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By Neil Quilliam and Sanam Vakil

Abstract: The mutation of local, national and regional conflicts has increased regional security tensions and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Without effective leadership or institutions to manage these crises, the MENA will continue to suffer from instability posing security challenges to the region and beyond. In this paper, the authors propose a pathway to address overlapping conflicts through the creation of two concomitant processes that rely on confidence building measures.

Keywords: Middle East | Gulf countries | Regional security | CBMs

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Introduction

The Middle East is beset with a number of overlapping national and regional conflicts that stem from state perceptions of regional security dynamics. These conflicts in turn fuel intra-state cleavages and conflicts. Whereas tensions once focused primarily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, today a number of conflicts have increased in scope and scale complicating the prospect of reaching resolutions in any of the conflict theatres. From the intense competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the ongoing war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar underway since 2017, Iran's longstanding regional interference in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Libya and growing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the wider Middle East has provided fertile ground for civil war, external interference and regional instability.

The 2003 Iraq war, the 2011 Arab Spring and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal – followed by the US withdrawal from the deal in 2018 by President Donald Trump have also contributed to state (in)security dynamics. Moreover, competition amongst European and Gulf Arab states as well as Turkey for influence in the Mediterranean region has further added to those dynamics. Over the past decade, the US security commitment to its regional partners through the Carter Doctrine has wavered, ushering in more regional activism and the entrance of Russia and China into the region. These issues have been made worse by Iran's regional posture, which is seen as strategically defensive in Tehran but is perceived as aggressive among many Arab states and Israel. Without any effective regional framework or de-escalation mechanism, regional states have engaged in destabilising behaviour by disrespecting state sovereignty, stoking regional and domestic/local tensions, supporting non-state actors, disrupting maritime security and disregarding arms control objectives.

To date, international and regional actors have yet to create an inclusive framework where all regional states can engage directly. Existing regional organisations ranging from the Arab League to the Organisation of Islamic States (OIC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have failed to provide strong and effective mechanisms to promote dialogue and mediation. The Arab League has become deeply politicised. The OIC includes all regional actors short of Israel but the body, which also includes other Muslim-majority countries outside of the Middle East, has no mediation structure. The GCC remains sub-regional in scope and even then has seen intra-organisational crises, such as the 2017 blockade of Qatar by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (and Egypt), limiting the functionality of the bloc.¹ In 2019, the Trump administration sought to create the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), which would have been a NATO-like Arab political and security organisation including the GCC states, Egypt and Jordan with the objective of collaborating against Iranian regional activity. The MESA initiative failed to materialise because of inter-Arab challenges and disagreements over the goals, threats and structure of such an organisation.² The Iran nuclear agreement, while solely focused on constraining Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for

¹ Peter Jones, "It Is Time to Establish a Middle East Regional Security System", in *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, No. 37 (Spring 2020), <https://www.thecaireview.com/?p=10897>.

² Yasmine Farouk, "The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go", in *Carnegie Articles*, February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/78317>.

sanctions relief, was intended to lead to wider regional discussions.³ However, post-JCPOA inertia and uncertainty over US withdrawal from the deal prevented regional discussions from advancing.

What has been lacking in these discussions and frameworks has been the development of sustainable confidence-building measures (CBMs). CBMs were a critical part of the Cold War Helsinki dialogue that gradually gave rise to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and later evolved into a fully-fledged Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), through a process designed “to reinforce stability in a frozen status quo and [...] lessen the risk of a surprise attack and mass-scale war”.⁴ CBMs seek to create predictable expectations and outcomes between states. The objective of CBMs is to incrementally build trust by addressing soft issues, which will over time allow the parties to discuss the harder issues that separate them. As one expert put it, “Over time the implementation in good faith of various specific measures has the potential to create a sum that is larger than its parts”.⁵ CBMs need not always be formal, but can also be informal, tacit and private agreements.⁶ However, experts agree that for CBMs to be meaningful they must be tied to a specific purpose and end goal, rather than becoming a process in themselves.⁷ In the context of the Middle East region, therefore, the purpose is the creation of a regional security framework.

This paper will examine the geopolitical context, challenges and opportunities for the creation of an internationally led and managed, multilateral regional security framework providing particular focus on the confidence-building measures needed to protect such a process and help guarantee the outcomes.⁸ Drawing on the findings of their previously published research,⁹ the authors will lay out recommendations that focus on a principle-centred approach set alongside multilateral and bilateral negotiations tracks, as pursued under the 1991 Madrid Process on the Israeli-Arab conflict and build upon the foundational blocks of CBMs that proved critical to the OSCE/Helsinki Process. While neither of these models can be replicated in the wider Middle East context, the authors believe that they provide valuable examples. In the sections below, the authors will lay out two concomitant pathways to build CBMs in the Middle East.

1. The regional context

Reviewing recent history is important to provide context on the changing regional and geopolitical landscape. A critical turning point that has had significant consequences for

³ Robert Einhorn, “The JCPOA Should Be Maintained and Reinforced with a Broad Regional Strategy”, in *Brookings Briefs*, 29 September 2016, <http://brook.gs/2cQweM4>.

⁴ Zdzislaw Lachowski, “Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the New Europe”, in *SIPRI Research Reports*, No. 18 (2004), p. 1, <https://www.sipri.org/node/1525>.

⁵ Peter Jones, *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East. Issues and Options*, Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2011, p. 26, <https://www.sipri.org/node/1828>.

⁶ Michael Krepon, “Conflict Avoidance, Confidence-Building, and Peacemaking”, in Michael Krepon et al. (eds), *A Handbook of Confidence Building Measures for Regional Security*, 3rd ed., Washington, Stimson Center, 1998, p. 3, <https://www.stimson.org/?p=5500>.

⁷ Zdzislaw Lachowski, “Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the New Europe”, cit.

⁸ Chen Zak Kane and Egle Murauskaite (eds), *Regional Security Dialogue in the Middle East. Changes, Challenges and Opportunities*, London/New York, Routledge, 2014.

⁹ Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, “Getting to a New Iran Deal. A Guide for Trump, Washington, Tehran, Europe and the Middle East”, in *Chatham House Reports*, October 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23350>.

regional security was the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. The war saw the growth of an American military presence on Iran's borders in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, where in late 2001 US troops had ousted the Taliban government because of their support to al-Qaeda, and over time gave rise to Tehran's interventionist regional strategy, where it has supported state and non-state actors such as Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. The outgrowth of these events alongside the 2011 Arab uprisings, and subsequent civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, gave way to a new wave of Arab state interventionism, which also coincided with Russia's forcible re-entry into the region.

The 2003 Iraq war is considered a turning point in regional security because the US invasion saw the removal from power of long-time Arab dictator Saddam Hussein. Arab Gulf states had repeatedly warned the George W. Bush administration that the removal of Saddam, who had long provided a counterweight, would result in the empowerment of Iran.¹⁰ The outbreak of the 2011 Arab Spring further exacerbated Arab Gulf fears. When the Barack Obama administration did not actively defend its ally, Egypt's long-standing autocratic ruler Hosni Mubarak, Arab Gulf leaders concluded in shock that they could no longer rely on Washington as a security partner.¹¹ The Syrian civil war furthered these qualms when again President Obama did not adhere to his stated commitment to enforce his "red line" on the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. Moreover, Iran's military deployment in 2012 to defend Assad increased Arab Gulf perceptions that Tehran's plans amounted to unhindered regional expansionism. Its direct military intervention in Iraq to stem the extremist threat from the Islamic State (ISIS) heightened such anxieties, though the extremist organisation posed a threat to Arab Gulf leaders too. The outcome of this assessment was manifested in Arab Gulf regional adventurism seen in the 2011 defence of the Bahraini monarchy, the 2015 Yemen war and the 2017 Qatar blockade.¹²

The Iran nuclear negotiations, underway from 2013 and finalised in 2015, provided additional impetus for America's alienated Arab allies. Simply put, the JCPOA, signed by Iran, the US, Russia, China, France, Germany, the European Union and the UK, included a number of concessions by Iran on its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. The agreement, while initially celebrated as a multilateral achievement, failed to win plaudits from the Arab Gulf states or Israel. Both saw the limited nuclear focus of the deal which gave economic benefits to Iran as one that would encourage Tehran's unbridled regional aggression in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and the continued development of its ballistic missile programme. Ultimately, Obama sought to create a new balance between Iran and the Arab Gulf.

Without support from Washington, the Arab Gulf saw President Trump's criticism of the JCPOA as an opportunity to contain Iran's regional footprint. This came to fruition on 18 May 2018 when Trump exited the JCPOA. The stated aim of the Trump administration's policy was

¹⁰ James R. Stocker, "Historical Legacies of US Policy in the Middle East", in Robert Jervis et al. (eds), *Chaos in the Liberal Order. The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 261-272.

¹¹ Fawaz A. Gerges, "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (March 2013), p. 299-323.

¹² Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Regional Role", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (September/October 2015), p. 18-27, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/61582>.

to rollback Tehran's regional influence and force Iran back to negotiate a comprehensive deal. The latter would not only increase the scope and scale of the nuclear restrictions, but would also see concessions and export controls imposed on Iran's ballistic missile programme and curtail regional support for Lebanon's Hezbollah, Syria's Assad, Iraqi militia groups and Yemen's Houthis.

In May 2019, having seen no concessions from Tehran, Washington imposed additional penalties as part of its maximum pressure campaign, preventing Tehran from exporting oil, subsequently sanctioning almost all Iranian trade and industry, designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a foreign terrorist organisation and also sanctioning Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif among others. In reaction to Washington's approach, Tehran shifted away from JCPOA compliance towards its own maximum resistance strategy. Over the course of 2019, in order to increase leverage and force a policy shift in Washington, Tehran began to transfer the costs of maximum pressure to the region. These included an increase in the frequency of missile attacks via proxy groups in Iraq and Yemen against US interests and Saudi targets respectively; amphibious assaults against tankers in the Persian Gulf; downing a US drone in June 2019; and accurate missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019. Further escalatory tactics employed by Iran also included incremental breaches of its nuclear deal compliance, which were telegraphed to the international media by Tehran.¹³

In reaction, the international community directly and indirectly lobbied Washington for a shift in strategy. French-led diplomacy unsuccessfully sought to bring Trump and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani together at the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2019 but challenges over optics, timing and lack of trust resulted in a stalled effort.¹⁴ A US response finally came after an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia killed an American contractor in December 2019. After some further escalation on both sides, Trump authorised the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in January 2020, an audacious move intended to re-establish temporary deterrence.¹⁵ Iran responded by striking the Ayn al Asad US base in Iraq. Rather than alter the course of maximum pressure, the Trump administration has continued to double down on sanctions.

US equivocation felt by Arab Gulf leaders has equally been felt by Mediterranean states, especially Greece and Cyprus but also other EU member states. Although successive US administrations have used energy diplomacy to considerable effect in drawing together the energy economies of East Mediterranean states, notably Israel, Egypt and Jordan (obviously not a Mediterranean state, per se), the Trump administration appears to have backed off from helping Greece and Cyprus reach a solution with Turkey over competing maritime claims in hydrocarbon-rich Mediterranean waters.¹⁶ As a result, both the EU and separately, some of

¹³ Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis and Clayton Thomas, "U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy", in *CRS Reports*, No. R45795 (8 May 2020), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45795.pdf>.

¹⁴ Robin Wright, "Trump's Close-Call Diplomacy with Iran's President", in *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/donald-trumps-close-call-diplomacy-with-irans-president-hassan-rouhani>.

¹⁵ Jared Szuba, "CENTCOM Commander Says Soleimani Strike Won't Deter Iran Forever", in *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2020, <http://almon.co/3dj8>.

¹⁶ Nektaria Stamouli, "Donald Trump Snubs Greece's Diplomatic Overtures", in *Politico*, 8 January 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-snubs-greece-kyriakos-mitsotakis-diplomatic-overtures>.

its member states, have been drawn into an intense competition over East Mediterranean energy resources, which is also connected to conflicts in North Africa, most notably in Libya.

The competition over hydrocarbon reserves has intensified amongst those states with a material interest in developing the sub-sea resources, namely Cyprus, Turkey and Greece, but also now including Israel, Egypt and Libya, as well as Jordan, Lebanon and the UAE.¹⁷ The core issue rests between Turkey and Greece and their long-running maritime dispute, but it has come to focus more recently upon Cyprus's resource-rich sovereign waters. The interests of EU member states Greece, France, Italy and Cyprus are driving EU policy forward and challenging Turkey's counterclaims and countermoves to secure access in Cypriot waters. The European Council made clear its position when it was quick to condemn Turkey for signing in November 2019 a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya on Delimitation of the Maritime Jurisdiction Areas in the Mediterranean, which infringed the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus.¹⁸ Yet the EU chose not to do so when Greece and Egypt signed their maritime agreement in August 2020. The dispute has catalysed France into becoming an assertive ally of Greece and Cyprus. To demonstrate its commitment, Paris sent naval frigate La Fayette to the East Mediterranean in August 2020 to participate in joint military exercises and stationed two Rafale fighter jets in Crete.¹⁹ Indeed, the UAE participated in the exercises too.²⁰ Nevertheless, France's interests are driven by its wider Mediterranean strategy and its intense rivalry with Turkey, rather than energy security per se.

The competition between Turkey vs. France, Egypt and the UAE manifests directly in Libya. The countries support differing sides in the North African state, with Istanbul backing the UN-recognised Government of National Accord, and France, Egypt and the UAE lending material support to the self-claimed Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar. In Libya, French and Emirati interests seem to align in their vision that the country be governed by a strong "secular" military leader as to opposed to "Islamist" groups, and to that end both have been willing to break the UN arms embargo and have continued to supply Haftar's forces with advanced weaponry to defeat those groups aligned with the Government of National Accord.²¹ Turkey's deepening military engagement in Libya, however, has not only thwarted the territorial advances made by Haftar, but has also reversed them.²²

The pendulum has swung in favour of the Government of National Accord and Turkey has seemingly undermined the success of France and the UAE's allies. As a result, France has increased its support to Cyprus and sought to push the EU towards placing sanctions upon

¹⁷ Hussein Ibish, "Competition for Mediterranean Natural Gas Deepens as Gulf, European States Join the Fray", in *AGSIW Blog*, 27 February 2020, <https://agsiw.org/?p=31315>.

¹⁸ Branislav Stanicek, "Turkey: Remodelling the Eastern Mediterranean Conflicting Exploration of Natural Gas Reserves", in *EPRS Briefings*, September 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652048](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)652048).

¹⁹ Victor Mallet et al., "France Stokes Turkey Tensions by Sending Naval Vessels to Waters off Cyprus", in *Financial Times*, 13 August 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/465ba697-451f-4601-b1a7-02eca6680edc>.

²⁰ "UAE to Send F-16s to Crete for Training with Greek Military amid Tensions with Turkey", in *Al-Monitor*, 24 August 2020, <http://almon.co/3e0f>.

²¹ Jason Burke and Patrick Wintour, "Suspected Military Supplies Pour into Libya as UN Flounder", in *The Guardian*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/dby2t>; Eric Schmitt and Declan Walsh, "U.S. Missiles Found in Libyan Rebel Camp Were First Sold to France", in *The New York Times*, 9 July 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2JnoGAh>.

²² Mohamed Eljarh, "Turkey's Intervention in Libya Disrupts the UAE but Opens the Door for Russia", in *Fikra Forum*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Turkey-Intervention-Libya-UAE-Russia-USA-Middle-East>.

Turkey. The East Mediterranean issue, therefore, has become increasingly complex and is no longer focused only on Cypriot gas reserves, but a much broader set of issues including interested parties from the Gulf as well.

2. Getting to a deal

In 2019, the authors published *Getting to a New Iran Deal: A Guide for Trump, Washington, Tehran, Europe and the Middle East*, an interview-based study that assessed President Trump's maximum pressure policy and the pathway to new negotiations with Tehran. This project drew upon 75 off-the-record interviews conducted with policy-makers and analysts in ten countries (the US, Iran, France, Germany, the UK, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel), who were asked to assess different negotiating scenarios including achievable improvements to the JCPOA.²³

Respondents generally did not foresee a "grand bargain" on Iran as a viable outcome of the US strategy. Their scepticism reflected in part the Trump administration's execution of a zero-sum, sanctions-focused strategy, and its limited understanding of Iran's decision-making priorities and national interests. Interviewees suggested the current stand-off would not result in Washington's sought-after results. The maximum-pressure strategy has produced greater regional instability and anxiety among the US's regional partners, resulting in a loss of US credibility in Europe and the Middle East. The unilateral US approach has not only created divisions with Europe over Iran policy, but has also allowed Russia and China to exploit this disunity to further their own economic and political interests.

Respondents saw a "JCPOA+" model as the best outcome of the current stand-off. A new agreement along these lines would offer improvements on the original JCPOA, including extensions to its sunset clauses, greater International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to nuclear sites, expanded monitoring and verification of Iranian compliance, and codification of stated constraints on intercontinental ballistic missiles.²⁴ Respondents saw Iran not only achieving sanctions relief but also meaningful access to the international banking system, security guarantees and insisting that a new deal would be confirmed as a treaty by the US Senate.

However, interviewees widely agreed that regional issues – including Iranian support for state and non-state actors in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen – and Iran's pattern of ballistic missile proliferation can only be addressed via a multilateral, European-led negotiation. These issues were repeatedly identified as being too complex and as requiring a sustained commitment from external actors to manage what would be a long process.²⁵ For most respondents, Europe is one of the few actors with the credibility to manage relations across the region, though much now hangs in the balance given events in the East Mediterranean.

For regional actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, respondents found that outsourcing the containment of Iran to the United States has proven ineffective. Instead,

²³ Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, "Getting to a New Iran Deal", cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

governments in these countries should consider crafting independent bilateral outreach, and a multilateral regional strategy that does not rely solely on containment but also includes engagement.

It is against this backdrop that the 3 November 2020 US election looms large. The outcome will bear consequences for US efforts to rebalance global relationships including with Europe and to address regional security challenges in the Middle East. Many experts hope that a Biden victory will result in a return to multilateralism, the promotion of democratic values and a commitment to human rights, a restoration of the transatlantic alliance, a re-entry into the JCPOA and an equilibrium in regional relations. It is also expected that in any new negotiation with Tehran a Biden administration would also attempt to address regional security dynamics that were not included in the first deal.

Such a shift would be in contrast to President Trump's regional approach that has swung between calls to increase burden sharing, to withdraw US troops from forever wars and to contain Iran through a sanctions-based maximum pressure strategy. Trump has sought to provide assurances to Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but has also stoked uncertainty in his inconsistent response to Iranian provocations and prevarications on military drawdowns. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic fallout, alongside the increased tensions with China, have produced even greater regional insecurity while the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain would appear to crystallise new alignments that have been underway for some time now.

3. Confidence-building pathways

Although expectations vis-à-vis a Trump or Biden administration differ, it is more likely that changes to the balance of power within the region will ultimately shape and determine the course of conflict over the coming decades. President George H. W. Bush's New World Order vision, put forth in 1991²⁶ and which saw the US assert its dominance as the only superpower that had a profound impact upon the region, has run its course. In its place a new order, much more complex than its predecessor, is emerging. It brings with it an imperfect blend of great power politics – a mismatch of military, political, financial and security dynamics amongst the United States, China, Russia and the EU. It is likely to be characterised by a mix of competition and cooperation depending upon priority areas. At the same time, regional actors such as the UAE, Turkey and Qatar are asserting themselves into the gaps left by the major powers, as mentioned above, and often exacerbating tensions.²⁷

The next US administration will enter office at a time when conditions are both supportive of and disruptive to resolving conflicts. Recent history has shown that smaller regional powers are unlikely to act with caution when filling the gaps left by the great powers. And, to date, the major powers have done little, if anything, to deter them from pursuing adventurous foreign policies. In fact, Russia has been an “enabler” and has unequivocally backed state and

²⁶ Joseph S. Nye, “What New World Order?”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Spring 1992), p. 83-96.

²⁷ International Crisis Group, “The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown”, in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 212 (27 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13832>.

non-state actors in Syria and Libya²⁸ respectively, while the United States, distracted by domestic priorities, is seen to be an unreliable security partner.

The major powers retain sufficient military, political, diplomatic and financial capital to rein in the ambitions of their regional allies. In fact, in their totality, they could bring all the parties to the table and use their leverage to catalyse a new inclusive process. However, they are only likely to do so if their immediate interests are at stake. Given the trajectory of conflicts in the region and the appetite of regional players for adventurism, conditions only look set to worsen and without a conflict-resolution mechanism in place, there is a growing risk of spill-over, which will directly affect the interests of Washington, Brussels, Moscow and Beijing.

Further instability in the Middle East and Mediterranean region carries with it risks for the EU in the form of trade, security and migration. The prospect of broader instability in an area outside of China's control poses a threat to its investments, energy security needs and expansive infrastructure projects. In fact, it may force Beijing to commit to a higher profile political, diplomatic and military presence. Russia, for its part, is arguably over-invested militarily in a number of theatres, which over time will act as a serious drain on critical national resources. And finally, irrespective of the pivot to Asia, the United States remains invested across the region because it needs to pursue and support stability as a means of freeing up capacity to meet the growing global influence of China.

In spite of the competition amongst the United States, the EU, China and Russia, they share a common interest in supporting a regional security framework that works towards resolving conflicts. Therefore, it is in the interests of all four actors to work together to develop a framework that enhances regional security. Whereas the collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to the unipolar moment, which enabled the United States to bring all parties to the table in Madrid, the emergence of a multipolar order in the region and the configuration of power amongst the four actors – in all its forms – present another moment when major powers can bring regional actors back to the table.

Given the complexity of each specific conflict dynamic, we argue that it would be more efficacious for one or two of the major powers to shepherd each sub-regional dialogue, such as the Gulf, the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean zone, separately. The sub-regions should be self-defined and not imposed from outside. The borders would need to be set and agreed by the actors themselves. It follows that each sub-region would pursue differing CBMs given the immediate environment, and those specific experiences would prove valuable and could serve as case studies to help other sub-regions progress along similar lines. The experience would not be linear and progress amongst the regions, however defined, would be uneven, but “plugging in” to the wider regional dialogue would give an opportunity to map progress.

Where a major power is a conflict actor, such as Russia in Syria, the EU in the Mediterranean or the United States in the Gulf, including a second less conflict-invested major power might help achieve an “honest broker” status and reassure all parties that the dice are not loaded. For example, the EU would be better suited to help shepherd the process in the Gulf than the Mediterranean where it is now a conflict actor. The co-chairing of sub-regional processes can

²⁸ Dmitriy Frolovskiy, “Russia’s Involvement in the Middle East: Building Sandcastles and Ignoring the Streets”, in *MEI Articles*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/81298>.

help mitigate against pronounced bias of the major powers and can also reassure all local parties that the chair will be balanced.

Before sub-regional discussions can begin, however, a wider multilateral track including all parties should be established to agree on guiding principles, norms and modalities to shape the overall approach to the process.²⁹ In order to reach this point though, the four external powers will need to design a series of CBMs, as means of helping establish a baseline of trust as well as identifying shared interests, threats and opportunities.

We propose two building block approaches to facilitate confidence-building measures. As argued by Michael Krepon, “All that is required is for the parties to see separate value in the particular steps chosen and for those steps not to intensify existing levels of hostility.”³⁰ If the parties view CBMs as a zero-sum game, negotiations will fail. As well, “A building-block approach to CBMs is more appropriate when little foundation of trust exists in tense regions.”³¹ The first pathway would take an issue-based approach and seek to build confidence by starting with less contentious areas and gradually moving on to more difficult ones. A pyramid structure of CBMs as we propose would build on progress made in earlier dialogue. A second process would see multilateral engagement on the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Palestine and the JCPOA process. Both pathways would see the creation of a CBM pyramid that would tackle more challenging issues only after trust and confidence has been an established outcome of earlier negotiations.

As with all efforts to resolve conflicts, sequencing is the key to achieving a satisfactory outcome for all parties. Although the two pathways would ultimately run concurrently, the issue-based approach would need to begin before the multilateral engagement track commences. This would allow for progress to be made on less contentious issues and amongst technocrats who share a desire to address common maladies that affect all societies. As progress is made climbing up the pyramid of issues, a point could be reached that triggers the second process, which then draws in higher-level decision-makers to consider more contentious issues. Given that so many issues pertain directly to security, it would be essential for “securocrats” to drive forward the dialogue with the ultimate goal of reaching a point where the heads of military, security and intelligence agencies engage in the process alongside political leaders. However, as noted above, the whole process should begin with a focus on pressing soft issues, such as health diplomacy.

The outbreak of COVID-19 offers a unique avenue to pursue a building block approach for regional de-escalation and discussions around health diplomacy. The virus has spread through all Middle Eastern states with a death toll surpassing 50,000. The travel restrictions alongside the economic toll from the pandemic have created regional economic vulnerabilities. Iran, Iraq, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been particularly hard hit by the virus. During the first peak, the UAE led a humanitarian effort to assist Iran, which was the first country hit in the area (and probably the source of region-wide infections), sending medical equipment and signalling that “providing life-saving assistance to those experiencing distress is essential to

²⁹ Peter Jones, “Structuring Middle East Security”, in *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (December 2009/January 2010), p. 105-122.

³⁰ Michael Krepon, “Conflict Avoidance, Confidence-Building, and Peacemaking”, cit., p. 6.

³¹ Ibid.

serving the common good. [...] the leadership and people stand shoulder-to-shoulder with nations in their time of need”.³² The UAE was not the only state to offer Tehran assistance. Indeed, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and even Saudi Arabia also provided support.

Social and humanitarian CBMs have been often identified as easier entry points for first discussions.³³ This outreach can set the basis for initial regional discussions on management of future health crises. A collective discussion on a regional rapid health response strategy could establish important common ground for future crises. Such a discussion could also be supported by the broader public because of the health focus. Providing collective humanitarian assistance and sharing medical expertise and best practices would undoubtedly build some baseline levels of trust.

Beyond the discussion on health-related collaboration, a next round of discussions should focus on religious tourism. A commitment to guarantee safe passage to religious sites has been a useful CBM that has depoliticised religious observance in the past. In 1987, after clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces, diplomatic ties were severed prohibiting Iranians from joining in the Hajj.³⁴ When Saudi-Iranian ties were gradually restored in 1991, religious pilgrimage was renewed and both countries worked to avoid politicisation of religious events. In 2017, after a two-year hiatus following a 2015 stampede in Mecca, Iranian pilgrims returned yet again as a first step to what many hoped would lead to broader regional dialogue.³⁵ In recent years, similar such exchanges have been seen between Iranian and Iraqi pilgrims. COVID-19 saw the cancellation of religious events and closure of borders across the region, with Saudi Arabia opening its borders to limited religious tourists only in November 2020.³⁶ Establishing parameters and commitments to allow for non-politicised respectful religious observance around the region would be an important building block that would encourage people-to-people exchanges while also building confidence.

The impact of climate change seen in rising temperatures, land degradation, desertification, water scarcity, food security and air and water pollution has wide-ranging impact around the Middle East. Scientists have predicted that without greater prioritisation of climate change policies and commitments, much of southern Iraq, Iran and the Arab Gulf states could become uninhabitable over the next fifty to one hundred years.³⁷ The impact of climate change is also expected to reduce access to resources and increase competition with serious potential consequences for economies and social and political stability.³⁸ As oil-producing states are diversifying their economies away from fossil fuel reliance, regional coordination and

³² UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *UAE Sends Aid Flight to Iran to Support Fight Against Corona virus*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/medialhub/news/2020/3/16/16-03-2020-uae-iran>.

³³ Peter Jones, “Structuring Middle East Security”, cit.

³⁴ John Kifner, “400 Die as Iranian Marchers Battle Saudi Police in Mecca”, in *The New York Times*, 2 August 1987, <https://nyti.ms/29zEcqE>.

³⁵ Mahmoud Mourad and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “Iran Sends Pilgrims Back to Haj in Test for Broader Dialogue”, in *Reuters*, 1 September 2017, <https://reut.rs/2wpAJqr>.

³⁶ Stephen Kalin, “Saudi Arabia to Resume Religious Tourism in Bid to Revive Economy”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-to-resume-religious-tourism-in-bid-to-revive-economy-11600866299>.

³⁷ Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, *Climate-exodus Expected in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2 May 2016, <https://www.mpg.de/10481936>.

³⁸ Gerald Stang, “Climate Challenges in the Middle East: Rethinking Environmental Cooperation”, in *MEI Policy Papers*, No. 2016-2 (May 2016), <https://www.mei.edu/node/23062>.

integration on environmental challenges is urgently needed. Technical discussions among experts have already pointed to the potential use of satellite technology as one area that could lead to greater environmental cooperation.³⁹ Growing global attention to climate challenges provides an opportunity for regional states to begin discussions and make commitments to work collaboratively on these issues.

Drug trafficking is another area that is often cited as a CBM for the Middle East. The region is not only a source for illicit trafficking but also an important transit point. Limited cross border coordination on trafficking controls exists, giving rise to growing local and transnational smuggling networks. Non-state actors and terror groups ranging from Hezbollah to ISIS rely on narcotics smuggling as a source of finance. Addiction rates are also rising across the region, imposing social and economic costs on regional governments.⁴⁰ Greater transparency, coordination and shared enforcement on routes, networks and dissemination patterns could lead to a more effective local and regional approach that would promote greater stability and cooperation.⁴¹

The energy landscape is undergoing a profound change and whilst the abundant hydrocarbon reserves in the Middle East region, including newly discovered resources in the East Mediterranean,⁴² serve it well, the global economy is without doubt heading towards a low carbon future. Whereas the energy debate a decade ago focused on two main issues – the dominance of China as an energy consumer, which was a comforting premise for the Gulf, and the emergence of unconventional gas as a game-changer – it has now shifted decisively towards the coming end of the hydrocarbon age.

At the same time, the climate science that some policy-makers once challenged, and international as well as national oil companies appeared to doubt, has persuaded a critical mass of not only decision-makers, but also – more importantly – public opinion that climate change is real and its effects profound. Against this changing landscape, the energy players of the past – mostly the crude oil producers – and the new gas players, especially in the Mediterranean, face an uncertain future. It is not surprising, therefore, that some states in the Gulf which once paid lip service to diversification are now seeking to fast-track the process to offset the risk of ending up with significant stranded assets. Whilst the competition for exploring and developing gas reserves in the East Mediterranean is “hotting up” and those countries engaged are dreaming of market share in Europe and Asia, the typical project lifespan of at least 20–25 years could, arguably, outlast demand or simply fail due to poor economics when compared to ‘low cost’ producers such as Qatar, Australia and the United States. As such, both oil and gas producers in the region face a common dilemma in that demand for the natural resources they hold – whether developed or not – will either decline over time or drop off almost overnight.

³⁹ Peter Jones, “Structuring Middle East Security”, cit.

⁴⁰ Georgios Bazoukas, “Drug Trafficking in the MENA: The Economics and the Politics”, in *EUISS Briefs*, November 2017, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2175>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Simon Henderson, “Cyprus Gas Discovery Could Be an East Mediterranean Game-Changer”, in *Washington Institute Policy Alerts*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cyprus-gas-discovery-could-be-an-east-mediterranean-game-changer>.

Given that context, energy diplomacy has a major role to play in aligning the interests of both oil and gas producers in the different sub-regions and working towards a goal of slowing the decline in demand for hydrocarbons, so that they can both develop alternative sources of energy and also diversify their economies. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum is a good starting point for coalescing the interests of its constituent members,⁴³ but excluding Turkey, Libya and Algeria, for example, will be detrimental to the collective interests of all Mediterranean producers and likely spur other major more advanced producers, such as Qatar, to accelerate development of their resources, thus putting pressure on the price and making Mediterranean gas uneconomic.

Although somewhat controversial, the United States has a proven track record in energy diplomacy and has dedicated time and resources into tying energy, economy and infrastructure together amongst Israel, Egypt and Jordan to considerable effect.⁴⁴ As developing new resources in the East Mediterranean is akin to a race against the clock, as hydrocarbon demand heads south and alternative energy sources become increasingly competitive, it is not in the interests of East Mediterranean Gas Forum members to delay operations interminably because of tensions with Turkey and Libya. Meantime, whilst the gas plays are sizeable, they are relatively small compared to the reserves held by the United States, Australia and Qatar –and indeed China – and as such are uneconomic unless all countries cooperate and share a common infrastructure to transport and export natural gas. There is a necessity, therefore, for all Mediterranean states to cooperate and find a means of monetising energy resources before it is too late.

Maritime security is a familiar form of CBM. It is pertinent to both theatres in the Gulf and those in the Mediterranean, and there is a pressing need for not only regional actors to be engaged in dialogue over this issue, but also external actors. Arguably, all participants in the global economy, for the time being at least, are dependent upon the Strait of Hormuz being navigable, as nearly 21 million barrels per day of crude oil passes through it⁴⁵ and all players in the Gulf have a vested interest in it remaining open. Whilst the United States carries the majority burden of providing maritime security alongside some of its NATO and EU partners, other major powers such as China and India are characterised by US policy-makers as direct beneficiaries and free-riders. However, their shared interest in maritime security, principally ensuring reliable energy flows, means that they have a vested interest in engaging diplomatically with spoilers. Whilst Iran seems to pose the greatest threat to maritime security in the Gulf, as evidenced by attacks against tankers moored in UAE waters,⁴⁶ the conflicts in Yemen and Somalia as well as piracy pose a common threat to all forms of shipping, including vessels carrying cargo destined for Syria passing through Bab al-Mandab into the Red Sea. Similarly, there is a common interest amongst all Red Sea littoral states, especially Egypt, to ensure that the Suez Canal remains navigable and that applies equally to all Mediterranean states, including Turkey. Ankara's deployment of navy vessels to

⁴³ Geoffrey Aronson, "Gas Heats Up the Eastern Mediterranean", in *MEI Articles*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/node/80245>.

⁴⁴ Nikos Tsafos, "The United States in the East Med: A Case Study in Energy Diplomacy", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 4 November 2019, <https://www.csis.org/node/54551>.

⁴⁵ Justine Barde, "The Strait of Hormuz is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint", in *Today in Energy*, 20 June 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>.

⁴⁶ Patrick Wintour, "Inquiry into Oil Tanker Attacks Stops Short of Blaming Iran", in *The Guardian*, 7 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/bjndb>.

accompany drill-ships in Cypriot territorial waters⁴⁷ has highlighted how differing interpretation on the part of Turkey and Greece/Cyprus concerning Exclusive Economic Zones as laid out in international law could lead to conflict between two NATO member states. Within the context of the wider Mediterranean, a shared maritime security paradigm is critical to help manage the flow of migrants travelling through North Africa and into Europe via trafficking gangs.

All states in the wider Middle East and Mediterranean region have a common interest in maritime security, especially as so many cross-cutting issues, including people trafficking, narcotics trafficking, oil and gas exports, sanctions busting, food security and political economy, amongst others, impinge upon governments and their populations. Therefore, maritime security presents a rich vein to mine when it comes to CBMs, and the connectivity between the Gulf and the Mediterranean offers many points of entry for all states engaged in the regional security project.

Arms control is among the most critical and dangerous areas impacting regional security in the region.⁴⁸ Weapons proliferation, the investment in indigenous nuclear programmes, support to non-state actors, the development and use of chemical weapons, cruise and ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, and the increase in weapons purchases from abroad are among the principle issues obstructing regional security. Regional defence asymmetries have been driven primarily by military imbalances between Iran and the Arab Gulf states but also extend to Egypt, Turkey and Israel. Due to decades of US sanctions, Tehran has had limited access to invest in traditional military infrastructure and instead has built regional proxy relationships. An equally important investment in developing nuclear and ballistic weapons programmes has also helped Tehran build deterrence capabilities. The JCPOA, before the US withdrawal, had proven effective at controlling any Iranian nuclear advancements but did not include any limits to its ballistic missile programme. To counter Iran's strategy, the Arab Gulf states have invested heavily in their defence sectors as military importers. Saudi Arabia is the largest regional military spender investing 82.8 billion US dollars as reported by IISS.⁴⁹ Moreover, the development of an unchecked Saudi nuclear programme is also underway.

In such a climate and against the backdrop of regional wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, a dialogue on de-escalation mechanisms is urgently needed. In this more difficult phase, threat perceptions, doctrines and the reasons why states acquire various conventional weapons are easier forays for a first discussion. The interplay and imbalance between missiles and conventional weapons must be acknowledged by all parties.⁵⁰ From there, states can also be encouraged to provide alerts for military exercises. Agreements on ballistic missile controls is another area where over time agreement could be reached. Gradually, parties could accept pre-notification of launches, range limitations and the capping of missile stocks and enrichment stockpiles.

⁴⁷ "Turkey Ramps Up Drilling Off Cyprus on Eve of Peace Talks", in *BBC News*, 8 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49275949>.

⁴⁸ Harald Müller and Daniel Müller (eds), *WMD Arms Control in the Middle East. Prospects, Obstacles and Options*, Farnham/Burlington, Ashgate, 2015.

⁴⁹ Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, "Global Defence Spending: The United States Widens the Gap", in *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/02/global-defence-spending>.

⁵⁰ Peter Jones, "Structuring Middle East Security", cit.

While formal, conventional arms control negotiations are unlikely to succeed in the region as a whole for some time, specific cases of bilateral or sub-regional flashpoints may give way to negotiations that are ushered in with the support of external powers. Improvements to the Iran nuclear agreement and region-wide acceptance and implementation of the Additional Protocol allowing for greater IAEA inspection would be important to achieve. External arms suppliers would also need to support regional efforts to forgo military investments and imports. Ultimately, regional states should accept the Hague Code of Conduct on Ballistic Missile Proliferation and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

A final equally critical step would be the establishment of multiple direct and indirect communication channels. Dedicated communication channels are necessary to manage the emergence of sudden conflicts.⁵¹ Where bilateral ties do not exist as in the case of Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran and even the UAE and Qatar, quiet backchannel dialogue and hotlines should be established to help reduce tension. Most recently, Oman and Kuwait have provided facilitation between the GCC states since the 2017 the Qatar blockade. Both states maintained open dialogue with Tehran that proved useful during the 2019 period of escalation in the Persian Gulf. Oman also provided a useful venue for backchannel talks between Iran and the United States which became the precursor to wider nuclear-related discussions with Iran.⁵² During the Obama administration, Tehran and Washington also maintained a direct line of communication that proved useful.

The second pathway would be triggered once progress has been made on some of the issues raised above. It would require a more substantive exchange on the principal issues driving conflict within the main theatres of Syria, Libya, Yemen and Palestine alongside JCPOA negotiation, but within a multilateral setting. These issues would include, but not be limited to the following: sovereignty/interference; non-state actors; arms proliferation; legitimacy; external powers; and cybersecurity.

The process should be shepherded by the four major powers (in different permutations of two) and amongst them – and with core common interests – they would be invested with enough leverage to encourage all primary conflict participants to engage meaningfully. The cost for the major powers of not addressing these pressing issues will be high, especially over the longer term, and they will ultimately pay the price. Therefore, there is an incentive to turn significant risk into opportunity, if all four pull in one direction. At the same time, if there is a semblance of unity amongst the major powers, at least on core issues, then this will in turn place pressure upon the regional actors party to each conflict. It is critical, however, that each party, as dialogue deepens and discussions focus on technical security matters, sends security and intelligence officers enabled to not only negotiate on behalf of their senior leadership, but also having the authority to make preliminary decisions. It would be important to the process to ensure that in each case, security institutions, whether responsible directly to civilian political authority or otherwise, are party to, and subscribe to, whatever resolutions are reached – and that the “shepherding” powers are willing to underwrite decisions.

⁵¹ International Crisis Group, “The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline”, in Crisis Group Middle East Briefings, No. 77 (23 April 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13846>.

⁵² David Ignatius, “The Omani ‘Back Channel’ to Iran and the Secrecy Surrounding the Nuclear Deal”, in *The Washington Post*, 7 June 2016, <http://wpo.st/3tHe1>.

Conclusion

The landscape of the Middle East is more fragile than ever. Conflict is prevalent at state, intra-state and regional levels and is fuelling endless cycles of protest, repression and frustration across the region. The intersection of civil wars and intense state rivalry with a broader structural crisis in the region, driven by poor governance, profound demographic change and pervasive corruption plus climate change, gives rise to a grim prognosis. Without effective communication and dialogue channels in place, a sequence of small events could easily lead to miscalculation and trigger a major outbreak of conflict. Whereas in the past, the United States had the capacity to better manage critical communication channels, the uncertainty over its future engagement in the region combined with a growing Russian and Chinese presence has only further muddied the waters and increased the likelihood and cost of miscalculation.

Given the new context, an investment in a new approach is needed. This approach as laid out here calls for a principles-based confidence-building process. This undertaking would require all participating states to agree on a shared set of principles – which could include a commitment to non-aggression and non-interference – and also a set of desired outcomes. For any process to succeed, high-level buy-in from political and security establishments in each country is required, as is the participation of all states that are party to the numerous conflicts. A pyramid CBM process beginning with health diplomacy and slowly covering essential areas such as arms control, nuclear, maritime and environmental security, the economy and communication channels should be incrementally convened. Dialogue and progress should be supported and nurtured to create gradual but sustainable trust. While the regional imbalances and intersecting conflicts might seem too intractable to resolve, continued inertia will only increase the political and economic costs of instability weighing down the Middle East rather than empowering the forces of growth, moderation and stability.

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