'asharq alalwsat' la natamassak bi ashkhas fee suriya ... wa tukaddim alhal yatruh awdataha lilailah al-arabiya" [Lavrov to Asharq Al-Awsat: We do not hold on to people in Syria ... presents a solution that suggests its return to the "Arab family"], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2019. https://clck.ru/ThKwg

atmosphere in which this would be possible.[11] Importantly, Russia considers China and India key stakeholders in the region's security along with the US and the EU. Therefore, the proposal is yet another Russian attempt to contribute to the development of a multipolar world where the BRICS nations assume more responsibility, which would also lessen the 'Americanisation' of security in the Gulf.

The latest Russian vision for the regional security architecture has a few new ideas compared to the 2004 and 2007 proposals. Among them can be found new confidence-building measures such as a dialogue on military doctrines, defence minister sub-regional meetings, establishing hotlines and, most importantly, extra-regional states renouncing permanent deployments of troops in the territories of the Gulf states. Unlike the 2007 proposal, in which there was no emphasis on missile defence weapons, the new proposal addresses the issue of "prohibition of destabilising accumulations of conventional weapons, including missile defence weapons." This can be accounted for by the worrying prospect of missile strike exchanges between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the event of a conflict. On balance, none of the new measures included in the updated 2019 proposal are brand new but instead are aiming to keep up to date with events in the region.

A life vest or a Trojan horse: perceptions of the Russian vision of Gulf security

The initial European reaction to the Russian proposal was cautious but more amicable than that of the US.[12] While the US perceived the Russian initiative as predominately an attempt at yet another zero-sum game, the European concern had to do with the need to make this a multilateral effort rather than a Russia-dominated

process. In other words, the Europeans for the most part were not against the Russian initiative in principle but sought some kind of engagement with it.

In 2019, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz experienced an increase in the level of instability, which resulted in many incidents which affected freedom of navigation. Although the supply of hydrocarbons to Europe is diversified, a significant proportion comes from the Persian Gulf region. For example, imports of crude oil from the Gulf countries to Europe in 2019 amounted to 104.7 million tons (20%) of the total 522.5 million tons, while imports of LNG amounted to 32.2 billion cubic meters (26.9%) of the 119.8 bn total.[13] Therefore, European interests depend on regional stability in order to ensure uninterrupted supplies.

The hijacking of the British tanker Stena Impero was followed by a UK proposal to establish a European naval coalition to protect shipping and "fight piracy." Italy, the Netherlands and France agreed with the British initiative.[14] Simultaneously, after anonymous attacks on tankers, a similar proposal was presented by the United States.[15] However, despite a general understanding of the need to take action, the countries' responses split into two separate missions.

When it came to the GCC countries, they demonstrated a rather lukewarm approach to the Russian concept. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain refrained from official comments on the initiative and instead continued to blame all the regional problems on Iran. Although they acknowledged that the Russian proposal contained many rational ideas, they did not conceal that a key determinant of their position would be the reaction from the

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11 United Nations, "Concerned about Lasting Conflicts", 2020.

12 Belenkaya, Marianna. "What Is Russia Up to in the Gulf?" *The Moscow Times*, 2019. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/21/what-is-russia-up-to-in-the-gulf-a67828

13 BP. "BP statistical review of world energy 2020." https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2020-full-report.pdf;

14 MacLellan, Kylie and Michael Georgy. "Britain calls for European naval mission to counter Iran's 'piracy." *Reuters*, 2019. https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-iran-idUKKCN1UH172

15 U.S. Central Command. "U.S. Central Command Statement on Operation Sentinel." 2019. https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1911282/us-central-command-statement-on-operation-sentinel/

United States.[16] Another concern was that Iran would benefit from implementation of the proposal as it was being given more freedom of action.

Some Arab pundits criticised the initiative for its long-term focus while the region needed effective de-escalation mechanisms immediately. Further criticism was aimed at the very idea of creating an OSCE-type of organisation which may not be suitable for the Gulf. They argued that the European experience was in a different set of circumstances: there was no acute conflict in Europe at the time when the OSCE emerged yet the atmospherics of the Cold War dictated a need for an effective checks-and-balances system. This, in the view of the critics, was a more conducive environment than what the Gulf - and the Middle East in general - was experiencing.[17]

Another concern for Arab observers was how the Russia-proposed regional organisation would co-exist with the GCC: did it seek to replace it in the long run or was it going to operate in the region alongside existing frameworks, such as the OSCE, NATO and the EU do in Europe? Others viewed the Russian concept as incoherent since extra-regional players would become observers in PGSCO and play an active role in bringing the regional players together while at the same time Russia insisted it was for the latter to find a solution.[18] There were also some symbolic criticisms which were nonetheless important to the Arabs in that the Russian proposal called the Gulf "Persian," which, in the view of the critics, was a subtle manifestation of Russia's 'pro-Iranian bias.' Finally, some criticism of the Russian initiative revolved around its emphasis on counter-terrorism, which allegedly shifted the focus from the interests of regional powers to those of outside states. In this logic, the priority for Arabs was not 'international terrorism,' often seen by outside powers as Salafi movements, but instead "armed militias themed around a religion" - a euphemism in much Arab discourse for pro-Iranian Shia groups.

The truth of the matter is that for Russia Iran is indeed a critical military partner well beyond the Gulf. Both Iran and Russia are keen to ensure that the Caspian Sea remains free of any US or NATO military presence. Similar security concerns drive the logic of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in Afghanistan. Given Russia's internal dynamics of radicalisation of Islam, Sunni radical groups represent a great challenge for Russian security, hence the focus on counter-terrorism and regional partnerships to clamp down on these groups' sponsors, recruitment channels and propaganda on Russian territory.

This argument is worth particular analysis since the word 'terrorism' is mentioned eight times in the text of the Russian proposal and even the Arab-Israeli conflict is framed in the context of terrorism. As a result of paying so much attention to terrorism, Russia was viewed as promoting the interests of great powers rather than putting emphasis on the needs of local actors such as solving the problem of militias.[19] This argument holds water since even a brief comparative analysis of the 2007 and 2019 proposals shows the latter's focus on combatting global terrorism. Clearly Russian foreign policy aims were being promoted through the initiative.

However, it is worth noting that the proposal did not provide a complete list of measures or a detailed path to success. It should be viewed instead as proposing "ideas for further discussion

16 Al-Monitor. "Putin's Gulf security plan depends on Trump," 2019. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/putin-gulf-security-plan-trump-iran-uae-saudi-arabia.html

17 Al-Khathlani, Saleh. "Qirat ayaliya fee mubadarat rusiya lilamn aljamayi fee alkhaleej alarabiy" [First reading of Russia's collective security initiative for the Arab gulf], Okaz, 2019. https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/na/1745141

18 Al-Ajmi, Zahir. "Mubadarat musku litadyil alkhaleej alarabiy '1-2'" [Moscow's initiative for the internationalisation of the Arab gulf '1-2']. *Al-Watan*, 2019. https://clck.ru/ThKtT

19 Al-Khathlani, "First reading", 2019.

and development."[20] Vitaliy Naumkin, Russian top pundit on the Middle East who participated in drawing up the initiative, said that "Russia does not impose anything and does not expect everyone to subscribe to this project immediately and run to implement it cheerfully. The conception is open for discussion."[21] The same idea was expressed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Speaking at a UNSC virtual meeting on 20 October 2020 he said that whatever the mechanism for cooperation might be, "the region's countries need to foster it among themselves and outside actors, including regional organisations, must encourage an atmosphere in which this is possible."[22]

The only GCC country that has openly expressed support for the proposal is Qatar, the relations of which with its neighbours have been frosty despite the recent rapprochement.[23] In autumn 2020, a Qatari representative said that the first step towards security in the Gulf would be to put an end to the raging conflicts (as the Russian proposal says) and then establish "a set of rules that would govern the relationships between states of the region, including by establishing a collective framework for security and working to actively prevent new escalations."[24] Furthermore, during a phone call with President Rouhani of Iran in August 2019, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim, went as far as to state that "the security of the region must only be ensured by its littoral states,"[25] therefore supporting the Russian idea of removing foreign troops from the region.

Beyond the regional reactions, in order to be successful the Russian proposal needs to be backed by Russia's resources. Militarily, Russia is a strong power but its capabilities are somewhat limited to a number of domains – such as air and space forces, missile strikes and special operations. This toolkit enables Moscow to achieve its policy goals but does not imply an expanded military presence in the region, perhaps for the better. On the diplomatic front, Russia has been skilful enough to forge ties with major regional actors and can now use this capital to move its Gulf initiative forward. Russia has been acting as a self-appointed but seemingly mutually accepted middleman between Israel and Iran and is engaging in talks with both sides seeking the least painful option for both, but one that includes reasonable security concessions. Moscow does not see its interaction with Israel or Iran as a 'deal' in the strict sense of the word. Both parties are being informed and consulted and in this sense Russia is not trading one partner for the other. Russia seems humble in its expectation of what it can achieve in keeping Iran and Israel apart and Moscow sees political and geographical limits to its mediation role. However, the very experience of dealing with the two regional arch rivals can prove useful and can eventually be incorporated in more active Russian diplomacy on Gulf security.[26]

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20 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area." 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575

21 Belenkaya, Marianna. "Na koleni Iran ne postavit" [Iran cannot be put on its knees]. *Kommersant*, 2020. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4557832

22 "Comprehensive review of the situation in the Persian Gulf region – Security Council Open VTC," filmed 20 October 2020, UN Web TV, video, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/meetings-2020-vtc

23 Batrawy, Aya, and Amr Nabil. "Gulf Arab leaders sign declaration to ease rift with Qatar." *AP News*, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/bahrain-qatar-iran-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates-8f18052ac759900cfb20b19f89baf369

24 Ibid.

25 "Tehran-Doha ties amicable, brotherly, developing/ Some extra-regional countries' activities in Persian Gulf make problems complicated/ Iran cares a lot about regional security." Official website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2021. http://www.president.ir/en/110796

26 Suchkov, Maxim, and Mariya Khodynskaya-Golenischeva. "Sravnitel'nyy analiz rssiyskikh strategiy soyuznichestva na Blizhnem Vostoke" [Comparative Analysis of Russian Alignment Strategies in the Middle East], Sravnitelnaya Politika [Comparative Politics] 12, no.1. 2021: 69-81.

A convergence of Russian and Iranian views?

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the key players in the Middle East, and in particular in the Persian Gulf. Some countries, when trying to discuss the establishment of stability in the region, overlook the obvious and exclude Iran from these discussions. However, dialogue is impossible without Iran's participation, none the least because its state border in the Persian and Oman Gulfs stretches for 2,440 km. This fact alone clearly indicates that any event in the Persian Gulf inevitably affects the interests of Iran. Although the United States proposes to ignore Iran, the absolute impossibility of this approach is clear to most countries. It is worth mentioning that in 2012 Iran presented a democratic solution for Palestine through a referendum in Palestine, in 2013 a four-point peace plan centred on self-determination by the Syrian people and in 2015 a four-point peace plan at the outset of hostilities in Yemen. Moreover, in 2016 in partnership with Russia and Turkey, Iran started the Astana process aimed at achieving peace and political stability in Syria. All these efforts were attempts to de-escalate tension in the region.

Iran has proposed several of its own initiatives in an effort to amplify peace and stability in the Persian Gulf. It first called for collective security arrangements in the Persian Gulf in the mid-1980s, while other countries were backing Saddam Hussein's 'tanker war.' In 2013 it proposed a World Against Violence and Extremism (WAVE) initiative, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. In 2018, in a meeting with Iraq's then-Foreign Minister Muhammad Ali al-Hakim in Baghdad, Javad Zarif offered a non-aggression pact with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. At the time, Russia reacted positively to the initiative with some pundits even calling it "advantageous."[27]

The Helsinki process can be effectively used as a frame of reference to resolve the conflict in the Persian Gulf. This idea was voiced for the first time in 2016 by Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif during a speech at the French Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee.[28] Nonetheless, in the case of the Persian Gulf, a complete copy of the Helsinki Accords is not possible. For the project to be rigorously implemented, the countries of the region must first come to an agreement on key security issues, such as the conflicts in Yemen, Syria and others, and then consider economic and humanitarian issues.

In 2016, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Javad Zarif denounced accusations that Iran was seeking hegemony in the region and stressed the need for a new security mechanism in the Persian Gulf based on Article 8 of Security Council Resolution 598 on the end of the Iran-Iraq war.[29] It is noteworthy that the Iranian side pointed to the negative influence of "stabilisation coalitions" in the region even before the US announced the creation of a naval coalition in the Persian Gulf to ensure the protection of its allies. Tehran came to see these formations as based on a zero-sum approach, and therefore less operational than a security network. Iran's initiatives, as much as those of Russia, proposed enhancing confidence-building measures through military visits and joint exercises. The Iranian side outlined the key role of Russia in the region, and therefore in the implementation of this model, based on the strategic vision for the region. Therefore, six months before the publication of the Russian proposal, Iran actually proposed similar initiatives, albeit not in written form.

As a result, it was only logical that Iran would welcome the Russian proposal since it contained all the major elements that Tehran itself had been

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27 "Lavrov otsenil predlozhenie Irana zakluchit' pat o nenapadenii" [Lavrov appreciated Iran's proposal to sign a non-aggression treaty], RIA, 2019. https://ria.ru/20190611/1555473522.html

28 Rezaian, Lachin. "Zarif meets French Senate president." *Mehr News Agency*, 2016. https://en.mehrnews.com/news/117563/Zarif-meets-French-Senate-president

29 "Statement by Mohammad Javad Zarif (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran)." *Munich Security Conference*, 2016. https://securityconference.org/en/medialibrary/asset/statements-by-federica-mogherini-and-mohammad-javad-zarif-1715-12-02-2016/

promoting: all-inclusiveness, the use of past European experiences in establishing dialogue and employment of Resolution 598 as the legal basis.

Iran believes that the security structure should be independent of other security zones and be based on the 'security complex' model. According to the Regional security complex theory (RSCT) proposed by Buzan and Weaver, international security should be considered from a regional point of view, where mutual relations between states develop in compliance with regional security complexes (RSC) – separate models in the field of security in which participants interact to different degrees. They include neighbouring entities isolated from each other by natural barriers such as oceans. The level of interaction between the members of an RSC is elevated and between members of various RSCs is relatively low. These systems are embedded in the extensive global political system. RSCT holds that the actions and key motivations of actors are regional.[30]

Unlike the American 'maximum pressure' approach, the model approved by Russia and Iran focuses on cooperation not coalitions, while none of the five external powers, including the United States, are excluded from the negotiation process.

At first sight it may appear that Russia and Iran are forming a coalition. In reality, however, it is more nuanced. On numerous occasions Tehran has announced its readiness for dialogue with other countries in the region and that it deems 'coalitions' to be fundamentally detrimental to the cause of regional stability and peace. In a similar fashion, Russia has been consistent in stressing its balanced approach to all the regional parties and in advocating for a de-escalation of tension. Creating a 'coalition' implies standing up to 'the opposing party' and in this sense would go against Russia's foreign policy principle of not intentionally aggravating relations with other parties.

After the publication of the Russian proposal, in 2019 Iran proposed a new idea called the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) to the UN General Assembly. The goal of the project is to develop cooperation between the states of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman "for the sake of regional peace, stability, progress and security."[31]

The HOPE initiative has three major objectives: to ensure the energy security of the countries of the region; to guarantee freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman; and to maintain unimpeded and safe transfer of hydrocarbons through the Strait of Hormuz. The goals of the proposed initiative suggest its primary focus is on economic rather than political cooperation.

The Middle East is still under external economic influence, and therefore Tehran's main proposal is to minimise the role of the foreign factor in the Middle East system of international relations and take control of the main economic resources. Iran expects the Coalition of Hope to be supported by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. Furthermore, it is assumed that more influential players like European countries and Russia will join the creation of a collective security system in the Persian Gulf. Non-regional players, non-aligned movement countries and more influential European countries that are interested in forming an effective collective security system in the Middle East are invited to take part in the work of the Coalition of Hope. In this sense, there might be some potential in converging the Russian and Iranian initiatives with participation by the Europeans.

Announced by Rouhani from the UN rostrum, the Hormuz Peace Endeavor is an initial version of a security doctrine which sets out its general idea. In this way, Iran has actually designated the vector of regional policy – as much as Russia did with its proposal.

In its current form, Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor

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30 Buzan, Barry, and Ole Wæver. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

31 United Nations. "At UN, Iran proposes 'coalition for hope' to pull Gulf region from edge of collapse." *UN News*, 2019. https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472

has three levels of application. To begin with, it serves as a means of protecting Iran from mounting US pressure. By linking national security with the security of the region, Tehran significantly increases the cost to Washington of anti-Iranian policies. Furthermore, the Iranian initiative provides a new mechanism for regional cooperation that should reconcile the conflicting states of the Persian Gulf. In addition, in the context of overall Middle East policy, the Hormuz Peace Endeavor is a step towards sovereignty and increasing the international legal personality of the countries of the region.

Therefore, although Iran welcomes the Russian proposal, it also offers its own vision for how to resolve the current situation. Iran does not abandon the idea of participation by regional and extra-regional powers but at the same time emphasises that a compromise in the Persian Gulf can be reached through joint efforts by the countries in the region.

Conclusion

Russia's proposal for a comprehensive security architecture in the Persian Gulf is a product of many years of its attention to the region, the need to safeguard Moscow's interests and the positive negotiation experience that Russia has gained in Syria over the last few years.

Moreover, Russia's initiative on Gulf security is a piece of the puzzle in the overall mosaic of its foreign policy to construct a more polycentric world. Moscow has positioned its vision for the region as completely different from that of the United States and designed its proposal as a virtual antithesis of the 'maximum pressure' campaign. Russia fully realises that not every American ally shares this approach, if only because it might lead to an all-out regional war, and has concentrated its efforts in engaging both the Arab monarchies and the Europeans in the proposed initiative. It has also used the proposal as a means to promote some of its own grand foreign policy ideas such as further de-Americanisation of the Middle East - and

more generally the world - and establishing what Moscow sees as a multipolar world where non-Western states are granted more responsibility and power. The Kremlin has few illusions that its efforts could launch a Saudi-Iranian peace conference but it nonetheless seeks to propose an alternative path for the development of the region, one that the regional powers are free to embrace or not but either way will have to think whether the path offered by the US is the best possible option. If they reach the conclusion that it is not, then there is a small chance that they will also seek a greater de-escalation and the allies will gradually lower their dependency on American security guarantees.

Among European countries there is no consensus on a common policy toward the Gulf region. The countries tend to operate in two camps and do not necessarily always coordinate their actions. The EU focuses on pursuing its own main goal, which is to ensure the safety of the passage of ships, and is somewhat reluctant to get involved as a mediator in a full-scale regional settlement. As a result, the Europeans themselves have not put forward a fully-fledged proposal for a security architecture in the region and are suspicious of the Russian initiative but are not against it in principle as long as Moscow is willing to genuinely engage on its own initiative to make it a multilateral matter.

Despite the fact that in Russia's collective security proposal the EU, along with the United States, China and India, is given a place as observers or associate members in the new organisation for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf zone, due to various factors these countries do not seek to act together and lay the foundation for establishing the organisation.

Over the years Iran has come up with a number of proposals for the security architecture of the Persian Gulf. For the most part, Tehran's proposals are similar in content to those of Russia or echo the Russian philosophy in many ways. Together with Russia's growing role in the region and the positive dynamics in the Russian-Iranian relationship over the last five years, this affinity in

visions of Gulf security enables the two powers to cooperate more closely. Despite the fact that more than a year has passed since the presentation of the initiatives, the process of de-escalation and negotiating is progressing disastrously sluggishly. Undoubtedly, the countries have a long and arduous road ahead. Success in this area can be achieved based on a strengthening of trust and cooperation and close interaction among all the countries in the region.

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China's Policy and Practice Regarding the Gulf Security

Liu Lanyu

Executive summary

This chapter analyses China's policy and practice regarding building security in the Gulf and the factors affecting its involvement in Persian Gulf security. The principles behind China's participation in the region are mainly peaceful development, promoting peace through dialogue and the primacy of the status quo. The factors behind these principles are China's interests in the Gulf region, diplomatic principles and the geopolitical situation of the region. Since China's main interests in the Gulf region are still energy, economy and trade, China pursues the principle of making no enemy in its diplomacy. Moreover, as China is extremely pessimistic about politics and security in the Gulf and it believes that it does not have the power to shape the dynamics of regional geopolitics, it aims to play the role of 'neutral friend' in Persian Gulf security-building and conflict management. Regarding security-building in the region, China tries to avoid unilateral involvement in regional disputes and mainly participates in the region's security governance through sending a special envoy, peacekeeping operations, economic assistance, bilateral institutions and multilateral mechanisms, presenting an image of passivity and seizing opportunities while avoiding harm. Consequently, China's participation in Gulf security affairs does not meet the expectations of regional states and Western powers, which argue that China should participate in security affairs in proportion to its economic strength.

This chapter offers the following three suggestions to stakeholders in Gulf issues which urge China to participate more actively and deeply in Gulf security-building in the future: they should invite China to participate in security-building in the region through an inclusive multilateral peace-building framework; the United States should encourage China to work together with it to manage tensions in the region; and Gulf security stakeholders should selectively invite China to participate in security-building following a pre-determined agenda. When it comes to anti-terrorism, humanitarian aid, post-war reconstruction, peace talks and other politically neutral issues without power competition implications, China should be invited and encouraged to play an important role.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Security construction, Chinese policy, Chinese security practices

Introduction

Since 2013, China has been vigorously developing its trade with Persian Gulf countries, by 2019 becoming the largest trade partner of the GCC states, Iran and Iraq. Given the future sustainable increase in China's energy imports and the active involvement of the Gulf countries in the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), economic links between China and the Gulf countries will continue to deepen, with these countries depending more on China in economic terms. Realistically, considering its substantially increased economic influence in the Persian Gulf region, China will be more willing and able to take initiatives to shape the political and security structure of the Gulf region according to its interests. Consequently, China will play a more crucial role or even take the lead in Gulf security-building. However, in practice China is still somewhat hesitant about becoming deeply involved in Gulf political and security issues.[1] As China does not desire to play

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1   Shengxiang, Liu, and Hu Xiaofen, "The Bipolar Trend of the International Pattern and China's Strategy Choice in the Middle East." *Global Review*, no. 5. 2017: 110. https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/

a significant role in the region's geopolitics,[2] its economic and political influences in the region are extremely asymmetric.

Why is China reluctant to play a role commensurate with its economic power in Gulf security-building? To answer this question, this chapter attempts to identify the factors affecting China's deep involvement in Persian Gulf security-building by analysing its policy and practice regarding Gulf security. The study proposes a set of suggestions regarding how stakeholders in Gulf security should encourage China to become more deeply and proactively involved in Gulf security-building.

Chinese Policy on Restructuring Persian Gulf Security

In January 2016 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Egypt, for the first time the government of China published *China's Arab Policy Paper*, which not only served as "a guide to developing China-Arab relations in the new era"[3] but also as a summary of past experiences in deepening China-Arab relations. In fact, many policies mentioned in the paper are targeted not just at Arab countries but at the Middle East as a whole. This was the first official policy paper on the Middle East formulated by the Chinese government, elaborating on both China's interests and its security-building principles in the Gulf and the entire Middle East.

According to this policy paper, China's interests in the Persian Gulf can be generally summarised as in energy, economy and trade, politics and security. Its energy interest is in a safe and stable supply of Gulf energy, including oil and natural gas, to China. The trade and economic interests are in expanded cooperation with Gulf countries

with regard to trade and investment, in particular cooperation in the fields of infrastructure construction, trade, investment and finance under the 'Belt and Road Initiative.' As for China's political interests in the region, it aims to deter any anti-Chinese power. On the other hand, countries supporting China's sovereignty over Taiwan and consistent with China in major international issues involving China's core interests and concerns should be supported. Last but not least, China's security interests in the Gulf region mainly include deterring the expansion of terrorism, resisting extremism, countering piracy to safeguard international maritime transport and protecting the operation of Chinese enterprises and the personal safety of Chinese citizens.[4] Because of its interests in the Gulf region mentioned above, China desires a peaceful and stable environment in both the Gulf region and the Middle East as a whole which will not only secure energy supplies to China for the implementation of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' but also continually serve its balancing strategy in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, China has its policy principles on how to achieve security and stability in the Gulf region. In accordance with *China's Arab Policy Paper* and other official statements on security issues in the Middle East and the Gulf region, China follows three core principles in Gulf security-building. First, regarding Persian Gulf security, China sees economic growth as the key to long-term security and stability in the region and so advocates promoting peace through development.[5] In the words of the Chinese president, "Middle East unrest, born of development, shall ultimately end with development."[6] In addition, China also believes that the root causes of turbulence in the

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2   Lons, Camille, Jonath Fulton, Degang Sun and Naser Al-Tamimi. "China's great game in the Middle East." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019. https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/

3   "China's Arab Policy Paper." Xinhua Net, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com//world/2016-01/14/c_1117780788.htm

4   "China's Arab Policy Paper" *China.org.cn*, 2020. http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2016-01/14/content_37576812.htm

5   Degang, Sun, and Zhang Dandan. "Peace Through Development: Ideas and Paths for China's Participation in Middle East Security." *Global Review*, no. 6. 2019: 110.

6   "China's New Role in the Middle East was Made Clear." *Xinhua News Agency*, 2016.

region lie in the prevailing zero-sum mentality[7] and extremist ideology resulting from the development deficit giving rise to competition and gaming among regional powers and the spread of terrorism. For instance, the lack of development thinking has induced the countries in the region to seek relative gains instead of absolute gains and inadequate economic development has left the young with less dignity in life, making them more violent and vulnerable to extremism. Second, China regards enhanced dialogue between all the parties as the best solution to regional disputes, rather than sanctions or military intervention and so it encourages promoting peace through dialogue. Third, China praises and highly respects all development paths adopted by different countries in keeping with their national conditions and stands for promoting peace on the basis of the status quo. To conclude, China's Gulf security-building is based on its interests in the Gulf region, its diplomatic principles and the geopolitical situation in the Persian Gulf. Next, this chapter will analyse the hidden factors behind China's three Gulf security-building principles.

Peaceful Development

In the understanding of the Chinese government, there are few differences between security-building and peace-building. The Chinese proposal for Gulf security-building involves promoting peace through development on the basis of three factors: its energy interests, its trade interests and its self-perception of its influence in the region. First, China's core national interest in the region resides in energy, centring on secure supplies of oil and gas to China. Given China's rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the gap between energy supply and domestic demand is increasingly enlarging. With its dependence on imported oil exceeding 50% in 2009,[8] it has

become the world's largest oil importer since 2016, accounting for 17.3% of the value of the world's total oil imports.[9] By 2019, China's dependence on imported oil and gas had risen to 72.5% and 45.2% respectively, making it the world's biggest importer of oil and gas.[10] Therefore, in the face of this heavy dependence on foreign energy supply, Xi Jinping, President of China, took the lead and organised a brainstorming meeting to discuss the national energy security strategy in June 2019. After the meeting, the Chinese government declared that energy supply was vital to national development and security, and that China would strengthen its all-round international cooperation and use global resources efficiently to secure its energy supply.[11]

As its most important source of oil and gas, China intends to bind its economic interests with those of the countries in the Persian Gulf by cooperating in the entire industrial chain (upstream and downstream in the oil and gas industry) with the regional oil producing countries. By doing so, in the oil and gas trade China is trying to enter more long-term contracts, obtain pre-emption rights and then gain greater pricing power. In addition, China holds that binding its economic interests with major oil and gas sources in the world will facilitate the internationalisation of the reminbi (the Chinese currency, RMB or CNY), increase the proportion of RMB in energy settlements and boost Gulf countries' RMB foreign exchange reserves.[12]

7   "Speech by Xi Jinping at the Headquarters of the League of Arab States." Xinhua Net, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com//world/2016-01/22/c_1117855467.htm

8   Qifan, Huang. "The New Development Pattern of "Double Circulation" is the Inevitable Choice for a Power." *Sina Finance*, 2020. http://finance.sina.com.cn/zl/china/2020-11-09/zl-iizhezxs0901305.shtml

9   "World's Largest Oil Importer – China." *China National Petroleum Corporation*, 2018. http://www.cnpc.com.cn/syzs/sysh/201808/0be99ca106634c069f2c412ead87db11.shtml

10 Hongwei, Xu, Xu Chao, and Yang Zhaobo. "Analysis and Thought of Energy Security under the New Situation." *Guangming Online-Theory*, 2020. https://theory.gmw.cn/2020-08/07/content_34068551.htm

11 "General Secretary Xi Jinping's Strategic Thought of "Four Revolutions and One Cooperation" on National Energy Security and Development," *China Energy Conservation and Environmental Protection Group*, 2019. http://www.cecep.cn/g13385/s25501/t69684.aspx

12 Wei, Jiang and Zhang Wanhang, "Enhanced Energy Cooperation between China and the Gulf International is in Line with the Vision of Both Sides." *China Development Observation*, no.1. 2017: 15-18.

Second, because the trade and economic relationships between China and the Gulf region are highly complementary, China has treated the region as an export market of great potential for commodities and services, and also an important market for project contracting and investment.[13] Industry in the Gulf region is far from mature, entailing imports of quantities of manufactured goods from China such as mechanical and electronic products, household appliances, light industrial and textile products and hardware tools. Additionally, the Persian Gulf countries are investing more and more in developing infrastructure in various areas including transport, energy and communication, which will benefit the 'Belt and Road Initiative' launched by China. The Initiative gives priority to infrastructure cooperation with the Belt and Road countries to alleviate the overcapacity problem in China. Last, thanks to their abundant energy reserves, the Gulf countries are well capable of paying. Even in the case of their being short of funds, they can also pay with their oil and gas resources, which can ensure their solvency.

Third, China's self-perception is that it still does not have the basic power to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Persian Gulf. In the first place, China believes that the Gulf region is generally still dominated by the U.S., without any comparable power outside the region in terms of military presence or the number of regional allies. China not only thinks it does not have a comparable power projection ability but it also believes that if it intervened or became excessively involved in the region's politics and security affairs it would antagonise the United States and other regional powers, which would suspect that China was vying with them in their sphere of influence.[14] Moreover, it is difficult for China to translate its economic influence on the Gulf countries into political influence, mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, with their strong purchasing power the Gulf countries

are not limited to China for imports of products and services but have multiple choices. On the other hand, although the world energy market is gradually becoming a buyer's market, China's energy demand is still on the rise, and so is its need for Persian Gulf oil. Consequently, China's oil imports are hardly a political bargaining chip with Gulf countries at present. As Li Shaoxian, one of China's most influential experts on the Middle East, has stressed, "the growing interests of China in the Middle East signify greater political influence. But China is still a newcomer, and it will be at least 20 years before it can exert effective political influence."[15]

Overall, the Gulf security-building policy of promoting peace through development put forward by China is completely consistent with its national interests and its self-perception of its geopolitical influence in the region. In turn, this strategic mindset also somewhat prevents China from investing strategic resources and energy in shaping the region's geopolitical landscape, and makes China only a good business partner for stakeholders in the region.

Promoting peace through dialogue

Promoting peace through dialogue is the approach advocated by the Chinese government to settle political and security differences and disputes among stakeholders in the region. The reasons behind this are China's assessment of the region's geopolitical situation and its diplomatic principles. Policy circles, academia and the public media in China are extraordinarily pessimistic about the political and security situation in the Middle East, considering it the most unstable region in the world[16] and holding that the region's

13 Wenlin, Tian. "The Belt and Road' Initiative and China's Middle East Strategy." *West Asia and Africa*, no. 2. 2016: 128.

14 Ibid.

15 "With a total investment of RMB 40.5 billion, China surpassed the United States to become the leading investor in the Middle East." *Zaobao China*, 2017. http://www.uzaobao.com/cngov/2017-08/0639279.html

16 Weijian, Li. "China-Arab Strategic Partnership: Basis, Status Quo and Trends." *West Asia and Africa*, no.4. 2018: 15.

geopolitical and security issues are intertwined, systematically problematic,[17] unpredictable and unmanageable. China believes that tension in the Gulf region is generated by complex causes, including interference by the U.S., sectarian and ethnic conflicts, security dilemmas among the region's countries, domestic conflicts, a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, religious extremism, terrorism, etc. These factors have made the Gulf region a veritable security burden and grave concern for the great powers. Bearing this in mind, China has long been unwilling to become involved in the security affairs of the region,[18] and even if China were involved it would be more to safeguard its existing interests. Furthermore, warned by America's previous failures to resolve political and security issues in the region, China realises that seeking security through force, political intervention or military alliances[19] would not solve the security problems in the Persian Gulf. Instead, it would be at the cost of its own hard and soft power,[20] even making itself the target of terrorist organisations with threats to its own security. Under these circumstances, China chooses to intervene in Gulf security affairs as little as possible. It prioritises promoting multilateral mechanisms for Gulf security to avoid future trouble. China claims that regional issues should be dealt with by strengthening and identifying consensus among countries in the region, boosting political solutions[21] and rigorously rejecting solutions imposed from outside the region.

Meanwhile, promoting peace through dialogue is proposed based on China's diplomatic principles. Since its reform and opening up, keeping a low profile has always been a core principle in China's foreign policy. The approach not only grew out of the judgement that "peace and development are the two main themes of our times," but also embodied the Chinese culture of moderation and avoiding competitiveness with the principle of making friends rather than enemies at its core. This is deemed to ensure a more favourable external environment for China's advancement.[22] China has been pursuing the principles of never claiming leadership, non-alignment and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. When dealing with Gulf security issues, China refuses to dominate any proceeding, intervene in regions and countries or ally with any countries in the region. Instead, it advocates that all parties to a conflict should minimise 'misjudgements' through close communications, thereby enabling regional countries to solve conflicts by themselves.[23] Thus, China has never initiated any peace process in the Persian Gulf, and could not even be counted as an active participant. In the case of Iran, when the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign escalated regional conflicts, Chinese companies were forced to leave the Iranian market and significantly reduce purchases of Iranian oil. China's response was only to advocate for the countries in the region to launch an inclusive dialogue process to solve their disputes, but it did not make more practical efforts to bridge the rift between Iran and its Arab rivals.

17 Degang, Sun and Zhang Dandan. "Peace Through Development: Ideas and Paths for China's Participation in Middle East Security." *Global Review*, no.6. 2019: 129.

18 Zhao, Tong. "China and the Iranian Nuclear Negotiations." *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, 2015. https://carnegietsinghua.org/2015/02/02/china-and-iranian-nuclear-negotiations-pub-58879

19 Degang, Sun and Zhang Dandan. "Peace Through Development: Ideas and Paths for China's Participation in Middle East Security." *Global Review*, no. 6. 2019: 113-114.

20 Wenlin, Tian. "The Belt and Road' Initiative and China's Middle East Strategy." *West Asia and Africa*, no. 2. 2016: 140.

21 "Speech by Xi Jinping at the Headquarter of the League of Arab States." *Xinhua Net*, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com//world/2016-01/22/c_1117855467.htm

22 Zhigong, Xu. "A major strategic principle that must be upheld for a long time to come – study on Deng Xiaoping's thought of keeping a low profile." *Marx Philosophy*, no. 1. 2015: 241-242.

23 Degang, Sun, and Wu Sike. "China's Participation in Middle East Security Affairs in the New Era: Ideas and Practical Exploration." *International Studies*, no.4. 2020: 3.

The primacy of the status quo

As a participant in the Persian Gulf security governance, China believes in respecting the choices made by the people in regions and countries and supporting them to explore development paths consistent with their national circumstances.[24] China promotes peace based on the status quo and on this basis aims to strengthen countries' capacities to build their discretionary security[25] instead of imitating others' development paths or resorting to external intervention. This policy was put forward by China on account of its political interests and the complicated Gulf geopolitics. First, it is indicated by respect for regional countries' exploration of development paths suited to their national conditions without any political preference or value orientation in the exchanges. By doing this, China assumes that it can gain political support from countries in the region for China's sovereignty and core interests, such as regarding the Taiwan and Xinjiang issues. This approach helps turn the region into a vote bank for China at the United Nations. Second, China holds that Gulf issues should be resolved in the long term, and that maintaining the status quo without making existing issues worse would actually make a contribution to regional peace. Moreover, it is also believed in China's political circles that the Middle East has been an important barrier against western hegemony[26] and has saved China from huge external pressure at critical moments.[27] There was a voice in the Chinese public media that if the Trump administration invaded Iran, China would have at least five years of development opportunity. Consequently, China has no urgency regarding security issues in the Middle East on the ground that to some extent the status quo is in its interest.

As an extension of the principle of the primacy of the status quo, China also emphasises fairness and justice as foundations for security-building in the Middle East. International law, consensus and other universally recognised rules such as the *Charter of the United Nations* are critical criteria. For instance, China regarded the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and exert unilateral maximum pressure on Iran as an unjust action as it trampled on the international consensus. In reality, by taking the *Charter of the United Nations* and other international laws and rules as principles in Gulf security-building and adhering to multilateralism in dealing with regional issues, China has not only reduced its responsibility in regional issues but also averted the possibility of making enemies.

China's practices in Gulf security-building

From the above analysis of the Chinese principles in rebuilding Persian Gulf security, we find that China still lacks willingness to be involved more deeply and proactively in the region's security-building. This is why China's efforts at security-building in the region are still extremely limited, staying at the level of "exchanges of views" and 'cooperative participation.' Even the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum, in which China plays a major role, is only a forum for expanding economic cooperation in the name of peacebuilding. In fact, the only thing that has forced China to show willingness to participate in security-building in the region is "China pressure theory."

In 2010, when its gross domestic product (GDP) surpassed Japan's, China became the world's second-largest economy after the U.S. Buoyed by its economic might, China's military spending increased rapidly, reaching USD 188 billion by 2013, twice as much as Russia's military spending and a third of that of the U.S. China's rise to being the second most powerful country in the world led to growing calls from the international community for more Chinese international responsibilities,

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24 "China's Arab Policy Paper" China.org.cn, 2020. http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2016-01/14/content_37576812.htm

25 Lincong, Wang. "Security Issues and Governance in the Middle East." *World Economics and Politics*, no. 12. 2017: 23.

26 Xiaotao, Cui. "The New Trend of China's Hot Issue Diplomacy." *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, no. 3. 2020: 44.

27 Wenlin, Tian. "'The Belt and Road' Initiative and China's Middle East Strategy." *West Asia and Africa*, no. 2. 2016: 144.

also known as "China responsibility theory."

Although China believes that 'China Responsibility Theory' is nothing but a means for the West to increase the costs of China's rise and create discontent with China's free-riding behaviour among the international community, it also perceives the theory as a kind of recognition of China as a great global power by the international system. To demolish the theory and turn the pressure into an opportunity and improve its international prestige, China always stresses that it is a responsible international stakeholder,[28] a country which is willing to sustainably provide international society with public goods and always be a contributor to and defender of global peace, development and order.[29] Statistics from the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERCIS) show that the numbers of China's involvements in important international and regional hotspots is on the rise, from three in 2010 to nine in 2018: the North Korean nuclear issue, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Afghanistan peace process, the Syrian crisis, south Sudan, the northern Burma and Rohingya refugee issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict.[30]

As for security-building in the Persian Gulf, China regards it as an important part of global governance and an indispensable opportunity for it to project its image as a responsible important country, enhance its voice in the international community, expand its political influence and build major-country relations in a new model featuring cooperation and stability with the United States, Russia and Europe.[31] However, so far China is a passive participant in the Gulf region's security-building, and mainly participates in Gulf conflict resolution through the special envoy mechanism, peacekeeping operations, economic assistance and bilateral and multilateral institutions.

Special envoy mechanism

China established special envoys of the Chinese Government in 2002 to represent the Chinese government in participation in regional hotspot issues, such as the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Syria issue and the Yemen crisis. The main duties of the special envoys are to present China's positions and views on issues to the parties concerned, listen to their opinions on how the situations will develop and catch up with the latest information. In addition, a special envoy should regularly contact stakeholders involved in hotspots to promote regional peace through communication. So far, a total of five Chinese special envoys have served on Middle East issues. As Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 triggered another round of tension escalation in the Persian Gulf region, Zhai Jun, the Chinese government's special envoy on Middle East affairs, visited the Gulf countries to exchange views on the situation in the Middle East and hotspot issues.[32]

As the government official with the best understanding of the security situation in the Middle East, his advice has a significant impact on Chinese Middle East policy and also plays a role in immediate de-escalation. Unfoundedly, so far all the special envoys have been very pessimistic about the future of peace-building in the Persian Gulf, and this pessimism to some extent damps the Chinese government's

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28 Shengjun, Zhang. "Enough of China Responsibility Theory," People's Tribune, no. 6, (2007):50; Li Limin, "Rational Analysis of 'China Responsibility Theory." People's Tribune, no.6. 2007: 52-53.

29 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "China and the World in the New Era." Xinhua News Agency, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-09/27/c_1125047331.htm

30 Xiaotao, Cui. "The New Trend of China's Hot Issue Diplomacy." Public Diplomacy Quarterly, no.3, (2020):41.

31 Degang, Sun. "Theory and Practice of China's Participation in the Middle East Conflict Governance." West Asia and Africa, no. 4. 2015: 87-88.

32 On 19 and 20 October 2019, Zhai Jun visited Saudi Arabia and exchanged views on Gulf security with Minister of Foreign Affairs Asaf, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Jubeir and Prince Bandar. Later, on 25 October 2019, Zhai visited Iran and met Advisor to the Supreme Leader for Foreign Affairs Velayati and Foreign Minister Zarif. On 6 and 7 January 2020, Zhai attended the Teheran Dialogue Forum, which was held in Tehran, the capital of Iran, and addressed the plenary session to explain China's position on the regional situation at that time. On the side-lines of the Forum, Zhai also met Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif.

willingness to participate in multilateral peace-building mechanisms. However, if in the future there is a special envoy who has a constructive view of the region's peace-building prospects, it might work well to make China a more proactive actor in immediate de-escalation in the region.

Peacekeeping operations

Since 1984, China has been supporting and participating in UN peacekeeping operations, which it regards as an important way to participate in global security governance and maintaining world peace. The past three decades have witnessed an increase in both the numbers and types of military peacekeeping forces sent by China, from military observers at the beginning to organic units such as engineering, medical, transportation, helicopter and police units, infantry battalions, etc. and peacekeeping professionals such as staff officers, military observers and contract officers.[33] In addition, since the end of 2008 China has sent thirty-seven groups of naval ships to carry out escort missions in the Gulf of Aden off the waters of Somalia, and in 2016 it established the Chinese People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, which is China's first overseas military base.

China always tries to keep its peacekeeping operations under the framework of the United Nations, but it is undeniable that China's military presence in the Middle East is on the rise, especially its maritime presence. Although the main motivation behind China's military presence in the region is to ensure that China's maritime energy transport routes are unimpeded and maintain the safety of Chinese cargo ships and citizens, its military presence can also help security-building in the region. For instance, China took part in a joint military exercise with

Iran and Russia in the international waters of the North Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman at the end of 2019 with the aim of promoting the security of international trade in this strategic region and combating terrorism.

It is important to point out that the joint military exercise with Russia and Iran does not mean that China has allied with these two counties to leverage against the U.S. and its regional allies. In fact, in early 2019 China also participated in a multinational military exercise in Karachi and its adjacent waters, which U.S., British and Australian vessels also joined. This indicates that China's peacekeeping operations are more focused on global governance than forming alliances. If the U.S. security presence in the region decreases in the future, China will have to rely more on its own military strength and help from countries in the region to secure its interests. Consequently, an increase in the Chinese marine presence in the waters around the Persian Gulf is expected in the future. This might also be accompanied by more Chinese involvement in bilateral and multilateral military operations in the region in the name of promoting regional security.

Economic assistance

China's economic assistance to the Gulf region is part of its policy of promoting peace through development. After the Iraq War, China was engaged in the reconstruction of Iraq. In October 2013, it promised to extend $25 million in grants to the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) launched by the UN and the World Bank. In 2004, it promised RMB 1.5 million in grants, and to train 20 foreign diplomats for Iraq. In January 2005, it offered grant aid worth $1 million to support Iraq's general election and assistance with mine clearance. In May 2007, on behalf of the Chinese government, then Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi announced at the International Compact Conference on Iraq, which was held in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, that China would provide RMB 50 million of free aid to Iraq that year.[34] In December

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33 China has participated in peacekeeping operations in more than 20 countries and regions, including Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sudan, Lebanon and South Sudan. In the Middle East, China joined the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM) from April 1991 to January 2003 after the Gulf War, served in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) from March 2006 and conducted a Syria Monitoring Mission from April to August 2012.

34 Minxing, Huang. "Relations between China and Iraq since the Iraqi War." *Arab World Studies*, no.9. 2014: 98-99.

2014, the Chinese government provided RMB 30 million of emergency humanitarian aid for Iraq's Kurdish region.[35]

In 2016, in order to help Middle East countries to strengthen and maintain their stability, China committed to providing USD 300 million of assistance for law enforcement cooperation, police training and other projects.[36] In February 2018, the Chinese government offered USD 3 million of grants to the UN World Food Programme to assist Iraqi and Afghan refugees in Iran, about 30,000 of whom were rescued.[37] Since the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, China has dispatched medical teams or medical supplies to several Gulf countries to help the governments ramp up efforts against the pandemic. In addition to offering grants, China has also been actively seeking to promote industrialisation in Middle East countries. In January 2016 in a speech at the headquarters of the League of Arab States, President Xi Jinping promised a loan of USD 55 billion to the Middle East, including USD 15 billion as a special loan for Middle East industrialisation, USD 10 billion as a commercial loan and USD 10 billion as a preferential loan. Meanwhile, a joint investment fund worth USD 20 billion was established with the UAE and Qatar.[38]

Bilateral institutions

At present, the main bilateral institution for China to participate in Gulf security-building is the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum (CASCF). Founded in January 2004, it was designed to promote dialogue and cooperation with 22 members of the Arab League and improve regional peace and development. With the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs established as its Secretariat, the Forum has held 9 Ministerial Meetings, 16 Senior Officials' Meetings and 5 High-level Strategic and Political Dialogues between China and Arab countries as of September 2020. The Ministerial Meetings and the Meetings of the Senior Officials Committee are those most related to political and security cooperation.[39]

The Meetings of the Senior Officials Committee are held annually by China and the LAS in turns or at any time by mutual consent. The meeting's main function is to maintain senior official-level strategic political dialogue of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), where international and regional issues of common concern are discussed.[40] The core function of the CASCF is to coordinate and improve economic, technical and cultural cooperation between China and Arab countries so as to safeguard and improve China's economic interests in the Gulf region and to deepen mutual understanding among the populations of the countries involved.

The main reason for China to initiate the CASCF was to increase its political, economic and cultural exchanges with Arab countries to cultivate Sinophiles in both their governments and societies. In this way China will have more support for Chinese interests in the Arab world and can keep these countries neutral in the competition between China and the U.S.

35 "China's Relief Supplies Delivered to Kurdish Areas in Iraqi." *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, 2013.

36 "China's New Role in the Middle East." *Xinhua Net*, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/22/c_1117868382.htm

37 "China Completes Refugee Aid Project in Iran." *Xinhua Net*, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-02/14/c_1122416182.htm

38 "China's New Role in the Middle East." *Xinhua Net*, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/22/c_1117868382.htm

39 Specifically, the Ministerial Meeting is attended by foreign ministers and the secretary general of the League of Arab States. It is hosted biennially in turn by member states and the headquarters of the League of Arab States, while extraordinary meeting can be held when necessary. During the meeting, all parties concerned exchange views to reach consensus on regional and international issues of common interest and hotspots focused on by the United Nations and its specialised agencies. Moreover, the meeting also discusses how to strengthen cooperation between China and Arab countries in the political, economic and security fields.

40 "China-Arab State Cooperation Forum." *Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China*, 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjb_673085/zzjg_673183/xybfs_673327/dqzzhzjz_673331/zgalb_673389/gk_673391/

Multilateral institutions

Since 2006, China has participated in the P5+1 mechanism (5 UN security council permanent members plus Germany), which was formed on the initiative of the United States to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. It is important for China to promote Gulf security-building through a multilateral institution. To resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, China mainly plays the roles of 'third party' and 'intermediary.' Adhering to the spirit of objectivity and fairness, it has actively engaged in mediation, particularly between the United States and Iran, to encourage all parties to narrow their differences and reach consensus.[41] Additionally, China broke the deadlock by putting forward a compromise plan. After the US announced its withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal in May 2018, China insisted on upholding the JCPOA and proposed that the United States should re-join the deal with no preconditions as early as possible and lift all sanctions against Iran and third-party entities and individuals. On this basis, Iran should fully resume compliance with its nuclear-related commitments.

In addition, considering Iran's position, in December 2020 China proposed decoupling regional security issues from the JCPOA so that the U.S. could resume its implementation. At the same time, considering the standpoints of the anti-Iranian countries in the region and the U.S., China proposed "establish[ing] a multilateral dialogue platform in the Gulf region" to launch an inclusive dialogue process and build consensus on regional security issues from scratch.[42] One can see that China will continue to maintain its policy of Gulf security-building and play the role of third party in the future, with mediation diplomacy remaining its main approach to participation in Gulf political and security issues. Moreover, from

China's initiative to set up a special dialogue platform in the Gulf region, it can be expected that China is likely to invest more diplomatic resources to actively engage in Gulf security-building in the future.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of China's ideals and practices in Gulf security-building, the factors influencing its involvement since 2013 can be summarised as interests, diplomatic principles and the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. At present, China's main interests in the Gulf region are still energy, economy and trade. The country still pursues the principle of making no enemy in diplomacy. Moreover, it is extremely pessimistic about Gulf politics and security, believing that it does not have the power to shape the dynamics of the region's geopolitics. As a result, China currently plays the role of 'neutral friend' in Gulf security-building and conflict management. China's policy in the Gulf region is to avoid unilateral involvement in regional disputes, and it mainly participates in security governance through multilateral mechanisms, passively seizing opportunities while avoiding harm. Obviously, China's participation in Gulf security affairs does not meet the expectations of regional states and Western powers which argue that China should participate in security affairs in proportion to its economic strength. How can stakeholders in Gulf issues urge China to participate more actively and deeply in Gulf security-building in the future?

This chapter proposes three suggestions as follows. First, when resolving regional security issues, the Gulf security stakeholders, and especially the U.S., can strive to initiate a multilateral mechanism, preferably including all stakeholders so as to reduce the restrictions of China's diplomatic principles on its participation. In the multilateral mechanism, China should play the role of persuader rather than pressuriser so as to make full use of the advantages of its friendly relations with the countries in the region.

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41 "China Proposes New Thinking on Resolving the Focuses of Iranian Nuclear Issue." *China News*, 2014. http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/11-24/6809602.shtml

42 "Chinese FM Puts Forward Four-point Proposal on Iran Nuclear Issue." *Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China*, 2020. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1841629.shtml

Second, the U.S. attitude may have a significant impact on China's participation in regional security governance. The bilateral relations between China and the U.S. may affect China's overall foreign relations. At present, China believes that a Sino-U.S. relationship featuring non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation is in line with its development interests, so it tends to avoid arousing the United States' suspicion in its foreign dealings. If the U.S. can take the initiative to cooperate with China on Gulf security-building, China will regard it as an opportunity to reduce differences and reach consensus, and will invest more diplomatic resources and efforts in Gulf security issues.

Finally, the Gulf security stakeholders should selectively invite China to participate in security construction based on an agenda. When it comes to anti-terrorism, humanitarian aid, post-war reconstruction, peace talks and other issues without obvious political preferences and power competition implications, China should be invited and encouraged to play an important role. Meanwhile, regarding issues characterised by power competition, expectations of China's participation should be lowered.

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SECTION 3
DE-ESCALATING RISKS OF MILITARY OUTBREAKS

Saudi Arabia and Iran: Exploring Theoretical Pathways Towards Desecuritisation

David Roberts

Executive Summary

This chapter explores critical security studies in order to discern potential strategies of desecuritisation that could be applied to the Saudi-Iranian case. In doing so, it offers both initial examples and potentially relevant concepts as waypoints for future research. The concepts of securitisation, desecuritisation and ontological security are introduced and explained. Lene Hansen's typology of desecuritisation is then used as a structure for the chapter. She argues that relations can be de-heated over time via détente, that critical (and problematic) 'othering' relationships can be rearticulated or replaced, or these issues can be silenced. The linked concept of 'altercasting' appears interesting as a way for one side to unilaterally shift the narrative about the other. The theory also emphasises the importance of taking every opportunity to shift the narrative away from reifying security-related divergences. Ontological security argues that such differences remain crucial to each side, but difference can be retained while shifting away from a particularly securitised subject.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ontological Security, Desecuritisation, Détente, Replacement, Rearticulation, Silencing

Introduction

This chapter plumbs the critical security studies literatures to offer thoughts on the Persian Gulf's key problematic bilateral relationship: between the competing, argumentative and mutually fearful states of Saudi Arabia and Iran. To this end, approaches like securitisation, desecuritisation and ontological security are introduced and explained. Subsequently, a typology of desecuritisation from the literature is employed to break down avenues for considering desecuritisation strategies. Hansen argues relations can be de-heated over time via détente, that critical (and problematic) 'othering' relationships can be rearticulated or replaced, or these issues can be silenced. The goals of this chapter are to introduce these theoretically rooted avenues for examination, to apply them to the case study in question to derive initial conclusions and to point out furrows for fertile future research.

Searching for intellectual tools

Securitisation and desecuritisation

Securitisation theory emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, driven primarily by Barry Buzan at the London School of Economics (LSE) and Ole Wæver at Copenhagen University. The Copenhagen School of security studies, as it came to be known, sought to shift the focus for security scholars (and, by extension, practitioners). It can be seen as something of a half-way house between strict realist positivism on the one hand and (often) radical social constructionism in critical security studies on the other.[1] During the Cold War in the era of bipolarity, bitter capitalist-communist competition laced with nuclear weapons and dozens of proxy conflicts typically confined the concept of security to discussion of warfare, military means and potentially existential costs.[2] Nevertheless, in 1983 Buzan wrote *People, States, and Fear*, arguing that security ought to refer to and 'mean' things other than

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1   On this wider debate and the emergence of new challenging approaches, see Smith, Steve. *Positivism and Beyond. in International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

2   On this era, see Buzan, Barry, and Lene Hansen. *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010: 101-153.

military security.[3]

With the end of the Cold War and the 'release' of bipolar pressures, the emergent Copenhagen School era arrived and the study of security proliferated. For many, the focus of security – the so-called 'referent object' – multiplied from a state's existential security to societally-rooted security concerns, human security and such issues.[4] Amid this 'widening' debate, some – often of the neo/realist school of international relations based in the US – rejected this move flatly, seeking to keep the focus on broadly military matters, complaining that if security widened too much the concept itself lost salience and power.[5] Scholars in the Copenhagen School were aware of this critique and responded *inter alia* with *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* in 1998.[6] Here, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde consolidated and updated their ideas to form a coherent concept of securitisation in five specific sectors: military, political, economic, societal and environmental. This, they argued, was suitably diverse – far away from the Cold War's myopic focus on the military threat – but not so diversified that the concept of security lost coherence.

Another critical development was their introduction of securitisation, an innovation that is particularly suited to the matter at hand of examining the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. They argued that a given issue could be non-politicised, politicised or securitised. This means that, respectively, issues are: not debated and not the focus of policymakers; debated and engaged with by policymakers; or presented and understood as an existential threat to a given referent object, which allows extraordinary measures to be enacted to

counter the threat.[7] The securitisation of an issue, therefore, is when it moves from non-politicised to politicised and then to being securitised. Issues move up the securitisation spectrum when relevant, and when suitably empowered actors undertake the 'securitising move,' often via a 'speech act,' which is accepted by the powers that be so that the extraordinary powers in question are enacted.[8] Conversely, an issue could reverse its journey from securitised to politicised and to non-politicised in a process referred to as de-securitisation. From the 2000s onwards the securitisation discourse proved attractive to scholars and critics trying to understand why some issues do and some do not become seen as critically important and impinging on security concerns (i.e. securitised).[9]

The notion of desecuritisation, although inherent to the concept and introduced in the 1998 book, has received comparatively less focus. One of the notable exceptions to this rule is a 2012 article by Lene Hansen. In this wide-ranging article that wrestles with long-established critiques of securitisation and desecuritisation, Hansen offers a typology of four 'forms' of how desecuritisation can occur: change through stabilisation, replacement,

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3   Buzan, Barry. *People, States & Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations.* Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd, 1983.

4   Buzan and Hansen, *Evolution of Evolution of International Security Studies.* 2010: 187-226.

5   Walt, Stephen M. "The Renaissance of Security Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2. 1991: 211-239.
    Note the rebuttal in Kolodziej, Edward A. "Renaissance in Security Studies? Caveat Lector!" I*nternational Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4. 1992: 421-38.

6   Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde. *Security: A new framework for analysis.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid. 21-49

9   Ciută, Felix. "Security and the problem of context: a hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory." *Review of international studies* (2009): 301-326.; Hansen, Lene. "The Little Mermaid's silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen School." *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 285-306.; Huysmans, Jef. "Language and the mobilization of security expectations: The normative dilemma of speaking and writing security." *ECPR Joint Sessions, Mannheim* (1999): 26-31.; Huysmans, Jef. "The European Union and the securitization of migration." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 38, no. 5 (2000): 751-777.; Elbe, Stefan. "Should HIV/AIDS be securitized? The ethical dilemmas of linking HIV/AIDS and security." *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006): 119-144.; Morozov, Viatcheslav. *Human Rights and Foreign Policy Discourse in Today's Russia: Romantic Realism and Securitisation of Identity.* Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 2002.; Jutila, Matti. "Desecuritizing minority rights: Against determinism." *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 2 (2006): 167-185; Snetkov, Aglaya. "Theories, methods and practices–a longitudinal spatial analysis of the (de) securitization of the insurgency threat in Russia." *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 3. 2017: 259-275.

rearticulation and silencing.[10] After explaining them in turn, this typology will be adopted and applied to the Saudi-Iranian case to reflect on potential pathways for this animus to be desecuritised.

Ontological paradoxes

Ontological security is one of the newer approaches that has emerged in international relations and international security studies and is reflective of the critical security studies modus operandi. At its core, ontological security argues that individuals need to attend to their ontological security needs: people need to feel a fundamental, deep and abiding comfort and stability in who they are and their place in the world to be at peace.[11] This understanding of ourselves is made up of our self-conception, reinforced by routines in day-to-day life and reified by others and how they deal with us, reinforcing our grasp of ourselves. Mitzen parlayed these widely accepted sociological concepts into international relations theory in 2006. She argued that states also have to satisfy ontological security needs. States act 'as if' they are individuals and need to, via routines, mediate understandings of themselves to forge a stable view of themselves.[12] However, in a swiftly and profoundly changing world, attaining this stable perspective – and a state's ontological security – is challenging.[13]

The interesting insight by Mitzen that is germane to this chapter is that she argues states will sometimes protect and prioritise securing their ontological security over their physical security.[14] As Mitzen puts it, states can

become attached to the competition as an end in itself. That is, physical security aspirations cannot be made salient for interaction because they are not recognized by the other; but because actors also need ontological security, as competitive practices are repeatedly recognized and reinforced, the routines supporting the identity of a competitor likely will feed back on the states' self-concepts. … Even if a state wishes it could be a security-seeker, it has become attached to the identity that is reinforced through competition. … Once ontological security needs are met through relationships that sustain competition, those aspirations are effectively insulated from practice. One generation later potential peace overtures seem threatening, the risk involved not worth the sacrifice in stability. … On a deep level, they prefer conflict to cooperation, because only through conflict do they know who they are.[15]

Pragmatic policy prescriptions follow this conceptualisation. The creation of routines is an integral part of building ontological security. Harmful routines reinforce pre-existing conceptions and can, theoretically at least, be replaced or supplemented with new sets of routines that, over time, might constitute the formation of new elements of a state's ontological security.[16] Last, it should be pointed out that ontological security concerns have been effectively discussed in the Persian Gulf context, specifically in the case of the Iran-Saudi dynamic, intimating that the concept has real salience and perhaps even explanatory value in the matter at hand.[17]

10 Hansen, Lene. "Reconstructing desecuritisation: the normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it." *Review of international studies,* 2012: 525-546.

11 Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991.

12 Mitzen, Jennifer. "Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma." *European journal of international relations* 12, no. 3. 2006: 341-370.

13 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 1991: 1–5, 145–160. Mitzen, "Ontological Security." 2006: 346.

14 Steele, Brent J. *Ontological security in international relations: Self-identity and the IR state.* Routledge, 2008; Mitzen, "Ontological Security", 2006: 342.

15 "Ontological Security" 2006: 360–361.

16 Ibid. 363.

17 Darwich, May. "The ontological (in) security of similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi foreign policy." GIGA Working Papers no. 263. 2014. B. Roberts, David. "Ontological Security and the Gulf Crisis." *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10, no. 2. 2020: 221-237.

From theory to practice

This chapter applies lessons from these interlinked theoretical literatures to the Saudi-Iranian dynamic. The goal is to map potential pathways for future detailed research on desecuritising and de-heating this conflictual relationship. Three particular insights are harnessed and deployed below.

First, the structure of the next section follows Hansen's breakdown of typologies of desecuritisation strategies through stabilisation (also referred to in common parlance as détente) via replacement and rearticulation, and by silencing. Second, the wider Copenhagen School approach offers an important injunction reminding us that security is far from merely an issue of, say, Saudi and Iranian military concerns. Instead, there are a range of securitised issues that need wider conceptualisation in political, economic, societal, environmental as well as military arenas, which benefit from examination according to Hansen's typology. Third, the literature on ontological security offers important injunctions when it comes to how stubborn conflicts can be understood. This literature reminds readers of the importance of symbolism, and how certain issues take on outsized or even irrational importance if they become understood as constitutive of a nation's identity. The constant reifying of these concerns via the creation of routines is an important way that concerns become, to borrow the term, securitised. Equally, ontological security insights concur with the Hansenesque desecuritisation processes, noting that harmful routines can be replaced over time.

Change through stabilisation or détente

Détente occurs at an inherently slow pace. During the Cold War this approach seemed fruitless on several occasions. Initially, there needs to be a certain sentiment of mutual recognition and legitimacy across key fronts. When it comes to the issue of territory, there are few if any serious bilateral irredentist concerns in the Persian Gulf case. This is in contrast, for example, to Greece

and Turkey refusing (to varying degrees) to countenance the legitimacy of each other's claim to territory in Cyprus. There are some issues when it comes to Iran's province of Khuzestan, where Saudi Arabia stands accused of supporting separatist movements.[18] Nevertheless, if there is any serious Saudi support for such movements at all – a deeply debatable proposition – it smacks of Saudi Arabia striving to find an issue it can manipulate to irritate Iran, in a similar way that Iran looks on the Houthi movement. In other words, if there is any Saudi support, it is merely tactical, it carries negligible meaningful redolent power, and it can be swiftly ended.

In contrast, there is deeper enmity and a lack of mutual recognition when it comes to each other's position as leading centres of Islam. Saudi Arabia explicitly claims to be the leader of all Muslims by virtue of its hosting Islam's two holiest places in Mecca and Medina. Iran, by contrast, styles itself as the leader of Shia Muslims, and, by virtue of its revolutionary ideology, it strives to offer a model for a theocratic state. The emergence of this challenge engendered King Fahd in Saudi Arabia to change his title in 1986 to include the line 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,' leveraging the state's religious legitimacy explicitly to counter Iran's. Examining these issues through an ontological lens highlights that these concerns are embedded in the very fabric of each state's self-conception and they are repeated ad nauseam in official discourse and practices.[19] Consequently, this specific aspect of the bilateral relationship will be resistant to anything approaching an easy change.

Nevertheless, similar dynamics of deep-seated animosities were overcome during the Cold War, albeit for limited periods of time. A variety of tactics worked to inaugurate and maintain an era of intra-superpower détente in the 1960s

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18 Reuters. "Iran Says It Captured Arab Separatist Group Leader Suspected of Military Parade Attack." 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-security-arrest/iran-says-it-captured-arab-separatist-group-leader-suspected-of-military-parade-attack-idUSL1N2HY1IH

19 Darwich, "The Ontological (in) Security of Similarity Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy", 2014.

and 1970s.[20] A combination of small security treaties begat more strategic ones, symbolic public relations-orientated moves (handshakes in space, etc.) contributed, as did more senior face-to-face meetings. Although debate continues as to the ultimate success of this era of détente, it did lead to pragmatic results like the installation of a conflict-de-heating hotline between elites, a clear lowering of tensions if for a limited period, leadership summits and important arms control treaties.

Many may scoff at such a comparison, arguing that it is near impossible to conceive of, for example, Mohammed bin Salman visiting Tehran, mirroring Nixon's 1972 visit to Moscow. This may be true. But we live in strange taboo-breaking times in the region. Until it happened, it would have been equally impossible to conceive of Saudi and the UAE launching a ground war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar or Mohammed bin Salman rising through the ranks to centralise power like no leader since Ibn Saud.

Such significant gambits rarely emerge from thin air but are facilitated by progress initiated by focusing on lower hanging fruit. Speaking to military and political security concerns, something like non-binding bilateral accords on ensuring the Persian Gulf remains a chemical and biological weapon-free zone might be a start. Precisely because this is not the most relevant or salient security concern in the Gulf, beginning the process of the normalisation of discussion on areas of mutual interest could act as an acorn. And ontological security insights suggest that the very initiation of discussions, on any topic, could be an important element normalising the concept of discussion as opposed to incessant hostility.

Otherwise, politics between Saudi Arabia and Iran is inherently linked with proxy conflicts around the MENA region, where both sides – but particularly Iran – support various clients. Discussing these issues head-on is difficult, but not all conflicts are equally important. For Iran, its long-term engagement supporting specific actors in Lebanon, Syria and now Iraq is deeply embedded in the state's defensive posture.[21] Iranian support in these theatres is also increasingly baked in to Iran's ontological view of itself as an actor, from its perspective leading revolutionary struggle among oppressed friendly peoples.[22] Consequently, discussion of these facets is more off-limits and difficult. Understanding these realities and their military, political and ontological significance is important as a mechanism to focus attention and energy. The JCPOA – colloquially known as the US-led 'Iranian Nuclear Deal' – followed this kind of compartmentalising approach.

However, as noted, Iran's machinations in Yemen and its support[23] for the Houthis in their conflict with the Saudi-led coalition is quite different. The scholarly sense in this case is that the Houthi movement, cause and the wider war is of far less intrinsic importance to leaders in Tehran.[24] Instead, it merely presents a golden opportunity to needle and bleed Saudi Arabia and its allies, undermining their security at minimal cost. This asymmetry – how this conflict is of critical importance to Saudi Arabia but of comparatively trivial importance to Iran – gives Iran significant leverage should it want to deploy it in any negotiation. Track-2 discussions with Saudi Arabia using whatever influence it has to stem a flow of funds or material to groups in Khuzestan while Iran similarly tightens up the flow of funds and material to the Houthis are one option.

Away from 'traditional' areas of focus in the political and military realm lie other sectors of

20 Cox, Michael. "From the Truman doctrine to the second superpower detente: the rise and fall of the Cold War." *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 1. 1990: 25-41.

21 Ahmadian, Hassan, and Payam Mohseni. "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence." International Affairs 95, no. 2 (2019): 341-364; McInnis, Matthew. "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies." In "Defeating the Iranian Threat Network: Options for Countering Iranian Proxies" *Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, 2016.

22 Firoozabadi, Seyed Jalal Dehghani. "Ontological Security and the Foreign Policy Analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Institute for Strategic Research Journal* 2, 2011.

23 There is no meaningful doubt that Iran supports the Houthis – the only legitimate discussion is to what degree and how important this support is. Juneau, Thomas. "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment" *International Affairs* 92, no. 3. 2016.

24 Ibid.

prime importance. The *Hajj* acts as a de facto point of significant Saudi-Iranian engagement. It is currently relatively desecuritised compared to the aftermath of the massacre of Iranian pilgrims on *Hajj* in 1987 that prompted a break in relations the following year.[25] The deployment of *Hajj* diplomacy – offering more Iranian visas or otherwise simplifying processes for Iranians – is relatively win-win for Saudi Arabia. It is inherently predicated on Saudi Arabia acting as a munificent extoller of benevolence, rejecting whatever the *provocation du jour* might be, and instead befitting the state as the custodian of Islam's most significant locations, nobly reaching out and offering religious alms.

Replacement and Rearticulation

Hansen argues replacement "theorises desecuritisation as the combination of one issue moving out of security while another is simultaneously securitised."[26] Rearticulation is different and occurs when actors are "actively offering a political solution to the threats, dangers, and grievances in question."[27] In reality, strategies of replacement and rearticulation inevitably run into each other. Actors engage in these policies for myriad reasons, but it all comes down to a shift in the perception of the cost-benefit analysis of the elites involved. Outside actors can, in small ways, frame problems in different ways and shift incentives if the final decisions remain with the protagonists.

In terms of how replacement is 'done,' Aradau argues that a form of "disidentification" is required for its instigation. This is to say that the 'assigned identity' of the other is shifted to something more universal, away from merely being the 'dangerous'

other.[28] Similarly, Wendt speaks of "altercasting." This is the process through which, for example, Saudi Arabia would unilaterally recast Iran irrespective of any substantive changes in Tehran. This is partly to try to induce change (i.e. the change to the newly cast identity) in the other, and partly to reshape internal understandings (in this case, in Saudi Arabia) of the Iranian other.[29] Iran's Hormuz Peace Initiative (HOPE) aimed at this kind of end, promoting a unilateral 'ceasefire' without any specific instigating incident.[30] As Wendt notes, this kind of self-binding commitment follows the logic of unilateral disarmament processes and some peace movements.[31]

Similar to elements of the HOPE concept, the approach would be to signal that the other is a key part of the regional infrastructure in the Persian Gulf and as such 'of course' it does not pose an existential threat to the Gulf. Importantly, this kind of approach would not eliminate the difference that ontological security argues is essential. Nor would it desecuritise the other as a whole. Instead, retaining elements of these unfortunately necessary differences, it would level down the broader security threat. Such an approach would follow Rumelili's logic. She notes that ontological security is constructed along "multiple dimensions" and does not necessarily mandate "the construction of an Other as a threat."[32] The relevant examples here

25 Ekhtiari. Reza Amiri, Ku Hasnita Binti Ku Samsu, and Hassan Gholipour Fereidouni, "The Hajj and Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Saudi Arabia." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46, no. 6. 2011: 678-690.

26 Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation", 2012: 541.

27 Ibid. 542.

28 Aradau, Claudia. "Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7, no. 4. 2004: 388-413.

29 Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." In *International Theory*. 129-177. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1995.

30 Zaccara, Luciano, and Mehran Haghirian. "Making Sense of Hope: Can Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor Succeed?" *Atlantic Council*, 2019. www. atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/making-sense-of-hope-can-irans-hormuz-peace-endeavor-succeed/

31 Böge, Volker, and Peter Wilke. "Peace movements and unilateral disarmament: Old concepts in a new light." *Contemporary Security Policy* 7, no. 2. 1986: 156-170.

32 Rumelili, Bahar. "Identity and desecuritisation: the pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security." *Journal of international relations and development* 18, no. 1. 2015: 52-74.

are the emergence of security communities, as in Europe and Scandinavia, which demonstrate how it is possible to retain individual ontological security and coherence, acknowledge individual differences of states, yet not cast the other as a threat requiring emergency action and securitisation.

Recently, the region saw an interesting example of altercasting as a form of replacement. While most in the region perceived the Qatar blockade to be a highly significant event in the contemporary history of the region, Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, altercasted this incident as 'a very, very, very small issue.'[33] In reality, the Qatar blockade was the most severe intra-Gulf monarchy crisis in generations. However, by shifting the narrative in this way, Mohammed bin Salman – rhetorically at least – deftly demoted the issue in Saudi Arabia's hierarchy of concerns, denuding Qatari actors of a certain power.

This approach might well be a model to adopt for Iran. If Qatar had been endowed as a critical participant in something akin to the greatest intra-Gulf crisis in generations, it would have given Doha's leaders tremendous power as it logically follows that such a large rupture in Gulf relations needs to be closed, and that Qatari leaders need to be placated (or at least large changes are required). Conversely, if it is a small issue, then Saudi leaders are telegraphing the idea that the spat can continue ad nauseam or be swiftly resolved. The same logic applies to Iran: by endowing it so vocally as such a pivotal destabilising and influential power in smouldering conflicts in Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and in isolated incidents in other Arab monarchies, Tehran's leaders are given a tremendous amount of power and leverage. Such a conceptualisation also fits nicely into Iran's self-conception as a powerful regional state. Options here could be to altercast these security concerns as emanating from weaknesses in the Iranian state that cannot

halt the illicit flow of funds or military material. Similarly, the incidents could simply be played down as mere criminal activity.

Rearticulation can be considered similar to Roe's notion of "management of a conflict."[34] Both approaches call for a certain normalisation of interactions, and to stop, where possible, reinforcing the routines (the public statements, the state-controlled opinion editorials, etc.) that reinforce (and ultimately reify) the other's worst security-challenging characteristics. Huysmans speaks of attempts to stop "telling a story" that reinforces the "security drama."[35] Instead, it is about telling a different story. The point is not to tell a new story that Saudi Arabia and Iran are fraternal allies. It is instead to tweak and alter in a piecemeal fashion over a period the messaging which so often paints the other as irredeemably perfidious and a vast danger to each's security. Before major concessions are possible, the 'temperature' needs to be reduced. Rhetoric can be toned down and a 'linguistic ceasefire' can be enacted involving avoiding incendiary language ('a terrorist-supporting state') and thus "uncoupling the act and the actor."[36]

Otherwise, in terms of ways to go about rearticulating or replacing a distinction, Hansen notes actors must consider temporal (advanced versus backward), ethical (munificently assuming responsibility over another/subject) or spatial dimensions (incorporating a territorial element).[37] This approach brings to mind the multiple dimensions in any given self-other distinction. In the Persian Gulf, mixing the temporal and

33 Alkhshali, Hamdi, and Tamara Qiblawi. "Saudi Crown Prince Calls Qatar Embargo a Small Issue." *CNN*, 2017. https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/26/middleeast/saudi-crown-prince-qatar/index.html

34 Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation." 540, 2012. This remains a niche point of disagreement, as Roe notes that his management concept does not strictly entail desecuritisation. Roe, Paul. "Securitization and minority rights: Conditions of desecuritization." *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3. 2004: 279-294.

35 Huysmans, Jef. "Migrants as a Security Problem: Dangers of Securitizing'Societal Issues", in Miles. R. and Thrèanhardt, D. (eds.). *Migration and European integration: the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion Pinter Publishers, London*, 1995: ix 209.

36 Haspeslagh, Sophie. "The 'linguistic ceasefire': Negotiating in an age of proscription." *Security Dialogue*, 2020.

37 See Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation", 2015: 67.

the ethical approaches could take the form of one side taking the moral high ground, ignoring provocation and offering cooperation for some united higher purpose, whether in the political, military, societal, economic or environmental sphere.

Borrowing from Snetkov's example examining Russian desecuritisation strategies, the locus of de/securitisation could be tailored so that there is careful disambiguation. Elements of the Iranian or Saudi threat, or the parts that are securitised, could be disambiguated into sub-national, national, regional and extra-regional elements. If so chosen, Sunni-Shia dynamics – necessary for ontological coherence for both sides – could be rearticulated to focus on the sub-national societal level. Such an approach would note unity (in Islam) amid sectarian differences, as Iran strives to promote annually via its International Unity conference. But, crucially, in this way sectarian elements could avoid the more egregious and pointed examples of securitisation, which could be reserved for Iran's role with Hezbollah, the Houthis and such links. Rather than merely casting these nefarious links in religious terms, they could be rearticulated as the political extension of Tehran's powerbase. Elements of ontological animus and securitisation remain, but such an approach could create more room for furrows of desecuritised normalised relations, which could contribute to a slow stabilisation of broader relations.

In terms of offering new ways of rearticulating a more united pan-Gulf vision, the economic and environmental sectors may offer the more fertile ground. Odes to common Gulf environmentally-rooted challenges appear the lower hanging fruit, while some quasi-post-hydrocarbon-focusing initiatives or reflections are as evidently of interest to the protagonists as they are so far away as to be relatively uncontroversial in the short term.

Silencing

Silencing happens when "an issue disappears or fails to register in security discourse."[38] It occurs more often than one might think. Irredentist

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38 Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation." 2012:544.

differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over their undefined border at one stage led to diplomatic incidents, the unilateral closing of the border and even a "naval battle" between the states in 2010.[39] However, these concerns have simply dropped off the diplomatic radar. This issue has been silenced.

In the Persian Gulf, and particularly for Saudi Arabia, the elite systems are relatively well established to engage with silencing. Just as elites have the power to lead the replacement or rearticulation of a given issue, say via the medium of altercasting, elites can silence issues – Mohammed bin Salman's rearticulation of the Qatar blockade as unimportant contains some elements of silencing. It must be remembered, however, that elites are far from omnipotent and might struggle to silence certain issues. Consequently, any silencing would have to be undertaken in a highly selective manner. Elites can in some isolated examples spend political capital and force through a de facto silencing. This arguably happened in Saudi Arabia as the state put its weight behind the convictions of specific activists and reset national red lines of acceptable public discourse.[40] Similarly, Rafsanjani's détente in the late 1980s and 1990s was built on the silencing of the deaths of 325 Iranian pilgrims at the 1987 *Hajj* protest that escalated into a riot and a stampede.

Conclusions, limitations & research pathways

Many of the pathways identified here require extensive senior-level buy-in if they are to take hold and prosper. This remains an *a priori* requirement. However, many elements can also be undertaken in a piecemeal brick-by-

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39 Spencer, Richard. "Naval Battle between UAE and Saudi Arabia Raises Fears for Gulf Security." *The Telegraph*, 2010. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/unitedarabemirates/7521219/Naval-battle-between-UAE-and-Saudi-Arabia-raises-fears-for-Gulf-security.html

40 Reuters. "Supporters of Saudi Women Activists Detained, Including Two U.S. Citizens: Sources", 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-idUSKCN1RH0N3

brick way at the civil society level. Replacing dominant narratives of the other with less conflictual elements and emphasising shared commonalities or less antagonistic aspects of the relationship is possible. The media landscape in both countries is, of course, far from free, and real limitations remain. However, neither state enjoys anything like North Koreaesque levels of state control. Iran has long enjoyed a vibrant and vociferous (what might be termed) middle-class intelligentsia that is composed of far from merely regime propagandists. In Saudi Arabia, while the earliest media sources were surprisingly boundary-pushing, there has been an evident closure of space in recent years, although as one of the world's most internet-penetrated countries there remain lively pockets of discussion. It is not inconceivable that pan-Gulf civil society projects on a suitably apolitical matter could take off.

Moreover, the utility of exploring strategies in this way is to highlight elements of surprising win-wins hidden amid the morass of negativity and difficulty when considering de-heating this problematic bilateral relationship. For example, the power of altercasting – albeit often initiated by an influential leader's acquiescence – can be seen as, if not a magic bullet, at least a way to decisively shift the rhetoric of a debate, and all it requires is for one side to engage. Similarly, it is vital to think about the rearticulating of an issue. The theory highlights that this can be done while retaining the central otherness, but switching it away from a security concern.

This chapter clearly articulates furrows for future study and potential engagement. More of a focus on détente is warranted, and strategies from the Cold War era need further examination to draw lessons for the Persian Gulf case study. The concept of altercasting is interesting and warrants further extrapolation and investigation with this case in mind. Similarly, a cohesive plan putting together a strategy offering distinct options for the replacement and rearticulation of relations of enmity is required. Examples of how issues became silenced in other countries are also worth investigation to ascertain whether there are

particular paths states need to follow if they are to silence a given issue.

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Responding to US-Iran Military Escalation[1]

Mahsa Rouhi

Executive summary

The growing tensions between US and Iran in the recent years have led to a series of escalatory exchanges in the Persian Gulf region. While Iran, the US and GCC states all share a mutual interest for long-term stability and security in the region, there are conflicting interests and threat perceptions that have led to security challenges. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of diplomatic forums at the bilateral and multilateral levels for engagement and growing uncertainty over the long-term US role in the region. A roadmap for engagement should be guided by a vision for long-term rapprochement, complemented by medium term measures as well as immediate steps for de-escalation. Such efforts need to acknowledge the legitimate security concerns of the stakeholders. These efforts focus on incremental progress over the long term. In the meantime, there are opportunities for immediate steps for de-escalation such as establishing regional crisis communication lines for air and sea.

Keywords: Middle East security, US-Iran relations, Iran's military strategy, Security in the Persian Gulf

Introduction

In recent years, relations between the US and Iran have grown increasingly tense through escalatory exchanges that have brought the two states to the brink of war. The growing risk of conflict is fuelled by a vicious cycle of competing security interests, misperceptions and miscommunications. The security dilemma relating to Iran is also exacerbated by counterproductive policies on all sides. The US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA, and the maximum pressure strategy Washington pursued between 2017 and 2020 shut down channels of direct communication and heightened Tehran's threat perceptions, creating a dynamic conducive to escalatory incidents.

To date, these escalatory exchanges have not precipitated a full-blown war. Because the killing[2] of IRGC General Qassem Soleimani and Iran's subsequent retaliation did not spark a cataclysm as some had expected, several commentators lauded the Trump administration escalations as policy successes.[3] Such positions, however, too lightly dismiss the potential for constant escalation to teeter over the edge. The next crisis could very well provoke a major conflict. For instance, if Iran's retaliatory missile attacks on US bases after the 3 January 2020 Soleimani assassination had killed US troops, the Trump administration would have been under immense pressure to respond forcefully. Efforts on both sides to restore deterrence could have started a war.

The status quo is increasingly unsustainable. The region is marred by unstable proxy wars, competition that is spreading geographically and dangerous tit-for-tat moves.[4] The strategy of "there will be no war, nor will we negotiate" divulged by Ayatollah Khamenei in May 2019 coupled with provocative policies was a risky dichotomy

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1   The analysis and conclusions presented in this chapter are based upon the author's individual research and do not necessarily represent the policies or perspectives of the National Defense University, the US Department of Defense, or the US Government.

2   US Department of Defense, "Statement by the Department of Defense". 2020. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/

3   Thiessen, Marc. "Trump Wins His Standoff with Iran." *The Washington Post*, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/09/trump-wins-his-standoff-with-iran/

4   Rouhi, Mahsa. "Whatever Iran's role in the Saudi attack, the regional status quo is unsustainable" *The Guardian*, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/18/iran-saudi-attack-nuclear-deal-us

amid growing tensions.[5] Moreover, the absence of venues to discuss de-escalation heightens the danger posed by these counterproductive policies.

Even though the two sides have managed to avoid direct conflict so far, the escalation has nonetheless presented serious risks and had devastating humanitarian consequences. The mistaken shooting down of Iran Air flight 655 in 1988 and Ukraine International Airlines flight 752 in 2020 were both tragic outcomes of escalatory US-Iran exchanges. Both tragedies involved civilian airliners and resulted in the deaths of all the passengers and crew members aboard – 290 people in 1988 and 176 people in 2020. As an Iranian citizen tweeted after the second case, "unfought wars have victims too."[6] If such incidents can happen as a result of mishandling and miscommunications, the casualties caused by an all-out war would be catastrophic.

Managing escalation risks effectively and sustainably will only be possible through a better understanding of the legitimate security interests and underlying perceptions of the key actors and stakeholders in the region. States often have unrealistic expectations about the concessions expected by other states. The region's dynamic nature creates additional obstacles to peace and security. For instance, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen have provided fertile ground for power struggles and competition among key actors in the region. The more the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other players financially and strategically invest in these conflict areas, the more difficult it becomes for them to reverse course and give up their perceived gains.

The multi-faceted nature of the region requires all the actors involved to make substantial investments and compromises to overcome challenges to peace and security. It is possible

to envision approaches more apt to produce substantive results, but these pathways must be based on the realities on the ground. This chapter examines the challenges and risks of escalation. It discusses options with the potential to address some of the most pressing security issues in the region by weighing the interests and perceptions of key actors and the feasibility of these options. First, It provides an analysis of the conflicting interests and focus on Iran's security objectives, military strategy and threat perceptions. Second, It explores potential escalation risks among the US, Iran and the GCC states. In the third section, It discusses some of the overarching barriers to engagement. Last, It lays out a roadmap for engagement, presenting the best opportunities for short-term de-escalation and engagement.

Conflicting Interests and Threat Perceptions in the Region

In the Persian Gulf, the US, Iran and the GCC states each have legitimate security interests. There are mutual interests such as maintaining stability and security for energy and trade and there are conflicting and competing interests. For instance, Iran wants a diminished US presence and role in the region, whereas other regional states that rely on the US as a security guarantor have an interest in a sustained US presence. Conflicting interests and threat perceptions are the root causes of much of the tension in the region. They have shaped the strategies and policy choices pursued by the US, Iran and the GCC states.

These challenges have been exacerbated by misperceptions and a lack of communications due to the paucity of diplomatic relations among the key stakeholders. These factors have created fertile ground for conflict and escalation. The following section explores the core interests, threat perceptions and some of the common misperceptions around Iran's strategic intent.

Iran has pursued three main security interests

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5   Khamenei.ir "Neither a war will happen; nor will we negotiate: Imam Khamenei." 2019. https://english.khamenei.ir/news/6707/Neither-a-war-will-happen-nor-will-we-negotiate-Imam-Khamenei

6   Rouhi, Mahsa (@MahsaRouhi), 9 January 2019. https://twitter.com/MahsaRouhi/status/1215364183107215360?s=20

since the 1979 revolution: (1) deterrence against security threats from the US and its partners in the region; (2) increased power and influence in the region; and (3) military and technological self-reliance.[7] These objectives sit at the heart of Iran's defence and security policies and have guided the decisions of Iran's leaders over the past four decades.

Iran's security interests are discordant with US security objectives in the Persian Gulf. Since the post-Cold War era, the US has sought to protect the free flow of oil in the Persian Gulf, ensure the security of oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia and maintain long-term stability.[8] If Iran-US relations were not so contentious on other fronts, Iran would share this common interest with the US. After 9/11, US security interests expanded to include counterterrorism efforts in the region, including defeating al Qaeda and later ISIS.[9] GCC security interests, in contrast, have narrowly focused on Iran's role in the region in recent years. From their perspective, since the US war in Iraq, Iran has pursued opportunistic policies to expand its network of influence in the region. The GCC states perceive Iran as being intent on "systematically encroaching into the Arab world through a campaign of destabilising Arab countries" and creating "chaos in Arab societies."[10]

The way the US and the GCC states have understood Iran and its pursuit of security interests has produced a conventional wisdom that incorrectly characterises Iran's military strategy as expansionism.[11] Largely perceived as either offensive or defensive in nature, Iran's military strategy is more correctly defined as one of deterrence.

Iran's deterrent strategy[12] is borne from its security interests, its threat perceptions, which have been shaped primarily by its troubled relationship with the United States, and its experiences during the Iran-Iraq war. Iran has a perceived need to deter a superpower and its regional partners while itself lacking sophisticated military capabilities, significant allies or mass-destruction weapons, and while being under sanctions for decades.

Since its inception with the 1979 revolution, the Islamic republic of Iran has faced not only military threats but also the threat of regime change.[13] It is important to note that the hostility that Iran faces from the US and its partners was primarily provoked by Iran's practices during the early years of the revolution, such as in the hostage crisis and its support for revolutionary movements that threatened Arab monarchies. The focus in this article on Iran's strategic thinking is not intended to overlook these provocations or the other players' perceptions, which are discussed in the other chapters of this book.

Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 was intended to destabilise the regime and prevent the revolution from expanding beyond Iran's borders.[14] From Tehran's point of view, while Iraq was the aggressor in this war, instead of international

7   Rouhi, Mahsa. "How to Make a Lasting Deal with Iran." *Foreign Policy*, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/07/how-to-make-a-lasting-deal-with-iran-proxies-missiles-nuclear-conventional-weapons-trump-rouhani/

8   Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. *International Interests in the Persian Gulf Region*. 2005. Toprani, Anand. "Oil and the Future of US Strategy in the Persian Gulf." War on the Rocks, 2019. https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/oil-and-the-future-of-u-s-strategy-in-the-persian-Persian Gulf/

9   Cordesman, Anthony. "American Strategic Interests in the Persian Gulf States" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2017. https://www.csis.org/analysis/american-strategic-interests-Persian%20 Gulf-states

10   Ibish, Hussein. "How Iran and the Persian Gulf Arab States Can Start a Dialogue Again." *Atlantic Council*, 2018. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/how-iran-and-the-Persian Gulf-arab-states-can-start-a-dialogue-again/

11   US Department of State. "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities." *Iran Action Group*, 2018. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Iran-Report.pdf

12   Ajili, Hadi, and Rouhi, Mahsa. "Iran's Military Strategy" *Survival* 61, no. 6. 2019: 139-152.

13   Rouhi, Mahsa. "Iran and America: the perverse consequences of maximum pressure" *The Survival Editors' Blog*, IISS, 2020. https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2020/03/iran-united-states-maximum-pressure

14   Hardy, Roger. "The Iran-Iraq War: 25 years on" *BBC*, 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4260420.stm

condemnation, Baghdad received wide support, including weapons and funding, from the West and many Arab states. On the other hand, Iran remained relatively isolated, fighting post-revolution battles internally while simultaneously fending off a strong enemy supported by much of the international community.[15] During the war, due to sanctions imposed in 1979 in response to the hostage crisis, Iran was unable to buy aircraft essential for its defence. Iraq, by contrast, procured military equipment and received tactical intelligence, including critical details about Iranian troop movements, logistic facilities and most importantly air defence capabilities, variously from the Soviet Union, the US, Europe and Arab states. This support continued despite multiple known uses of chemical weapons by Iraq, which were estimated to have killed between 10,000 and 20,000 Iranians, sickened nearly 100,000 more and exposed up to a million Iranians in total.[16] Amid the power disparity and flagrant violations of the Geneva Convention, Iran felt largely defenceless and isolated. Current Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif pointed to the experience as a reason why the missiles programme is essential for Iran's security: "Iran did not have a single missile to retaliate so that maybe Saddam Hussein would stop. We went to one country after another, begging, begging, I am insisting, begging for a single Scud missile to defend our people."[17] Eventually, Iran was able to acquire ballistic missiles from Libya, Syria and later North Korea, and these Scud-B missiles became the

only way to strike back against Iraq. With this searing memory, Iran continues to develop and expand its missiles programme, which is one of the main areas of concern for the US and regional countries.

Due to decades of sanctions, Iran has been unable to rebuild its outdated conventional military capabilities to confront perceived threats. Lacking the resources to build or maintain a conventional military force, Iran faces a vast disparity in military capacity in the region. In 2018, for example, Iran spent about $13.2 billion on defence, compared with Saudi Arabia's $67 billion.[18] This spending disparity was not the case for just one year but for nearly four decades, adding to Iran's challenge in competing with regional states with top-of-the-line conventional military equipment.

As a result, Iran has resorted to a deterrent strategy that relies on three pillars: (1) nuclear hedging as political leverage[19] to support it in the long term;[20] (2) ballistic missiles for current defence and deterrence; and (3) a regional network of influence for strategic depth.[21] Tehran's aim is to use these asymmetric capabilities in order to shift the cost-benefit calculations of any potential adversaries by increasing the cost of any attack on Iran. This strategy has been effective. In Yemen, for example, it is estimated that Saudi Arabia has spent around $200 million a day, exceeding $250

15 Dagres, Holly. "Tehran's Foreign Policy Originates from the Iran-Iraq War." *The Atlantic Council*, 2018. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/tehran-s-foreign-policy-originates-from-the-iran-iraq-war/

16 Harris, Shane, and Aid, Matthew. "Exclusive: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran." *Foreign Policy*, 2013. https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/exclusive-cia-files-prove-america-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran/; George, Marcus. "Insight: After Syria, Iran laments its own chemical weapons victims." *Reuters*, 2013. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-chemical-weapons-insight/insight-after-syria-iran-laments-its-own-chemical-weapons-victims-idUSBRE98F08020130916

17 Zarif, Javad. "Iran FM Javad Zarif responds to a reporter's question regarding ballistic missiles." *Youtube*, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejudkZgs5Vg&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=Persian_boy

18 Wezeman, Pieter, and Kuimova, Alexandra. "Military Spending and Arms Imports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE" *Lobelog*, 2019. https://lobelog.com/military-spending-and-arms-imports-by-iran-saudi-arabia-qatar-and-the-uae/

19 Levite, Ariel. "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited." *International Security* 27, no. 3. 2002: 59-88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092114

20 See The 'Japan option' combines an advanced civilian nuclear programme and domestic and/or international legal prohibitions on weapons development. Laipson, E. "What the 'Japan Option' Tells us About Iran's Nuclear Prospects." *World Politics Review*, 2015. https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16433/what-the-japan-option-tells-us-about-iran-s-nuclear-prospects

21 Rouhi, Mahsa. "How to Make a Lasting Deal with Iran". *Foreign Policy*, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/07/how-to-make-a-lasting-deal-with-iran-proxies-missiles-nuclear-conventional-weapons-trump-rouhani/

billion in total by early 2020.[22] By contrast, Iran's asymmetric measures supporting Houthi rebels have cost Tehran only millions each year.[23] The way Iranians see it, their involvement in Yemen is draining Saudi Arabian resources, weakening a key rival and expanding Iran's reach in the region. In other words, their foothold in Yemen seems to reconfirm the importance of their asymmetric capabilities as part of their security strategy. It has allowed them to pursue influence cheaply and despite sanctions and has given them an edge over rivals which have a clear advantage when it comes to conventional weapons.

Iran has also pursued a strategy of nuclear hedging. Tehran's leaders have strategically expanded their nuclear programme, often in incremental easily reversible steps such as by increasing enrichment capacities. Increasing their nuclear capacity also serves to build leverage in negotiations.[24] This was a common pattern before the negotiations starting in 2013 that produced the JCPOA and has been since May 2019.[25] The JCPOA put on hold efforts to build a weapons capability, but in the face of maximum pressure Iran has gradually returned to its nuclear hedging strategy while preserving options to return to its commitments under the deal.[26]

While Tehran has used its nuclear programme for leverage building, it views its missile programme as pivotal to its security. This view is especially shaped by its experience in the Iran-Iraq War, where missile defence became "embedded in the national psyche" of the Iranian people.[27] From the early 2010s, Ayatollah Khamenei directed the Iranian military to focus on the precision of its ballistic missiles and reducing launch times, a strategy arguably more in line with projecting deterrent capabilities than posturing offensively.[28] The retaliation for the drone strike that killed Major General Qassem Soleimani and militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis showcased these developments. Tehran launched over a dozen surface-to-surface ballistic missiles at Iraq's al-Asad and Erbil military bases, where American troops were stationed.[29] The precision of these attacks indicated that Iran's short-range ballistic missile programme has greatly advanced and established what Iran would be capable of in a sustained conflict. The attack also signalled that Iran was willing and able to strike back with ballistic missiles.

The third pillar, non-state actors, provides Iran with significant deterrent capabilities and offers it the ability to extend its influence in the region and keep the fight with enemies outside its borders. While Iran's nuclear hedging and ballistic missile programme are both major concerns to its regional neighbours, its support for Hezbollah, the al-Assad regime in Syria, Houthis in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq are of even greater concern. Through its network of influence, Iran has extended its presence and influence into Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, engaging in

22 Jalal, Ibrahim. "Saudi Arabia eyes the exit in Yemen, but Saudi-Houthi talks alone won't resolve the conflict". *Middle East Institute*, 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabia-eyes-exit-yemen-saudi-houthi-talks-alone-wont-resolve-conflict

23 Reidel, Bruce. "In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again." *Brookings Institute*, 2017. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/06/in-yemen-iran-outsmarts-saudi-arabia-again/

24 Rouhi, Mahsa. "The North Korean Playbook Won't Work with Iran." *Foreign Policy*, 2018. https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/08/the-north-korean-playbook-wont-work-with-iran/

25 After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when Iran's threat level was perhaps at its highest with the US more present in the region, Iran paused its enrichment activities. As the threat level subsided, Iran resumed the development of its nuclear programme between 2006 and 2009 and again in the 2010-2013 period.

26 Fitzpatrick, Mark, and Mahsa Rouhi. "Iran preserves options over the nuclear deal." *IISS Survival Editors' Blog*, 2020. https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2020/01/iran-preserves-options-over-jcpoa

27 Elleman, Michael, and Mark Fitzpatrick. "No Iran does not have an ICBM program." *War on the Rocks*, 2018. https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/no-iran-not-icbm-program/; Ajili and Rouhi. "Iran's Military Strategy" 2019.

28 Safapour, Mahdi. "Why Iran has focused on improving the precision of its missiles rather than increasing their range." *Javan Newspaper*, 2017. https://www.javann.ir/003hht

29 Rubin, Alissa, Farnaz Fassihi, Eric Schmitt and Vivian Yee."Iran Fires on U.S. Forces at 2 Bases in Iraq, Calling It 'Fierce Revenge'." *New York Times*, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/world/middleeast/iran-fires-missiles-us.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

regional conflicts and managing to do so even under tough pre-JCPOA sanctions. Non-state actors also serve as deterrents themselves: their involvement and presence throughout the region increase the cost of military conflict with Tehran for Iran's adversaries, making self-restraint prudent. Iran's non-state networks raise costs for adversaries, while effectively lowering costs for Iran. Beyond the relatively cheap cost (compared to missiles and major weapons systems), Iran's network of non-state actors also allows it to engage in conflicts outside its borders.[30] The deniability that use of proxy forces provides also lowers the political cost for Iran. It is for these reasons that Iran's Supreme Leader argued that "no wise government" would give up the strategic depth and "defence at a distance" of Iran's non-state actor alliance.[31]

However, in the long run it is in Iran's interest not to be too heavily dependent on its network of influence if it plans to remain a regional power after the conflict zones subside and these states rebuild. Over the long term, the costs and consequences of Iran's use of regional non-state actors are not sustainable. At some point in the future, these states will probably transition to stable governments and groups within them will be primarily driven by their own interests. Moreover, while conflict zones and failed states provide fertile ground for Iran to create a foothold, such environments also create fertile ground for terrorist groups such as ISIS that could pose a serious threat to Iran itself. Therefore, it would be short-sighted for Iran to think that its network is an adequate substitute for a regional security arrangement.

The Gulf Arab states have relied heavily on the US to support their security interests. US arms sales and military presence and support for the GCC states have greatly contributed to the

asymmetrical power distribution that is at the heart of Iran's threat perception. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 amplified this threat for Iran's leaders. While the invasion of Iraq removed Iran's top security threat, the rhetoric at the time of the attack about Iran being next on the agenda created a heightened threat perception. Iran feared both a military attack and incitement of regime change. The US military's quick toppling of Saddam, an enemy Iran fought inconclusively for eight years, underscored the sense of threat.

The presence of US troops in the region for the last three decades and the billions of dollars the US has provided to its partners in military assistance and sales fans Iran's concerns. [32] In both the Obama and Trump administrations, for example, there were nearly 60,000 troops deployed across the Middle East at any given time.[33] In contrast, during the First Gulf War the number of US troops in the Middle East was roughly 540,000.[34] The US military maintains a presence[35] in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Afghanistan and the UAE, and also has overflight and/or maritime access to Egypt, Oman and Jordan, among other places."[36]

This troop presence, along with contention over Iran's nuclear programme and talk of "all options on the table"[37] have contributed to a high threat perception that has shaped a strategy of strengthening unconventional military tactics. In

30 Barzegar, Kayhan, and Abdolrasool Divsallar. "Political rationality in Iranian foreign policy." *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1. 2017: 39-53.

31 *Khamenei.ir* , "Imam Khamenei sets 7 conditions for Europe to prevent breaching of their commitment." 23 May 2018. https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5699/Imam-Khamenei-sets-7-conditions-for-Europe-to-prevent-breaching

32 Cordesman, Anthony. "The Arab Persian Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization and the Shifting Military Balance" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181212_Iran_GCC_Balance.Report.pdf

33 International Institute for Strategic Studies. " 'North America' *The Military Balance."* 2019. https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2019/north-america

34 Encyclopedia Britannica. "Persian Gulf War." *Britannica*, 2021. https://www.britannica.com/event/Persian-Gulf-War

35 Votel, Joseph L. "Great Power Competition: The Current and Future Challenges in the Middle East." *Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of US Central Command* 5, 2019.

36 Gause III, F. Gregory. "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East." Survival 61, no. 5. 2019: 7-24.

37 Reuters Staff. "Obama says on Iran all options on the table." *Reuters*, 2009. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSWAT011302

the last decade, as the US struggled to stabilise Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran seized the opportunity in Iraq to build a support base there with two main intentions. The first was to ensure Iraq will not pose any threat to Tehran. The second was to have the ability to inflict harm on US forces and interests as a critical part of a deterrence by denial strategy.

Therefore, what the US and the GCC states see as protecting their interests and balancing against Iran is seen by Tehran as a threat; and what Tehran sees as protecting its interests and balancing against the US and its regional allies is seen by Washington as a threat.[38] This is a classic case of a security dilemma. Israel's military might is also perceived by Iran as an existential threat, and unlike US forces Israel cannot leave.[39] Israel does not need to be an implacable foe – witness the friendly relations between Israel and Iran under the Shah. But the very nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran makes the two adversaries with imbalanced capabilities, exacerbating the security dilemma.

In order for there to be long-term peace and stability in the region, this security dilemma needs to be broken and a zero-sum basis for relations established. The very nature of the asymmetrical relations heightens the security dilemma and contributes to the instability, insecurity and distrust that the region has experienced for the last four decades.[40]

Escalation Risks

Despite conflicting security interests, one element that the US, Iran and the GCC states have in common is an interest in keeping the Persian Gulf secure. The importance of the Gulf to these states means that all would prefer to avoid a direct conflict there because of the devastating costs that it would impose. While no one wants a war, Tehran is sending clear signals that it will not be passive if attacked. The message is that there can be no such thing as a limited strike against Iran.[41] Through aggressive manoeuvres like the 2019 attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and the Abqaiq attack, Iran has signalled its ability and intention to inflict significant damage and cost.[42] However, it has walked a fine line in avoiding more drastic action, such as attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz, which would provoke retaliation. Nonetheless, the actions it has taken are risky and could spiral into an outbreak of war despite everyone's intention to avoid one.

When the US withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 reimposing pre-JCPOA sanctions and adding others, Iran initially followed an approach that President Rouhani called "strategic patience." Tehran continued its compliance with the terms of the deal, while it waited for the remaining parties to the JCPOA to deliver on the promised economic benefits. It became clear after a year that the Europeans would be unable to deliver these benefits as the US ramped up sanctions pressure. In addition, in January 2020 the US launched a strike that killed General Soleimani.[43] This aggressive approach shifted Iran's strategic

38 "Iran's Foreign Minister called the deployment of the US forces to the region "A very dangerous move." *Radio Farda*, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/29962473.html

39 For further discussion on Iran's threat perception from Israeli security policy, see Divsallar, Abdolrasool. "Israel's Framing of Iranian Defense Policy" *Italian Review of Geopolitics*, 2019. https://www.academia.edu/38847347/Israels_Framing_of_Iranian_Defense_Policy_LIRAN_GIOCA_ALLATTACCO_PER_DIFENDERSI_DA_ISRAELE_

40 Middle East Expert Group. "Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2011. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRI2011Jones.pdf

41 Montoya-Falvez, Camilo. "Iran's foreign minister 'not confident' his country and US can avert war." *CBS News*, 2019. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/javad-zarif-on-face-the-nation-irans-top-diplomat-not-confident-war-with-us-over-saudi-oil-attack-can-be-averted/

42 Rouhi, Mahsa. "Whatever Iran's role in the Saudi attack, the regional status quo is unsustainable." *The Guardian*, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/18/iran-saudi-attack-nuclear-deal-us

43 US Department of Defense, "Statement by the Department of Defense." 2020. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/

cost-benefit calculus.[44] Facing growing security threats, seeing no prospect of sanctions relief and judging that it had little left to lose, Tehran showed an increasing willingness to take risky measures.

Barriers to De-escalation and Dialogue

The vicious cycle of conflicting objectives and the security dilemma have created the dynamics we see today in the Persian Gulf. The underlying challenges are exacerbated by other significant barriers, including the lack of diplomatic channels among adversaries, discontent among regional actors and the growing US inclination to reduce involvement in Middle East conflicts.

The lack of direct diplomatic channels for engagement is perhaps one of the most crucial barriers to productive engagement. Without proper communication channels, the prospects of successfully navigating any future crises in the region diminish. Since 1980, the US and Iran have not had formal direct diplomatic channels other than those formed during negotiations over the JCPOA, and Iran and Saudi Arabia have not had formal diplomatic relations since 2016. The Trump Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and subsequent 'maximum pressure' campaign erased the nascent informal diplomatic channels that had opened between the US and Iran. While the JCPOA was never intended to be a comprehensive security framework, it provided an opportunity to chip away at decades of animosity and mistrust. The benefits of direct diplomatic channels emerged just six months after the deal was struck when the IRGC seized two American boats in Iranian waters in the Persian Gulf.[45] Under other circumstances, this incident could have escalated into a naval battle. Instead, American and Iranian diplomats communicated directly and the US sailors were released within days.[46] US Secretary of State John Kerry credited the successful outcome to the diplomatic work of the JCPOA, noting the peaceful release was possible "because we built a relationship, because we are working at this nuclear effort, because we are trying to turn a corner, as President Rouhani has said."[47]

The Persian Gulf region lacks a forum for real dialogue on security matters. Elsewhere, regional institutions facilitate dialogue that can support constructive collaboration. The GCC is the only supra-national body in the region, but it is not inclusive of even all the Arab states that border the Persian Gulf. Moreover, its six members have become wholly disunified, including on how to deal with Iran. The GCC states struggle to decide on what security interests and concerns to prioritise. Without a common definition of security concerns, the GCC states and Iran will not be able to identify and prioritise the most critical security concerns [48] The lack of cohesion in GCC stances also means that it is difficult to settle on the scope of any negotiations with Iran. The GCC was once described as a "de facto collective defence alliance directed against Iran"[49] but this has mostly disintegrated in recent years. Track 1.5 fora could be better utilised and potentially support a Track-1 initiative facilitated by the United Nations. Without a proper forum for dialogue or the right stakeholders present,

44 Rouhi, Mahsa. "Explosion at Natanz: Why sabotaging Iran's nuclear program could backfire." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2020. https://thebulletin. org/2020/07/explosion-at-natanz-why-sabotaging-irans-nuclear-program-could-backfire/

45 Cooper, Helene, and David Sanger. "Iran Seizes US Sailors Amid Claims of Spying." *The New York Times*, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/world/middleeast/iran-holds-us-navy-boats-crew.html

46 DeYoung, Karen. "Intense diplomacy between Secretary of State Kerry and his Iranian counterpart secure sailors' release." *Washington Post*, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/01/13/intense-diplomacy-between-secretary-of-state-kerry-and-his-iranian-counterpart-to-secure-sailors-release/

47 Kopan, Tal. "John Kerry: Sailors footage made me 'angry'." *CNN*, 2016. https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/18/politics/john-kerry-iran-deal-sailors-prisoners-nuclear/index.html

48 Wehrey, Frederic, and Richard Sokolsky. "Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP256_Wehrey-Sokolsky_final.pdf

49 Ibid.

the region lacks the infrastructure for expanded multilateral cooperation and leaves open the question of which state will assume the role of mediator.[50]

As noted, the US has provided security support to several Gulf Arab states, which welcome a robust American presence in the region as a balance to what they perceive as "Iran's historical ambition of regional hegemony."[51] However, while the GCC states are close partners, they are not US allies. The US can prioritise advancing its own national interests and security concerns, including non-proliferation (as evidenced in its negotiation of the JCPOA) over interests considered more urgent by states with which it does not share an alliance commitment or a set of values.

Roadmap for Engagement

In order to change the trajectory of relations in the region, new approaches must be adopted that encompass both short-term and long-term measures. By pursuing both short-term and long-term solutions simultaneously, the US, Iran and others in the region can establish a pathway starting from communication channels and potentially leading to comprehensive arms control. Propelled by a vision for long-term rapprochement, smaller-scale agreements will support trust building, overcome complex issues of confrontation and begin the process of accepting each other's legitimate security interests. Progress on one issue over time will allow space for progress in other areas. While detailed discussion of long-term solutions is beyond the scope of this chapter, a long-term framework is essential for short-term measures to succeed and lead to sustainable security.

Notwithstanding serious obstacles against a long-term shift in relations, there are several opportunities for immediate de-escalation. These measures may not comprehensively address the security challenges of the region by themselves, but they could serve to de-escalate and allow space for continued dialogue while security issues are being negotiated. The areas with the highest escalation risk in the Persian Gulf relate to airspace and naval encounters.

The most significant opportunity for immediate de-escalation measures in both the air and sea realms would be the creation of a crisis communication hotline between the US and Iran.[52] Direct communication could help prevent miscommunications and miscalculations. In a recent interview with the International Crisis Group, US Air Force chief of staff General David Goldfein explained: "There is no deconfliction hotline nor any communication between the US military and Iran, except for safety of operation radio calls on guard at the tactical level." [53] As a result, when there is a military encounter between the US and Iran there are no robust diplomatic or high level military-to-military networks of communication to resolve the matter swiftly. Instead, communication is limited in scope and left to the on-the-ground military officers. The humanitarian tragedies of Iran Air 655 and Ukraine Air 752 sadly reflect this deficiency.

A hotline-style communication channel, however, may be more ambitious than what is possible given the current state of US-Iran relations. The US and Iran currently do have one indirect channel of communication via Switzerland, but this channel is mainly used for potential prisoner exchanges and other consular matters rather than to address military conflict rules and procedures. Given the political climate in Tehran, the option most likely to succeed would be a communication

50 Foradori, Paolo, and Martin Malin. "A WMD Free Zone in the Middle East: Creating the Conditions for Sustained Progress." *Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School*, 2012. https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/WMDFZ_PDF.pdf.

51 Wehrey, Frederic, and Richard Sokolsky. "Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* 2015. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP256_Wehrey-Sokolsky_final.pdf

52 Barzegar, Kayhan, and Abdolrasol Divsallar. "It's Time for an Iran-U.S. Military De-Confliction Line." *LobeLog*, 2019. https://lobelog.com/its-time-for-an-iran-u-s-military-de-confliction-line/.

53 International Crisis Group. "The Urgent Need for a US-Iran Hotline." 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/b77-urgent-need-us-iran-hotline

channel formed by key regional stakeholders, particularly Oman, which shares the Strait of Hormuz with Iran. Working through these issues would be more politically feasible for Iran if it were facilitated by regional measures.

An indirect back channel is another option that could support immediate de-escalation. Many experts agree that the most effective potential partners to serve as intermediaries include Switzerland and Germany – in addition to Oman.[54] These countries would be viewed as honest brokers that have already supported communication efforts in some capacity. According to the International Crisis Group, Oman is the best candidate to serve as an intermediary due to its "deep expertise in Gulf navigation" and its "constructive diplomatic relations with both the US and Iran."[55] Perhaps most critical is for the channel to be managed by senior officials and decision-makers. Those involved in the communication channel need access and authority for rapid communication in tense situations that can quickly spiral out of control into conflict.

Second, the US could draw from its crisis communication experiences over escalating tensions in the South China Sea and establish a working group to build direct de-escalation channels. In October 2020, the US military and the Chinese People's Liberation Army hosted a working group meeting with the objective of building "mutual understanding … on principles to prevent and manage crisis and reduce risk to forces." [56] According to the US Department of Defense, "The two sides agreed on the importance of establishing mechanisms for timely communication during a crisis, as well as the need to maintain regular communication channels to prevent crisis and conduct post-crisis assessment." [57] With tensions in the Persian Gulf reaching critical points over the past year, experts in both the US and Iran have realised the need for a channel for de-escalation.

While the incidents over the last year have not prompted an opening for direct talks between the US and Iran, they did prompt calls for regional dialogue. In a meeting with Qatar on 12 January 2020, Iran stated that the "only solution" was de-escalation. President Rouhani noted "We've decided to have more consultations and cooperation for the security of the entire region."[58] The conflict in Yemen is an obvious example of the need for de-escalation.[59]

In addition to a crisis communication hotline, establishing rules of engagement or codes of conduct for the Persian Gulf region could also serve de-escalation efforts by reducing uncertainty, defining clear red lines and supporting cooperative engagement. Washington and Tehran both have critical security interests in the Persian Gulf. A code of conduct in the Gulf could manage tensions in the face of any emerging disputes by outlining red lines, defining potential dispute settlement mechanisms and acknowledging the legitimate security interests of each side.

Codes of conduct have been used in other crisis zones, including the South China Sea. Negotiations to establish a code of conduct there have been underway since the early 1990s, culminating in the 2002 non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC).[60] While these efforts largely stalled,

54 Stewart, Phil, and Michelle Nichols. "Why US-Iran tensions could quickly escalate into a crisis." *Reuters*, 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-communication-insight/why-u-s-iran-tensions-could-quickly-escalate-into-a-crisis-idUSKCN1SU11V

55 International Crisis Group. "The Urgent Need for a US-Iran Hotline." 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/b77-urgent-need-us-iran-hotline

56 US Department of Defense Press Release. "US Department of Defense Hosts First Crisis Communications Working Group with People's Republic of China People's Liberation Army" 2020. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2398907/us-department-of-defense-hosts-first-crisis-communications-working-group-with-t/

57 Ibid.

58 France 24. "Iran concedes de-escalation 'only solution' to end crisis with US." 2020. https://www.france24.com/en/20200112-iran-concedes-de-escalation-only-solution-to-end-crisis-with-us

59 Rouhi, Mahsa. "US-Iran Tensions and the Oil Factor," *Survival* 60, no.5l. 2018: 33-40.

60 ASEAN. "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea." 2002. https://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2

escalating tensions in late 2016 revived talks and resulted in a substantial draft by 2018.[61]

Another option for immediate de-escalation could be via a humanitarian response to the global Covid-19 crisis. At the onset of the pandemic, leaders around the world called on the US to relax sanctions on Iran in order to facilitate medical shipments. Instead, the US imposed more sanctions and blocked an emergency IMF loan of $5 billion requested by Iran, restricting Tehran's ability to respond to the crisis. Former US senior officials Stuart Eizenstat and Thomas Pickering argued that, "By opening the door with humanitarian-related assistance and following with other confidence-building measures – such as continuing the exchanges of prisoners – the United States might be able to push Tehran to decrease military aggression in disputed regions."[62] While humanitarian efforts alone would not reduce tensions, they could serve as trust-building mechanisms. Assistance with Covid-19 vaccine could be a great first step.

Last but not least, the best opportunity for short-term de-escalation would be for the US to return to the JCPOA. Four decades of sanctions and enforced isolation, while effective in inflicting significant economic pain, were ineffective in changing Iran's approach and improving regional dynamics. In 2015, the JCPOA showcased how multilateral diplomatic engagement could achieve concrete objectives.[63] The JCPOA provides some critical insights on how the international community can effectively engage with Iran and how the deal supports short-term strategies for crisis management and de-escalation.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the JCPOA for resolving regional issues is the importance of incrementalistic approaches.[64] The patient engagement of Iran and the US between 2013 and 2016 served as a stepping stone for future diplomatic engagement and immediate crisis management,[65] as was proved effective during the aforementioned naval crisis six months later.

President Joe Biden's administration has signalled a willingness to return to the deal in exchange for Iran's return to compliance with the terms of the deal.[66] In an interview on 17 November 2020, Zarif expressed a similar willingness for what can be described as a 'compliance for compliance' approach.[67] A return to the deal could be fraught, however. In response to the 27 November 2020 assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and with its own domestic pressures with a presidential election coming up in June 2021, the Rouhani administration is likely to need to demand a high price to return to the deal.[68] However, as demonstrated by the detained sailor crisis in 2016, a return to the JCPOA would be a productive start for realistic and immediate de-escalation in the short term with an opportunity for long-term peace and security.

Given the growing interest in US politics in extricating the United States from the endless wars in the Middle East, a strong US presence in the

61 "South China Sea Expert Working Group. A Blueprint for a South China Sea Code of Conduct." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. https://amti.csis.org/blueprint-for-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/

62 Eizenstat, Stuart and Thomas Pickering. "A Pandemic Opportunity with Iran." *Foreign Affairs*, 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2020-06-24/pandemic-opportunity-iran

63 Rouhi, Mahsa. "The JCPOA at 5: How the US squandered an unprecedented diplomatic opening with Iran." *Responsible Statecraft*, 2020. https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/07/19/the-jcpoa-at-5/

64 Rouhi, Mahsa. "Trump Should Avoid Believing the Myths of the JCPOA." *The National Interest*, 2017. https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-should-avoid-believing-the-myths-the-jcpoa-23312

65 Nasr, Vali. "The Only Way Out of the Middle East is Through It." *Foreign Affairs*, 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-08-26/only-way-out-middle-east-through-it

66 Biden, Joe. "There's a smarter way to be tough on Iran." *CNN*, 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/13/opinions/smarter-way-to-be-tough-on-iran-joe-biden/index.html

67 Reuters Staff. "Iran's Zarif says Biden can lift sanctions with 'three executive orders'." *Reuters*, 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-usa-zarif/irans-zarif-says-biden-can-lift-sanctions-with-three-executive-orders-idUKL8N2I36FV

68 Erlanger, Steven. "Biden Wants to Rejoin Iran Nuclear Deal But It Won't Be Easy." *The New York Times*, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/world/middleeast/iran-biden-trump-nuclear-sanctions.html

region no longer seems to be a given, potentially changing the prospects for regional dialogue. Uncertainty around the level of reliance on the US for security in the region could accelerate the necessity of de-escalating tension in the region. After the US election, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif hammered this point by tweeting, "A sincere message to our neighbours: Trump's gone in 70 days. But we'll remain here forever. Betting on outsiders to provide security is never a good gamble. We extend our hand to our neighbours for dialogue to resolve differences. Only together can we build a better future for all."[69]

However, Iran should also accept the reality that the Arab countries to its south rely on the US for arms sales and military support. Even with a shift in US policy in the region, this will remain the case for the foreseeable future. Iran has mainly treated the GCC states and relations with them as an extension of its relations with the US. While this has negatively impacted GCC perceptions regarding Iran, it presents an opportunity. If relations with the US improve, Iran will have less reason for an aggressive posture toward these countries.

Conclusion

A deep understanding of the security interests and threat perceptions of the US, Iran and the GCC states and the realities on the ground is critical for designing paths for engagement, crisis management and long-term peace and security arrangements in the region. The US, Iran, the GCC states and the international community should consider pursuing short-term, medium-term and long-term measures simultaneously. Current policies do little to address the underlying structural challenges or provide opportunities for de-escalation and instead have caused perverse effects that have served only to escalate tension. While immediate steps and crisis management are necessary and critical now for de-escalation when the next crisis arises, these advances will

simply be patchwork, not transformation. While long-term solutions seem unachievable and far-fetched, they are an essential groundwork for guiding short-term engagements as steps toward a more comprehensive solution.

Sustainable progress is achieved through an agreed long-term vision that acknowledges the legitimate security interests at the core of tensions. Simultaneously, efforts for engagement with an incremental approach that supports trust-building and progress will serve to de-escalate tensions in the short-run. Through this approach, a more meaningful and fruitful dialogue can take place and achieve progress toward long-term peace and security in the region.

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69 Zarif, Javad (@Jzarif). 9 Nov 2021. https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1325574384854077443?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

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SECTION 4

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY INSTRUMENTS

A Process "Good in Itself" or a "Waste of Time"? Assessing the Values and Limits of Track-2 Programmes in the Gulf

Riccardo Redaelli

Executive summary

This chapter critically assesses the role of Track-2 with specific reference to the Gulf region. Track-2 is generally considered a useful channel of communication and contact when official tracks are either blocked or extremely weak due to a plurality of reasons. With the end of the Cold War period, this concept progressively enlarged, from programmes focused on immediate conflict resolution between two parties to a wider perspective of supporting peacebuilding efforts, laying the ground for establishing a positive peace and reconciliation, both at inter and intra-state levels.

After an analysis of this evolution, the chapter focuses on the debate among scholars and practitioners over how to measure the effectiveness of Track-2 with objective metrics and on the definition of the concept itself. Indeed, this loosely defined label on the one hand allows for a degree of flexibility about what can be considered Track-2; on the other, the lack of a clearly defined and accepted definition and the absence of empirical scientific standards are perceived as sources of weakness. Supporters of Track-2 claim that "the process is good in itself," as is often repeated. In contrast, its critics consider it little more than a waste of time organised by naïve unprofessional diplomats. This chapter offers a more balanced view and reflects on the main obstacles that hamper these efforts, analysing in detail the case-study of unofficial channels between the West and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite some evident limits and despite the fluidity of the current international security architecture, it is possible to envisage some elements and trends that highlight the enduring relevance of Track-2 mechanisms, which still represent important assets for non-partisan, independent and open discussion.

Keywords: Track-2, Track-1 and a Half, Diplomacy, Security instruments

Introduction

This chapter provides a critical assessment of the roles of Track-2 and Track-1 and a Half in the Gulf region. Track-2 is generally considered a useful channel of communication and contact when official tracks are either blocked or extremely weak due to a plurality of reasons. However, there is a growing perception that – at least in this area – these unofficial diplomatic channels have failed to achieve notable success. While in other regions (such as the Asia-Pacific) Track-2 programmes have helped in determining the post-war security architecture, mainly (re-)defining perceptions of interests, threats, norms and visions, in the enlarged Persian Gulf region the vast array of projects, channels and unofficial meetings over the last three decades could not overcome the mutual distrust of the official regional and international actors involved.

Before evaluating these programmes, the crucial point is to select the metrics for defining success or defeat. Supporters of Track-2 claim that "the process is good in itself," as is often repeated, as the simple establishment of these kinds of unofficial diplomatic channels represents a worthwhile result. In contrast, their critics consider them little more than a waste of time organised by naïve unprofessional diplomats. The chapter will try to offer a more balanced view, discuss possible ways to identify metrics to measure their impacts and reflect on the main obstacles which have hampered these efforts, focusing on the case of unofficial channels between the West and

the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In a region dominated by a rigid concept of security based on a realist zero-sum-game approach among actors indulging in polarised visions and well-rooted prejudices, it has been extremely difficult to find room for a new vision of security or even for understanding others' perceptions of interest and insecurity. Moreover, the dichotomy between collective security and cooperative security has never been positively solved, either at the theoretical level or at the political one. These difficulties have been further aggravated by deep fissures and opposition within the political, military and diplomatic circles of the countries involved. Very often, promoters and participants of Track-2 initiatives have needed a 'Track-2 effort' even with their political and administrative referents, due to the sensitiveness of some contacts.

Another relevant problem has been a continual change of perspectives, from 'grand bargain' illusions to extremely specific programmes of engagement (e.g. the obsessive focus on nuclear negotiations with Iran) or insistence on outdated concepts such as a NWFZ (Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) in the Middle East. Others attempts have relied on a sociological perception of Track-2, creating cultural bridges, which – despite being useful in a long-term perspective – cannot offer tangible results in the short-medium term.

In any case, the miserable current situation of polarisation, sectarianism distrust and use of proxies in the region demonstrates once again the need to reactivate multiple informal channels of communication at the regional and international levels. Successful or not, these programmes may and should still play a role in a region unable to find a credible, shared and inclusive security architecture.

Liquid diplomacy for a liquid international order?

The increased complexity of the world system following the end of the bipolar period has produced a profound spatial reconfiguration which sees a growth of internal conflicts within and among its regional security complexes[1] and along its political, religious, social and economic fault lines. There is a perception of a geopolitical chaos further enhanced by long-term trends which are altering the previous precarious balances at the demographic, ecological and technological levels. Migration, climate change and cultural and technological transformations interweave and mix with the traditional security, political, economic and diplomatic tensions that are shaking the traditional architecture of the international system. In the enlarged Middle Eastern region all these global trends have been exacerbated by its security crisis, and by the explosion of a plurality of proxy and civil wars and sectarian confrontation as a result of the geopolitical rivalry between the two shores of the Gulf.

This situation does not help the efforts of traditional diplomatic mechanisms, already eroded by what we see as a growing "liquid diplomacy" in this "liquid modernity," to employ the overused concept of Zygmunt Bauman. Traditional formal diplomatic mechanisms and practices, in other words, seem to be increasingly disrupted by the political, social and technological transformations of recent decades.

Within this larger framework, in recent decades there has been a proliferation of unofficial informal interaction, meetings and pre-negotiations usually carried out by non-government actors with access to the decision-makers of hostile nations and movements, often with third parties as facilitators, informal relations which often become a supplement to, when not a substitute for, official diplomatic channels. These dialogues

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1 The famous Regional Security Complex theory was first drawn up by Buzan and Wæver in 1983 and immediately became one of the most popular and debated theories in International Relations. Substantially modified in 1998 and 2003, this approach paved the way for a theoretical debate, which is still going on, on the possibility of using it to describe Middle Eastern security dynamics, or of amending and adapting it to this specific part of the world. Buzan, B. and Ole Wæver. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

are often labelled 'Track-2 diplomacy,' a term coined in 1981 by Joseph Montville and more precisely defined in 1991 as "… unofficial, informal interaction among members of adversarial groups or nations with the goals of developing strategies, influencing public opinion and organising human and material resources in ways that might help resolve the conflict."[2]

Obviously, these forms of unofficial contacts are intended to produce ideas, build relationships and change perceptions before their theoretical formalisation, but there is little doubt that their visibility and role expanded with the end of the Cold War bipolar confrontation. Doubts, however, exist about Track-2 diplomacy's effectiveness, with a clear difference in perspective between theoretical scholars who try to empirically assess its results and practitioners who insist that the results of this kind of informal diplomacy are inherently intangible and therefore difficult to measure with quantitative and objective metrics.[3]

Certainly, this mechanism of informal diplomacy has several shortcomings. The most evident one is probably its limited ability to influence foreign policy and political power structures due to the participants' lack of political power, in particular in autocratic regimes – which are rarely open to bottom-up initiatives – or during a period of conflict. An indirect consequence is that participants often do not have the economic resources to carry on long-term negotiations. At the same time, since they work unofficially and avoid taking public positions, there are often a plurality of similar active channels with no coordination, and which at times are in competition.[4]

In any case, the debate over how to measure their effectiveness with objective metrics also

encompasses the definition of the concept itself. Indeed, the loosely defined label on the one hand allows a degree of flexibility about what can be considered Track-2; on the other, the lack of a clearly defined and accepted definition and the absence of empirical scientific standards are perceived as sources of weakness and confusion, especially since these programmes are generally considered a subfield of the broader area of conflict resolution. However, "This is true for much of Track-2, but not all; there are variants of Track-2 that are not dedicated to the resolution of conflict. These include Track-2 processes aimed at promoting regional security in various parts of the world, and these need to be understood in their own terms"[5].

Indeed, the concept itself of Track-2 has progressively enlarged, from programmes focused on immediate conflict resolution between two parties to a wider perspective of supporting peacebuilding efforts, laying the ground for establishing a positive peace and reconciliation, both at inter- and infra-state levels. The stress in these cases is less on problem solving vis-à-vis a conflict and more on interpersonal relations, psychological aspects, de-construction of consolidated terms or state-centred security approaches – something very far from the realm of the realist school of international relations, but also difficult to verify with objective metrics.

However, this is a scientific impasse more in the minds of theoretical scholars than in those of people who have real experience of Track-2 programmes, whose main aims are to create confidence and share ideas and possible effective solutions favouring the establishment of cultural bridges and trying to involve portions of civil society, and not to ease the task of quantitative researchers or to respond to the epistemological criticisms of blind referees evaluating essays. In the field, establishing indicators of what success means is indeed more blurred, intangible and uncertain than theoretical analysts think. Track-2, in fact, should not be perceived as a single event

2 Montville, Joseph V. "Transnationalism and the role of track-two diplomacy." *Approaches to peace: An intellectual map*, 1991: 255-269.

3 Allen, Nathaniel, and Travis Sharp. "Process Peace: A New Evaluation Framework for Track II Diplomacy." *International Negotiation* 22, no. 1. 2017: 92-122.

4 Mapendere, Jeffrey. "Track one and a half diplomacy and the complementarity of tracks." *Culture of Peace Online Journal* 2, no. 1. 2005: 66-81.

5 Jones, Peter. *Track two diplomacy in theory and practice*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015.

or a series of events (round-tables, conferences, informal meetings) but instead as an ongoing process to infuse confidence and defuse tension, a process that is "good in itself" even without formal and empirically evident results, in the sense that the process itself is a positive accomplishment since it creates channels of communication and informal bridges between hostile parties.

Track Two in the Middle East: a difficult path in a 'zero-sum-game' region

For decades, the enlarged Middle East has witnessed a plurality of track-Two programmes, mainly focused – although not exclusively – on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, on nuclear negotiations with Iran, on favouring peacebuilding initiatives and on the establishment of collective or cooperative security. Probably the most famous and most successful of these Track-2 programmes led to the famous Oslo accords in 1993, but many others are less well known.

According to a Rand study, "Approximately 750 regional and extra-regional elites participated in Track-2 activities during the 1990s, of which an estimated 200 were from the military. Today [i.e. 2007], thousands of individuals have participated in one or more Track-2 activities related to the Middle East. During the 1990s, approximately 100 track two events were organised, averaging one activity per month."[6] The lack of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue forced the establishment of a plurality of processes focusing on other crises and issues, with a growing presence of Gulf-centred Track-2 initiatives.

However, especially if compared to other regions, these kinds of unofficial diplomatic channels are dealing with a particularly difficult if not hostile environment. In southeast Asia, for example, Track-2 projects in 1993 led to the creation of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), which is widely regarded as the premier Track-2 organisation in that region[7] and one of the most notable successes in the field of collective security ever, a result hardly imaginable for the Middle Eastern region, which is still paralysed by deep reciprocal mistrust and reciprocal vetoes among the main regional players and is completely unable to create a forum similar to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).[8]

A particularly negative effect on these kinds of parallel diplomacy activities has come from the strong adherence of regional political elites to the zero-sum-game approach to security. The regional powers have never moved past this dichotomist antagonistic vision in which they can exclusively be the winner or the loser with no room for any form of comprehensive collective perception of security. Therefore, each main actor is trying to win through a combination of direct political and military confrontation, interferences in the internal affairs of neighbours and the use of proxies to exploit domestic crises. The ill-planned invasion of Iraq in 2003, the growing geopolitical confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and some of the Arab monarchies, and the Arab uprisings of 2011-12 have even exacerbated this stance, with interferences and proxy wars played out in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Libya.[9]

All the political leaderships have been reluctant, despite enormous costs at the human and economic levels, to abandon this zero-sum approach that has often been pivotal in their national narratives. Any positive negotiation

6   Kaye, Dalia Dassa. *Talking to the enemy: Track-2 diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2007.

7   On this organisation, see: Ball, Desmond, and Chong Guan Kwa, eds. *Assessing Track-2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region*: A CSCAP Reader. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010.

8   The emphasis on personal contacts, informality and consensus-building rather than formal institutionalised decision-making that characterises ASEAN provides the Middle East with a stimulating model. Cf. Kaye D. (2007), cit. and Acharya, Amitav. "Culture, security, multilateralism: The 'ASEAN way and regional order." *Contemporary Security Policy* 19, no. 1. 1998: 55-84.

9   Gause III, F. Gregory. "Beyond sectarianism: The new Middle East cold war." *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 11, 2014: 1-27.

would have implied surrendering a portion of it.

Indeed, the Middle East is not the best environment for having effective parallel diplomacy initiatives, especially in the field of a shared non-dichotomist perception of security. Despite some important results (again, with the Oslo process among the paradigmatic), many Track-2 processes seem to have substantially failed in paving the way for thinking in cooperative terms, in spreading new models of security among political and security decision-makers and in reducing reciprocally negative misconceptions or polarising sectarian narratives. They also often discreetly contribute to spreading concrete step-by-step solutions among elites, although it is hardly recognised during official negotiations. Specific measures adopted or points of convergence are often results of a diligent discreet effort to shape them during unofficial problem-solving meetings and then to deliver them through the participant channels.

However, the galaxy of Track-2 programmes in the wider Middle East of recent decades has effectively contributed to a sort of 'socialising function' creating occasions for meetings of influential political, religious and security figures and spreading at least a common vocabulary for thinking about the region's problems and possible solutions to them. It is true that most of this education to a new less antagonist vocabulary has often been confined to narrow circles and has not spread to a wider audience or found echoes at the popular level, but this is a characteristic of these informal unofficial negotiations. Therefore, a recurrent criticism is that "Track-2s have often been accused of promoting a form of 'group think, when they gather individuals with similar professional or academic backgrounds as part of the consensus-building apart from the rest of civil society."[10] This is a danger which appears extremely real, especially in the case of long-term programmes that focus on theoretical or utopic issues clearly disconnected from the actual regional political and security scenarios (such as

the unfruitful debate on the creation of a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East). At the same time, their lack of public transparency raises negative perceptions, as if Track-2 programmes were a sort of obscure 'lodge' with secret goals and ambitions. Connected to this suspicion, there is also a fear that participants attending these programmes might be influenced or even manipulated by representatives of antagonist states, creating a deficit of trust in them within power structures. Another limit is connected with the 'long durée' of these dialogues, which are generally time-consuming and require investing in a plurality of different personalities, in particular when dealing with fragmented regimes.

The organisers hope to have among their circle persons who can either effectively deliver to the power elite or assume positions of responsibility. But this effort requires widening the network, even to participants reluctant (when not hostile) to dialogue and engage with one another. Indeed, here lies the critical issue of the real representation of a regime: participants attending these meetings are often not real representatives of the 'deep state,' while due to security concerns real representatives are generally banned from attending. This represents a critical element since one of the *raisons d'etre* of these programmes is to avoid presenting and discussing the formal official position of a country or a movement; instead, the focus is on leading participants to step back from the official narratives to develop new ideas, adopting a wider non-conflictual vision of the root causes of tension and similar open-minded stances. At the same time, however, it is important to touch the real sensitive issues perceived by the target state. As we will see in the next section, such limits have been a serious problem for most of the Track-2 programmes related to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Another obstacle to the promotion of informal channels of confidence-building lies in the limited role played by infra-regional so-called 'cultural diplomacy' in the limited collaboration among regional universities and a lack of a sort of Middle Eastern Erasmus programme. In

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10 Ball, Desmond, and Chong Guan Kwa, eds. *Assessing Track 2 Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region*: A CSCAP Reader. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2010.

both cases, these cultural connections are still outside the region with international universities (mainly Western higher education institutes) – an extremely negative lack of cultural networks, since it is increasingly evident that universities and schools of higher education can play a positive role in the field of contemporary 'liquid' diplomacy. Not only do they represent Track-2 channels but they are pivotal in removing sectarian polarised narratives, promoting a culture of peace and spreading a more nuanced vision of the 'others.'[11] This weakness in 'cultural diplomacy' ties played a negative role in President Khatami's attempt to promote a better regional and international political environment in his famous 'Dialogue of Civilisation' project during the so-called 'reformist period' in Iran (1997-2005).[12]

The case of Track-2 attempts with the Islamic Republic of Iran

It is not surprising that in the absence of formal diplomatic relations between the US and the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1980 – and with Iran's fluctuating relations with the EU countries – Track-2 channels became a popular mechanism for maintaining relations and supporting official diplomacy, often intertwined with so-called Track-1 and a Half programmes.[13] In the 1990s, EU countries were the first to create semi-formal channels that led to the so-called 'Critical Dialogue' with Tehran, and to attempt to influence

Iranian behaviour on the human rights agenda and strengthen 'moderate' and reformist forces in Iran.[14] Despite its lack of tangible results, this dialogue increased confidence between the parties involved and paved the way for the role played by the EU in the following decade.

Unofficial meetings and relations increased in the 'reformist' period of Mohammad Khatami's presidencies (1997-2005), during which a plurality of programmes started, launched by US and Canadian foundations and by a number of European research centres, universities and other organisations. Despite the challenges they had to face and some 'ups-and-downs' connected with the complexity of the political dynamics within the fragmented post-revolutionary elite in Tehran, these initiatives created a network of consolidated inter-personal relations that helped the long thorny negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme until the conclusion of the historic JCPOA in 2015.

Indeed, the Iranian participants in several of these programmes were extremely well connected with their domestic power system. For instance, regarding the US-sponsored dialogue, "Javad Zarif, as Deputy Foreign Minister and later as Ambassador to the UN, was the leading Iranian figure in these initial talks, alongside a small cohort of other interlocutors – many of whom had been educated in the US and had a sophisticated understanding of international affairs."[15]

In 2005 with the election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejah (2005-2013), an ultra-populist strongly connected with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), most (but not all) of these Track-2 channels were, however, interrupted and several Iranians who had joined them were threatened or even jailed. This was also due to

11 Zakerian, M., Z. Sadoughi, A. Nabavi, and R. Mahdi. "Realization of peace from the perspective of the role of higher education in the field of diplomacy: experience of academic diplomacy in Iran." *Journal of Fundamental and Applied Sciences* 9, no. 1S (2017): 184-203.

12 Wastnidge, Edward. "The modalities of Iranian soft power: from cultural diplomacy to soft war." *Politics* 35, no. 3-4. 2015: 364-377.

13 Nan defines Track One and a half diplomacy as "diplomatic initiatives that are facilitated by unofficial bodies, but directly involve officials from the conflict in question," Nan, A. S. "Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgia-South Ossetian Peacemaking" in R. J. Fisher (Ed.), *Paving the Way*, Lexington Books: Lanham, 2005: 169.

14 On the 'Critical Dialogue,' see Ali, Omran Omer. "From critical to comprehensive dialogue: the effectiveness of the EU's policy towards Iran (1992-1998)." British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (2019): 1-16; Struwe, Matthias V. "The policy of critical dialogue: an analysis of European human rights policy towards Iran from 1992 to 1997." University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1998.

15 Wertz, Daniel. "Track II Diplomacy with Iran and North Korea." *The National Committee on North Korea*, 2017.

the fact that, with revelations of new undeclared nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, after 2002 negotiations with Tehran were progressively dominated by the nuclear crisis and by the growing confrontation between the international community and Iran.[16] At the same time, the decision by France, Great Britain and Germany (labelled the E3/EU) to launch an official programme of engagement on the Iranian nuclear programme in 2002 soon after the 'nuclear crisis' broke out made the realisation of unofficial diplomatic programmes less urgent.

President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's extremely antagonistic posture and his repulsive statements on Israel and denying the holocaust further isolated Iran and led to the failure of the E3/EU format. In 2006, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) took over and launched the P5+1 format (the five permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany), and this produced a shift in the focus of the dialogue.

In fact, as has been rightly pointed out, there were three different and interrelated dimensions of the negotiation process over the Iranian nuclear programme: legal (concerning what is permitted under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT), technical (pertaining to International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA – inspections) and political (arising from UNSC decisions). Since 2006 – that is, with the end of the negotiations conducted in the E3 format and after the IAEA's handover of the Iranian issue to the UNSC – the political aspect of the negotiations has taken precedence. The approach has been twofold: continuation of the talks between Iran and the so-called P5+1 and a progressive adoption of economic and political sanctions against Tehran.[17]

While the first sanctions adopted in 2006 were little more than symbolic, they gradually intensified, reaching their maximum around 2012 with the incremental adoption of extremely harsh financial, commercial and energy-related sanctions. They contributed to convincing the reluctant portions of Iran's fragmented political elite to seriously enter into a new round of negotiations. The new president, Hassan Rouhani (2013), formed a government the main aim of which was evidently to sign an agreement with the international community and to deal directly with the US, as was eventually done in 2015. Interestingly, several of its ministers were PhDs educated at Western universities and members of different Track-1 and a half/Track-2 programmes.[18] Likewise, officials in the Obama Administration had similar backgrounds.

Paradoxically, this did not help the revival of unofficial diplomatic programmes since their 'legacy' was now embedded in the official channels of negotiations. Indisputably, however, this should be considered a demonstration of their value, although it might be difficult to 'quantify' this according to empirical metrics. The fact was that, even without formal relations, during the period from 2013 to 2015 the American and Iranian delegations (or their support staffers) also consisted of a group of persons who had established personal links and developed reciprocal confidence through their participation in Track-2 meetings, which eased discussions.

Moreover, during this period, Track-2 discussions on technical issues related to Iran's nuclear programme also helped to supplement the P5+1 talks and this was a continuation of the previous unofficial search for possible realistic technical solutions that had been discussed in a plurality of closed problem-solving workshops and debated

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16 For a detailed reconstruction of the Iranian nuclear programme, see Gaietta, Michele. *The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program*. New York City: Springer, 2016.

17 Redaelli, Riccardo. "Nuclear Iran: Risky Business." *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, 2012: 201-208.

18 Foreign Minister Javad Zarif being prominent among them, but it is also possible to mention Prof. Nasser Hadian of the University of Tehran and Dr. Kazem Sajadpour, head of the Iranian Institute of Political International Studies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They have been influential political advisers and members of some of the most important Track-2 projects in the Persian Gulf region.

in the previous decades.[19]

Theoretical scholars tend to dismiss these results, in particular after President Trump unwisely destroyed years of efforts to sign the JCPOA and fomented a demonisation of Iran, a stance that once again weakened the moderate wing of the political elite in Tehran and indirectly favoured Iran's anti-Western radical forces and a further securitisation of its stance.[20]

As previously underlined, measuring the success of past and current Track-2 efforts is difficult because there is usually not an immediate breakthrough or impact on policy. Since the main goals are to present a more nuanced picture of topics and problems and to establish personal ties, reliable channels of communication to be used in case of crisis and possible options for cooperative solutions, it is not easy to measure their effectiveness.

This is particularly true in the case of engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran, not only because of the degree of hostility and mistrust that has characterised relations between Washington and Tehran (and often with Europe), but also due to the complexity of Iran. This is a triple complexity. First, there is a constitutional complexity which derives from the convolution of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, where different and competing organs and institutions coexist and vie for power. Then, there is also a political complexity: the Islamic post-revolutionary political elite is deeply fragmented and divided. In Iran there are different personal and political factions with very different perspectives and ideals, and the *nizam* (the system) marginalising all voices perceived as threats to an unpopular corrupt autocratic regime. However, the country is also characterised by cultural complexity. Iranians are proud of their sophisticated culture and great refinement (such as speaking *Ta'rouf,* the famously elaborate formal language of politeness). Concealment and dissimulation should not be considered negative behaviours but as a form of self-defence and respect for social relations. These postures are deeply rooted in the history and culture of Iran but they definitely do not help in international negotiations.[21]

A further element which hampered Track-2 effectiveness was the presence of powerful groups at the international, regional and domestic levels which vehemently opposed any form of engagement between Iran and the West. These groups – lobbies, political and religious movements, para-military entities, single personalities, US allies in the region and so on – represented (and will represent in the future too) a formidable obstacle to any positive step and they have often been able to upend engagement processes.

Therefore, despite all the shortcomings and the lack of measurable results (at least in the formalistic way perceived by academia today), it would be ungenerous – even more, simply unfair – to dismiss the variety of informal outreach attempts and Track-2 programmes as a simple 'waste of time' or perceive them as a sort of 'closed circle' the main aim of which is to guarantee the survivability of the process itself. On the contrary, these informal bridges eased the difficult path towards more formal negotiations. The failure of the JCPOA and the new wave of mistrust and hostility cannot be ascribed to them.

Conclusion

With the new international environment after the defeat of Donald Trump and the new Biden presidency in the US, is there still any role for these informal negotiation mechanisms? Despite the fluidity of the current international security architecture, it is possible to envisage some

19 Lee, Carol E., Jay Solomon, and Laurence Norman. "Two-Track Negotiations Led to Iran Nuclear Deal". *The Wall Street Journal*, 2013. https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304281004579218343099984808

20 Divsallar, Abdolrasool, and Marc Otte. "Reviving the Security Function: EU's Path to Save the JCPOA." *Egmont Institute,* no. 113. 2019.

21 Redaelli, Riccardo. "Why selective engagement? Iranian and western interests are closer than you think." The Stanley Foundation, 2008. https://stanleycenter.org/publications/pab/RedaelliPAB608.pdf

elements and trends that highlight the importance of the Track-2 mechanisms:

- Since traditional diplomacy often fails to give the right relevance to so-called 'cultural diplomacy' and to identity-related perceptions (especially at the religious level), Track-2 still represents an important asset for non-partisan, independent and open discussion.

- Due to the growing number of civil wars and sectarian confrontation within failed states or in areas of limited statehood, these informal negotiations help communications among antagonist communities and offer a factual table to establish new channels for communication, presenting problem-solving proposals and step-by-step road maps.

- Understanding cultural contexts remains a crucial key in order to frame suitable agreements and compromises in areas of crisis, a preliminary step that traditional diplomacy cannot easily make.

- However, it is important to avoid a proliferation of Track-2 labels, which in recent decades have identified a great array of extremely different programmes, sometimes totally disconnected from the power circles of the countries involved (in this case being little more than a personal display of vanity). Pressures from theoretical scholars of international relations to achieve some objective methods of verification of their results should be enhanced with an attempt to reach a better codification of what a track two really is, although an excessively formalistic approach should be avoided.

- At the same time, one of the most evident limits of past Track-2 programmes has been the pervasiveness of anachronistic debates. Since many of these projects rely on the same sponsors and promoters, there has been a tendency to remain anchored to old and outdated formulas and topics. The need for a medium-long term perspective cannot be an excuse to refuse to adapt one's efforts to a new political situation. On the contrary, it is vital to connect them to current research, to

the new problems and issues that define the diplomatic and security debates in the main international crisis hotspots.

- Finally, practitioners should realise that new social media and informal platforms of communication are not only affecting official diplomacy, but Track-2 diplomacy as well. Therefore, their role is less that of delivering messages and establishing communication bridges but always more often to discretely support official negotiations offering problem-solving tables and enhancing collaboration on specific non-sensitive issues (from water management to ecological topics, from cultural relations to technical non-dual-use exchanges, just to mention a few examples).

- Even more importantly, since the current international system is increasingly polarised and witnesses growing sectarian dichotomist narratives, Track-2 programmes should focus on finding possible common grounds for cooperation, underlining convergences of interests, perceptions of threats and insecurity, and working to envisage inclusive security architectures and win-win solutions, in this way contrasting a dangerous return to a zero-sum-game attitude in the international security system.

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Iran-Saudi Relations: Is Pilgrimage a Mirror of Conflict?

Mahjoob Zweiri

Executive Summary

The *Hajj* (pilgrimage) is considered one of the pillars of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This aspect of their relationship starkly mirrors the political and sectarian polarisation in the Middle East region, of which Tehran and Riyadh are the leaders. The *Hajj* has indeed been the reason behind many of the conflicts in their relations. At the same time, as a recurring ritual for all Muslims, the *Hajj* is believed to have at times reflected advances and improvements in the disputed relations between the two countries, reflecting a sort of *Hajj* diplomacy.

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which *Hajj* diplomacy succeeds in breaking the ice in the deadlocked relations between the countries and assists in building security to face mutual threats in the region, and how religion plays a role in constructing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The paper argues that despite religion's ability to represent a common element that could lead to collaboration, it does not seem to transcend Iran-Saudi relations. While acting as a communication channel and an incentive for broader relations, the *Hajj* has not succeeded in repairing Iran-Saudi relations. Regional conflicts have in fact spilled over into the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia and have further led to deteriorating their ties. Indeed, the *Hajj* has been a driving factor behind worsening relations, and the only times when *Hajj* relations have improved remarkably have been during periods of détente and political breakthroughs. Instead, there have been various instances of *Hajj* politicising.

Introduction

Iran-Saudi relations essentially reflect the political and sectarian polarisation in the Middle East, where sectarian discourse appears nothing but a complement to political rivalry and competition for influence in the region. When discussing Iran-Saudi relations after the Islamic Revolution, it could be said that what is political is often confused with what is religious. Religious discourse seems to be a major obstacle to achieving maximum political security. In this context, the *Hajj* (pilgrimage) has been at the core of the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh since diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1929.

The 1979 revolution in Iran intensified significant differences between the two nations, as Iran adopted a policy that was anti-monarchical, universalist and anti-imperial. From the perspective of Riyadh, the demise of the Shah and the ascent of Khomeini was a genuine upheaval posing a threat to the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. Iran was aware of the benefits of appealing to Saudi's marginalised Shi'a population in the Eastern Province. Iran challenged the Saudi claim of Islamic leadership and divulged a different jargon of defiance to Islamists throughout the region. The subtleties of conflict and cooperation are present in the management of the *Hajj*, which has been a long-lasting cradle of ideological conflict but has also appeared as a setting for discourse and representational reconciliation between the two states.

Iran and Saudi Arabia compete for leadership in the Islamic world. This competition has been particularly apparent on several occasions. For instance, it was seen in their sectarian and political presence in post-2003 Iraq and their positions on developments in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Yemen in the context of the Arab uprisings. Iran has also supported pro-Palestinian Islamic movements as

a strategy to foster hatred towards the anti-Islamic United States and Israel. It has also sought to introduce Qom to replace Mecca in the 'umm al-qura' (mother of villages) theory. Moreover, Iran's presence in Syria was justified by the presence of 'Wahhabi' Takfiri forces supported by Saudi Arabia.

The *Hajj* is and has been an essential religious question in Iran-Saudi relations. In fact, four major Hajj-related incidents have caused disputes between Saudi Arabia and Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Despite Ali Khamenei's previous declaration that considering the repressive behaviour of the Saudi rulers towards pilgrims the Islamic world should fundamentally rethink the way of managing the *Hajj*, at times it has been a tool for contact between the two countries. Paradoxically, Saudi Arabia allows pilgrims from Iran to do the Hajj but not pilgrims from Qatar, despite both Iran and Qatar cutting their relations with Riyadh. This may indicate that religious diplomacy has been incorporated into the regional dialogue and that *Hajj* diplomacy has acted as the only official diplomatic channel between the two countries.

This paper addresses the following questions. To what extent does *Hajj* diplomacy can succeed in breaking the ice in the deadlocked relations between the two countries and assist in building security to face mutual threats in the region? How does religion play a role in constructing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia? It argues that despite religion's ability to stand as a common element that could lead to collaboration, it does not seem to transcend Iran-Saudi relations. In short, the *Hajj* as a communication channel and an incentive for broader relations has not succeeded in repairing Iran-Saudi relations.

Previous literature has divided the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran into four periods: before 1979 and the Islamic revolution; from 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic until the end of the Iran-Iraq War (1979-1988); from the end of this war to September 11 (1988-

2001); and since September 11.[1] In an effort to analyse *Hajj* relations over the history of the two states, this paper distinguishes two more periods: from September 11 until the Arab uprisings (2001-2011); and from the eruption of the Arab uprisings until today.

Iran and Saudi Arabia: Historical Relations and Persistent Tension

International, regional and internal factors have influenced the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran making their rivalry multi-faceted. It has a sectarian dimension visible in the Sunni-Shi'a divide, an ethnic dimension manifesting in Arab vs. Persian superiority, an ideological dimension in terms of aligning or opposing the US, and a geopolitical dimension represented in their regional manoeuvres, as both countries portray themselves as leaders of the Middle East and the greater Muslim world.[2]

In 1929 when Iran and the Najd-Hijaz kingdom signed a friendship treaty, diplomatic relations between the countries were formalised. Relations remained stable until 1943, when an Iranian pilgrim was executed in Saudi Arabia for insulting the Kaaba, and remained severed until King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia sent a letter to the Iranian Shah asking to re-establish relations. Thereafter, relations improved considerably, especially in the light of both countries' partnerships with the US. During the 1950s and 1960s, common threats to both countries emerged. An example is the nationalist Jamal Abdel-Nasser in Egypt, who endangered the conservative elites in Saudi Arabia and Iran and leant towards the Soviet Union. However, Egypt returned to align with the

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1   Haveshki, Mostafa Aliakbarian, Alireza Golshani, and Ismail Shafiee Sarvestani. "The role of Saudi Arabia in creating religious tensions in the Balochistan region of Iran." *Dilemas Contemporáneos: Educación, Política y Valores* 7, no. 1. 2019.

2   Bahi, Riham. "Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Africa: Implications for Regional Stability." *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 4. 2018: 26-40.

conservatives following Nasser's defeat in 1967.

Subsequently, the 1971 British withdrawal from the Gulf restricted the Iran-Saudi partnership in the sense that Saudi Arabia feared Iranian control over the Persian Gulf and felt suspicious of Bahrain and the Farsi and Arabi islands. However, with the National Front for Liberation in Yemen and the Baathist coup in Iraq, there were prospects of cooperation and confidence between the two countries, also motivated by Richard Nixon's dual containment policy. With the Islamic revolution and the Shah's overthrow, the Saudis perceived the new regime as one with similar goals to the old Shah regime. They expected Iran would attempt to achieve regional hegemony, but this time through unfavourable measures. For instance, they feared this would happen through delegitimising the ruling family in Saudi Arabia.[3]

The first decade following the revolution was characterised by conflicts with regional states. In particular, Saudi Arabia was greatly concerned about regional security and stability given the revolutionary dynamics in Iran, which left no place for Riyadh's conciliatory attitude. Accordingly, Riyadh initiated Gulf talks on security and military collaboration and moved closer towards Iraq as the only power capable of deterring Iran. However, Iran considered the initiation of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 an attempt to eliminate the revolution. The establishment in May 1981 of the GCC supported this thesis as it was perceived by Tehran as a "vehicle for Saudi domination of the Arabian Peninsula." However, Saudi Arabia was careful to avoid directly intervening in the war but secretly supported the Iraqi regime.[4]

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the regional security and political atmospheres changed in favour of Iran. This could be considered a "turning point in regional developments." Iran took a neutral stance towards the invasion, which led to it improving its relations with its neighbours, and with Saudi Arabia in particular. The latter was also cautious about the threat of Iraq, which led to it restoring mutual relations with Iran to avoid risks coming from Iraq.[5]

During Mohammad Khatami's era and the turn towards pragmatism, relations between Tehran and Riyadh further improved.[6] However, this period of détente and limited trust stalled with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.[7] Towards the end of Khatami's term, the GCC countries and Saudi Arabia became aware of Iranian involvement in Iraqi politics.[8] Therefore, the US-led invasion of Iraq created hard options for Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, it would eliminate and overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime and, on the other, it would threaten Riyadh with an increased regional influence of Tehran with the removal of the bulwark against the Shi'a.[9] A vacuum of power in Iraq allowed the Shi'a to ascend into the political arena, which represented an unprecedented opportunity for Iran to achieve its aim of exporting the revolution and expanding Shi'a Islam.[10] No event was as unwelcome to Saudi Arabia as events resulting in a bias in favour of the Shi'a in Iraq.[11]

3   Soltaninejad, Mohammad. "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Emotionally Constructed Identities and the Question of Persistent Tensions." *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 1. 2019: 104-121.

4   Covarrubias, Jack, and Tom Lansford, (eds.) *Strategic interests in the Middle East: opposition and support for US foreign policy*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2007.

5   Amiri, Reza Ekhtiari, and Fakhreddin Soltani. "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." *Journal of Politics and Law*. no.4. 2011: 188.

6   Warnaar, Maaike, Luciano Zaccara, and Paul Aarts. "Why Can't We Be Friends? Bridging the Divide between Iran and the GCC." In Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf*. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016: 102-124.

7   Vakil, Sanam. "Iran and the GCC: Hedging, pragmatism and opportunism." *Chatham House*, 2018. https://bit. ly/38Rujnc

8   Molavi, Afshin. "Iran and the Gulf States." *United States Institute for Peace*, 2010: 159-161. https://iranprimer. usip.org/resource/iran-and-gulf-states

9   Mattair, Thomas R. "Mutual threat perceptions in the Arab/Persian Gulf: GCC perceptions." *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2. 2007: 133-141.

10 Obaid, Nawaf. "Meeting the Challenge of a Fragmented Iraq: A Saudi Perspective." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2006.

11 Kandeel, Amal A. "Regional upheaval: The stakes for the GCC." *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 4. 2013: 59-67.

The Arab uprisings exacerbated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had differing reactions. Saudi Arabia tried to constrict Iran's influence in Iraq during the Arab uprisings, as Iraq was seen as "one side of a triangle in Gulf politics which made for a regional balance, preventing any one state from achieving supremacy."[12] Iran was surprised by the unexpected GCC unity and decisiveness in Bahrain led by the Saudi state but it was unwilling to risk its relations with all the GCC countries over Bahrain.[13] Especially in Yemen, Iran-Saudi rivalry reached a new peak after the arrival of Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in power in Saudi Arabia with his ambitions to impose his regional leadership.[14]

In addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia's opposition over Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen, they were in conflict over other regional disputes, such as those in Syria and Lebanon. Their rivalry also reached Africa. Iran was mainly interested in spreading Shiism, for example in Nigeria and Cameroon, and in breaking its isolation, for instance by smuggling arms to the Houthis in Yemen and trans-shipping arms to Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran also sought to benefit economically and make economic deals with African countries such as Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Niger. Saudi Arabia had a similar policy regarding Africa, and countries in need of investment favoured it over Iran.[15] Pakistan also served as an area of regional dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with both countries seeking to exploit religious sects for their own purposes.[16]

Finally, another area of conflicting interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran was the JCPOA.

Saudi Arabia was perhaps the country most concerned regarding the implications of the JCPOA. It feared abandonment by its principal ally, the US, and loss of the responsibility it took for its security.[17] Therefore, once the US quit the deal, Saudi Arabia felt relieved.

The Hajj: A Shadow War

The year 1979 was transformative for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Iran, the Islamic revolution created hostility to the West and an anti-Western type of Islam. Its foreign policy became focused on "exporting its religious-political doctrine, empowering Shi'a peoples abroad, undermining Western interests in the Middle East, and establishing itself as a regional hegemon."[18] Iran increasingly promoted Shi'a pilgrimages to Karbala to undermine the *Hajj* to Saudi Arabia.[19] The Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized in 1979, an occasion that urged Sunni clerics to promote a fundamentalist anti-Western Islam in Saudi Arabia and which halted social and economic liberalisation. Therefore, by exporting certain religious beliefs, the elites in both countries developed new survival strategies to justify their rule, opening the door for competition between two schools of thought. The first was the Saudi one in Jeddah and the other was the Iranian one in Qom.[20]

For Iran, Islam was a tool for vulnerable people across the region to fight against the great powers such as Israel and the US.[21] The Iranians believed

12 Chubin, Shahram. "Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated." *GRC Gulf Papers*, 2012: 21-27.

13 Ibid., 21-22.

14 Cerioli, Luíza Gimenez. "Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain's and Yemen's Arab Spring." *Contexto Internacional* 40, no. 2. 2018: 295-316.

15 Bahi, "Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Africa: Implications for Regional Stability." 2018: 30.

16 Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Shahram Akbarzadeh. "Pakistan caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia." *Contemporary South Asia* 28, no. 3. 2020: 336-350.

17 Bahi, "Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Africa: Implications for Regional Stability." 2018: 28.

18 Jayamaha, Buddhika, Kevin S. Petit, Jahara Matisek, and William Reno. "The Great Saudi-Iranian Proxy Game." *Middle East Quarterly* 26 (Fall 2019).

19 Szanto, Edith. "The largest contemporary Muslim pilgrimage isn't the Hajj to Mecca, it's the Shiite pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq". *The Conversation*, 2020. https://bit.ly/3ihNDNE

20 Jayamaha et al. "The Great Saudi-Iranian Proxy Game", 2019.

21 Rakel, Eva Patricia. "Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006" *Perspectives on Global Development and Technonlogy* 6, 2007: 167.

that the West had exploited the vulnerabilities of the region for centuries, which threatened the culture of Iran and the Muslim countries. Through propaganda and financial support, the Iranian leaders nurtured the idea of its own Islam in the neighbouring countries. Through the Hajj, the Iranians sought to advance the export of its revolutionary ambition to Saudi Arabia.[22] The history of the *Hajj* in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia shows how it has been controversially used as a tool in both diplomacy and disputes at various times.

In 1806 the Wahhabis occupied Al-Medina and demolished the Al-Baqii cemetery. By the end of the 19th century the cemetery had been re-built, but at the opening of the 20th century the Saudis demolished it again, an act regarded by the Shi'a as a profanation of one of their shrines. In response, the Iranian government did not recognise Al-Saud's rule and convened a conference of Shi'a in Lucknow in India to request Muslims to expel the Sauds from Hijaz. They also required the creation of a Muslim general assembly to manage the holy places. Furthermore, Iran forbade Iranian pilgrims from going to *Hajj*. However, Ibn Saud allowed Iranian pilgrims to continue to arrive through Iraq and Syria during the ban, while the 'ulama of Iran demanded the restoration of the right of pilgrimage. Finally, in 1928 Iran removed the *Hajj* ban, and the two countries signed a treaty of friendship in 1929.[23]

Since that time, religious practices have constituted important issues in disputes between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Following the execution of Iranian pilgrim Abo Taleb Yazdi in Saudi Arabia in 1944, the Iranian government prohibited Iranian pilgrims from visiting Saudi Arabia for several years, eventually allowing them again in 1948.

Additionally, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iranian pilgrims paraded in political demonstrations during the *Hajj* calling for liberation from infidels,

including the US and Israel, "an ideological approach in Iran's foreign behaviour."[24] However, this practice was de-sectarianised by Ruhollah Khomeini, who in September 1979 declared a fatwa allowing Iranian Shi'a to "pray behind a Sunni imam in Mecca and Medina."[25]

Khomeini saw the *Hajj* as an ideal occasion to express hatred for domination by great powers and a place where all Muslims could gather to teach, discuss and coordinate their mutual destiny. He saw Makkah as a city for all Muslims where they could publicly identify their friends and enemies and express their objections to "satans," including the US. Saudi Arabia prohibited Hajj demonstrations following uprisings in the Shi'a province in 1979 and 1980, which created security implications for the Saudi Arabian government and fears of it being toppled.[26]

Khomeini also proclaimed that the *Hajj* was "not only a religious but also a political occasion, and the ideal place to export the revolution with propaganda," thereby justifying demonstrations and making them obligatory. Khomeini further claimed that Wahhabism was not totally Islamic and that the Al-Saud were not suitable rulers of the Holy Places, in addition to being "puppets" of the US, thereby questioning the legitimacy of the Saudi rulers and the ideological underpinnings of Saudi Arabia. This caused King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to declare that Saudi Arabia was committed to the Quran as a constitution. He then took further "Islamisation" measures. For example, in 1984 he introduced a new national anthem with a more prominent Islamic tone, and in 1986, he replaced the title 'His Majesty' with 'Custodian of the Two Holy Places.'[27]

During the first half of the 1980s, the number of pilgrims in Makkah from Iran in the *Hajj* season

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22 Ibid.

23 Kramer, Martin. "Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca." In Kramer, Martin. *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival*. Oxford: Routledge, 1996: 161-87.

24 Amiri, Samsu & Fereidouni, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." 2011: 679.

25 Van Den Bos, Matthijs. "The balance of ecumenism and sectarianism: Rethinking religion and foreign policy in Iran." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 1. 2018: 30-53.

26 Marschall, Christin. *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami*. Routledge, 2003: 48.

27 Ibid.

exceeded 100,000. They continued the practice of demonstrating against the West despite bans on political protests by the Saudi authorities. They chanted slogans against the US and Israel, which exacerbated tensions with the Saudis, who were still in a security alliance with the US. During the 1987 *Hajj*, fierce clashes occurred between 402 Iranian pilgrims and the Saudi security forces, resulting in killings on both sides. 275 Iranians, 85 Saudi citizens and 42 pilgrims of other nationalities lost their lives in the clash.[28] After that, Saudi Arabia reduced the number of Iranian pilgrims allowed to the *Hajj*[29] and relations between the countries froze, finally resulting in a complete break in 1988 for the next three years.[30] Clearly, the *Hajj* can be described as a "sticky issue" between the countries.[31] The Saudis viewed the incident as a riot in which demonstrators killed themselves, while the Iranians characterised it as a premeditated massacre.[32]

Before the 1987 *Hajj* incident, rapprochements between the countries avoided ideological differences and frictions at the *Hajj* were avoided. Thus, the hostility was to a great extent linked to the discourse of the countries rather than to ideology. This is because the degree of conflict between Tehran and Riyadh was primarily determined by the path of events in the Iran-Iraq war.[33]

In 1981, when the Iranian leaders called for the export of the revolution, Saudi Arabia created the GCC and supported Iraq in the war, while Saudi police clashed with pilgrims from Iran. Pilgrims also demonstrated twice in 1982, which led to some being expelled. Additionally, in 1982 Saudi

Arabia found the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps[34] trying to smuggle arms into the country and seized them. In 1983, Tehran said visas had not been issued to Iranian pilgrims, but the situation improved in 1984 as Tehran sought to improve relations with neighbouring countries due to war setbacks and as Saudi Arabia accepted 150,000 Iranian pilgrims. The first high-level meeting between the two countries took place in May 1985 when the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud bin Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, visited Tehran. The 1986 Hajj was also quiet after the occurrence of the Iran-Contra affair earlier that year, and with King Fahd releasing Iranian pilgrims who were arrested during demonstrations. In 1986, some Iranian pilgrims attempted to smuggle plastic explosives, but this incident was not known of until the release of a videotape in 1987.[35]

While there had been prospects of better relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the year 1987 wiped them out. Indeed, after 1987 the *Hajj* transformed into a tool that contributed to a worsening relationship. Khomeini was quoted as saying "we could forgive Saddam Hussein, but we could not forgive the King of Saudi Arabia because they killed many innocent pilgrims who had nothing against the Saudi regime."

The result of the 1987 *Hajj* incident was much psychological damage[36] and the propaganda war over the incident escalated on both sides. In March 1988, Saudi Arabia imposed a Hajj quota system in which one pilgrim for every 1,000 of the population could arrive at the *Hajj* from each country. This system only allowed Iran to send about 55,000 pilgrims, which angered Iran, which in previous years had sent approximately 150,000. In April 1988, Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations and kept the new quota system.

As a result, Iran boycotted the *Hajj*. There were improvements in the Tehran-Riyadh relationship in July 1988 after the ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq

28 Kifner, John. "400 die as Iranian marchers battle Saudi police in Mecca; embassies smashed in Teheran" *New York Times*, 1987. https://nyti.ms/3sySL4L

29 Rakel, "Iranian Foreign Policy since the Iranian Islamic Revolution: 1979-2006", 2007: 169-170.

30 Amiri, Samsu & Fereidouni, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." 2011: 679.

31 Covarrubias & Lansford (eds.), *Strategic interests in the Middle East: opposition and support for US foreign policy*, 2007: 149.

32 Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca.

33 Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy*, 2003: 48.

34 The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) was founded on 22 April 1979 to act as a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces.

35 Marschall, "*Iran's Persian Gulf Policy*", 2003: 49.

36 Ibid: 50.

war. Relations tensed again when Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie[37] and in July 1989 when "a group of Kuwaiti and Saudi Shi'a affiliated with Hezbollah in Kuwait were caught smuggling explosives into the kingdom and placing them in the vicinity of Mecca's Grand Mosque."[38]

However, in the same year, Saudi Arabia raised Iran's *Hajj* quota to 115,000 pilgrims and permitted rallies in some places, and Ali Akbar Velayati participated in the 1991 Hajj and Prince Saud visited Iran. The Hajj in 1994 was strained, as Riyadh again restricted the number of Iranian pilgrims to 55,000, prompting criticism from Iran. This control of the number of pilgrims caused difficulties for the Iranian government. The limitation of access to the *Hajj* added social pressure on the Iranian government. In this way, to some extent Saudi Arabia weaponised the *Hajj* as a tool for political influence.

In 1996 relations between the countries started to improve with the peace process in the Middle East and in 1997 Khatami assumed the presidency in Iran and advanced his policy of détente. Riyadh raised Iran's Umrah quota from 3,000 to 5,000 visitors a week. Later, in 1998 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani made his first official visit to Saudi Arabia to improve relations. The Saudi authorities raised the Iranian pilgrim quota to 85,000 and the following years were without disputes and the relationship became less strained.[39] Furthermore, Khatami participated in the 1999 *Hajj* and in 2001 the two countries signed a security agreement, which remarkably allowed a total of 535,000

Iranian pilgrims for Umrah in 2004, compared to only 100,000 in 1999.[40]

Differences exist over the *Hajj*. They are mostly issues of access, quotas of Iranian pilgrims and maltreatment of them. Such issues were substantial enough to lead to the closure of diplomatic relations from 1988 to 1991. However, Saudi Arabia has used the *Hajj* as a tool to signal rapprochement as well as pressure mechanism.

The pilgrimage can be seen as an opportunity to reconcile differences, at least allegorically. Former Iranian president Ahmadinejad's performance of the *Hajj* in December 2007 at the invitation of King Abdullah demonstrates this. In the following year, overlapping with Rafsanjani's visit in June 2008, the Saudi authorities permitted female Iranian pilgrims to visit a distinguished Shi'a cemetery in Medina for the first time.[41] These efforts at accommodation highlight how the *Hajj* can be used as a platform for political manoeuvring and to reset relations between the two nations.

Tensions rose again in 2009 during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's term due to conflicts in northern Yemen. These tensions had escalated after remarks Khamenei made to departing *Hajj* pilgrims[42] and after Saudi Arabia's assault on the Houthis in Yemen.[43] However, neither country tried to ease relations. For example, in 2010 Saudi Arabia refused to offer the head of Iran's *Hajj* and pilgrimage organisation an entry visa.[44]

A stampede in Mina during the 2015 *Hajj* season resulted in the deaths of at least 465

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37 The Rushdie Affair, or the Satanic Verses controversy, was a reaction to the controversial novel published in 1988 by Salman Rushdie entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which is influenced by the life of Muhammad (the Prophet of Islam) and was accused of blasphemy. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa legitimating the killing of Rushdie in 1989. However, in 1998, the government of President Mohammad Khatami declared that it no longer supported the killing of Rushdie. However, the fatwa remains in place.

38 Levitt, Matthew. "Iranian and Hezbollah Threats to Saudi Arabia: Past Precedents" *The Washington Institute*, 2015. https://bit.ly/2HJZQMB

39 Marschall, "*Iran's Persian Gulf Policy*", 2003: 50-55.

40 Amiri, Samsu & Fereidouni, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." 2011: 685.

41 BBC Monitoring Middle East. "Iran Women Pilgrims Visit Baqi Cemetery in Medina for First Time" 2008. https://bit.ly/3nMgc6N The cemetery, known as Jannat al-Baqi (The Gate of Heaven), contains the graves of many of the Prophet Mohammad's companions. It was demolished in 1925 by Ibn Saud.

42 Amiri, Samsu & Fereidouni, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." 2011: 687.

43 Allam, Abeer. "Hajj climax marked by 3m worshippers" *Financial Times*, 2009. https://on.ft.com/34wDmaT

44 Amiri, Samsu & Fereidouni, "Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship." 2011: 687.

Iranian pilgrims.[45] Commenting on the incident, Khamenei said "Saudi Arabia failed to fulfil its duties concerning the desperate wounded, and should we decide to show any reaction, our reaction will be tough and harsh." Protests against Saudi Arabia erupted in Iran.[46] Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, responded saying that "Iranians should not politically exploit a tragedy."[47]

Then, in January 2016, 47 people were executed in Saudi Arabia, including a Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, a loud critic and opponent of Al-Saud. Iran responded saying that while the Saudi government oppressed its domestic critics it still supported terrorist movements and extremists abroad.[48] Protestors in Iran marched, attacked Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran and set it on fire.[49] This caused a major diplomatic crisis between the two countries which resulted in Iranians missing out on the *Hajj* pilgrimage in 2016 after the two sides could not come to an agreement to allow Iranians to travel to the *Hajj*.

Chief Said Ohadi of the Iranian Hajj Organisation stated that Riyadh "refused to lift a ban stopping Iranian airline firms from landing planes in the kingdom and there is a very hostile political climate towards Iran in Saudi Arabia."[50] As a sign of the soured relations, Iranians again protested against Saudi Arabia during the first anniversary of the stampede in 2016.[51]

However, at the beginning of 2017 Iran sent a delegation to Riyadh to discuss Iranian attendance at the *Hajj* that year,[52] which resulted in Iranian pilgrims finally participating that year[53] and again in the following two years. This shows that Iran also made use of its *Hajj* policy to signal rapprochement with Saudi Arabi. However, Iran still criticises Saudi Arabia's *Hajj* arrangements, especially in the light of the spread of the Covid-19 disease.[54]

Conclusion. Hajj Diplomacy: Does it succeed?

Since the execution of the Shi'a cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia and the raid on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 2016, the two countries have lacked any diplomatic ties. They are both engaged in regional disputes and military entanglements. Puzzlingly, Saudi Arabia allowed Iranian pilgrims to attend the *Hajj* while at the same time moving it out of reach of the Qataris[55] after the GCC crisis started in June 2017.[56] This leads to the question of whether *Hajj* diplomacy will succeed in achieving a breakthrough in the deadlocked relations between the two countries and contribute to building security to face mutual threats in the region. It also questions whether religion plays a role in constructing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This cannot be answered with a clear yes or no; it is a question of to what extent.

Despite religion's ability to be a common element that could lead to collaboration, it does not seem

45 "New tally shows at least 1,621 killed in Saudi Hajj tragedy." *Business Insider*, 2015. https://bit.ly/3mt6eXN

46 "Taẓāhura ḍid al-saʿūdiyya fy Tahrān baʿd ḥādithat fy al-ḥaj." *Watan*, 2015, https://bit.ly/31QIll3

47 "Iran's Khamenei threatens 'harsh' retaliation over Hajj stampede at Mina", CBS58, 2015. https://bit.ly/3e3uKvz

48 "Saudi Arabia executes prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr" *Financial Times*, 2016. https://on.ft.com/3oxNuZ5

49 "Iranian Protesters Ransack Saudi Embassy After Execution of Shiite Cleric" *New York Times*, 2016. https://nyti.ms/2HFigys

50 "No Iranian pilgrims in Hajj 2016" *TRT World*, 2016. https://bit.ly/2HwZaL7

51 "Iranians protest against Saudi Arabia before Hajj pilgrimage" *The Guardian*, 2016. https://bit.ly/3kzDvju

52 "Iran sends delegation to Saudi for talks on rejoining haj" *Reuters*, 2017. https://bit.ly/2HHUJfU

53 "Iran pilgrims to join this year's Hajj: Saudi Arabia." *Al Jazeera English*, 2017. https://bit.ly/35D4k08

54 "irān tastabʿid qudrat al-saʿudiyya ʿalā tanẓīm manāsik al-ḥaj." *Wakālat al-ʿahd news*, 2020. https://bit.ly/37MacXx

55 "No Hajj for Qataris this year amid Saudi dispute" *Al Jazeera English*, 2017. https://bit.ly/3kHTlsE

56 The Qatar diplomatic crisis erupted on 5 June 2017 when Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt banned Qatar from using their airspace and land and sea routes and severed their diplomatic relations with Qatar.

to transcend Iran-Saudi relations. The *Hajj* as a communication channel and an incentive for broader relations has not succeeded in repairing Iran-Saudi relations over history. However, it has been a mirror or a window to assess whether the political relationship is improving or deteriorating.

Political differences have failed to avoid spreading into *Hajj* issues despite diplomatic efforts on both sides. Regional disputes and conflicts have been the dominant variables in *Hajj* relations. In fact, at different times the *Hajj* has been a driving factor behind worsening relations, and the only times when *Hajj* relations improved remarkably were during periods of détente and political breakthroughs.

Politicising the *Hajj* has happened in various instances, most recently with the execution of Nimr Al-Nimr. However, the *Hajj* is perhaps the only channel through which Iran can fiercely accuse Saudi Arabia, as the latter would not aggressively challenge Iran on this religious matter. Iran has used religious propaganda to discredit Saudi Arabia, challenging it to prove its flexibility in *Hajj* matters. A strict approach by Saudi Arabia puts its religious position at risk across the Islamic World by undermining its prestige and legitimacy. However, Saudi Arabia has also used its control over the *Hajj* quota and security and its treatment of Iranian pilgrims to influence and shape the political spectrum. Any Saudi mismanagement of the *Hajj* or distorted image of Saudi Arabia can only be fixed by gradually rebuilding *Hajj* relations and improving the *Hajj* status of Iranian pilgrims. Therefore, improved *Hajj* relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia can show goodwill by both countries, at the scale of the Muslim world and not just in relations between the two countries.

Following the Islamic revolution in Iran, discussion of Iran-Saudi relations often confuses politics with what is religious. Religious discourse seems to be a significant obstacle to achieving maximum political security. In this atmosphere, the *Hajj* has become a subject of confrontation between competing Islamic sects, with both governments blaming each other for politicising it. It is not just a religious matter but it tends to be both a security and a political issue.

In short, the *Hajj* should be protected from being an object of political contestation. It should be brought back to being a purely vital religious ceremony. Iran and Saudi Arabia compete over regional political issues, yet despite these differences and their geopolitical rivalry the *Hajj* should act as a possibility to help restore diplomatic relations. If the *Hajj* were depoliticised it could be used as a tool to improve diplomatic relations.

However, based on historical experience, the two countries are very likely to put more pressure on *Hajj* matters in the light of current relations, given that both face regional difficulties. This was what happened when Saudi Arabia refused entry to Iranian pilgrims between 1988 and 1991. On the one side, Saudi Arabia has failed in many regional arenas where it is in conflict with Iran. On the other side, Iran is facing international pressure that favours Saudi Arabia. Therefore, restrictions on Iranian pilgrims might be imposed by Saudi Arabia, and international condemnations and accusations might be made by Iran, considering the improbability and unimaginability of a breakthrough in Iran-Saudi relations.

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The Religious Potential for De-escalation of Iran-Saudi Tension: The Case of the Hajj

Ghadir Nasri

Executive summary

Can *Hajj* promote religious reconciliation? What can *Hajj* diplomacy offer to de-escalate tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia? This chapter draws on interviews and dialogues with Iranian officials and argues that there is a tendency in Tehran to see the annual presence of hundreds of thousands of Iranians in the *Hajj* programme as a means for starting a reconciliation process with Saudi Arabia, provided that small and gradual decisions are made by both sides. The chapter proposes *Hajj* as a low-cost tool for addressing and resolving other disputes. While other ways might be costly and complicated at the initial stage of reconciliation, the *Hajj* and its new agenda is a forgotten initiative for the two main regional powers. The chapter makes several recommendations to both Saudi and Iranian officials in this regard.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Hajj, Desecuritisation, Reconciliation, Minorities

Introduction

The origin of international alliances is either dependency or compulsion. When two actors depend on each other, they might pursue a policy of convergence and de-escalation. Alternatively, when two actors fear each other they see incentives to reconcile at a certain point. Such conditions do not govern relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two countries neither need

each other for economic, security, etc. nor are they fundamentally afraid of each other. However, it seems that security dependency based on mutual fear is gradually arising. Both need to resolve the current deadlock they face throughout the region and in countries where they seek to exert influence. For example, Lebanon has not had a stable government for a long time, which requires both Iran and Saudi Arabia to play active roles. The reconstruction of Syria depends on similar cooperation among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and the United States, while the humanitarian crisis in Yemen could be stopped if the Saudis could be sure that they would not be attacked by the Iran-backed Houthis.

This chapter focuses on how minimum expectations of cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia could be created by analysing the potential of the *Hajj* pilgrimage. To do this, it explores the possibilities which non-traditional reconciliation provides. The chapter is based on interviews with Iranian officials in charge of the organisation of the *Hajj* and the results of focus groups organised with them. It deals with how the *Hajj* could be turned into a starting point for a temporary short-term reconciliation between the two countries. The results are somewhat surprising. The people involved in organising the *Hajj* argued that with simple practical decisions misunderstandings between the Iranians and Saudis at the societal level could be minimised, and that as a first stage social peace and bottom-up reconciliation could ensue instead of political peace. The chapter argues that the *Hajj* is a thermometer of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, but it could also be a driving force to reduce tension between the two key countries in the region. Although it would only be a small step, distancing the *Hajj* from ideological confrontation can have positive long-term impacts on the range and intensity of relations between the two countries.

Perpetual rivalry versus reconciliation

There is a widespread view that reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia seems so difficult primarily because of intense ideological and political differences. In this view, due to the wide disputes between Wahhabism and Shiism, the two countries are destined to confront each other and the Persian Gulf region is doomed to being locked between crisis and war. A more optimistic view, however, is based on the idea that the two neighbouring Muslim countries could find common ground and put their political differences aside. They might decide to reconcile through regional accords such as the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE) or another externally tailored accord. A third and probably more realistic possibility is through taking gradual small steps. Ideational resources such as the spiritual potential of the *Hajj* could be used as a starting point in this direction despite the only minimal possible results.

The optimistic idea of a major reconciliation is hard to materialise because it ignores the fundamental differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia sees Iran and its regional paramilitary forces in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq as a threat to its interests and survival. By the same token, Iran sees Saudi Arabia as an actor carrying out hostile acts against its national security. In some cases, the conflict of interests between the two countries has reached dangerous levels following a zero-sum game logic. Radical forces in both capitals pursue hard-line strategies aiming to exclude their rivals from regional arrangements.

In such a context, regional peace through existing weak accords like the JCPOA or failed attempts like the Hormuz Peace Endeavour seems impossible. One of the weaknesses of the JCPOA was that Iran was given a concession that deeply worried Saudi Arabia as it was concerned that Iran's future role in the region could ultimately threaten its position in the Islamic world. The JCPOA was signed in 2015, almost five years after the Arab Spring, a time in which the spectre of regime change was still looming over many Arab rulers in the region. In those years, Saudi Arabia feared the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Spring had not yet reached a dead end. Moreover, Syria was under the influence of anti-Assad forces and no one believed that Assad could take Syria back from the Salafi groups. Syria was a testing ground for the Iranian proxy model and the implementation of an axis of resistance. One of the most important consequences of the Syrian crisis for Iran was that it tested the loyalty of the pro-Iranian forces in the region.[1] Iran succeeded in organising Shi'a groups from Lebanon, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq and involving them in an ideological struggle. They were not fighting against secularism because Bashar al-Assad is a secular ruler. From the point of view of the forces close to Iran, only one main enemy was active in Syria, and that was "takfiri" Salafism, which saw the Shi'a and their values as enemies. These mutual perceptions of threat undermined hopes for immediate reconciliation.

According to pessimists, Iran and Saudi Arabia have different perceptions of order and security in the region and they will not resolve their historical ideological disputes. The radicals in both countries believe this. According to Saudi radicals, the revisionist Shi'a government in Iran cannot cope with the conservative Sunni government in Saudi Arabia because there is no element linking the two sides.

From the point of view of the radical forces in Tehran, the Saudi rulers donated billions of dollars to Saddam Hussein's regime. Exactly four months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, they established the GCC to confront the Islamic Revolution. They support the "takfiri" Salafis, which are an anti-Shi'a front, and support opposition to the Islamic Republic, preventing Muslims around the world from rising against Western colonialists and Israeli occupation. With the emergence of new radical and militant leaders in Riyadh (unlike traditional kings like

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1 Diansaei, Behzad. "Iran and Saudi Arabia in The Middle East: Leadership and Sectarianism (2011-2017)." *Rudn University Scientific Periodicals*, 2018. http://journals. rudn.ru/internationalrelation

King Abdullah), no reconciliation between the two countries is possible even through the *Hajj*. From this point of view, *Hajj* diplomacy is meaningless. This pessimistic radical perception also exists in Saudi Arabia. According to this, improving ideological disputes with Iran is impossible because of the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic.

However, the above view is over-pessimistic and pushing in this direction is not realistic. Iran and Saudi Arabia know that continuing their conflict is dangerous for both of them. Many Iranian politicians believe that resolving disputes with Saudi Arabia will help reduce other tensions in the region. For example, agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia could be a critical key to resolving the Lebanese dilemma and the Syrian problem. In this context, the *Hajj* could be an effective starting point and a bright signal of the start of a new era.

Political reconciliation as a religious decision

If we consider foreign policy to be a continuation of domestic policy and domestic policy to arise from religious and national values, we can realise the importance of religion, religious authorities, and religious rituals in any agenda, either peaceful or hostile, in Saudi-Iran relations. Indeed, religious institutions, including those associated with the *Hajj*, also set political agendas in both countries.

In Saudi Arabia's history and politics, the rise of Islam was a turning point. Prophet Muhammad was a legislator, a military commander, a judge and a religious leader, and the Prophet's sayings, way of life and intellectual reflections, which are known as *Muhammad's Sunnah*, remain as sources of inspiration for Islamic government. This is of critical importance in the Arabian Peninsula, where Wahhabi scholars are considered the guardians of this tradition.

Governance in Saudi Arabia in based on both political and religious pillars. The political pillar

of the government, the Saudi family, controls the country's wealth and bureaucracy; the religious pillar, the Wahhabi clerics, oversees religious institutions. These include thousands of mosques and in particular the two holy shrines of Mecca and Medina. The Saudi government could lose its legitimacy if it lost the approval of the Wahhabi clerics, while the latter cannot carry out their religious programmes without the political and financial support of the Saudi government. Saudi Arabia and Iran both use Islam as a foreign policy instrument.[2] The Saudi religious elite's influence on and control of mosques is extensive. According to the Syrian Minister of Endowments, Syria has 9,000 active mosques but only 3,000 of them are run under the supervision of the Syrian Ministry of Endowments, with the remaining 6,000 being run under the auspices and with the support of Wahhabi scholars.[3] The religious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been explained by Svante Cornell in *The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*.[4] He writes that the Saudis have built many mosques in Central Asia and the Caucasus and want to use the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union to replace communism with Salafism. As a result, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in active competition and religion has become a part of it.

Similarly, in Iran religious institutions play a determining role in initiating or resolving any conflict. Shiism is deeply political. Historically, it took years for the Shi'a to gain political power. They were persecuted for centuries and forced to keep their religious traditions in secret, as being a Shi'a was considered a form of polytheism and blasphemy and was even subject to the most severe punishments. A constant fear of destruction and dissolution created unity among

2 Mandaville, Peter, and Shadi Hamid. "Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy." (interview with the author, January, 2014), *Brookings. Washington, DC:* 2018.

3 Author's interview with Syrian Minister of Endowments, 4 January 2014

4 Cornell, Svante E. *The politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan*. Silk Road Studies Program, Uppsala University, 2006.

the Shi'a. The Shiites have succeeded in turning the past sufferings of their leaders into a means of producing and deepening solidarity. For example, the *Ashura*, the memorial ceremony for the martyrdom of the third Shi'a Imam, has the same significance for the Shi'a community that the Holocaust has among the Jews. Just as the Jews fear the danger of destruction, dispersal and displacement, and have turned their past calamities into a source of solidarity and resistance, Iranians observe Ashura in the same way.

Among the motives for maintaining ideological solidarity is to build *otherness* into an enemy. That is, a potential or actual threat of an enemy must be designed to maintain ideological solidarity.[5] While Wahhabis see Shi'a as their *others*, similarly Shi'a have constructed Wahhabis as their main *others*. In this process, the *other* mentality has profoundly affected religious practices such as the *Hajj*, reducing its pacifist capacity. The Wahhabis see the Shi'a not as guests of the house of God but as an extremist minority and a radical religious rival, and the Shi'a feel more or less the same. To understand the capacity of the *Hajj* to foster reconciliation and peace-building, one must pay attention to these ideological and securitised functions of the *Hajj*.

Incremental bridge building through the Hajj

For both Shi'a and Sunnis, the *Hajj* is like daily prayer, fasting and jihad, which means it is an obligation. Every Muslim with enough wealth and property *should* perform the *Hajj*. According to the words of the prophet Muhammad, *hadith*, Islamic governments cannot halt the *Hajj* without an emergency threatening the Islamic community. In fact, if normal people cannot afford to go to the *Hajj*, Shari'a law obliges Islamic governments to spend from their treasuries to send people to the *Hajj*. In this way, the house of God will not remain empty of pilgrims. If a Muslim who can afford to

do the *Hajj* does not perform it, it is considered a great sin and a sign of disbelief.

This explains why three million Muslims from around the world go to Mecca and Medina each year. According to Seyyed Abdolfattah Navab, representative of Ayatollah Khamenei for *Hajj* affairs, the number of Iranians registered on the waiting list to attend the *Hajj* is more than seven million. With the current quota system, it will take 26 years for all the registered Iranians to go to the *Hajj*.[6] These statistics explain the importance of *Hajj* and the religious obligation of states to mutually cooperate to maintain a sustainable pilgrimage. As the Qur'an states, the Hajj provides an opportunity for acquaintance and approximation in the hearts of Muslims.[7]

However, the *Hajj* is not just a simple religious ceremony. The transport, accommodation, health and financial affairs of pilgrims require a considerable amount of negotiation and agreement. Therefore, Iran and Saudi Arabia are routinely involved in negotiation on all the different issues arising from the *Hajj*. They could expand these talks to cover similar non-political issues. The two countries have had practical agreements about how to conduct various sensitive programmes involving pilgrims. These agreements show that negotiation has not been a taboo and has continued amid tensions, with regular updates to improve agreements.

The *Hajj* can also improve people-to-people and cultural diplomacy. A comparison between Iranian pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia with Iranian diplomatic activity in New York might give some interesting insights. The number of Iranian pilgrims who go to Saudi Arabia each year is about 87,000, which is far bigger a number than that of Iranian diplomats going to New York. Unlike diplomatic tasks, *Hajj* is not an official political mission, so pilgrims coming from a more conservative part of Iranian society find the chance to freely build contacts with Saudis and societal connections with an Arab society. This is one of the rare moments in which Iranians meet an Arab community, so

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5   Kramer, Martin. *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987.

6   Author interview with S. A. Navab, representative of Ayatollah Khamenei for Hajj affairs, Qom, 10 Jan. 2021.

7   Qur'an, Qom: Islamic publications, 1999:19

from the perspective of cultural interaction it cannot be neglected. According to S.A. Navab, "the *Hajj* has an international and diplomatic capacity for revisiting sectarian issues through increasing peaceful coexistence and reinforcing solidarity among Muslims and even considering environmental disasters in the Islamic world".[8]

With the arrival of the Biden administration in early 2021, the changing US approach might provide new opportunities for regional de-escalation, including through diplomatic pressure on Saudi Arabia to take a more moderate stance. In this situation, the *Hajj* could emerge as one of the least politically costly ways to start a reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although the grounds for confrontation and hostility are much greater than what can be resolved through religious diplomacy alone, in a situation where no political initiative exists low-yield actions may have value. The Iranian perspective on using the *Hajj* for de-escalation seems positive. Ghazi Asgar, who was the representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran for *Hajj* affairs until 2019, reaffirmed Navab's view on the de-escalation capacity of the *Hajj*. According to him, Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two main regional powers and they need to rethink about the potential of religious diplomacy to solve their problems.[9]

Respecting mutual Wahhabi-Shi'a Values

According to a *fatwa* of former Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayotollah Khomeini, published in August 1979, "Shi'a pilgrims should not pray separately in their own hotels during the *Hajj*. Instead, they should go to the Sunni mosques and follow the Sunni Imams."[10] This goes against the views of some hard-line voices in Tehran, who despite their lower religious status, have been successful in their propaganda against joint Shi'a-Sunni prayer. At the official level, the view of the founder of the Islamic Revolution has always been presented as a show of goodwill respecting the other side. In fact, the *Hajj* is an important base for making societal connections between Iranian pilgrims and the Sunni community, thus taking on a dispute resolution function. Tehran should increase its training of the heads of its pilgrimage missions to promote the idea that the Sunnis and Shi'a are all descendants of the same religion and so can have joint sessions of prayer.

Iranian Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has issued a similar *fatwa*. According to Saeed Ohadi, head of the *Hajj* and Pilgrimage Organisation, and with the endorsement of Seyyed Ali Ghazi Asgar, Khamenei has emphasised that Shi'a should not insult and disrespect Sunni saints and elders. The Supreme Leader has issued a fatwa forbidding insults and disrespect to Aisha (one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad, who is a controversial figure between the Shi'a and Sunnis) and any other symbols of the Islamic religions.[11] In addition to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, dozens of other Shi'a religious scholars and authorities have argued that it is permissible for Shi'a to visit Sunnis, pray in their mosques with the Sunni clergy and attend their funerals. All these examples show new flexibility in the religious sphere. Ali Akbar Ziaee, director of the Hajj and Pilgrimage Research Institute, defines the *Hajj* as an opportunity for cooperation, not for religious confrontation.[12] In Feb 2021 he held an international conference in Qom on the capacity of *Hajj* diplomacy to focus on the significance of the *Hajj* in reducing misunderstandings and disagreements between the two main Muslim countries, despite Tehran's belief that Saudi Arabia is a regional leader of anti-Iranian policies.

There are also radical anti-Shi'a activists in Saudi

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8 Ibid.

9 Author interview with H. Q. Asgar, Tehran, 11 Jan. 2021.

10 Khomeini, Rouhollah. "Ahkam va adab namaz dar masjedol haram va masjedol alnabi chist?" [what are the rules and regulation of prayer in Mecca and Medina and their joint prayer sessions?]. *Imam Khomeini Portal*, 2018. http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c12_14034/

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11 Khamenei, Seyed Ali. "Insulting Aisha and any Sunni symbols is forbidden." *Khabar online.* 4 October 2010. https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/97482/آیتی-الله-خامنه‌ای-توهین-به-عایشه-و-هر-کدام‌از‌نمادهای-اهل-سنت

12 Author interview with A.A. Ziaee, 17 January 2021, Qom.

Arabia who take every opportunity to oppose the Shi'a and their teachings. The anti-Shi'a voices own TV stations that routinely ridicule Shi'a values and ideology. An important proportion of Saudi Wahhabi scholars consider Shi'a to be heretics, infidels, polytheists and liars. Both sides should stop their religion-based propaganda campaigns against each other as a show of goodwill. For example, Tehran has recently moved in this direction. Seyyed Sadegh Shirazi, who was running several anti-Sunni TV networks, has now been restrained and restricted by Tehran. Similar reciprocal measures have not been taken by Saudi Arabia, although they might be perceived in Tehran as a positive sign of de-escalation.

Improving socio-security protocols

The political activism of Iranian pilgrims in Saudi Arabia has witnessed many ups and downs, mainly influenced by a ceremony called 'Innocence of the polytheists' which was introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini in the post-1979 era. This is a ceremony held by Iranian pilgrims to express sympathy with globally oppressed Muslims. According to the programme, Iranian pilgrims during the Hajj season introduce the United States and Israel as the main sources of oppression of Palestinians and chant slogans against them. The ceremony has been called a declaration of hatred, but in an incident during the 1987 *Hajj*, 275 Iranian pilgrims were killed in clashes with Saudi security forces and a stampede. The Iranians soon realised that spreading revolution with similar ceremonies and creating popular anger among the pilgrims was of little use. Since then, Iran has considerably limited such ceremonies, while Saudi Arabia has stepped up its crackdown on Iranian pilgrims. What seems plausible to both parties and also effective for temporary reconciliation is the promotion of practical steps to regulate and order these ceremonies. Indeed, the Iranian ceremonies are framed with anti-colonial and anti-occupation themes and the Saudis can only regulate them for Iranian pilgrimages by making conditions such as they should be held in closed spaces and for a

limited time. In recent years, the programme has been implemented with no reports of incidents, but there seems to be a need for the Iranian and Saudi officials to establish a joint protocol to prevent possible challenges in the future. This could help to raise mutual confidence between the two countries. Tehran should educate its pilgrims and officials on agreed protocols to prevent any future tension. Ali Akbar Ziaei, head of the Hajj and Pilgrimage Research Institute in Qom, which is an institution for examining the quality of *Hajj* ceremonies and the implementation of *Hajj* diplomacy, believes that "both sides should put their prejudices and sectarian views implementing these ceremonies aside and instead use [the *Hajj*] as a de-securitising platform under the concept of the Islamic community.[13]

Joint discussion on the status of Sunni-Shi'a minorities

The policies of the two countries on their Sunni and Shi'a minorities are interlinked. The Wahhabi's anti-Shi'a sentiments and the Saudi officials' harsh policies against Shi'a have roots in Iran's restrictive policies regarding its Sunni minorities. By the same token, Iran has strong objections to Riyadh's strict treatment of its Shi'a minority. Saudi Arabia has a Shi'a population of about two million, but Iran's Sunni population is four times more. Most of the Iranian Sunnis live in the two provinces of Kurdistan and Sistan and Baluchistan, which are located in areas bordering with Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey. These areas have traditionally been less developed, with more poverty than the other parts of the country, regardless of whether the poor are Shi'a or Sunnis. The politicisation of poverty and securitisation of identity in these areas has long been a security issue for Iran, while Saudi Arabia fears Iranian meddling in its Shi'a minority regions, which are similarly below national development standards. Iran has shown a readiness to cooperate with Saudi Arabia to improve the symbolic and real position of its Sunni minorities. This might be

13 Author interview with A.A. Ziaee, Head of the Hajj and Pilgrimage Research Institute, Tehran, 23 Dec. 2020.

a possible immediate avenue of cooperation that with few political costs could mitigate both countries' internal security challenges. Indeed, an agreement between Tehran and Riyadh would be necessary to make openings on joint activities to resolve issues among their respective minorities: Shi'a in Saudi Arabia and Sunnis in Iran.

De-securitisation of the Hajj

The *Hajj* has become a purely political issue in recent years. During the *Hajj*, many books and pamphlets are prepared and distributed among pilgrims from other countries. Each country tries to introduce its ideas and programmes among the pilgrims. Although according to Islamic teachings the *Hajj* is a symbol of unity and avoidance of national and secular affiliations, it is easy to distinguish Turkish pilgrims from Egyptian and Iranian ones. It is essential to promote a social and cultural perspective on the *Hajj* rather than a politically oriented one. If the *Hajj* incorporates social dimensions, both Riyadh and Tehran can use the opportunity as a space for acquaintance and cultural interchange between their societies. The *Hajj* could be organised with social stratifications through which various groups from similar sectors could find a chance to meet and interact. Writers, artists, the military, intellectuals, poets, athletes, women and other social groups from both countries could jointly perform the *Hajj* and build a platform for societal dialogue. Saudi and Iranian people are familiar with European culture but they do not have accurate perceptions of each other's life styles. The most important evidence of this misunderstanding is speaking Arabic in Iran and Persian in Saudi Arabia. Despite years of studying Arabic as a second language, few Iranians speak Arabic and their image of Saudi society is biased and distorted with misinformation. Saudi intellectual and social acquaintance with Iranian culture is even less. Linguistic barriers and cultural misrecognition amid religious confrontations have deeply separated the two nations' societies. The *Hajj* could be an initial but important step in the direction of filling this gap by providing an opportunity for both societies to know each other.

Conclusion

In the four years from 2017 to 2020 Iran presented three plans to improve relations among the countries bordering the Persian Gulf: the Regional Dialogue Forum, a Non-Aggression Pact and the Hormuz Peace Endeavour. However, so far none of these three proposals has found a chance to proceed. The main target of these proposals was Saudi Arabia. In other words, if Saudi Arabia had agreed to show a positive signal, the other countries in the region were expected to follow the same direction. Confrontation and conflicts of interests between the two countries in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan show the complexity and multifaceted nature of their confrontation. However, with Biden in office and his positive outlook on multilateralism, there are hopes that there will be room for bridge building, but there is no guarantee that the two regional powers will reconcile.

In the situation in which disputes over Saudi's concerns about concessions in the JCPOA and regional issues have remained unresolved, the two countries can focus on small but measurable steps such as *Hajj* diplomacy instead of only focusing on large and ambitious disarmament and non-intervention treaties. With gradual success in these areas, they could expand the scope of reconciliation to other critical issues such as Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. Softening the two countries' policies on the *Hajj* would not harm their prestige. On the contrary, it would send a positive rapprochement signal.

Based on interviews and dialogues with Iranian officials, this chapter has argued that there is a tendency in Tehran to see the annual presence of hundreds of thousands of Iranians in the *Hajj* programme as a means of starting a reconciliation process with Saudi Arabia, provided that small and gradual decisions are made by both sides. Examples of such decisions could be the Iranian

religious authorities announcing a new fatwa condemning the radical anti-Wahhabi minority in Iran and preventing future disrespect of Sunni figures; holding special programmes for Iranian pilgrims and officials along the same lines before they travel to Saudi Arabia; Iranian and Saudi officials signing a joint security protocol to prevent security incidents in the *Hajj* season; using the *Hajj* to facilitate cultural ties through civil society contacts during the *Hajj*; and joint work on anti-terrorism during the *Hajj* period. The *Hajj* can be a new low-cost pattern for addressing and resolving other disputes. While other ways are costly and complicated, the *Hajj* and its new agenda is a forgotten initiative for the two main regional powers.

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The Politics of Pilgrimage: Exploring the Hajj as a Site for Dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Simon Mabon and Lucia Ardovini

Executive summary

In recent decades, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has oscillated between periods of overt hostility and of burgeoning rapprochement. Amidst the rivalry there are a number of points where the two states come together, predominantly through the activities of institutions such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). However, another relatively unexplored area that brings the two together is the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca. In spite of tensions between them, there is dialogue over the Hajj, its management and the allocation of places. Representatives from Saudi Arabia and Iran engage directly in a rare instance of dialogue between the two regional rivals.

In this chapter we explore the possibility of the *Hajj* serving as a site for dialogue and a means of building trust between the two competing states. To do so, we build on informal conversations with a number of prominent academics and religious officials from across the Middle East who have shared their views on the Hajj as a site for possible dialogue. Overwhelmingly, the consensus is that the *Hajj* is a deeply spiritual place and not an arena for dialogue aimed at reducing geopolitical tensions. This is further reinforced by accounts which emphasise the reality of performing the *Hajj*, which, aside from its religious component, involves divisions of pilgrims along ethnic, religious and social lines. A few of our interlocutors referred directly to these divisions to contest the idea that the *Hajj* could be a site for rapprochement, especially between two powers with such a long and complicated history of confrontation. Fundamentally, we argue that this ongoing dialogue is important in the context of Saudi-Iranian relations, even though this alone is not sufficient for the improvement of regional relations.

Keywords: Hajj, Dialogue, Trust-building mechanisms, Geopolitics

Introduction

On 2 January 2016, Nimr al-Nimr, a Shi'a cleric from Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, was executed for his involvement in a series of protests against the Al Saud, most notably during a spate of uprisings in 2011 and 2012. The death of al-Nimr sparked outrage in Shi'a communities around the world, most notably in Iran, where the Saudi embassy in Tehran was set alight. In response, Saudi Arabia suspended diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, marking the latest incident in a long and complex history between the two major powers in the Persian Gulf and the wider Muslim world.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have historically oscillated between periods of overt hostility and of burgeoning rapprochement, conditioned by the interplay between politics, religion and geopolitics. The need to understand the nature of the rivalry has prompted a number of different approaches that position this enmity within a struggle for power, long-standing sectarian differences or competition over a regional order in which religion and sectarian identities provide capital for the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran.[1]

In spite of this rivalry, there are a number of points where the two states come together, predominantly through the activities of institutions such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). However, another relatively unexplored area that brings the two

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1   Mabon, Simon. *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East*. London: IB Tauris, 2013.

together is the annual *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca. Performing the *Hajj* is an obligation for all Muslims, albeit contingent on health and circumstances. However, with a global population of over 1 billion, there is limited capacity for Muslims wishing to do the *Hajj* or the *Umrah*, requiring regulation and the allocation of places across sects and nationalities. This is done on the basis of roughly 1 place per 1000 Muslims per country in an effort to provide an equal distribution across the world's Muslims. Only around 3 million are able to make the pilgrimage each year due to logistical challenges. However, in regulating the *Hajj*, Saudi Arabia and Iran are brought together to discuss a number of issues pertaining to the pilgrimage and its management. Representatives from Saudi Arabia and Iran engage directly in a rare instance of dialogue between the two regional rivals.

In this chapter, we explore the possibility of the *Hajj* serving as a site for dialogue and a means of building trust between the two competing states. To do so, we build on informal conversations with a number of prominent academics and religious officials from across the Middle East who have shared their views on the Hajj as a site for possible dialogue. These exchanges helped us to gain a more detailed understanding of the dynamics surrounding the *Hajj*, from both personal and regional perspectives. Given the sensitivity of the topic, none are mentioned by name, but their views inform what follows, which suggests that, while dialogue continues, separating the *Hajj* from broader (geo)political issues is only possible when discussing the allocation of spaces for the pilgrimage and the safety issues that follow. Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that the *Hajj* is a deeply spiritual place and not an arena for dialogue aimed at reducing geopolitical tensions. This is further reinforced by accounts which emphasise the reality of performing the *Hajj*, which, aside from its religious component, involves divisions of pilgrims along ethnic, religious and social lines. A few of our interlocutors referred directly to these divisions to contest the idea that the *Hajj* could be a site for rapprochement, especially between two

powers with such a long and complicated history of confrontation.

However, an interesting note was a discussion with one individual who spoke of a sermon on the day of Arafah which spoke of the need for Muslims to put aside their differences and work towards a common goal. The sermon spoke of unity among Muslims: "All mankind are from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab […] except by piety and good action […] every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and [remember] that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood."[2] This sentiment alludes to a normative obligation to cultivate peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran at the time of the *Hajj*, yet a range of problems remain. Moreover, the sensitivity of the *Hajj* and its broader importance mean that the possibility of it being used for political purposes brings with it serious risks to Saudi Arabia's Islamic legitimacy. However, the symbolism and legitimacy involved in the *Hajj* mean that if such divisions are circumvented – and other political issues are addressed first – the *Hajj* can serve as a means of strengthening any diplomatic efforts.

Islamic Rivalries and Competition over the Hajj

Since Ibn Saud gained control of large swathes of the Arabian Peninsula in the formative decades of the 20th century, Saudi leaders have endured a complex relationship with their Iranian counterparts, both before and after the 1979 revolution, with various identity markers playing a prominent role in shaping – and challenging – both domestic politics and regional relations.[3]

The Al Saud has relied on a long-standing alliance

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2   "The Farewell Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad." *Human Appeal*, 2020. https://www.humanappeal.org.uk/news/news-2020/the-farewell-sermon-of-the-prophet-muhammad-pbuh/

3   See, for example, Mabon, Simon. *Saudí Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East.* IB Tauris & Co Ltd., 2013; Keynoush, Banafsheh. *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes.* London: Palgrave, 2016.

with Wahhabi clerics, an alliance that dates back to the 18th century. This increased in 1925, when Ibn Saud seized control of the Hijaz, including the holy places of Mecca and Medina, and with them the *Hajj*.[4] This imbued the ruler of the *Hajj* with considerable religious legitimacy – albeit contingent on adhering to a set of responsibilities – but also financial rewards deriving from the influx of pilgrims.

The role of the Al Saud as Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques (Mecca and Medina) is therefore a central feature in their broader claims of Islamic legitimacy, which have long been predicated on a fusion of Islamic and tribal credentials.[5] In the Al Saud's custodianship, a key element concerns the protection of Muslims doing the *Hajj* and *Umrah* regardless of their nationality or sect. Although the Al Saud have long sought to prevent the *Hajj* taking on a political significance, a number of events have punctured the Kingdom's efforts to keep the pilgrimage free from political – and geopolitical – protest.

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 the two powers became embroiled in a complex rivalry, which, while often couched in religious language, was mostly driven by security and geopolitical concerns. Central to this were claims of religious legitimacy and concerns over the manipulation of internal sectarian schisms, with both states being domestically divided along sectarian lines.[6] Suspicion over the loyalties of Shi'a groups had long been rife among policymakers across the Middle East, from the British involvement in the formative years of Faisal's rule in Iraq to the actions of groups such as Hizballah and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain in the early 1980s. In the years that followed, such concerns increased, prompting allegations of a Shi'a Crescent in 2004, and a widespread descent into sect-based violence in the years after the Arab uprisings.[7] While sectarian identities had a clear role to play, these identities were routinely manipulated by Saudi Arabia and Iran in pursuit of their own geopolitical goals.[8]

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, King Khalid professed his support for the new state:

It gives me great pleasure that the new republic is based on Islamic principles which are a powerful bulwark for Islam and Muslim peoples who aspire to prosperity, dignity, and well-being. I pray the Almighty to guide you to the forefront of those who strive for the upholding of Islam and Muslims, and I wish the Iranian people progress, prosperity, and stability.[9]

Similarly, the new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sought to demonstrate unity:

There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs and the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united [. . .] They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranianism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and Islamic philosophy.[10]

In spite of this moment of possibility, relations quickly soured. Khomeini expressed a desire to:

[. . .] export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of

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4 Teitelbaum, Joshua. "Hashemites, Egyptians and Saudis: the tripartite struggle for the pilgrimage in the shadow of Ottoman defeat." *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 1. 2020: 36-47.

5 Nevo, Joseph. "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia" *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3. 1998: 34-53.

6 Mabon, "*Saudi and Iran*", 2013.

7 Simon Mabon, *Houses built on sand: Violence, sectarianism and revolution in the Middle East*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.

8 Mabon, Simon. *The Struggle for Supremacy: Saudi Arabia and Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

9 Rubin, Lawrence. *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics*. Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2014: 52.

10 Amirahmadi, Hooshang, and Nader Entessar (eds.). *Iran and the Arab World*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993: 3.

Islamic teachings among the enslaved nations.[11]

Such remarks prompted a great deal of consternation across the Saudi Kingdom, yet for the Al Saud worse was to come. Khomeini's system of veleyat-e faqih was explicitly anti-monarchical and thus diametrically opposed to the Saudi state, making it an obvious target:

If we wanted to prove to the world that the Saudi Government, these vile and ungodly Saudis, are like daggers that have always pierced the heart of the Moslems from the back, we would not have been able to do it as well as has been demonstrated by these inept and spineless leaders of the Saudi Government.[12]

He later declared the Al Saud to be "corrupt and unworthy to be the guardians of Mecca and Medina"[13] and referred to them as "traitors to the two holy shrines,"[14] while calling for an evolution from "holy *Hajj* to holy *jihad* by bathing yourselves in blood and martyrdom."[15] In his will, Khomeini called on Muslims to "curse tyrants, including the Saudi royal family, these traitors to God's great shrine, may God's curse and that of his prophets and angels be upon them."[16]

Such comments would not go without response. For Fahd, the new Saudi king, the nascent regime in Iran were "hypocrites and pretenders who are using Islam to undermine and de-stabilise other countries."[17] He later warned that protests or demonstrations on the *Hajj* that could create an atmosphere of "chaos and upset the peace" would not be tolerated.[18] On the *Hajj*, Iranian

pilgrims raised banners proclaiming "God is Great, Khomeini is Great; We obey Khomeini," prompting Saudi officials to suggest that Khomeini was drawing parallels with God.[19]

In the years that followed, the *Hajj* became a new site of protest, either channelling tensions around the symbolism of the pilgrimage itself or manifesting issues pertaining to its organisation. In 1987 this site of protest reached its zenith as clashes between Saudi security forces and Iranian pilgrims led to the deaths of over 400 attendees, including 275 Iranian pilgrims, while several other thousands were injured. The clashes were a result of increasing tensions between the two states in the aftermath of the revolution, exacerbated by demonstrations by pilgrims against Israel and the United States. After the clashes, Iranian officials called for the *Hajj* to be placed under international oversight, much to the chagrin of their Saudi counterparts, for whom regulation of the pilgrimage serves as a key legitimising factor for the House of Saud.[20]

This particular incident was the culmination of years of protest and anger among Iranian pilgrims, who routinely chanted political slogans in the *Masjid al-Haram* and the Prophet's Mosque, despite calls from Khomeini for pilgrims to remain calm. In spite of these calls, prominent Iranian officials, including Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha – a personal representative of Khomeini regarding *Hajj* affairs – called on Saudi officials to allow demonstrations in the mosque itself. Moreover, after the deaths, spontaneous demonstrations by Iranians resulted in attacks on the Saudi and Kuwaiti embassies in Tehran, prompting Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic relations with Iran and to also reduce the number of Iranian pilgrims from 150,000 to 45,000. Saudi officials were reluctant to impose a complete ban on Iranian pilgrims for fear of charges that they were denying Muslims the opportunity to fulfil one of the fundamental

11 "Excerpts from Khomeini Speeches", *The New York Times*, 1987. www.nytimes.com/1987/08/04/world/excerpts-from-khomeini-speeches.html

12 Ibid.

13 Coughlin, Con. *Khomeini's Ghost*. London: Macmillan, 2009: 274.

14 "Excerpts from Khomeini's Speeches." 1987.

15 Goldberg, Jacob. *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia: the formative years*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986: 589.

16 Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007: 36; Moin, Baqer. *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*. London: I.B.Tauris, 1999: 305.

17 Goldberg, *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia*, 589.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid. 602.

20 Matthiesen, Toby. *The Other Saudis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014: 128.

obligations of Islam.[21] However, in response to the reduction, Iran boycotted the *Hajj* until 1990. Since then, as relations between the two entered a period of burgeoning rapprochement, over 115,000 Iranian pilgrims have been allowed to perform *Hajj* each year and even to engage in demonstrations, albeit within the confines of their Mecca compound.

Apart from the religious legitimacy that Saudi Arabia derives from hosting the *Hajj*, the management and organisation of such a pivotal event requires a great amount of care, planning and economic resources. Central to the management and regulation of the pilgrimage is the Saudi Ministry of *Hajj* and *Umrah*, which works with local agencies to allocate places to pilgrims from different countries, but is also tasked with ensuring safety and the capacity for particular rituals to be performed in a safe and respectful manner. In pursuit of this, the Ministry typically welcomes delegations from across the Islamic world, including from Iran. Indeed, working with Iranian delegates has been a key concern for Saudi officials in an effort to prevent outcomes such as those in the 1987 and 2015 *Hajj*, which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives.[22] Reflecting the sensitivity of the pilgrimage, the Ministry of *Hajj* and *Umrah* also works closely with the Ministry of the Interior and is often overseen by a senior royal. In spite of recent tensions between the two states, there have been positive exchanges between Saudi and Iranian officials involved in *Hajj* planning. After the devastation of the 2015 *Hajj*. Seyed Ali Qazi-Askar, Khamenei's representative for Hajj and pilgrimage affairs, declared that the Saudi Minister of *Hajj* and *Umrah* had thanked the Iranian pilgrims for behaving in an "orderly, organised and spiritual manner," which was a significant recognition of

participation and cooperation.[23]

However, several concerns remain over the implicitly political nature of the *Hajj.* Speaking in 2017, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed concerns about anti-Iranian sentiments and efforts to cancel or undermine Iranian ceremonies on the side-lines of the pilgrimage.[24] In spite of this, following the visit of an Iranian delegation to the Kingdom for talks with the Ministry of *Hajj* and *Umrah*, an agreement was reached between Saudi Arabia and Iran guaranteeing a steady Iranian presence. Central to these discussions was a need to reach agreement over security.[25] Similarly, a year later in 2019, Ali-Rena Rashidian - head of Iran's *Hajj* and Pilgrimage Organisation - travelled to Riyadh on the invitation of the Minister of *Hajj* and *Umrah* to engage in further talks, demonstrating that dialogue around these issues is ongoing.[26]

While the existence of talks between Saudi and Iranian officials over the *Hajj* is undeniable, the possibility of these discussions being used as a trust-building mechanism appears limited. Similarly, it seems implausible for the *Hajj* to be used in a broader portfolio of diplomatic efforts for rapprochement, given both the vulnerability of such efforts and the broader repercussions that would come if the *Hajj* took on an overtly political role. It follows that the significance of the *Hajj* being an apolitical and, more importantly, spiritual event means that any effort to use the pilgrimage as a tool in broader political and geopolitical projects risks having serious consequences for

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21 Kramer, Martin. *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: the politics of ideas in the Middle East*. London: Routledge, 1996: 176.

22 On the Hajj of 1987 over 400 pilgrims were killed in clashes between Shia pilgrims and Saudi security forces, while a further 700 deaths occurred in 2015 following a stampede.

23 "Iran's expectations fulfilled in Hajj, official says." *The Iran Project*, 2017. https://theiranproject.com/blog/2017/09/16/irans-expectations-fulfilled-hajj-official-says/

24 "Hajj best opportunity to foil anti-Iran propaganda," *The Iran Project*, 2017. https://theiranproject.com/blog/2017/10/03/hajj-best-opportunity-foil-anti-iran-propaganda-leader/

25 "Iran, Saudi Arabia reach deal on Hajj 2018," *The Iran Project*, 2018. https://theiranproject.com/blog/2018/06/03/iran-saudi-arabia-reach-deal-on-hajj-2018/

26 "Iran Hajj official off to Saudi Arabia for talks on major Hajj ritual," *The Iran Project*, 2019. https://theiranproject.com/blog/2019/12/09/iran-hajj-official-off-to-saudi-arabia-for-talks-on-major-hajj-ritual/

Saudi Arabia across the Muslim world, which could perhaps negatively impact its status as the protector of Mecca and Medina. Perhaps if the Kingdom unilaterally increased the number of Iranian pilgrims allowed to perform the *Hajj* then political considerations may be circumvented, but this would open up issues with other states demanding increases in their quotas.

Another factor that further complicates this process is that efforts to use Islam for political purposes are also seen as part of the securitisation of Islamic solidarity, which was demonstrated by the increase in funding from Saudi Arabia to Islamist groups around the world from the 1970s onwards. The OIC was also similarly politicised and in early 2016 denounced "Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the States of the region and other Member States (including Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Somalia) and its continued support for terrorism," therefore losing its perceived neutrality in the eyes of regional partners and international observers.

Diplomatic Efforts

In spite of these issues, there are a number of ongoing efforts aimed at mediating tensions between the two states. Predominantly occurring along Track-2 lines, they involve external actors mediating dialogue between the two countries over issues as wide-ranging as regional security and education. Efforts to reduce tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran require complex approaches to political concerns that have been fuelled by religious differences and competing claims of leadership of the Muslim world. Although adhering to different sects of Islam – leading some to reduce the rivalry to 'ancient hatreds' between Sunni and Shi'a – the rivalry infuses long-standing political tensions with politically charged religious differences and competing visions of regional security. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran associate regional supremacy with regime survival, meaning that their rivalry has long

assumed an existential character.[27] In addition to the role that different denominations of Islam play in shaping both countries' foreign policies, the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is also driven by traditional security concerns, ranging from territorial integrity to economic competition and international alliances. Religion is not excluded from this – as both powers share an inherent fear of political upheaval, which is often reflected in the religious identity of the other, and which highlights once again the political connotations of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, despite its veil of religious allusion.[28] Hence, in addition to religious competition over claims of Islamic legitimacy, the two states have also become increasingly involved in geopolitical competition, both in the Gulf and in the region, which is arguably a reflection of these security concerns.

While geopolitical aspirations are at the core of this ongoing rivalry, its often-sectarian component shapes perceptions of it as a struggle over claims of Islamic legitimacy, furthering views of religion as an instrumental political tool. Another element that complicates the process of looking beyond the 'religious veil' attached to the tensions between the two countries is the fact that both powers rely on the promotion of certain religious interpretations for regime survival, both regionally and domestically.[29] Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville propose looking at such efforts in terms of "Islam as statecraft," meaning that religion is incorporated in foreign policy as a form of "religious soft power."[30] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran rely on harnessing the

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27 See, for example, Chubin, Shahram, and Charles Tripp. *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*. London, Routledge, 2005.

28 Dupont, Kevin. "Religion or Politics? An analysis of sectarian relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Cornell Policy Review*, 2; Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*. 2013.

29 Lucia Ardovini, "Competing Islams: unpacking the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and Iran," forthcoming 2021.

30 For a more detailed analysis, see Mandaville, Peter, Shadi Hamid. "Islam as a statecraft: how governments use religion in foreign policy." *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, 2018: 1-28.

power of religious symbols and authority to meet greater geopolitical objectives, meaning that religion becomes both an instrument and a space for expressing conventional geopolitical rivalries.[31] This becomes even more important when considering that, as autocratic theocracies, both Saudi Arabia and Iran see regime survival as inherently linked to religious legitimacy. In such a context, the *Hajj* has historically been a space for ideological, diplomatic and religious competition between the two powers.

Therefore, it is evident that, despite its geopolitical component, the deadlock and rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is mostly understood along its religious dimension. This has led some to question whether or not a focus on religious diplomacy, meaning the integration of a focus on religion in diplomatic practices, could positively impact the ongoing political deadlock between the two countries. While the dogmatic nature of religion has long been seen as an obstacle to diplomacy, especially in contexts where religious legitimacy is at the core of the conflict at hand, so-called 'faith-based diplomacy' has gained a prominent role since the end of the twentieth century. Promoting dialogue between religious traditions, religious legitimacy is seen as playing a key role in establishing an exchange and understanding between religious leaders and regimes in the Islamic world.[32] Faith-based diplomacy differs from more traditional models of conflict resolution as it puts emphasis on socio-political reconciliation, meaning that its objectives go beyond conflict resolution to include the restoration of political order and the reconciliation of individuals and social groups.

However, despite the relative novelty of the concept, it should be noted that the political role played by religion cannot be separated from the domestic and foreign policies of both Riyadh and Tehran, as it not only serves as a historical tool of legitimisation for the regimes and their ruling

elites but it also shapes domestic manifestations of dissent and provides scope for interfering in the politics of other powers. More importantly, the way in which both powers incorporate religion - in this case Islam - in their foreign policies and international behaviour is often shaped by domestic considerations of how ideology relates to political authority. For example, when the influence of religion and faith on foreign policy is in question, looking at geopolitical shifts across the region one can see that sectarian narratives are often mobilised to address specific security threats that have little to do with religion and more to do with fear of domestic insurgency.[33] In the cases of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, ongoing domestic struggles between the role of Islam and Islamism cannot be contained and religious legitimacy becomes a space for expressing broader geopolitical rivalries – as is shown by the sectarian use of religion in Saudi Arabia's portrayal of Shi'a Islam as an avatar of Iran.[34] Therefore, not only has religious diplomacy already long been a part of negotiations between the two powers, but it also does so along with the phenomenon of 'religious soft power,' indicating a state incorporating religious promotion in its broader foreign policy conduct, often masking broader geopolitical goals and reflecting concerns over the status of domestic politics.[35]

Moving Forward and Conclusions

The politicisation of the *Hajj* as a site of contestation and its consequent use as a geopolitical tool further complicates the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, rather than providing space for rapprochement. The *Hajj* has held a critical position in the bilateral relations between the two countries

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31 Ibid: 2.

32 Mandaville, Peter, and Sara Silvestri. "Integrating religious engagement into diplomacy: challenges and opportunities." *Issues in Governance Studies* 67, 2015: 1-13.

33 Mandaville, Hamid, "Islam as a statecraft," 2018: 2.

34 This has taken place across the Middle East, predominantly occurring in societies divided along sectarian lines, perhaps best encapsulated in King Abdullah of Jordan's remark about a "Shi'a Crescent."

35 Mandaville, Hamid, "Islam as a statecraft", 2018: 6.; see also Wastnidge, Edward. "The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War," Politics 35, no. 3. 2014: 364-377.

since they were first established in 1929, so it is unlikely that its role will be neutralised moving forward. Moreover, the pilgrimage is now more politicised than ever by global actors, which adds another threat to Saudi Arabia's monopoly over it. The pilgrimage has long come to embody ideological tensions, with clashes taking place over access quotas for Iranian pilgrims, their treatment by the Saudi authorities and suspicions of them fomenting revolutionary ideals in the kingdom. However, there are those who argue that there is scope for the *Hajj* to eventually turn from a venue for sectarian rivalry into a space for communality, despite the bilateral differences that exist over its meaning and management.[36]

Arguments in favour of viewing the *Hajj* as a venue for dialogue, symbolic rapprochement and religious diplomacy point to symbolic events such as former Iranian president Ahmadinejad's performance of the *Hajj* in 2007 at the invitation of King Abdullah and ongoing dialogue between the two over its management. The symbolism of such events is undeniably powerful. However, while undoubtedly being a representative event, this visit served the broader geopolitical purposes of both powers rather than paving the way for more collaboration and dialogue. Iranian clerics heralded the visit as "proof" of Iran's regional popularity, while Saudi Arabia got to play the part of the magnanimous host.[37] Therefore, the overarching narrative was once again that of Saudi Arabia relying on its custodianship over Islam's two holiest sites to bolster its standing in the Muslim world, while Iran in turn aimed to use its renewed access to the *Hajj* to undermine the kingdom.

Events such as this signal that, despite the fact that negotiations between Saudi and Iran around the *Hajj* seem to be progressing in recent years, this is not necessarily a sign of an easing in their mutual distrust or of a move towards greater dialogue and cooperation. This is because the *Hajj* and the political dynamics attached to it do not take place in a vacuum. Instead, they are highly influenced by the broader tensions between the two powers that do not appear to be easing. Above all, the *Hajj* is of paramount importance to the Saudi Kingdom for religious, political and economic reasons. The House of Saud derives great legitimacy from it and is well aware of the broader consequences possibly stemming from a perceived politicisation of the *Hajj*. However, ongoing talks over issues of security and inclusion regarding the *Hajj* signal that, moving forward, greater cooperation is possible. This is of course dependent on the evolution of geopolitical tensions between the two countries, especially regarding ongoing efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region which rest on a very fragile balance of power. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping an eye on ongoing and future talks in this avenue, especially to get a better understanding of how the religious component of the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran evolves in the light of new challenges ahead.

In an effort to further reduce tensions between the two states, the *Hajj* can have a role to play, albeit in the context of broader high-level dialogue, which is paramount. As history has shown, the pilgrimage provides opportunities for symbolic moves by both states, largely remaining open in spite of broader political tensions between them.

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36 Wehrey, Frederic, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey. "Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship." *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Rand Corporation, 2009:44.

37 Ibid.

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Smart Context-Based Investments in the Persian Gulf's Economic Security

Robert Mogielnicki

Executive summary

The acute shocks caused by the coronavirus pandemic and oil price rout of 2020 have exacerbated ongoing global trends of instability. Subsequent reverberations throughout the Persian Gulf have revealed the vulnerabilities of the regional economic and security structures. During Donald Trump's tenure as president, the U.S. favoured coercive forms of economic diplomacy that put greater pressure on the Gulf region's economic security. However, the end of a turbulent 2020 may mark the beginning of a new period of cooperation and collaboration.

This chapter argues that the political and economic contexts within which governments leverage economic policy tools are as important as the policy mechanisms themselves. Economic policymakers and influential business actors in the Persian Gulf can seek to strengthen a regional security system based on cooperative economic diplomacy by prioritising three realistic and promising avenues for engagement: 1) repairing existing ties, 2) exploiting new opportunities across territories and industries, and 3) a selective engagement of external actors from outside the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East region.

The low-hanging fruit of cooperative economic diplomacy and consequently a stronger regional security system involves repairing existing ties and safeguarding them against future tensions. Such an approach involves the utilisation of cooperation-oriented infrastructure and associated mechanisms that are already in place. Strengthening the Persian Gulf's economic security also entails realising the potential of new partnerships – whether between territories or within high-growth industries. The influence of external powers looms large over the Persian Gulf, and international partnerships are a reality of the region's economic security system. Regional actors must find ways to encourage external powers to engage with the Persian Gulf in a selective constructive manner.

The extraordinary events of 2020 call for creating a more inclusive, rather than exclusionary, regional order in the Persian Gulf. Addressing domestic needs and implementing foreign policy agendas often require external support. However, international engagement and external support must unfold in a more cooperation-based environment. Enhancing the underlying contexts for cooperative economic diplomacy – rather than immediate reliance on threatening policy instruments – is a good path forward.

Keywords: Gulf Arab, Economic cooperation, Economic policy, Integration, Persian Gulf

Introduction

The acute shocks caused by the coronavirus pandemic and oil price rout of 2020 have exacerbated ongoing global trends of instability. The subsequent reverberations throughout the Persian Gulf have shaken the economic foundations of the regional states. Pre-existing challenges and tensions further reveal the various weaknesses of regional economic structures. Formal and informal boycotts have disrupted supply chains; ongoing civil conflicts and isolated attacks have raised political risk premiums; and new leaders in Oman and Kuwait have struggled to manage unsustainable government finances – a familiar story across the region.

The U.S. has done little to act as a stabilising force in the region. During Donald Trump's tenure as president, the U.S. favoured coercive economic diplomacy – more rough sticks than gourmet carrots. His administration steadily intensified economic pressure on the Iranian government and

Iranian firms through targeted sanction regimes. The Trump administration likewise approached U.S.-China economic relations as a game of commercial brinkmanship, adding pressure on Sino-Gulf ties. The economic dimensions of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere largely revolved around specific officials wielding the threat of policy instruments.

However, the end of a turbulent 2020 may mark the beginning of a new period of cooperation and collaboration. The Biden administration is likely to tone down the aggressive U.S. posture toward Iran as it mulls over the future of the Iran nuclear deal. A Saudi-led reconciliation with Qatar – formally announced in January 2021 – has reduced regional tensions between GCC member states. The consequent reopening of transport links signalled a return to more familiar forms of regional economic cooperation. Heightened Saudi-Turkish tensions, which culminated in an informal boycott of Turkish goods in late 2020, seem to have given way to a cautiously pragmatic form of economic engagement.

Diplomatic breakthroughs offer another source of optimism and pave the way for new forms of regional economic cooperation. A normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel has initiated a flurry of memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and investment deals in banking, trade, logistics, commodities, health and technology. Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have taken similar steps in their relations with Israel. Officials hope that normalisation agreements will help boost tourist, trade and investment flows from around the globe.

Prevailing economic climates – at the global and national levels – cannot be discounted, given the profound and extraordinary changes ushered in by the coronavirus pandemic and the oil price rout of early 2020. Indeed, in a September 2020 report the energy giant BP announced that the era of oil demand growth is over.[1] With

countries across the Persian Gulf region reeling from multiple interrelated economic and health crises, addressing urgent fiscal challenges and implementing sustainable development strategies take priority over competitive jockeying for regional economic hegemony. This may not be a negative development but instead may encourage a greater diversity of partnerships and consensus building.

This chapter argues that the political and economic contexts within which governments leverage economic policy tools are as important as the policy mechanisms themselves. Economic policymakers and influential business actors in the Persian Gulf can seek to strengthen a regional security system based on cooperative economic diplomacy by prioritising three realistic and promising avenues for engagement – and simultaneously working to enhance these contexts:

- First, they should seek to revive previous economic ties that have fallen into disrepair. Gulf relations with Qatar is an obvious example here, but Iraq and Turkey also provide opportunities to build on historical economic linkages.

- Second, they should exploit the economic dimensions of new diplomatic breakthroughs and expand cooperation across innovative industries, especially in areas positively impacted by the coronavirus.

- Third, they should reassess the involvement of external parties – whether from the U.S., Europe or Asia – in regional issues and encourage their roles to unfold in a selective constructive manner.

This chapter builds upon and deepens the author's previous research findings concerning the persistence of economic linkages amid political tensions. In *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*,[2] the author examined the political veneer of economic exchange in Turkey's

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1 Katakey, Rakteem. "BP Says the Era of Oil-Demand Growth is Over." *Bloomberg*. 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-13/bp-says-the-era-of-oil-demand-growth-is-over?sref=zEzFg8RN.

2 Tol, Gönül and David Dumke. *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*. Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2019.

bilateral relations with both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He found that deteriorating diplomatic and political relations between 2011 and 2018 did not necessarily impact trade, investment and people flows in a negative manner. Meanwhile, the author's chapter in *Fractured stability: war economies and reconstruction in the MENA*[3] found that Saudi Arabia continued to leverage the prospect of border free trade zones amid bilateral tensions to reach various political and economic objectives relating to Yemen and Iraq.

Conflict Fatigue

Conflict is costly, and the Gulf governments are in no position to assume unnecessary expenses. Since the oil price crisis of 2014-15, most Gulf Arab governments had been running year-on-year fiscal deficits. Managing the fiscal burden of 2020 alongside the coronavirus pandemic and volatile oil and gas prices has proven especially difficult. Qatar is the only GCC country expected to post a balanced budget in 2020. Sovereigns across the region have tapped international debt markets and relied heavily on local borrowing, leading to ballooning government debt levels. Economic contractions in the region during 2020 are likely to be followed by slow growth over the coming years. The economic climate is not conducive to reversing foreign direct investment (FDI) trends, which have largely been in decline or stagnant over the past decade. Net inflows of FDI into Saudi Arabia, for example, steadily declined from $39.5 billion in 2008 to $1.4 billion in 2017.[4]

The involvement of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni civil war has done little to bring the devastating conflict closer to a resolution. The UAE has largely drawn down its military operations in Yemen, but Saudi Arabia's perception of the security threats posed by its southern neighbour have so far prevented the country from finding an acceptable exit strategy. Estimates of Saudi Arabia's daily expenditure on the Yemen conflict are approximately $200 million,[5] and this level of military involvement is set to enter its sixth year in 2021.

Responsibility for bearing the brunt of stabilisation and reconstruction costs in Yemen, which range from $40 billion to $80 billion[6] and continue to rise, will also fall on Saudi Arabia. However, the Saudi finances were negatively impacted first by the steep drop in oil prices in 2014-15 and then again by the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and oil price rout in 2020. The Saudi Development and Reconstruction Programme for Yemen (SDRPY) was established by royal decree in May 2018 as part of efforts by Saudi Arabia to collaborate with international donors and the World Bank over the stabilisation and reconstruction of Yemen. In late February 2019, the SDRPY announced that total "support provided by the Kingdom to help the Yemeni people" since the start of 2014 exceeded $14 billion.[7] Much of this financial support, however, consisted of pledges rather than deployed funding.

Rising regional tensions with Iran and its proxy groups resulted in attacks on inland oil facilities and maritime vessels around the Persian Gulf, which damaged critical infrastructure and

3   Narbone, Luigi. *Fractured Stability: War Economies and Reconstruction in the MENA*. Florence: European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2019. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/64127

4   The World Bank. "Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (BoP, Current US$) - Saudi Arabia." 2021. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?end=2019&locations=SA&start=2007

5   Jalal, Ibrahim. "Saudi Arabia Eyes the Exit in Yemen, but Saudi-Houthi Talks Alone Won't Resolve the Conflict." *Middle East Institute*. 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabia-eyes-exit-yemen-saudi-houthi-talks-alone-wont-resolve-conflict

6   Yahya, Maha, Marc Lynch, Frederic Wehrey, Frances Z. Brown and Dalia Ghanem. "The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction." *Carnegie Middle East Center*. 2018. https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/09/13/politics-of-post-conflict-reconstruction-pub-77243

7   Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen. "Saudi Arabia Donates an Additional USD $500 Million to Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan." *SDRPY Press Release*. 2019. https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/saudi-arabia-donates-additional-usd-500-million-yemen-humanitarian-response-plan

exposed various vulnerabilities.[8] These attacks subsequently raised the political risk premiums associated with commercial operations in Gulf countries and posed new obstacles to privatisation efforts in countries like Saudi Arabia. Continual incidents in the Gulf region have led ship insurers to raise coverage rates for merchant ships passing through the Red Sea, which is likely to impact traffic at Red Sea ports like Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.[9] The outgoing Trump administration's last-minute designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organisation served to further heighten regional tensions. However, the Biden administration has reversed this decision and promptly delisted the Houthi movement from the list of foreign terrorist organisations.

The 2017 Gulf rift resulted in an economic boycott of Qatar lasting more than three years. Each of the participating parties suffered economically. Qatar's government injected billions of dollars domestically to shore up confidence in its economy. While Qatar ultimately mitigated the worse impacts of the boycott, the small country lost access to overland trade and transport links, was unable to exploit larger Gulf markets and had to rely on (and pay for) the utilisation of Iranian airspace. The countries imposing the boycott – namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – temporarily lost investors and wealthy tourists from Qatar. Many supply chains moving goods to and from Qatar were reconfigured to bypass the boycotting countries. The primary gears of regional economic cooperation and integration, which served as a major objective behind the establishment of the GCC, largely ceased to exist.

The dispute between Gulf Arab neighbours boiled over into the international realm, involving formal complaints lodged with multinational institutions and other lawsuits. In August 2017, Qatar formally requested World Trade Organisation dispute consultations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain over trade restrictions and intellectual property right concerns.[10] Later, in October 2017, Qatar filed applications with the International Civil Aviation Organisation, a specialised agency of the United Nations, to implement cases against the boycotting countries for aviation prohibitions.[11] The step initiated a series of objections and appeals – ultimately requiring the involvement of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Qatar also instituted proceedings at the ICJ against the UAE for alleged human rights violations, or discrimination against Qataris on the basis of their nationality.[12] For its part, the UAE lodged various aviation- and football-related complaints against Qatar.[13] The Qatari sports broadcasting company beIN likewise sought to recoup $1 billion in compensation from Saudi channels.[14] These measures elevated regional tensions to a global level and included expensive lobbying efforts.

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8   Narbone, Luigi. *Revisiting Natural Resources in the Middle East and North Africa*. European University Institute. 2020: 63-72. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69265/QM-04-20-713-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

9   Saul, Jonathan. "Ship Insurers Primed to Raise Rates After Red Sea Attacks." *Reuters*. 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-shipping-insurance/ship-insurers-primed-to-raise-rates-after-red-sea-attacks-idUSKBN29I1Q1

10 World Trade Organization. "Qatar Files WTO Complaints Against the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia." 2017. https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news17_e/ds526_7_8rfc_04aug17_e.htm

11 "Qatar Submits Rejoinders in Two Cases Before ICJ." *Gulf Times*, 2019. https://www.gulf-times.com/story/637826/Qatar-submits-rejoinders-in-two-cases-before-ICJ

12 International Court of Justice. "The State of Qatar Institutes Proceedings Against the United Arab Emirates and Requests the Court to Indicate Provisional Measures." 2018. https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/172/172-20180611-PRE-01-00-EN.pdf

13 "Football: UAE's complaint against Qatar to be heard by sport's highest court." *Gulf News*. 2020. https://gulfnews.com/sport/football/football-uaes-complaint-against-qatar-to-be-heard-by-sports-highest-court-1.1578428485577 "UAE to file complaint over flight interception by Qatar." *Saudi Gazette*, 2018. https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/526348/World

14 "Qatar's beIN Demands $1 Billion Compensation for Saudi TV 'Piracy'." *Al Araby*, 2018. https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/10/1/qatar-launches-billion-dollar-bid-to-stop-saudi-tv-piracy

Repairing Old Ties: Qatar, Iraq, Turkey

The low-hanging fruit of cooperative economic diplomacy and consequently a stronger regional security system involves repairing existing ties and safeguarding them against future tensions. Such an approach would involve the utilisation of cooperation-oriented infrastructure and associated mechanisms that are already in place. Qatar's tenuous position within the GCC is a useful case study in this regard. Despite a bitter economic and diplomatic rift between Qatar and a coalition of Arab states, the participating parties met in January 2021 at the 41st GCC summit in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia, where they effectively agreed to end a boycott on Qatar that had lasted more than three years.

From an economic standpoint, all of the parties directly involved in the boycott had reached the point of diminishing returns long before the end of 2020. An alternative, cooperative, approach to regional relations provides the opportunity to reap some economic gains – however uneven or narrow. Qatar stands to enjoy immediate economic benefits from the reopening of air, land and sea links. The reconciliation also created the necessary conditions for other commercial activities to resume. On the same day as the 41st GCC summit, Qatar's finance minister flew to Cairo to inaugurate the St. Regis hotel, which is owned by the Qatar Diar real estate company.[15] Meanwhile, broadcasts from Qatar-based beIN Sports began appearing in Saudi Arabia in the immediate aftermath of the agreement,[16] suggesting a resumption of a more familiar form of regional engagement.

Other Gulf Arab states stand to gain from repaired regional ties. Saudi Arabia is manoeuvring to reap longer-term rewards. Clear progress on regional integration is aiding Saudi efforts to develop its tourism sector and promote high-profile development initiatives, such as those along the Red Sea. The Gulf reconciliation also allows Saudi officials to make a stronger case for multinational firms to relocate their regional headquarters to Riyadh.[17] Trading hubs in the UAE – such as Jebel Ali and RAK Ports – stand to recoup business lost in the aftermath of the boycott, when the reconfiguration of Qatar-related supply chains bypassed traditional re-export destinations in the Gulf.

Iraq is another theatre for repairing relations among the Persian Gulf actors. The country has had a history of tensions with bordering countries: the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) was a major motivation behind the creation of the GCC; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 soured relations with the GCC states; and the 2003 invasion of Iraq by a U.S.-led coalition set in motion years of instability and conflict. This vulnerability permitted Iranian meddling in Iraq's politics, economy and security system – further complicating relations with Gulf Arab neighbours and the U.S. Under the Trump administration, U.S. officials tried unsuccessfully to wean Iraq off its dependence on Iranian energy imports to meet the country's power needs. The U.S. repeatedly renewed sanction waivers permitting Iraq to purchase electricity imports from Iran until the very end of the presidency of Donald Trump.[18]

A rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iraq may signal a new avenue for regional cooperation. The International Crisis Group argues that this rapprochement began as early as 2016 and stands to increase with the election

15 "Qatari Finance Minister Inaugurates the St. Regis Hotel in Cairo." *Egypt Independent*, 2021. https://egyptindependent.com/qatari-finance-minister-inaugurates-the-st-regis-hotel-in-cairo/

16 "As Thaw Continues, Broadcasts by Qatar-based beIN Sports TV Channel Appear on Saudi TVs, Witnesses Say." Saudi-US Trade Group, 2021. https://www.sustg.com/as-thaw-continues-broadcasts-by-qatar-based-bein-sports-tv-channel-appear-on-saudi-tvs-witnesses-say/

17 Kerr, Simeon. "Saudi Arabia tries to lure multinationals from Dubai." *Financial Times*, 2021. https://www.ft.com/content/b968a082-486b-4eb0-b268-e1f2377891d9

18 Mower, Jeff. "US grants 45-day Sanctions Waiver Allowing Iraq to Buy Power from Iran." *S&P Global*, 2020. https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/electric-power/112020-us-grants-45-day-sanctions-waiver-allowing-iraq-to-buy-power-from-iran

of politicians open to re-engaging with Riyadh.[19] In November 2020, Saudi Arabia and Iraq opened the Arar border crossing for trade for the first time in 30 years. The Iraqi government has sought to capitalise on this warming of relations by driving foreign investment in the energy and agriculture sectors. The border crossing's director, Habib Kadhim al-Ali, expects the opening of Arar to generate around $1 billion in revenue in 2021.[20]

Turkey's relations with Gulf countries fluctuated during the first two decades of the 2000s. Warm relations between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in the early 2000s were symbolised by Erdoğan receiving the King Faisal Prize for Service to Islam. Competing views of the threat posed by political Islam, however, pitted Turkey against Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the aftermath of 2011. The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul exacerbated Saudi-Turkish tensions. Warming relations between Doha and Ankara filled the gap. Rising Qatari foreign direct investments in Turkey took place alongside declining Saudi and Emirati investments, and Qatar has provided financial support – primarily through currency swaps – to help shore up confidence in Turkey's banking sector.

Turkey is an influential economic actor in the broader Middle East region. With a gross domestic product (GDP) that reached a historic high of $957.8 billion in 2013, the Turkish economy served as the region's largest until it was surpassed by Saudi Arabia's GDP in 2018. Turkey's population of approximately 82 million is comparable to that of Iran and is only eclipsed by Egypt's estimated 100 million people. Many Gulf-based firms seeking to mitigate sluggish domestic growth view Turkey as a growth market. In 2019, Emirates NBD – Dubai's largest bank – acquired Turkey's

Denizbank for $2.76 billion. The countercyclical nature of Gulf-Turkish energy dynamics, in which the Gulf countries are hydrocarbon producers and Turkey is a hydrocarbon importer, creates an economic complementarity that can be leveraged for economic diversification efforts. Turkey also remains a popular tourist destination for Gulf citizens and residents. The number of Saudi tourists visiting Turkey grew from 84,934 in 2010 to 747,233 in 2018.[21]

Exploiting New Opportunities: Iran, Israel and Technology

Strengthening the Persian Gulf's economic security also entails realising the potential of new partnerships – whether between territories or within industries. Iranian linkages with Gulf Arab states are by no means new, but the changing parameters of international engagement signal the possibility of newfound partnerships. Iran's evolving position in the global economy is a key concern of neighbouring Gulf Arab states. On January 18, 2021, Qatar's foreign minister urged his counterparts in neighbouring Gulf Arab states to enter into a serious dialogue with Iran and offered to broker negotiations.[22] The Biden administration is determined to roll back the maximum pressure campaign pursued by the Trump administration, potentially paving the way for Iran to reintegrate in global trade and investment processes. Discussions on Iran's global reintegration often focus on the impact that Iranian hydrocarbon commodities would have on an over-supplied and low demand energy market. In a narrow economic sense, greater quantities of Iranian crude available on the energy market does not bode well for Gulf Arab governments, which

19 International Crisis Group. "Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad." 2018. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/186-saudi-arabia-back-baghdad/

20 "Arar Border Crossing Expected to Generate $Bln in Revenues for Iraq." *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2020. https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2682226/arar-border-crossing-expected-generate-bln-revenues-iraq

21 Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism. "Number of Arriving-Departing Visitors, Foreigners, and Citizens." 2019. https://www.ktb.gov.tr/Eklenti/64443,julybulletin2019-temmuzxlsxls.xls?0

22 Foxman, Simone. "Qatar Says It's Time Gulf Arabs Start Talks with Iran." *Bloomberg*, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-18/qatar-says-it-s-time-gulf-arabs-start-talks-with-iran?sref=zEzFg8RN

by and large rely on oil and gas proceeds for at least 70% of their revenue and are struggling to manage lower-for-longer oil prices.

However, this risk is overstated. Unsustainable dependencies on oil and gas proceeds are precisely the reason behind longstanding economic diversification efforts in the Gulf Arab states. Iran may compete in some economic spheres with them but the Iranian market, if it is operating within an open access order, also presents commercial opportunities for firms and investors based in the Gulf Arab states. Iran's population – standing at approximately 83 million – is roughly the size of Turkey's and represents a veritable consumer base. Established socioeconomic linkages between the Gulf Arab region and Iran provide GCC-based firms with a distinct advantage in reaching Iranian consumers. There were an estimated 600,000 Iranians living in Dubai as of 2019.[23] In 2017, 29% of Iran's imports – worth a total of $71.5 billion – passed through the UAE.[24]

In the first year after the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran's real GDP grew by 12.5%[25] reflecting the growth potential of an economy unburdened by international sanctions. Free zones and re-export hubs in Dubai, the northern emirates, Sohar and Bahrain stand to benefit from greater volumes of goods moving to and from Iran. Moreover, greater international access to Iran will improve the commercial value associated with nascent development projects, such as the special economic zone at Duqm, and initiatives still at the conceptual stage, like Silk City in northern Kuwait.

In late 2020, both the UAE and Bahrain formalised

normalisation agreements with Israel, and Sudan and Morocco announced plans to initiate similar normalisation processes shortly thereafter. Informal security and commercial ties between Israel and Gulf Arab states have existed for many years. However, Israeli-Emirati economic ties, in particular, proliferated rapidly in the wake of normalisation. A strong technology focus weaves together many of these ties. Several joint Israeli-Emirati funding platforms have emerged to invest in regional technology ventures. Cooperative linkages are not only forming at the level of high-tech frontier industries but also intersect with established industries in the Gulf: finance and banking, commodities, energy, tourism and logistics.

The focus of these nascent linkages and the mechanisms used to facilitate them – such as free zones – suggests a strong commitment to developing the economic dimensions of these newly formalised ties.[26] Following the announcement of a UAE-Israel normalisation agreement in August 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mentioned that his country would import from UAE free zones, stating "We know that we will get good prices." In September 2020, DP World and Dubai Customs signed multiple MoUs to study the development of ports and free zones in Israel and to establish a direct shipping route between Eilat and Jebel Ali.

Israeli officials hope to secure additional normalisation agreements with other Gulf Arab states. A primary motivation behind these agreements is the establishment of a regional bloc to counter Iranian influence. In this respect, and also for economic reasons, Saudi Arabia represents the major prize in prospective normalisation agreements with Israel. Saudi Arabia is not only the region's economic powerhouse but also a central actor with respect to the global Muslim community. Moreover, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is aggressively pushing to promote his country as a technology hub through new government entities,

23 Taylor, Adam. "The once flourishing Iranian community in Dubai faces pressure amid Persian Gulf tensions." *Washington Post*, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-once-flourishing-iranian-community-in-dubai-faces-pressure-amid-gulf-tensions/2019/08/12/450dfb88-afa7-11e9-9411-a608f9d0c2d3_story.html

24 Khalid, Tuqa and Andrew Torchia. "In Dubai, U.S. sanctions pressure historic business ties with Iran." *Reuters*, 2018. https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-sanctions-dubai/in-dubai-u-s-sanctions-pressure-historic-business-ties-with-iran-idNKCN1NO151

25 Paivar, Amir. "Nuclear deal: Is Iran's Economy Better Off Now?" *BBC*, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43975498

26 Mogielnicki, Robert. "UAE-Israel Economic Ties Proliferate in the Wake of Normalization." *AGSIW*, 2020. https://agsiw.org/uae-israel-economic-ties-proliferate-in-the-wake-of-normalization/

like the Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence, and national development projects, such as Neom. Located in north-western Saudi Arabia, Neom's aim to revolutionise urban living by developing a high-tech sustainable ecosystem[27] may eventually leverage the nearby proximity of Israel and its technology capabilities as part of the project's ambitious development trajectory.

Many of the new economic opportunities emerging in the Persian Gulf exist in the digital domain. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan and Pakistan established the Digital Cooperation Organisation (DCO) in November 2020 to foster multilateral cooperation in the digital economy.[28] Qatar, the UAE, Oman and other MENA countries may also become DCO members. Enhancing the region's digital economy is an important step toward improving economic security, especially as regional governments continue to diversify away from the oil and gas sector.

The coronavirus pandemic and measures to curb its spread have accelerated the growth of technology-oriented industries in the region: e-commerce, payment platforms, data hosting, robotics, new media and e-sports. The commercial activities related to these industries – and the effective implementation of related policy mechanisms, such as value-added tax, standards and regulations – require regional collaboration. Not all of the region's cutting-edge technology initiatives will meet with immediate success. In January 2021, the Iranian government launched a crackdown on Bitcoin data processing centres because of the burden on the country's power grid.[29]

Building Purposeful External Partnerships

The influence of external powers looms large over the Persian Gulf, and international partnerships are a reality in the region's economic security system. Regional actors must find ways to encourage external powers to engage with the Persian Gulf in a selective constructive manner. The thrust of this engagement should be economic, with a focus on economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and the oil price war of 2020 and – in the case of Iran – returning into the fold of the global economy. In the same manner that economic diversification initiatives seek to reduce dependency on revenue from the oil and gas sector, it is necessary for the Persian Gulf states to carefully balance external relations and avoid an outsized reliance on any particular bilateral relation.

The U.S. will continue to be the primary partner in the region, especially as Iran is likely to be at the forefront of the Biden administration's foreign policy priorities. President Biden heralds a return to traditional American foreign policy approaches that rely on strong alliances and consensus building. Jake Sullivan – Biden's national security advisor – wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that "The United States has repeatedly tried using military means to produce unachievable outcomes in the Middle East. Now it's time to try using aggressive diplomacy to produce more sustainable results."[30]

The presidency of Donald Trump and his foreign affairs agenda demonstrated that their approach was not inherently American but rather greatly dependent on specific leadership personalities. Governments and other actors in the Persian Gulf can expect a more coherent and consistent foreign policy stance from Washington under the Biden administration. However, this dynamic could revert back to a Trumpian form in the future. The Gulf's economic partnerships with the U.S. must therefore be deep and flexible – deep

27 Neom. "Home page." https://www.neom.com/en-us/

28 Digital Cooperation Organization. "Membership." 2021. https://www.dco.org/sa-en#membership

29 Karimi, Nasser and Isabel Debre. "Iran, Pressured by Blackouts and Pollution, Targets Bitcoin." *Associated Press*, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/iran-media-social-media-bitcoin-coronavirus-pandemic-6d1c7 03a7faa1f85b0f94011259ec63e

30 Benaim, Daniel, and Jake Sullivan. "America's Opportunity in the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs*, 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east

enough to derive sufficient benefits from relations but flexible enough to weather abrupt changes. For example, former President Trump issued an order exempting the UAE from 10% tariffs on U.S. imports of aluminium imports and instead placed a quota on the country's metal exports to the U.S. in the final hour of his presidency.[31]

European partnerships, especially those facilitated by European Union (EU) institutions, are inherently multilateral. The EU has managed to maintain strong economic ties with the GCC countries while also continuing to support the Iran nuclear deal. This European balancing act will be especially important as the Biden administration reconsiders relations with Iran and consults various stakeholders. Trade and investment represent a crucial component of EU-GCC ties. The GCC member states represented the EU's fourth largest export market in 2016.[32] European countries likewise function as vital foreign investors in the region. Government officials in Oman, Saudi Arabia and the resource-scarce emirates of the UAE hope that inward investments from Europe can reverse stagnant FDI flows. The reverse is also true: GCC-based firms and investment vehicles oversee substantial FDI and portfolio investments in Europe.

A strong energy demand from Asia is a bedrock of Gulf-Asia regional ties – and this dynamic persists. The oil and gas sector alone accounts for more than 70% of government revenue in most Gulf Arab countries, and Asian countries are primary consumers of the Gulf's oil and gas exports. In April and May 2020, China purchased nearly 90% of Omani crude oil exports. While Gulf countries are trying to diversify their economies, government spending and the interrelated hydrocarbon industries remain the primary drivers of economic growth in the region. Therefore, Asian economies play a key - albeit indirect - role in the ability of governments in the Gulf to allocate capital expenditure, create jobs, promote

entrepreneurship and launch economic initiatives that attract investment.[33]

In previous economic crises, China and other Asian countries proved crucial economic partners for Gulf states seeking to initiate recovery efforts. Although large-scale hard infrastructure projects may be slowing down, China is accelerating the digital dimension of its Belt and Road Initiative[34] – often referred to as the Digital Silk Road. Gulf Arab governments view technological solutions from Chinese firms as cost-effective methods for streamlining government services and cutting wasteful expenditure. Meanwhile, Chinese technology firms view the Gulf region as fertile ground for growing overseas revenues. A prospective 25-year strategic agreement between Iran and China promises greater Iranian-Sino collaboration in strategic areas of Iran's economic security, such as developing Iranian special economic zones and other dimensions of the Islamic Republic's non-oil economy.

Conclusion

The extraordinary events of 2020 call for creating a more inclusive, rather than exclusionary, regional order in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, addressing domestic needs and implementing foreign policy agendas often require external support. However, international engagement and external support must unfold in an environment conducive to cooperation.

Enhancing the underlying contexts for cooperative economic diplomacy should precede immediate reliance on threatening policy instruments. Aggressive tactics heighten the risks associated with miscalculations. Collaborative exercises can help various parties to realise common goals or – at the very least – identify shared interests. Three

31 Deaux, Joe, and Bruce Stanley. "In Final Hour, Trump Eases Metal Tariffs on One More Nation." *Bloomberg*, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-20/in-final-hour-trump-eases-metal-tariffs-on-one-more-nation?sref=zEzFg8RN

32 European Commission. "Countries and Regions: Gulf region." 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/gulf-region/

33 Mogielnicki, Robert. "How China Is Quietly Expanding Its Economic Influence in the Gulf." *World Politics Review*. 2020. https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28924/how-china-is-quietly-expanding-its-economic-influence-in-the-gulf

34 Blanchette, Jude, and Jonathan E. Hillman. "China's Digital Silk Road after the Coronavirus." *CSIS*, 2020. https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-digital-silk-road-after-coronavirus

approaches discussed in this chapter provide initial avenues forward: 1) repairing existing ties, 2) exploiting new opportunities across territories and industries, and 2) a selective engagement of external actors from outside the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East region.

Once these paths are taken, economic policy mechanisms and other incentives can be used to encourage desirable behaviours in a cooperative context. Shocks, crises and tensions are inevitable. Regional actors therefore must be armed with the instruments needed for de-escalation. However, the effectiveness of these instruments and policy mechanisms is likely to be greater within an established context-based economic security framework. This alternative approach might just work - stranger things happened in 2020.

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Environmental cooperation in the Gulf region: Why it matters and why it is failing

Tobias Zumbrägel

Executive summary

This chapter argues that environmental vulnerability as an aspect of broader security needs to be part of a future security architecture in the Persian Gulf. While there are some existing mechanisms and regional institutional frameworks conducive to regional climate governance, comprehensive action on regional environmental cooperation is so far rare. The chapter discusses several factors across different dimensions (national, regional and global) that impede regional environmental collaboration and explain the lack of institutional and organisational capacity. These include (a) an inward-oriented prioritisation of securing the welfare state and the provision of basic utilities, (b) a regional setting characterised by competition and conflict that leads to political stalemate, and (c) the exploitation of environmental diplomacy for ulterior political motives at the international level. It concludes by offering policy recommendations to foster transboundary concerted climate actions and regional collaboration.

Keywords: Environmental Cooperation; Climate Change; Gulf Region; Power Structures; Social Contract

Introduction

Scholars increasingly consider environmental vulnerability in the Gulf region to be one aspect of a broader security understanding.[1] The arid and hyper-arid climate makes it a global hotspot for water scarcity. In addition, many countries suffer from soil degradation, exposure to toxins, waste disposal problems, threats to food and energy security, pollution and biodiversity loss. The severe effects of climate change such as global warming (e.g. sea-level rise) exacerbate the deteriorating ecological situation. It is expected that environmental degradation and climate change, in combination with socioeconomic, political and demographic shifts, will cause further tensions in an already fragile ecosystem.[2] As a transboundary threat, climate change is above all a regional challenge and a matter of collective security, which makes it a key issue to consider in a future security architecture.

As Aisha al-Sarihi and Mari Luomi highlight, the Arab region has several schemes and mechanisms that enhance environmental cooperation at the regional, sub-regional and inter-regional levels. These include the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment (CAMRE), the GCC's Committee on Climate Change and the Regional Organisation for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME), which also includes Iran.[3] Despite these promising signs, the authors also stress that there are very few multilateral environmental approaches in the region. According to them, the main reasons for this lack include "a legacy of weak regional institutions; absence of clear implementation targets, defined roles and follow-up mechanisms;

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1   Soubrier, Emma. "Redefining Gulf Security Begins by Including the Human Dimension." *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 2020. https://agsiw.org/redefining-gulf-security-begins-by-including-the-human-dimension/

2   For an overview of research on the climate-conflict nexus, see Koubi, Vally. "Climate change and conflict." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, 2019: 343-360.

3   For a comprehensive overview, see Al-Sarihi, Aisha and Luomi, Mari. "Climate Change Governance and Cooperation in the Arab Region". *Emirates Diplomatic Academy*, 2019. https://eda.ac.ae/research/energy-climate-change-and-sustainable-development

low levels of transparency and accountability of governance activities; limited focus on mitigation; and a siloed approach both within and across institutions."[4]

In addition to these organisational and institutional shortcomings, this chapter suggests further reasons why jointly announced environmental initiatives frequently do not materialise and why state leaders frequently only pay lip service to proposals for common action to mitigate the severe effects of climate change. This paper seeks to explain some of these underlying driving forces on different dimensions (national, regional and global). In addition to obvious anthropogenic and natural drivers of environmental insecurity, it identifies socio-political trajectories as key obstacles. At the national level, these includes a prioritisation of natural resource management that is closely linked to the provision of public goods such as energy, food and water as generators of domestic regime stability. Beyond the national level, the region is particularly a geopolitical setting that is dominated by fierce competition and a pursuit of hegemony. Lastly, at the global level there is a strategic instrumentalisation of environmental governance for ulterior political motives such as gaining influence and better (i.e. greener) reputations that prevent compliance with legal guidelines to fight climate change and environmental degradation.

By outlining these underlying socio-political trajectories and providing solutions to overcome them, the chapter argues that environmental cooperation has indeed the potential to enhance regional security and offers a unique opportunity to overcome the regional fault line. To do so, leaders must focus on the regional realm instead of an inward-oriented resource management approach or an outward-oriented perspective of 'greenwashing PR.' Given the deep antagonistic relations among several states that hamper government-to-government cooperation, this chapter argues in favour of promoting multilateral workshops and initiatives that can offer an avenue for the creation of an independent regional organisation or forum that enhances environmental coordination and cooperation.

Environmental vulnerability as a collective security threat

The study of the relationship between environmental insecurity and conflict has a long tradition. In particular, the Malthusian tradition holds that climate change and environmental degradation are powerful catalysts of future conflicts. In the late eighteenth century, Thomas Malthus postulated that unconstrained exploitation of nature in combination with high population growth will inevitably lead to hunger, disease and war. Especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when ecological disasters turned into public scandals and the oil crisis of 1973 unveiled the global dependence on limited nationally governed resources, this Malthusian dystopian perception attracted a broader audience. Since then, neo-Malthusian voices have been eager to assert that 'climate wars' "are no longer merely a question of inter-state conflict, but also intra-state violence."[5] Events such as 'water wars' between Israel and its neighbours and civil wars over dwindling natural resources in Syria, Sudan and Yemen have been central references to support this assumption of a *direct* linkage between climate and conflict. In contrast, other scholars argue in favour of *indirect* linkages and highlight the socio-political origins of these conflicts. They consider environmental processes to be co-determined by other political, economic and cultural forces. This approach is "primarily concerned with how power evinces itself in particular environments and how (narratives) of environmental degradation affect authority and legitimacy."[6]

When conceptualising climate insecurity in the Gulf as a matter of collective security, it seems reasonable to eschew a simplistic causality of 'climate wars' and instead to look at the interplay between human-induced environmental degradation and further socio-political factors.

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4   Ibid.: 1.

5   Cited in Verhoeven, Harry. *Environmental Politics in the Middle East. Local Struggles, Global Connections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2018: 13.

6   Ibid: 15.

There are at least three interrelated factors to consider for a future security paradigm in the Persian Gulf.

First, there are threats from climate change. including a progressive rise in the long-term average temperature and falling precipitation leading to growing water stress and salinity together with further degradation of soil quality. These will all significantly increase food insecurity, water stress and further desertification. Additionally, sea-level rise poses a major long-term risk and threatens the densely populated urban centres in all the littoral Gulf states. Furthermore, occasional environmental disasters such as earthquakes, flash floods and cyclones will occur more frequently. Second, human-caused environmental degradation exacerbates the fragile ecosystem. Already now, many states in the region (above all the hydrocarbon-wealthy GCC states) have the highest rates of carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions in the world. Poor air quality is also particularly visible in large cities such as Teheran and constitutes a growing human health problem, especially for people who suffer from lung diseases such as asthma. Additionally, the water quality of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman is decreasing because of desalination plants and their production of brine, the extraction and combustion of fuel, and increasing pollution (both residential and industrial) caused by weak regulation of waste management. Intermittent environmental degradation is also caused by other human-induced activities, including incidents such as ignited oil wells, leaking oil tankers and nuclear accidents (e.g. at the Iranian power plants in Iran and Abu Dhabi), which might have devastating ecological consequences. Third, intensifying economic and political tensions over environmental losses strain state-society relations. Two examples can be mentioned. On the one hand, governments are increasingly struggling to provide basics services such as water, food, electricity and health care in the light of climate change and environmental degradation. This absence of state services raises questions about the government's core function and may constitute a potential source of social contestation. On the other hand, it can be expected that climate consciousness will steadily increase in the region as is happening in other parts of the world. In Iran, growing environmental mobilisation already led to the detention of several environmental activists in 2019.[7] While most of the above-mentioned multidimensional and accelerating challenges are cross-border phenomena that demand collective action, the following sections provide several reasons at the national, regional and international levels why there is very little regional coordination.

The domestic focus on safeguarding public goods

As outlined above, there are pessimistic long-term projections of dramatic changes in temperature and precipitation which will have impacts on health (e.g. increasing mortality through heat waves) and the availability of food and water (e.g. less rainfall, desertification and evaporation from agricultural land). Access to and distribution of public goods such as food, water and energy are further complicated by over-exploitation of natural resources, increasing contamination by human-derived waste and growing demand due to demographic growth and the continual expansion of urban centres.[8] However, despite gradual progress over the last decade, governments in the region do not consider climate change and environmental degradation a top policy priority. On the one hand, this can be explained by a general low awareness of environmental concerns among both citizens and policymakers since climate politics is considered a "back-of-the-mind issue."[9] On the other hand, there is varying understanding of the concept of sustainability, which has very little to do with environmental protection and conservation and more to do with economic diversification and the survival of the

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7   Madani, Kaveh. "The environment was once a safe space for activism in Iran. No longer." *The Guardian*, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/28/environment-safe-space-activism-iran-hardline-forces

8   Lange, Manfred A. "Impacts of climate change on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa region and the water–energy nexus." *Atmosphere* 10, no. 8. 2019: 455.

9   See Giddens, Anthony. *The Politics of Climate Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

welfare state.

A major concern is government responsibility to make the provision of basic utilities sustainable in the light of growing economic, environmental and demographic pressures. In particular, the single challenges of securing water resource sustainability and food/energy supply chains cannot be considered individual tasks but are closely interlinked. This so-called water-energy-food nexus remains the greatest challenge and a possible litmus test of future political stability because these public goods "are extremely emotional at all levels of social organisations" and so remain of strategic importance in state-society relations.[10] They also form they key foundation of the social contract. Particularly in the rentier-based Gulf monarchies, the distribution of free or at least highly subsidised utilities (e.g. electricity, water and transport fuel) far below production cost is a fundamental legitimation base for the dynastic rulers. While particularly smaller resource-rich Gulf states such as Qatar and the UAE have embarked on promoting renewable energy megaprojects and sustainable measures to meet the growing demand, other states, particularly populous Saudi Arabia and resource-poorer states such as Bahrain and Oman, face increasing difficulties in fulfilling their welfare commitments. Even Iraq and Iran, which have more fresh-water reserves, are experiencing worsened water shortages like their wealthier neighbours.

The inward-oriented interest in preserving domestic water and energy security can add to the region's unsustainability or even cause environmental problems elsewhere. For instance, it is doubtful that the large-scale development models of the smaller GCC states will decrease their already high ecological footprints. One prominent example is Abu Dhabi's Masdar City, which is increasingly turning into a "green ghost town."[11] Additionally, as a reaction to water and energy shortages, various countries are embarking on environmentally unfriendly practices such as expanding desalination systems in all the GCC states and more recently in Iran, a coal power plant in Dubai and nuclear energy (aspirations) in Iran, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia. The growing need to secure food, water and energy supply chains has also enhanced "tendencies to externalise resource exploitation and has resulted in the deterioration of environmental integrity in many regions of the world."[12] For example, some Gulf countries have heavily invested in foreign agriculture over the past decades, leading to food insecurity in some African countries.[13] Another example is the exploitation of the non-renewable Qa Disi aquifer between Saudi Arabia and Jordan to irrigate large commercial farms in Saudi Arabia. Both the desiccation of transboundary aquifers and the increasing salinity will have long-term environmental consequences and represent an illustrative example of a potential future conflict over natural resources rather than cooperation in the future.[14]

In brief, access to and distribution of natural resources in the Persian Gulf are decreasing due to a mixture of climate change, demographic growth, environmental mismanagement and questionable government policies, including subsidisation and water-intensive agricultural planning. While these developments might lead to new security-related instabilities in the region, a key point is that a national focus on securing the water, energy and food supply is

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10 Allan, Tony, Martin Keulertz, and Eckart Woertz. "The water–food–energy nexus: an introduction to nexus concepts and some conceptual and operational problems.", *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, 2015: 301-311.

11 Pouran, Hamid, and Hakimian, Hassan. "Introduction", in Pouran and Hakimian (eds.), *Environmental Challenges in the MENA Region: The Long Road from Conflict to Cooperation*. London: Gingko Library, 2019.

12 Lange, Manfred A. "Impacts of climate change on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa region and the water–energy nexus." *Atmosphere* 10, no. 8. 2019: 455.

13 Tetreault, Mary Ann, Deborah L. Wheeler, and Benjamin Shepherd. "Win–Win Versus Lose–Lose: Investments in Foreign Agriculture as a Food Security Strategy of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf." *Food Security in the Middle East*, 2014: 221-47.

14 Giordano, Mark, Voss, Katalyn and Stroming, Signe. "Groundwater Resources: Supply, Use and Security Implications in the Middle East and North Africa." in King, Marc D. (ed.). Water and Conflict in the Middle East, London: Hurst, 2020: 113.

diametrically opposed to the idea of a regional understanding on safeguarding the environment as a transboundary task.

Regional conflict and competition over cooperation

Apart from the growing domestic challenges, at the regional level there are further aspects of conflict and competition that impede comprehensive joint action on environmental sustainability. Over recent decades, the Gulf region has been defined by parameters such as securing regime stability, protecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity against external aggression and guaranteeing the export of oil and gas at a high rate. Major (geo)political shifts such as the three Gulf Wars, the creation of the GCC as an anti-Iranian alliance and the recent intra-organisational conflicts within the GCC have negatively affected regional environmental governance.

The need for collective action is best illustrated by the lack of protection and conservation of the marine environment and the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. All the Gulf littoral countries need to limit pollution, develop more sustainable desalination practices and improve environmental risk management systems.[15] As previously mentioned, there have been previous attempts at action. The creation of the Regional Organisation for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) in 1979 can be seen as an early and promising step towards regional integration on environmental issues. The organisation includes all the littoral states (i.e. Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), which are represented in a special working group, the Regional Task Force on Climate Change. However, despite promising initiatives and joint declarations ROPME's impact

has been limited due to regional rivalry and its status has remained unclear for some time.[16]

Other frameworks and mechanisms for environmental cooperation have not unfolded in the Persian Gulf. The lack of multilateral environmental collaboration even applies to the countries that form the GCC sub-regional organisation. For instance, the launch of the General Regulations of Environment in the GCC States, which came into force in 1997, marked a watershed in regional environmental governance.[17] So far it is the most pivotal framework to promote a stronger focus on environmental considerations and it requires collective action by all the GCC states regarding environmental monitoring and assessment in combination with the available technology and resources. However, by the end of the last century progress had stalled. The oil boom between 2002 and 2008 triggered a radical modernisation course with a lavish lifestyle and reckless consumption habits, with environmental concerns losing their importance. The 'Dubai Model' with its artificial islands destroying natural habitats, outdoor air-conditioning systems, ski halls and glass-fronted skyscrapers with poor insulation is a vivid example. Various countries competed with each another following this 'hyper-developmentalist' model while the ecological footprint of each country expanded.

Only lately can one notice a revitalisation of 'green thought,' which is mainly expressed through the launching of Gulf green megaprojects. Moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, all the states have stressed environmental sustainability as important pillars in their national strategic development plans (visions). However, the diversification plans say very little in terms of collaborative regional efforts to combat climate change and reduce environmental degradation. In brief and as the previous section has already indicated,

15 Bentley, Emma. "What could environmental cooperation between Iran and the GCC look like?" *Middle East Institute*, 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-could-environmental-cooperation-between-iran-and-gcc-look

16 Al-Sarihi and Luomi. "Climate Change Governance and Cooperation in the Arab Region" 2019: 6.

17 Sever, S. Duygu, Tok, M. Evren and D'Alessandro, Cristina. "Global Environmental Governance and the GCC. Setting the Agenda for Climate Change and Energy Security." in Leslie Pal and M. Evren Tok (eds.). *Global Governance and Muslim Organizations*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019: 197–228.

unilateralism dominates the region. Several countries have created individual environment-related research centres with very little cross-national coordination. These snapshots show that regional environmental governance is often hampered by fierce competition and rivalry exploiting strategic policy niches such as environmental sustainability. Regarding promoting green energy sources, it has rightly been pointed out that:

"*While GCC countries have similar renewable goals and share similar challenges, a prevailing feature of current renewable energy efforts is that each country is operating unilaterally with, at best, minimal, and most frequently zero, collaboration or coordination with others.*"[18]

It even seems that environmental concerns are instrumentalised for regional hegemonic aspirations. For instance, in 2015 the Saudi government decided to shut down production from two joint Saudi-Kuwaiti oilfields, namely the onshore al-Wafra field and the offshore al-Khafji field. Riyadh cited environmental concerns and violations as reasons, but it became clear that this was instead a cover story to put economic pressure on the neighbouring country. This dispute, which was only solved at the end of 2019, marked a major shake-up among two of the GCC members.[19] More recently, Abu Dhabi announced the completion of the first commercial nuclear power station in the Arab region, which started generating electricity in August 2020. Geographically, the Barakah nuclear power plant is located closer to Qatar than Abu Dhabi's capital, which prompted Qatari policymakers to raise concerns over its safety, an unclear regulation of nuclear waste and the lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The 'Trojan Horse' of international environmental governance

While some scholarly assessments have claimed that authoritarian countries tend to shy away from multilateral organisations and initiatives,[20] it can increasingly be noticed that autocratic rulers have "learnt to instrumentalise multilateral organisations for their own purposes."[21] Among these ulterior political objectives, gaining external legitimation, reputation and influence are of the utmost importance. Moreover, authoritarian regimes frequently try to systematically undermine multilateral organisations (e.g. by blocking unwanted initiatives and decisions) or to influence them in their favour.

All the Arab states are members of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and have ratified the 2015 Paris Agreement. However, particularly Saudi Arabia was long-known for its destructive role in hampering environmental decision-making in this supranational body.[22] With regard to the Kyoto Protocol, Joanna Depledge explains the strategic accession behaviour:

"*It is interesting to note that eight OPEC members waited until there was certainty that the Kyoto Protocol would enter into force, and then acceded to it within a few months (the Protocol had been open for ratification for six years, receiving 128 ratifications before that point).*"[23]

18 Al-Ubaydli, Omar, Ghada, Abdullah and Yaseen, Lama. "Forging a More Centralized GCC Renewable Energy Policy". in Akhonbay, Hisham (ed.). The Economics of Renewable Energy in the Gulf. London, New York: Routledge. 2019: 217.

19 Mills, Robin. Protracted Negotiations Yield Solution to Saudi-Kuwaiti Neutral Zone Dispute. *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 2020. https://agsiw.org/protracted-negotiations-yield-solution-to-saudi-kuwaiti-neutral-zone-dispute/

20 For more, see Mattes, Michaela and Rodríguez, Mattes. "Autocracies and International Cooperation." *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3. 2014: 527–38

21 Wientzek, Olaf and Enskat, Sebastian. "The Trojan Horse of Multilateralism: Why Authoritarian Regimes Favour International Cooperation While Simultaneously Undermining It." *KAS-Auslandsinformationen*, 2020: 92. https://www.kas.de/en/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/multilateralismus-als-trojanisches-pferd

22 Luomi, Mari. "Bargaining in the Saudi Bazaar. Common Grounds for a Post-2012 Climate Agreement?" *The Finish Institute of International Affairs*, 2009. https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/bargaining-in-the-saudi-bazaar

23 Depledge, Joanna. "Striving for No: Saudi Arabia in the Climate Change Regime. *Global Environmental Politics*" Global Environmental Politics 8, no. 4. 2008: 12.

Given the fact that the Gulf states are considered developing countries (Non-Annex I), another benefit is that non-compliance with the internationally agreed rules has very few negative repercussions such as a loss of credibility or other delegitimising effects within the international community.[24] As Mari Luomi observes, "the oil-exporting monarchies have monopolised regional climate policy at the level of declarations."[25] Especially the smaller but aspiring countries such as the UAE and Qatar have played more active roles on the global environmental stage to escape the Saudi sphere and showcase themselves as environmentally responsible countries.[26] Examples include the UAE voting against the Saudi preferences during the 2010 Copenhagen Accord discussions, its hosting of the International Renewable Energy Agency a year earlier and its organisation of the climate summit in 2012. Both states tend to foster self-projections as 'global good citizens' with environmentally conscious leaders despite their unsustainable and environmentally questionable use of resources. Ultimately, environmental governance appears to be somewhat a 'trojan horse' for image polishing and exertion of influence while frequently undermining the principles and objectives of the global climate regime represented by the UNFCCC.

Conclusion

This chapter has had two objectives. On the one hand, it has stressed the need to integrate climate change and environmental degradation into a (broader) future security paradigm in the Gulf. On the other hand, it has elucidated some of the main socio-political trajectories to explain why environmental cooperation, although highly relevant, is barely existent. These include domestic prioritisation of securing basic utilities, a regional struggle over dominance and 'vanity niches' and a strategic political instrumentalisation of environmental governance at the international level. These ulterior motives may help to explain the lack of environmental cooperation beyond well-known facts such as a general lack of institutional and organisational capacity. Unfortunately, there is very little optimism that this will change in the near future. Despite recent signs of easing the diplomatic rift in the GCC, there are minimal to zero signs of joint regional responses in terms of safeguarding the environment and tackling climate change. Ongoing geopolitical power games, military conflicts and deep-rooted mutual distrust between regional rivals, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran, make any government-to-government cooperation currently difficult.

Consequently, multilateral programmes should be promoted in the field of environmental cooperation that can build a conducive fundament for state-led collaboration once diplomatic relations improve. Dialogue platforms (Track-2 and Track-1.5) must be implemented to overcome the existing lack of trust and foster a process towards regional integration and a shared vision.[27] Transboundary threats such as climate change and less sensitive issues such as environmental sustainability can be useful topics for work towards trust-building measures. Additionally, the global climate regime (i.e. the UNFCCC) should monitor more comprehensively the countries' climate actions and commitments to environmental principles. International organisations such as the ESCWA, the FAO, the World Bank and GIZ that are already involved in the regional environmental governance architecture should continue and expand their technical assistance and advisory

24 For more, see Bodansky, Daniel. "The legitimacy of international governance: a coming challenge for international environmental law?" *American Journal of International Law* 93, no. 3. 1999: 596-624.

25 Luomi, Mari. "Gulf of interest: Why oil still dominates Middle Eastern climate politics." *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1, no. 2. 2011: 249-266.

26 Al-Saidi, Mohammad, Esmat Zaidan, and Suzanne Hammad. "Participation modes and diplomacy of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries towards the global sustainability agenda." *Development in Practice* 29, no. 5. 2019: 545-558.

27 A few efforts are already in place, including the project 'Tafahum – Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula' initiated by the Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF). https://carpo-bonn.org/en/tafahum/

support for the states in the Persian Gulf. They should further maintain their support in building a regional consensus and evaluating more closely how both regional (e.g. CAMRE) and subregional schemes (e.g. ROPME) can help to foster regional dialogue.

Apart from that, there are further ways in which dealing with the multidimensional challenges of human-induced climate change and environmental degradation that are co-determined by political, economic and social forces at different levels of analysis can help to build a future security system in the Persian Gulf.

Building trust through common environmental threat perceptions.

Despite their differences, all the Gulf states face similar existential threats posed by climate change, environmental degradation and the accompanying social forces as outlined above. In particular, concerns related to the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman offer many opportunities to boost regional cooperation. Joint activities under the umbrella of ROPME should be revitalised. Concrete initiatives include technology transfers and exchanges for cleaner desalination processes, early warning systems for sea-level rise and joint wildlife conservation programmes.

Integrating the water-energy-food nexus in a common regional debate.

At the national level, environmental sustainability is mainly perceived as a resource management problem. Sustainable resource management programmes should be created to provide incentives for leaders to tackle these shortcomings caused by demographic growth, climate change and environmental degradation. One possible approach would include environmental assessment initiatives at the interface between policymakers and scientists with the objective of enhancing connectivity and integration at the regional level. Ultimately, all these steps can lay foundations for creating a water-energy-food

network in the Persian Gulf.

Promoting collaboration through green recovery efforts.

Proposals for economic diversification and sustainable development were already increasing prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the coronavirus has accelerated this need caused by a dramatic oil price slump and economic recovery measures. Associating Covid-19 economic recovery packages with measures aiming at environmental sustainability (so-called green recovery) provides a unique opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation. In various sectors such as industry (e.g. decarbonisation projects), buildings (e.g. energy efficiency programmes), transport (e.g. metro and railway systems) and energy (e.g. electricity reforms and renewable energy projects and grids), governments could align their sustainable development aspirations by exchanging best practice models. This can also offer windows of opportunity for cross-border businesses. Certainly, one prerequisite is the easing of economic sanctions on Iran, which have direct and indirect environmental implications.[28]

Fostering policy learning and joint ventures through the creation of a regional environment authority.

Empowering already existing organisational structures such as ROPME or creating new ones such as a water-energy-food network can be the avenue to establishing a permanent independent environmental authority across the region. This environmental institution must aim to ensure transparency and neutrality to foster trust among opposing political camps and facilitate coordination among the individual countries. Each country should set up local environmental offices that constantly report to the supervising authority.

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28 Madani, Kaveh. "How International Economic Sanctions Harm the Environment." *Earth's Future* 8, no. 12. 2020.

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CONCLUSION

Towards a Security-Building Continuum in the Persian Gulf

Abdolrasool Divsallar and Luigi Narbone

The chapters in this book have mapped the threats that heighten tensions and competitions in the Persian Gulf region. In recent times they have resulted in growing fears of conflict. The region needs a security architecture to establish guiding principles and codes of conduct, together with norms for transnational cohabitation. While many might agree with these goals and aspirations, finding an effective approach has proven difficult for both policymakers and scholars of the region.

Given the complexity of factors that generate regional insecurity, ambitious 'grand bargains' involving all major players are unlikely. Non-inclusive attempts to address regional security issues are also likely to fail as the countries excluded will torpedo any process. Moreover, military interventions, economic sanctions and balancing practices have also rendered it impossible to move towards a cooperative approach to the governance of regional security. In view of the failures of previous initiatives in this direction, new approaches are needed to build a security system in the Gulf. One way to break the current impasse might be to move to a *security-building continuum*.

In the sections below we highlight some of the features that frame the search for such a security-building continuum.

Framing a security-building continuum

There is no set pattern for the development of regional security regimes in the world.[1] However, as the history of many regional security frameworks such as OSCE, ASEAN, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation show, they are more likely to emerge after a series of incremental evolutionary steps. There is no reason to believe that the Middle East and the Gulf region should be exceptions. Many researchers have shown that building a security system in the region is necessarily a long-term-trend and phased endeavour.[2]

Furthermore, the difficulty in achieving grand bargains and revolutionary policy shifts highlights the importance of a step-by-step approach, a process that can evolve through several interlinked phases and give rise to a continuum. Small but critical improvements implemented in each stage could pave the way for more advanced achievements. The result might be a sequence of positive changes in the security environment that respond to existing obstacles, following a rationale which is diametrically opposed to approaches which expect a sudden and immediate improvement in the security environment.

The establishment of a security-building continuum has several aspects. They include logical and systemic aspects, the actors involved, the objectives, the tools employed, and the process and the sequences to follow.

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1   Jones, Peter. "Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options," *SIPRI*, 1998. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRI2011Jones.pdf

2   See, for example, Jones, Peter. "It is Time to Establish a Middle East Regional Security System," *The Cairo review of Global Affairs*, 2020. https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/it-is-time-to-establish-a-middle-east-regional-security-system/; Vakinl, Sanam, and Neil Quilliam. "Steps to enable a Middle East regional security process." *Chatham House Research Paper*, 2021; Parsi, Rouzbeh, and Dina Esfandiary. "So Close Yet So Far Apart. Facilitating Dialogue and Cooperation across the Persian Gulf." *IAI Papers* 20, 2020. https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/so-close-yet-so-far-apart-facilitating-dialogue-and-cooperation-across-persian-gulf

Increasing the incentives for cooperation

One of the first objectives of all actions aimed at building a new security system in the region should be a contribution to changing the strategic calculus among actors to favour an end to confrontations. This entails work on both positive and negative incentives for regional actors and to shape the political will which is needed to start cooperating

The Gulf region is marked by a wide array of threats of different natures. While traditional geopolitical and geostrategic threats figure high in the region, new transnational threats in non-traditional security areas are on the rise. The complex and multifaced threat environment resulting from the combination of long-term frictions, geopolitical and geostrategic threats and growing non-linear transnational threats risk pushing the Gulf region into a 'mutually degrading' environment and even triggering war. This threat formation will ultimately bring collective loss to both regional and external actors. In the absence of working regional security, there is no guarantee that insecurities will be kept at manageable levels.

Traditional state-centred threats have not led to war among Persian Gulf countries so far, but this does not mean that they do not have the capacity to inflict heavy losses on regional states. Threats in the Gulf cold war have over time expanded to numerous contested domains, involving a growing number of actors and generating unpredictable trajectories of tension.

State-centred crises follow a path of recurrent ebbs and flows, causing unexpected flare-ups of tension which could potentially escalate to an all-out conflict. As a consequence, major regional actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pushed towards unsustainable security policies, raising their risks of incurring greater losses over time. Although the elites in these countries seem confident about their strategic calculus, in reality this might be a miscalculation. Iran, for example, is faced with growing popular dissatisfaction with the country's

regional behaviour in the neighbourhood. Iran's axis of resistance is increasingly under pressure due to resource constraints and this dynamic bears costs in terms of government legitimacy and would negatively impact its mobilisation potential. The long-term loyalty of the Shite groups that Iran supports in its regional policies is also questionable. These groups' desire for more autonomy and a greater political role is growing and for Tehran this threatens their reliability in the future. Moreover, Iran's current defence model is challenged by the development of more effective US anti-ballistic missile technologies, cyber-attacks, artificial intelligence breakthroughs and the prospects of a future Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This will continue to undermine Tehran's reliance on its current deterrence model.[3]

Saudi Arabia is subject to equally challenging prospects. The US decision to leave the region and the uncertain way in which this decision will be implemented create an unreliable strategic environment for Riyadh. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's failed military intervention in Yemen has strongly hampered the country's power projection, showing rivals the limits of the Kingdom's military performance. The future challenge posed by the ongoing energy transition and the fiscal constraints produced by the oil price downturn combined with internal socio-political pressures cast doubts on the sustainability of Riyadh's ambitious arms purchases. Similar political and financial constraints apply to the UAE, limiting their capacity to continue engaging in power projections in the Middle East to stop Iranian influence while hedging between different

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3   See Divsallar, Abdolrasool. "Why Biden shouldn't seek to deprive Iran of conventional deterrence." *Middle East Institute,* 2020. https://www.mei.edu/publications/why-biden-shouldnt-seek-deprive-iran-conventional-deterrence

external powers to guarantee their security.[4] New anti-Iranian alliances with Israel will not be Riyadh and Abu-Dhabi's sustainable solution either due to limits rooted in Arab public opinion sensitivities and differences in objectives.

Moreover, the Iran-Saudi rivalry is not the only arena of regional power competition. As recent evidence shows, the Iran-Turkey rivalry could create even more complex uncertainties in the near future for the security of the Persian Gulf.[5] If this unfolds, it will represent a third pole in the current faut line network, adding to that between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt vs Turkey-Qatar on one side and that between Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs Iran on the other. This could render existing alliances obsolete and push the countries involved to form new ones, and even to change anti-Iranian alliances for new ones made to contain Turkish penetration in the Arab world.

As Murphy rightfully asserts, the Biden administration's Persian Gulf force posture review and its efforts to convince allies that there are alternatives to a never-ending military contest with Tehran are powerful ways to send the message that the only solution is to foster a regional security dialogue and put an end to arms races and proxy wars.[6] Other international actors, and in particular the EU, should move in the same direction. International players should stop playing 'the great game' in the region and facilitate a convergence of all parties on basic shared principles, like reducing inflammatory rhetoric and increasing respect for international law, territorial integrity and the protection of human rights.

Transnational threats, such as transnational organised crime, extremism, migration, environmental degradation and climate change, to name just a few, also pose serious challenges for all countries in the region. They increase the risks of instability in the region and produce spill-over effects across the neighbourhood, as is shown, for instance, by the case of Covid-19 spreading across borders in the region. An additional example is the common threat posed by regional underdevelopment. Uneven economic development could turn into a primary driver of instability and conflicts in the region,[7] as the case of the long-term decline and poor development performance of Yemen has already tragically shown. Other regions around the globe have had similar dynamics. As Henz shows in the South African case, South Africa was forced to deploy its military to contrast the security externalities of an underdeveloped region.[8]

Both Tehran and Riyadh should consider the costs of these negative dynamics. Iran as a increasingly fragile or even failed state might turn into a source of long-term non-traditional threats for the Arabian Peninsula, while a Saudi Arabia bankrupt or drifting into instability and civil strife would inevitably pose challenging scenarios for Tehran, also given the security risk of a rise in Sunni extremism. All the countries have positive incentives to try to address together common issues and challenges like those posed by the transnational threats mentioned above.

Who to include?

The choice between a collective or a cooperative security system is a critical step in the revision of the regional security system in the Gulf. Until very recently, the current security system has followed an institutionalised pattern of competition between two confronting blocks: the US-led camp comprising the GCC countries on one side and

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4   Almezaini, Khalid. "The UAE's Security Perceptions In The Middle East: Regional Challenges, Alliances and the Diversification of Partners." In Colombo, Silvia, and Andrea Dessì. *Fostering a new security architecture In the Middle East*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), November 2020: 220.

5   Bokhari, Kamran. "The Coming Turkish-Iranian rivalry." *News Lines Magazine*, 2021. https://newlinesmag. com/argument/the-coming-turkish-iranian-confrontation/

6   Murphy, Chris. "America's Middle East Policy is Outdated and Dangerous." *Foreign Affairs*, 2021. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ united-states/2021-02-19/americas-middle-east-policy-outdated-and-dangerous?utm-medium=social&s=09

7   Shaw, Timothy. "Africa in the Global Political Economy at the End of the Millennium: What Implications for Politics and Policies?" *Africa Today* 42, no. 4. 1995: 107.

8   Hentz, James J. "The Southern African security order: regional economic integration and security among developing states." in Rick, Fawn. *Globalising the regional, regionalising the global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009: 194.

Iran on the other. Each camp has pursued an exclusion path, in an attempt to keep the other side out of the regional system. Through the provision of security assistance to the GCC, the US-GCC camp has been partially successful in building a collective security pact that excludes Iran from regional institutions. Iran has responded by building its own alliance with non-state actors, which might be seen as an asymmetrical collective balancing measure. In so doing, it has been able to limit Saudi Araba's freedom of action and make US power projection more costly, as was recently acknowledged by the CENTCOM commander General MacKenzie.[9] Paradoxically, the Iranian quest to resist the exclusionary status quo is pursuing another exclusionary objective: expelling and excluding the US from regional security arrangements.

Reliance on a collective security model has succeeded in institutionalising competition and in promoting misrecognition of the other side's security grievances as a way to guarantee security. However, no successful examples of regional security regimes have begun with statements that certain countries or views must forever be excluded.[10] The GCC's failure to provide its members with sustainable security and the fragility of Iran's security arrangements prove this. In addition, the region's previous experience with the ACRS working group shows that excluding regional players – at the time Iran, Iraq, Libya and Syria – plays a role in blocking regional reconciliation.

A durable security framework in the region will only emerge when a common vision of security is shared among all the members of the security system and across a wide range of subjects and audiences that matter in feeding insecurity. Inclusion goes beyond the state level and should help to respond to security concerns at multiple levels, including those of the individual, the family, the state and the international system.[11] However, moving toward inclusiveness does not necessarily mean abandoning or transforming existing arrangements, such as the GCC. A realistic security model would entail that the GCC continues as a collective security model while being complemented with a parallel cooperative security regime including actors like Iran and Iraq. This is the model provided by the co-existence of NATO and the CSCE in Europe during the cold war. An earlier collective pact was complemented by a broader and more inclusive cooperative one.

What to expect?

Inclusiveness is often wrongly mistaken for comprehensiveness. Although inclusiveness should aim to bring together all the actors concerned, in the early stages of engagement it might be unrealistic to comprehensively include all the contested issues and stakeholders in security talks. Previous security talks show that actors have different understandings of inclusiveness and comprehensiveness and that this might unrealistically raise expectations in initial phases of dialogue. For instance, part of the opposition to the JCPOA in recent years was linked to the unrealistic expectation that achievements in the area of nuclear security would also automatically translate into security improvements in other areas. In the current Gulf security environment, achievable objectives for all sides have proven to be compartmentalised and expectations should be adjusted to the scope and domain of each area of dialogue.

To initiate a sustainable security continuum, actors should be convinced that gradual inclusion of contested topics means specific limited gains from each stage. A gradual process is bound to produce modest positive improvements in the security climate and exaggerated hopes and

9   Martin, Peter, and Tony Capaccio. "Iran is a Daily Threat as U.S. Dominance Wanes, General Say." *Bloomberg*, 2021. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-20/iran-presents-daily-threat-as-u-s-dominance-wanes-general-says?sref=RR1m1tD8

10 Jones, "Towards a Regional Security" 1998: 11.

11 Moghaddam, Arshin Adib. "Prospects for peace in the Gulf." In Gupta, Ranjit, and N Janardhan (eds). A New Gulf Security Architecture: *Prospects and Challenges for the Asian Role.* Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013: 61.

expectations could be lethal to the process. Again, the example of ACRS revealed the importance of starting with easy objectives in security cooperation, ones which had fewer linkages to the political processes, which might have upset progress.[12] This approach naturally limits the achievable goals because it is designed as a response to repeated failures of big revolutionary security attempts.

Which tools should be used?

The Persian Gulf needs a larger toolkit of instruments to build a cooperative order. This toolkit includes non-traditional instruments. Despite the fact that tensions often flare up in the military field, there are two fundamental reasons why it is important to shift away from a focus on military security issues. First, a considerable number of topics beyond the traditional military security domains have been weaponised. A peaceful security system will necessarily require moving towards efforts to de-securitise and normalise these issues. Second, opportunities for cooperation can more easily emerge outside the traditional security domain, for instance on common transnational threats.

Many areas ranging from social to economic, cultural, religious and health ones have been instrumentally weaponised and employed in state competition. The Covid-19 emergency is one of the latest examples, with the US and Iran having used the health emergency to inflict cost on each other.[13] Arab-Iranian relations are also witnessing securitisation of non-traditional security issues. As Bahgat et. al. show, Arab-Iranian relations are influenced by powerful structural forces such as geographical proximity, history and demographical and national identity

asymmetries.[14] These factors have gradually become part of political conflicts. For example, Iran's long history gives it a strong sense of national identity and pride, while the national identity in Saudi Arabia created in 1921 and in five other Gulf states created in the 1960s and 1970s is still forming.[15] This identity asymmetry has added to Gulf Arab states' threat perceptions and incentivised aggressive reactions led by fear, bringing identity to the forefront of competition.

Securitisation of non-traditional security domains makes following an active strategy of de-securitisation in these fields and a wide use of new non-traditional instruments inevitable. These should then be integrated in the security architecture as a way to address the broad dimensions of rivalries.

The second reason why non-traditional security instruments should be used is the opportunities that they might provide to promote cooperative behaviour. Despite the expanded scope of securitisation, there are still domains outside the remit of existing rivalries that are less politicised and that are areas of mutual interest. The areas posing common risks to regional stability, like environmental issues and water scarcity, and areas that are important for all parties, like health and education, lend themselves to experimenting with loose regional cooperative experiences while keeping the security-building process alive.

What process should be followed?

In a complex security environment like that of the Gulf, revisiting the security system is unlikely to follow a simple linear path in which one step could follow another in an orderly manner. The first step would be mutual recognition of each actor's legitimate security concerns. In the current confrontational environment, the Gulf states and

12 Kaya, Dallaya Dassa. "Can it happen here?" Chapter one in Hanna, Michael Wahid, and Thanassis Cambanis (eds). *Order from Ashes.* A Century Foundation, 2018: 22.

13 Divsallar, Abdolrasool, and Luigi Narbone. "A US-Iran zero-sum game on Covid-19 could threaten global health security." *RSCAS/Middle East Directions policy paper*, 2020. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/66754

14 Bahgat, Gawdat, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Neil Quiliam (eds). *Security and bilateral relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

15 Bahgat, Ehteshami, and Quiliam. "Security and bilateral relations", 2017: 3.

Iran operate in a classic security dilemma in which they both perceive the actions of their rival as threats and take measures to counter them, which in turn trigger new threat perceptions by the other party. Noticeable progress in regional talks might only happen when there is a temporary suspension of leverage-taking actions and parties recognise the realities of the status quo until a new order emerges, a kind of Gulf Ostpolitic,[16] in which all sides recognise the others' regional roles. It is essential to open a much-needed political space for dialogue and to stabilise existing fault lines rather than adding new ones. Temporary adherence to the status quo is the way to give diplomacy a chance to proceed.

Second, given the current wide map of insecurities and the abundance of disrupting factors, the roadmap entails a complex model of parallel phases which might be pursued simultaneously. This gives great value to the process per se rather than to specific outcomes,[17] seeding and nurturing norm-making activities while breaking down complexity to foster a logic of regionalisation. As Louise Fawcett argues, regionalisation refers to an increase in interactions at the regional level that may not be the result of a deliberate policy but that take the form of process.[18] To this end, the security building process should maximise the benefits arising from informal context-based mechanisms, while it should encourage a diversification of agents by giving roles to small states and maximising the use of ad-hoc actions.

Third, boosting informal diplomatic exercises in the Gulf would contribute to the development of the practice of working together. As Nasser and Auda argue, an obsession with formalised and institutionalised forms of security arrangements should not undermine the importance of informal non-textual unofficial models and less documented security cooperation that takes place between states and non-state actors at the

subregional level.[19] By complementing formal processes with local informal diplomatic actions, the security-building process will become more natural and resilient to shocks and setbacks.

Fourth, in formal processes more emphasis should be given to the involvement of small states. The Omani government's facilitation of secret US-Iran talks in 2012 is a good example of the potential positive role that can be played by a small state in a security process. Jordan and Qatar in the ACRS and Norway and Finland in the CSCE played similar agenda-setting roles. In the Gulf too, the shuttle diplomacy of Iraqi, Omani and Qatari officials to make a bridge between Riyadh and Tehran in times of high tension have been an important asset in crisis prevention. Recent reports of Iraq's mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia are the latest in this episode. On the other hand, as Michael Wahid Hanna argues, an insufficiency of such Arab mediation in the summer of 1990 resulted in failure to ease tensions and prevent Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.[20] Therefore, international actors should invest in empowering local mediation and in promoting local capabilities in the region, such as in the case of Oman and Kuwait, to elevate them to focal points of regional dialogue.

Final words

The elements highlighted above represent a framework for actions and processes that could be used to build a security continuum in the Persian Gulf region. Within this framework, regional actors could pursue a step-by-step approach where small achievements in the short term would bring about longer-term sustainable improvements in the regional security climate, enabling increasingly ambitious steps. In this way, the region could gradually move towards an agreed set of principles and norms to manage the

16 With Ostpolitik, West Germany's recognition of East Germany as a geopolitical reality later led to a facilitation of security talks in Europe.

17 Kaya, "Can it happen here?" 2018: 21.

18 Fawcett, Louise. "Regionalizing Security in the Middle East: Connecting regional and Global." Chapter 3 in Elizabeth Monier (ed), *Regional insecurity After the Arab Uprisings*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015: 42.

19 Nasser, Nasser bin, and Jasmin Auda. "Cooperation, contestation, and historical background," Chapter 4 in Hanna, Michael Wahid, and Thanassis Cambanis (eds). *Order from Ashes*. A Century Foundation, 2018: 49.

20 Hanna, Michael Wahid. Chapter 4 in Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis (eds). *Order from Ashes*. A Century Foundation, 2018: 307.

risks produced by intense competition and reduce the likelihood of war. It could also hope to put in place reliable conflict management mechanisms and to institutionalise a peaceful mechanism to satisfactorily address the security concerns of all the actors in the region.

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