

## Research Paper

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# Steps to enable a Middle East regional security process

Reviving the JCPOA,  
de-escalating conflicts  
and building trust

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# Summary

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- The Middle East region urgently needs a framework for security. Its multiple conflicts and wars, intensifying competition among key regional states and persistent governance challenges all pose a deep and profound threat to the well-being and livelihoods of the region's population. This paper argues that the process for getting to a regional security framework should begin now, as conditions are – counterintuitively – favourable.
  - Arriving at a regional security framework will require international and regional investment in conflict management and trust-building. Addressing Iran's interventionist role in conflicts and countries beyond its borders is key to this process. But if there is to be any prospect of improvement in regional dynamics, not only does Iran need to recognize the counterproductive impact of its financial and military support for proxy groups across the region: Arab states also have to acknowledge that they too bear responsibility in driving conflict. Regionalizing solutions brings a greater chance of success.
  - This paper draws on interview-based research to examine how international and regional actors might arrive at a regional security framework for the Middle East. Based on the findings from 210 confidential interviews with experts and current and former policymakers from 15 countries, it is clear that the point at which a regional security process can be mapped out can only be arrived at through discussion, de-escalation and conflict resolution involving all regional actors, enabled by critical external partners. This means committing to the multiple pathways set out through the paper.
  - Although these pathways are non-linear, all must eventually lead to a point where the pursuit of regional security is viable. As part of this, the foundational step lies in the Biden administration's re-engagement with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the Iran nuclear deal from which the US withdrew in 2018 – and Iran's return to compliance. Alongside lie crisis-resolution tracks – focusing on the wars in Yemen and Syria, building greater solidarity among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and the Israel–Palestine conflict – and the creation of meaningful confidence-building measures.
  - There is little doubt that the US will continue on its trajectory of Middle East disengagement and competition with Russia and China under the Biden presidency. Nonetheless, the change of administration in Washington creates a clear opportunity for multilateral cooperation and conflict management in the Middle East, drawing on resources and support from Europe, Russia and China.

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# 01

# Introduction: A moment to act

**The current period of flux and transformation in the global and regional order presents an opportunity to work towards a new security framework for the Middle East, but one that could easily slip out of reach.**

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There is a pressing need for a security framework in the Middle East. It is clear – however it is presented, and notwithstanding the change of administration in Washington – that the US is in the process of disengaging from the region, or at the very least reconfiguring how it engages with partners and adversaries there. The causes of US disengagement are well documented,<sup>1</sup> and boil down to a combination of fatigue from participation in so many never-ending wars, and a departure from ‘lower-order’ issues to enable greater focus on confronting the rising challenge from China more directly in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, the consequences of US disengagement are clear to see, in the form of an outsourcing, with little due diligence, of security provision to regional actors. So far, this particular approach to burden-sharing has not worked in favour of peace and stability. It seems to have exacerbated conflicts, further polarized the region, and brought even more pain and misery for the people of the countries affected.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there appears to be no discernible mechanism – let alone motivation, will or effort – to stem the region’s multiple ongoing conflicts, all of which will come to challenge the very basis of the existing state system. The wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen have drawn in international and regional actors, seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Brands, H. (2019), ‘Why America Can’t Quit The Middle East’, Issue 1921, Hoover Institution, 21 March 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-america-cant-quit-middle-east> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020); Tisdall, S. (2020), ‘Why Instinct and Ideology Tell Trump to Get out of the Middle East’, *Guardian*, 11 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/11/why-instinct-and-ideology-tell-trump-to-get-out-of-the-middle-east-suleimani-iran> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020).  
<sup>2</sup> Blank, S. (2017), ‘The consequences of US disengagement from the Middle East’, *The Hill*, 24 October 2017, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/356902-the-consequences-of-us-disengagement-from-the-middle-east> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020).



making the prospect of reaching resolutions difficult to imagine at present, and there is a very real threat that state collapse in each of these countries will profoundly impact neighbouring states and regions. In other words, there will be an even greater cost to pay not only in the region, but much further afield too, unless global and regional powers – right now – work towards developing a security framework for the Middle East.

There are plentiful voices on the US right that argue that disengaging carries few real costs, especially as the Middle East region will diminish in importance as the world moves towards a post-hydrocarbon era and the struggle for power between the US and China shifts towards the Indo-Pacific. In other words, the Middle East region will be left behind to manage its own affairs, with its ability to influence the global economy diminished, even though its sovereign wealth funds will continue to play a significant role. This perspective, shared by a number of people interviewed as part of the research for this paper, holds that the level of conflict and violence in the region will neither increase nor decrease dramatically, and conflict management will be left to regional states, as the US effectively withdraws and European states simply lend bilateral support to their partners. We consider this to be an unduly benign prognosis, and one that does not take into account the ensuing arms races among Middle East states, including not only the acquisition of advanced materiel, but also the pursuit of new missile technologies and capabilities, as well as a quest for nuclear capabilities. In this scenario, the cost of indifference far outweighs that of engagement, which in the case of the US in the region amounts to at least \$3 trillion since the 2003 war in Iraq.

Failing to act decisively carries high costs for everyone. It will serve to exacerbate conflict, accelerate state failure and the breakdown of governance, and undermine all previous efforts at development in both resource-rich and resource-poor states. As the war in Syria has shown, the impact of major conflicts does not stop at borders, and the spread of hostilities across the region poses a major threat to neighbouring regions, including Europe and the Caucasus. Wars often lead to migrations – both forced and unforced – and that has certainly been the case in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia and Vietnam, among many others. The war in Syria has demonstrated just how sensitive European states are to the arrival of migrants on their soil, even though the greatest burden of displacement has been shouldered in neighbouring countries, including Jordan and Turkey.<sup>3</sup> In fact, inward migration has long been a chief obsession of right-wing parties across Europe. It was evidently a contentious issue in the UK's Brexit referendum, and the population flows stemming from the Syrian war have brought to the fore strongly nationalist sentiments in many European states.<sup>4</sup> The cost of doing nothing in the Middle East region, therefore, carries risks for Europe, and for the institution of the European Union (EU), as it could lead to a further increase in the number of people seeking to cross into European countries – whether legally or illegally – and further stoke destabilizing nationalism.

<sup>3</sup> Rayes, D. (2020), 'Amid an Unfolding Humanitarian Crisis in Syria, the European Union Faces the Perils of Devolving Migration Management to Turkey', Migration Policy Institute, 20 March 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/amid-humanitarian-crisis-syria-eu-faces-perils-devolving-migration-third-countries> (accessed 25 Nov. 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Schain, M. (2018), *Shifting Tides: Radical-right Populism and Immigration Policy in Europe and the United States*, Report, Washington DC and Brussels: Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/Schain-PopulismUSandEurope-Final-Web.pdf> (accessed 27 Nov. 2020).

The prognosis for the Middle East region is grim. There is little hope that regional players will come together without international pressure and support to shepherd them towards reaching agreements on some of the fundamental issues that separate adversaries. The US approach of partially outsourcing security to regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has in practice incentivized those states to be more bullish in their foreign policies and military actions. The US has outsourced security to Israel on occasion, although the latter's quest for independence of action has often run counter to Washington's interests. Now, the alignment of interests between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel in wanting to push back against Iran – and latterly also Turkey – is likely to further heighten the risk of conflict. Instead of pressing for the resolution of conflicts, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will most likely follow Israel's lead in living with chaos, but always being willing to intervene to manage conflict. Saudi Arabia's experience in Yemen will certainly temper its appetite to get involved substantively elsewhere in the region. As this paper makes clear, there is no love lost between these three states and Iran, and trust – in any form – is at an all-time low. As such, there is no appetite among them to reach an understanding with Tehran or with any of its allies, and the prospect of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi or Tel Aviv seeking a resolution of sorts is very unlikely.

Similarly, there are powerful groups in Iran that have no incentive to pursue peaceful resolutions for the conflicts it is engaged in across the region, as the price it would want to recover both from host states, such as Syria and Lebanon, and from other regional actors would be too high. It has put forward proposals of its own – such as the HOPE initiative, discussed in Chapter 5 – but these have been dismissed by regional actors as they do not address core grievances, notably those of Saudi Arabia. At most, Iran will wait for the US to re-engage with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and make every effort to keep all negotiations focused on the nuclear dossier, and far away from regional issues.

We argue that, while counterintuitive, the current period of flux and transformation in the global and regional order presents an opportunity to work towards a new security framework, given the underlying vulnerabilities shared by all states in the region.

## Multipolar conflicts

The unipolar moment in global affairs is well and truly over. Although the US-led war against the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 could be considered as the point at which it started to crumble, for the Middle East region it was the onset of war in Syria that ushered in the new era best described as multipolar. There can be little doubt that the US remains the world's most dominant military power, but its willingness to project this power has been tempered by experiences in punishing wars from Korea to Vietnam, and, over the past two decades, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since former president Barack Obama made his pivot to Asia, and made plain that Saudi Arabia must now 'share' its neighbourhood with Iran,<sup>5</sup> the US has drawn

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<sup>5</sup> Goldberg, J. (2016), 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/#5> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

down its troop presence in the region<sup>6</sup> and embarked on a process of diplomatic disengagement too. There is still considerable debate within the policy research community as to whether the US is actually committed to an exit from the region. Academics such as David DesRoches argue persuasively that the US's military footprint has in reality increased, not receded, and that it has redeployed rather than drawn down.<sup>7</sup> There is insufficient space here to consider the technical aspects of this argument, but what is clear is that Gulf Arab leaders perceive the US to be withdrawing from the region, and they believe that China and Russia are now more deeply involved than before. In fact, interviewees from Gulf Arab states argued that the US has left a vacuum that has been quickly filled by other powers, principally Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. While Russia is a regional rather than a global power, it has acted like a major player, and has asserted itself militarily in a number of conflicts – notably in Syria and Libya. It has aligned itself closely with Turkey, too, and has increased arms sales not only to Ankara, but also to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Moscow has driven forward the OPEC+ agenda, and after Saudi Arabia first crashed the price of oil in early 2020 has worked closely with Riyadh to keep the OPEC+ grouping compliant with production cuts,<sup>9</sup> even though Russia itself has consistently cheated on its undertakings.<sup>10</sup>

## **Interviewees from Gulf Arab states argued that the US has left a vacuum that has been quickly filled by other powers, principally Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.**

China remains reluctant to expend too much political capital in the Middle East, and is happy to continue to leave it to the US to provide regional security. It has started to show an appetite for some diplomatic engagement in line with its overriding economic interests, but this effort remains lodged within international organizations, particularly the UN.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, China is evidently already a major economic player in the region, and it is only a matter of time before it will either need to help secure its economic interests, or opt to focus elsewhere. In relative terms, however, the MENA region is not a priority for Beijing. Karen Young, of the American Enterprise Institute, has made a cogent case that China's investment in the region is neither significant when compared with its deployment of capital elsewhere, nor transformative in terms of its relations with Middle

<sup>6</sup> Associated Press via *Guardian* (2011), 'Barack Obama Announces Total Withdrawal of US Troops from Iraq', 21 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/21/obama-us-troops-withdrawal-iraq> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Research Service (2020), *Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy*, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf> (accessed 24 Mar. 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Khlebnikov, A. (2019), 'Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports', Middle East Institute, 8 April 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Pandey, A. (2020), 'Russia: From OPEC+ Offender to Enforcer', *Deutsche Welle*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-from-opec-offender-to-enforcer/a-53746041> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Quilliam, N. (2020), 'Russia and Saudi Arabia Power Risks OPEC+ Break-Up', Chatham House Expert Comment, 24 November 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/russia-and-saudi-arabia-power-risks-opec-break> (accessed 22 Dec. 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Lons, C., Fulton, J., Sun, D. and Al-Tamimi, N. (2019), *China's Great Game in the Middle East*, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/china_great_game_middle_east.pdf) (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).



East states.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Beijing has taken critical steps to ensure that it is not reliant on energy from the Gulf, and its own drive towards developing new sources of energy means that long bets on ever-increasing dependency between China and the Gulf are unlikely to pay off. For the time being, though, China does stand to benefit from US disengagement, as this opens up new avenues and diplomatic channels that Beijing is happy to explore. The 25-year China–Iran economic and security cooperation agreement signed in March 2021 is one such example, whereby Beijing intends to invest in Iran in exchange for access to oil.<sup>13</sup> Like Russia, China is able to partially fill the vacuum left by the US. This might not come in the form of security guarantees, but it is already evident in major construction projects, port development, arms sales and the alignment of major investment opportunities in China.<sup>14</sup>

One greatly significant consequence of the emergence of this multipolar order is that major powers are either directly engaged or otherwise invested in the Middle East region's conflicts. In Syria, for example, Russia has backed the Assad regime, and has deployed significant military force since September 2015,<sup>15</sup> while the US has supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in their fight against ISIS and to recover territory across the northeast of the country.<sup>16</sup> Although China's military footprint in Syria is far less visible, it has taken the initiative in advancing efforts at reconstruction, arguing strongly that rebuilding the country can come ahead of reaching an inclusive political settlement.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, these three external powers are essentially at odds not just in how they have approached the conflict in Syria, but also over how they envision a resolution of the conflict. This in itself has served to prolong the war. Of course, a host of other factors have done that too, including the presence of regional actors such as Iran and Turkey. However, the misaligned interests of the US, Russia and China have meant that there has been no concerted effort to compel or enforce a settlement, or to hold warring parties to account when ceasefires are agreed and hostilities temporarily stop.

Although each theatre is different, and involves various other actors, this pattern of divergent interests among the major powers is repeated across the region. As a result, conflicts have been exacerbated, and/or there has been no real mechanism in place to bring about their end. In Libya, for instance, a combination of US disinterest and heightened Russian military engagement, albeit in the form of well-resourced mercenaries, has created space for Moscow to pursue its own

<sup>12</sup> Young, K. (2020), 'China Is not the Middle East's High Roller', American Enterprise Institute, 2 July 2020, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/china-is-not-the-middle-east-high-roller> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Rasmussen, S. E. and Egbali, A. (2021), 'Iran, China Sign Economic, Security Agreement, Challenging U.S. Pressure', *Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-china-sign-economic-security-agreement-challenging-u-s-pressure-11616866936> (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Fulton, J. (2019), *China's Changing Role in the Middle East*, Report, Washington DC: Atlantic Council, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas\\_Changing\\_Role\\_in\\_the\\_Middle\\_East.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chinas_Changing_Role_in_the_Middle_East.pdf) (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Spaulding, H. et al. (2015), *Russian Deployment to Syria: Putin's Middle East Game Change*, Institute for the Study of War, 17 September 2020, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Deployment%20to%20Syria%2017%20September%202015%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Deployment%20to%20Syria%2017%20September%202015%20(1).pdf) (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Clawson, P. (ed.) (2016), *Syrian Kurds as a US Ally: Cooperation and Complications*, Policy Focus, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-kurds-us-ally-cooperation-and-complications> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Calabrese, J. (2019), 'China and Syria: In War and Reconstruction', Middle East Institute, 9 July 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-syria-war-and-reconstruction> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

direct interests. At the same time, it has allowed regional players such as the UAE and Turkey to act with impunity – in defiance of international sanctions – and engage directly in military confrontation in support of their allies.<sup>18</sup>

Yemen, meanwhile, has been emblematic of the recent US approach to the region. On the one hand, Washington disengaged diplomatically during the Trump years; on the other, to varying degrees, it advised, supported and armed the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis.<sup>19</sup> Although the conflict has been driven primarily by local factors, US disinterest arguably encouraged a more assertive and robust engagement on the part of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This, in turn, created an opportunity for Iran to join the fray, not only through its support for the Houthis and their allies, but also through the direct threat now posed to Saudi Arabia from a neighbouring country. Since taking office in January 2021, the Biden administration has re-engaged diplomatically on Yemen, appointing Tim Lenderking as special envoy, ending Trump's last-minute proscription of the Houthis, and calling for a review of US–Saudi relations. Neither Russia nor China is involved substantively in the Yemen war, having no direct or indirect interests at stake there.

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The complex nature of the region's conflicts – which play out not just in armed combat, but also through instruments such as economic rivalry and cyberattacks, and include an overlapping array of regional and international actors – means that each is intimately connected with the others. All of this is symptomatic of an emerging regional order that is still in flux, and the overlay of an international order that is equally still playing out. Given this context, separating out the various conflicts and addressing each as a discrete project will prove particularly challenging. This is especially so at a time when two of the major powers – the US and China – are wary of investing too much diplomatic and political capital, in contrast to Russia, which is intent on deploying its military resources in ways that secure its interests at relatively low cost.

Even so, there is a clear and pressing need for a security framework for the region that addresses the range of issues in which the US, Russia and China are involved in their varying ways. While these three external powers may not share an interest in the same kind of regional security system, we make the case that pursuing an

<sup>18</sup> Lederer, E. (2020), 'Experts: Libya Rivals UAE, Russia, Turkey Violate UN Embargo', AP News, 9 September 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-north-africa-qatar-libya-united-arab-emirates-20a2ad9c585f40ec291585dbf8e9ed22> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Congressional Research Service (2020), 'Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015–2020', <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45046.pdf> (accessed 26 Nov. 2020).

incremental approach presents an opportunity to better capture and align their interests – even where they diverge presently – and a means to work towards establishing a security framework for the region.

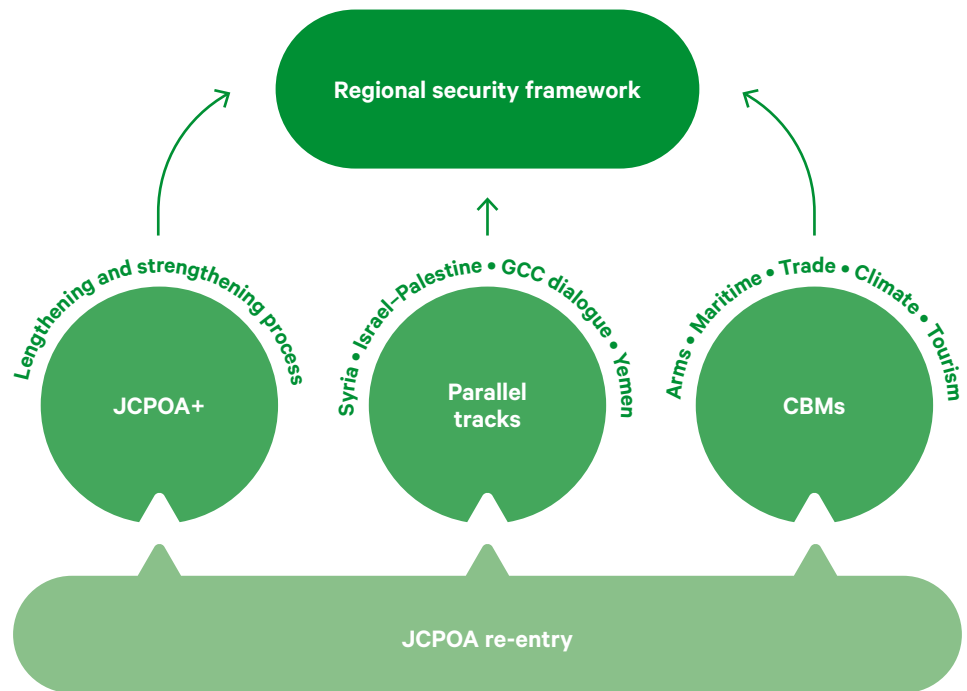
After the costly and turbulent Trump years, the arrival of a new US administration under President Joe Biden represents a pivotal moment, in that Washington and Beijing have an opportunity to pause and reappraise relations. While the two powers are undoubtedly locked in competition, they each, for their specific reasons, share an interest in helping stabilize the Middle East. As already identified, over the longer term the US looks intent on leaving regional security in the hands of regional actors. At best, that will result in pockets of stability and instability, which will have the effect of undermining the economic landscape of the region and thus threatening the integrity of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The change of US administration can thus serve both countries well, if they choose to work together with the common goal of developing a regional security framework. And with Biden now in the White House, there are further critical factors that could help lead to a security framework for the region, including: reviving the JCPOA, with 'plus' elements; curtailing or making use of Russian influence to pressure the Assad regime into reaching a settlement in Syria; pressing the Gulf Arab states to resolve their outstanding differences after signing the Al Ula security and stability pact in January 2021; and pushing Saudi Arabia and the UAE to end their military intervention altogether in Yemen. However, these factors could easily slip out of reach, and the Biden administration will need to act quickly to be able to deploy a well-thought-out approach. This will be extremely challenging in the early part of Biden's presidency, as he first prioritizes domestic issues – in particular the response to the COVID-19 crisis – and rebuilds relations with Europe, NATO and other key allies.

## About this paper

This paper draws on interview-based research to examine how international and regional actors might arrive at a regional security framework for the Middle East. Based on our analysis of 210 confidential interviews with experts and current and former policymakers from 15 countries, we make the case that the point at which a regional security process can be mapped out can only be arrived at through discussion, de-escalation and conflict resolution involving all regional actors, enabled by critical external partners.

The paper outlines pathways to a point where the pursuit of regional security can become viable. The foundational step lies in the US administration's re-engagement with the JCPOA and Iran's return to compliance. Recommitting to the JCPOA cannot be an end in itself, however. A broader 'JCPOA plus' process is needed to lengthen and strengthen the deal. Regional challenges relating to Iran's interventions beyond its borders can best be managed through multilateral negotiating tracks. Alongside this lie crisis-resolution tracks – focusing on the wars in Yemen and Syria, building greater solidarity among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and the Israel–Palestine conflict – and the creation of meaningful confidence-building measures.

**Overview figure.** Getting to a regional security framework



The next chapter describes the methodology for the interviews that have informed our analysis. Chapter 3 then sets the regional context, and Chapter 4 discusses past regional security efforts. Chapter 5 considers multilateral engagement, first outlining regional security proposals put forward since 2019 by Russia, China and Iran, and then focusing on how de-escalation might best be initiated. Chapter 6 considers Iran’s regional role in driving instability across the region, but underscores that Iran is not the only Middle East actor engaging in disruptive activities. Chapter 7 then turns to the revival of the JCPOA and work needed, beyond the US’s return, to ensure its resilience. Chapter 8 focuses on the parallel tracks for Yemen, the GCC, Israel–Palestine and Syria; and Chapter 9 on the confidence-building measures that can have an important role in de-escalating tensions across the region and building trust that a security framework is a viable prospect. In conclusion, in Chapter 10, we offer a set of recommendations on the way forward for key external and Middle East stakeholders.

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# 02 Methodology

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This study has drawn on semi-structured interviews conducted, on condition of confidentiality, with 210 experts and current and former policymakers in 15 territories (the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, Israel, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Extra-regional countries were selected because of their engagement with and support for current and former regional security processes. Regional countries were chosen for their involvement in active crises.

Drawing on Chatham House's wide networks in these 15 territories, we contacted subject-matter experts and current and former policymakers, as well as serving decision-makers from across the political spectrum, to gauge their views on the issues examined in this paper. Chatham House researchers made every effort to avoid a selection bias in identifying interviewees for the project and in analysing the data. Particular attention was given to targeting a diverse, gender-balanced and representative sample of interviewees, including respondents with divergent political views. Information was solicited, recorded and interpreted using a consistent framework. Interview questions were drawn up by the authors and tested with regional security and Middle East experts.

From July to November 2020, using a standardized, semi-structured survey, interviewees were asked about/for the following:

- The feasibility of, and potential pathways towards, a regional security process in the Middle East;
- The challenges of the current regional environment;
- Observations on geopolitical tensions;
- Views of how the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election would impact regional security;
- Perceptions of the drivers of regional tensions, with a specific focus on Iran; and
- Recommendations for addressing these tensions, with particular attention on Iran's regional role in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen.

Relying on quantitative and qualitative analysis, this paper draws on these conversations and presents the findings alongside policy recommendations and potential pathways forward to manage intersecting regional security conflicts.

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# 03

## Setting the scene

**As the US has switched its main focus towards Russia and China, it has outsourced the management of regional challenges to its partners in the Middle East. The outcome has been greater instability, amid waves of popular protests and governance challenges.**

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### From the Iraq war to the JCPOA

Relevant to understanding the current climate of tensions and conflict in the Middle East are three critical points: the 2003 Iraq war, the 2011 Arab Spring, and the signing of the JCPOA – the Iran nuclear agreement – in 2015. All of these have dramatically altered regional security dynamics in the Middle East, further unleashing inter-regional competition, the growth of extraterritorially sponsored non-state actors, and regionally led foreign policy initiatives. In 2014, Professor Greg Gause accurately described the regional situation as a ‘cold war’, pitting ideological adversaries against each other.<sup>20</sup> Crucially, in his assessment: ‘Axes of conflict in cold wars are never simply bilateral, and the same is true of the new Middle East cold war.’<sup>21</sup> The multipolar nature of regional conflicts makes achieving any resolution more challenging.

A further aggravating factor has been a growing US focus and prioritization of geopolitical competition with Russia and China. As the US has increasingly outsourced the management of regional challenges to its partners, the outcome has been more rather than less instability, amid waves of popular protests and governance challenges. During the research for this paper, survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that addressing regional security challenges in the current climate of regional tensions would be a ‘herculean’ task that would be unlikely to yield promising results. The issue of Middle East security thus needs to be framed in this context of regional insecurity and assertiveness, coupled with uncertainty over US commitments to the region and to its international partnerships.

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<sup>20</sup> Gause, G. F. (2014), *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Report, Doha: Brookings Doha Center, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



The Iraq war that brought an end to the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 gave rise to an increased US regional military presence encircling neighbouring Iran. Arab states, which opposed the war and warned of the consequences of a power vacuum in Iraq, saw Hussein as an effective counterweight to Tehran's regional ambitions. Indeed, their warnings proved prescient when, as part of its forward-defence policy,<sup>22</sup> Tehran began to actively promote Shia parties in Iraq and through its long-standing support for Lebanon's Hezbollah saw its standing grow in the 2006 war against Israel. At the time, Arab states framed Iran's expanding influence, across what they characterized as a Shia crescent, in terms of sectarianism. The reality, however, was that Iran would prove effective at engaging with multiple actors by opportunistically capitalizing on vacuums of power to assert its regional interests.

## **The Iraq war that brought an end to the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 gave rise to an increased US regional military presence encircling neighbouring Iran.**

Arab state insecurity was made worse by shifts in US posture towards the Middle East, with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and growing American domestic fatigue from 'forever wars'. The Obama administration came into office seeking to address 'the excesses of the war on terrorism [that] had left the United States overextended', and which had left the US struggling to manage the Iraq war amid growing strains of regional competition.<sup>23</sup> This effort sought to rebrand and rebalance the US role in the region. As such, the Obama administration did not actively intervene in the 2011 Arab Spring protests that brought about the overthrow of US's Egyptian ally Hosni Mubarak. This sparked anxiety among the Gulf Arab states, which interpreted Washington's muted response as a shift that would foreshadow further fluctuations in US commitments to the region.

With protests also ongoing in Bahrain, the GCC states sent their own Peninsula Shield forces to protect the Al Khalifa monarchy from further unrest and prevent the spread of protests throughout the Gulf.<sup>24</sup> The outbreak of protests in Syria, and Iran's subsequent military and proxy-based support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2012, resulted in greater regional activism on the part of the Gulf Arab states in supporting non-state actors of their own.<sup>25</sup> The GCC states' fears of a US realignment were then confirmed when President Obama did not honour his 'red line' pledge to protect Syrian civilians from Assad's chemical weapons

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<sup>22</sup> Iran's forward-defence policy is designed to push perceived threats away from Iran's borders. See Katzman, K. (2020), *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, Report No. R44017/77, Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Lynch, M. (2015), 'Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Regional Role', *Foreign Affairs*, 94(5):

pp. 18–27, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/obama-and-middle-east> (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Bronner, E. and Slackman, M. (2011), 'Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest', *New York Times*, 14 March 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ibish, H. (2016), *What's at Stake for the Gulf Arab States in Syria?*, Issue Paper No. 6, Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, <https://agsiw.org/whats-at-stake-for-the-gulf-arab-states-in-syria> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

attacks.<sup>26</sup> Iran's military intervention in 2014 against ISIS in Iraq – a group that also posed a challenge for Gulf Arab leadership – further heightened the GCC states' concerns of unchecked Iranian influence.<sup>27</sup> Paul Salem captured these trends, commenting:

The events of the past few years have broken the precarious old Middle East order without replacing it with a new one. And although rival external and regional players have been pushing their own agendas for a new regional order, none of them has prevailed. The competition among these rival visions and forces appears destined to continue in the years ahead.<sup>28</sup>

Through this period, the Obama administration began separate discussions through the multilateral P5+1 framework (comprising the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) to arrive at a negotiated settlement over Iran's nuclear programme. The interim Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) was signed in 2013; and the final JCPOA was agreed in 2015, resulting in Iranian nuclear concessions in exchange for sanctions relief.<sup>29</sup> The deal was hailed by its proponents as a multilateral achievement that imposed limits and oversight on Iran's nuclear programme. For their part, however, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were highly critical. Israel took aim at the timelines of the deal, which allowed Iran's enrichment programme to continue, albeit at a limited level. Collectively, these countries saw the deal as having failed to address Iran's ballistic missile programme and sponsorship of non-state actors – including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and militias in Iraq – as well as Tehran's backing of the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>30</sup> They perceived the Obama administration to be prioritizing nuclear challenges over regional security imbalances that were empowering Tehran at their expense.

Progressively, these developments gave rise to more coordinated regional alignment between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as has been most dramatically evident in the war in Yemen since 2015 and the blockade of Qatar between mid-2017 and early 2021. The intervention in Yemen was pursued by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and supported by Washington, to stem Iran's influence and support for the Houthis, or Ansar al Allah group.<sup>31</sup> During the period of instability that followed the 2011 Arab uprisings, Tehran developed ties, albeit limited ones, with the Houthis, eventually helping the group thwart the Saudi-led intervention with training and military transfers. Six years on from the intervention, despite

<sup>26</sup> DeYoung, K. and Gearan, A. (2012), 'Obama's 'red line' warning to Syria on chemical arms draws criticism', *Washington Post*, 21 August 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-red-line-warning-to-syria-on-chemical-arms-draws-criticism/2012/08/21/bcaf39e0-ebd2-11e1-a80b-9f898562d010\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-red-line-warning-to-syria-on-chemical-arms-draws-criticism/2012/08/21/bcaf39e0-ebd2-11e1-a80b-9f898562d010_story.html) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Esfandiary, D. and Tabatabai, A. (2015), 'Iran's ISIS Policy', *International Affairs*, 91(1): pp. 1–15, <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/91/1/1/2326817> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Salem, P. (2008), 'The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order', <https://carnegie-mec.org/2008/07/30/middle-east-evolution-of-broken-regional-order-pub-20326> (accessed 9 Apr. 2021).

<sup>29</sup> For a brief summary of the JCPOA, see Davenport, K. (2020), 'The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance', Fact Sheet, Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020). For the longer document, see European External Action Service (2015), 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran\\_agreement/iran\\_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Katzman, K. (2020), *US-Iran Conflict and Implications for US Policy*, Report No. R45795, Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, pp.2–8, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R45795.pdf> (accessed 1 Aug. 2020). Also see: Einhorn, R. and Nephew, R. (2016), *The Iran nuclear deal: Prelude to proliferation in the Middle East?*, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Series, Paper 11, Washington DC: Brookings, p.19, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/acnpi\\_20160531\\_iran\\_deal\\_regional\\_proliferation.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/acnpi_20160531_iran_deal_regional_proliferation.pdf) (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Salisbury, P. (2015), *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf) (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

de-escalatory efforts including a UN-led mediation and an Emirati drawdown from southern Yemen, the war drags on without resolution – and with Tehran’s relationship with the Houthis also deepened.

In 2017, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar, demanding that Doha moderate its regional ambitions and relationships away from Iran, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. The ‘Arab Quartet’ issued a set of 13 demands, including the removal of Turkish troops, the downgrading of Doha’s relationship with Tehran, and the closure of Al Jazeera.<sup>32</sup> Despite subsequent efforts at resolving the crisis, Doha neither buckled to pressure nor altered its regional posture over the next three-and-a-half years. The impasse was eventually broken in January 2021, when the GCC states came together at Al Ula, Saudi Arabia, to sign an agreement that formally ended the rift. In Syria, stalemate ‘dynamics’ prevail. Bashar al-Assad, with assistance from Tehran and Moscow’s 2015 intervention, has reasserted control over much of the country. Meanwhile, Israel has repeatedly bombed Iranian-linked targets, as part of its efforts to counter Tehran’s military presence and entrenched military facilities.

## The Trump administration and ‘maximum pressure’

The election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 offered America’s partners in the region a new opportunity to redirect US policy towards addressing Iran’s growing influence.<sup>33</sup> Trump’s consistent disavowal of the JCPOA culminated in his withdrawal of the US from the deal in May 2018, in favour of a graduated, sanctions-based campaign of ‘maximum pressure’ directed towards the administration’s stated goal of obtaining broader concessions not only on Tehran’s nuclear programme, but also pertaining to its ballistic missile programme and regional engagement. This strategy brought no change in Tehran’s calculus, while also causing transatlantic tensions as the European signatories chose to defend the JCPOA rather than bend to pressure from Washington.<sup>34</sup> The E3 – France, Germany and the UK – unsuccessfully lobbied the Trump administration against the withdrawal, warning of instability while promising to shepherd new negotiations with Tehran. For its part, the Trump administration doubled down on its maximum pressure strategy, ultimately sanctioning all Iranian industry, including oil exports, as well as Iran’s leaders, and designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist entity. The economic impact of sanctions in Iran has resulted in multiple currency depreciations, higher inflation and unemployment rates,

<sup>32</sup> Reuters (2017), ‘Arab states send Qatar 13 demands to end crisis, official says’, 23 June 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/gulf-qatar-demands/arab-states-send-qatar-13-demands-to-end-crisis-official-says-idUSL8N1JK07H> (accessed 7 Dec. 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, D. (2017), ‘Qatar row: What’s caused the fall-out between Gulf neighbours?’, BBC, 5 June 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40159080> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Bassiri Tabrizi, A. and Parsi, R. (2020), *State of play of EU-Iran relations and the future of the JCPOA*, In-depth Analysis Paper, Brussels: European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603515/EXPO\\_IDA\(2020\)603515\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603515/EXPO_IDA(2020)603515_EN.pdf) (accessed 21 Dec. 2020).

and a decline in GDP. Iran's domestic political environment has also hardened, with conservatives discrediting moderate President Hassan Rouhani and capitalizing on the economic and political failures of the JCPOA.<sup>35</sup>

From May 2019, Iran shifted away from its compliance-based strategy in respect of the JCPOA, launching its own 'maximum resistance' approach with the aim of transferring the risks and costs of maximum pressure on to the regional and international community. Frustrated by the lack of international response or limited economic assistance, despite its compliance with the nuclear deal, Tehran began a series of breaches. Iran has since increased its stockpiles of enriched uranium, uranium gas and heavy water in excess of JCPOA limits; installed and tested additional advanced centrifuges with natural uranium; activated advanced centrifuges at its Natanz facility; and built a new centrifuge manufacturing facility near Natanz.<sup>36</sup> Except for advances in research and development, these breaches, as presented by the Iranian leadership, are all reversible, but they have yet again reduced Iran's breakout time from one year, in line with the provisions of the JCPOA,<sup>37</sup> to a number of months.<sup>38</sup> Within the region, the frequency of missile attacks via Iranian-backed proxy groups against US interests in Iraq and Saudi stakes in Yemen increased. There were attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf, a US drone was downed in June 2019, and in September of that year Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais were targeted by drone and cruise missiles believed to have come from Iran.

## **Iran has since 2019 increased its stockpiles of enriched uranium, uranium gas and heavy water in excess of JCPOA limits; installed and tested additional advanced centrifuges with natural uranium; activated advanced centrifuges at its Natanz facility; and built a new centrifuge manufacturing facility near Natanz.**

Throughout this period, the Trump administration equivocated, defending neither its own interests nor those of its Gulf Arab partners. French President Emmanuel Macron attempted to bridge the US–Iranian stand-off in September 2019, but differences over trust, timing and optics could not be overcome. When, in December of that year, a US contractor was killed by Iranian-allied Iraqi militias – the only established red line for the Trump administration – the president authorized a response that resulted in the killing of IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani

<sup>35</sup> CNBC (2019), 'Iran's president faces calls to resign over economic crisis', 24 February 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/24/irans-president-faces-calls-to-resign-over-economic-crisis.html> (accessed 7 Dec. 2020).

<sup>36</sup> This new facility is being built to compensate for an explosion at its Natanz facility in July 2020. See Davenport, K. (2020), 'Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran', Fact Sheet, Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>37</sup> 'Breakout' commonly refers to the amount of time it would take for a country to produce enough fissile material for one nuclear bomb. Every country has a breakout timeline. See Davenport, K. and Masterson, J. (2020), 'The Limits of Breakout Estimates in Assessing Iran's Nuclear Program', Issue Brief 12(6), Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2020-08/limits-breakout-estimates-assessing-irans-nuclear-program> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

in early January 2020. Tehran responded in an attack on Ayn al Asad airbase in Iraq, but de-escalated by forewarning of the strike. This experience did not alter the Trump team's calculations, however. Despite Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's acknowledgment, in July 2020, that while sanctions had 'clearly had an impact', they hadn't 'achieved the ultimate objective, which is to change the behavior of the Iranian regime', sanctions-based pressure continued through the year.<sup>39</sup>

Regional uncertainty over the likely outcome of the November 2020 US presidential election was captured in the normalization of ties between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain and the signing of the 'Abraham Accords' at a ceremony hosted by President Trump in September.<sup>40</sup> In bringing together US regional allies, the normalization guarantees bipartisan Israeli–Emirati relevance in Washington, but also points to the degree of regional anxiety about the future role of the US in the Middle East.

Through this same period Tehran, also anticipating the US election, calibrated its regional strategy to avoid provocation with Washington. Joe Biden had been clear from early in his campaign that he intended to return the US to the JCPOA on a compliance-for-compliance basis.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the arms embargo against Iran was set to expire in October 2020. Despite the Trump administration's considerable efforts, within the UN Security Council, to get the embargo extended and snapback sanctions imposed on Iran, Tehran sought to gain from the failure of this US pressure campaign against the E3, and Washington's resultant isolation on the issue, while waiting out the results of the November election.

## Cross-regional factors

### Lack of trust

Although there is no absolute or relative measure of trust among the region's leaders, almost all of those interviewed as part of the research for this paper cited lack of trust as being a key obstacle to resolving the region's many conflicts. While conflict resolution practitioners commonly cite lack of trust as a block to progress, it is particularly acute in the Middle East region; furthermore, it is a factor not just between two rival states, but among a whole array of actors. For example, Saudi policymakers, academics and commentators referred in the interviews to the 'treachery' they perceived, having reached out to the Iranian leadership under the presidency of Sayyid Mohammad Khatami, when their bold steps were rebuffed after Mahmoud Ahmedinejad came to office in 2005. Levels of trust between the leaders of Qatar and the UAE were at an all-time low, with the latter firmly believing that

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<sup>39</sup> Rev (2020), 'Mike Pompeo Testimony Transcript: Secretary of State Testifies on State Dept. Budget', <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/mike-pompeo-testimony-transcript-secretary-of-state-testifies-on-state-dept-budget> (accessed 1 Aug. 2020).

<sup>40</sup> The Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel was agreed to in a joint statement by the US, Israel and the UAE on 13 August 2020. Bahrain and Israel similarly concluded their normalization agreement on 11 September, and a formal signing ceremony was hosted by President Trump at the White House on 15 September. U.S. Department of State (2020), 'The Abraham Accords Declaration', <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Biden, J. (2020), 'Joe Biden: There's a smarter way to be tough on Iran', CNN, 13 September 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/13/opinions/smarter-way-to-be-tough-on-iran-joe-biden/index.html> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

Doha supports groups within the emirates that intend to challenge and overthrow the ruling family in Abu Dhabi.<sup>42</sup> Qatar's leadership, like its people, experienced the blockade imposed by the Arab Quartet between 2017 and the beginning of 2021 as painful, and the severity of the embargo will undoubtedly undermine Doha's trust in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for years to come. With the signing of the US-brokered Abraham Accords in September 2020, Palestinians will likely consider the UAE and Bahrain, in agreeing to normalize relations with Israel, to have betrayed their cause.

It is clear that there is a massive trust deficit across the region, and not just between leaders of the different countries engaged in competition or conflict. Within countries, it is deeply ingrained between communities and national leaders. For instance, Syrians opposed to the Assad regime have no trust in it whatsoever, and view Iran with the deepest suspicion too. The recent period has also seen the irrevocable breakdown of trust in both Iraq and Lebanon between the young populations and their leaders, with sustained protests demanding an end to the system of quotas (*muhasassa*), as well as the cronyism and the corruption that have long characterized their political and economic systems.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, too, there is lack of trust between communities. For example, Yazidi communities mistrust Sunni communities in Iraq after years of marginalization and, from 2014, persecution under ISIS. Furthermore, there has long been a culture of mistrust between state and citizens, wherein states, especially security states, believe that citizens are malcontents and thus plotting to overthrow their regimes; or where citizens believe that the state is inherently predatory, and exists only to preserve the interests of a ruling elite at the expense of the people.

This lack of trust runs deep, and has in many cases since 2011 mobilized populations to protest against their political leaders. Of course, mass protests are not new across the region, and the issues dividing states and citizens has long been termed a legitimacy deficit. In practice, this legitimacy deficit means that agreements reached between governments, such as the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, exist in law but are not subscribed to by the population. For example, that Jordan is now able to import gas from Israel remains deeply unpopular among Jordanians, notwithstanding the clear economic benefits this offers.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, any agreements fostered and reached between governments in the region, or between rival parties in civil conflicts, will need buy-in from local constituencies. This can only be achieved if the social contract between the state and its citizens is rebuilt on more solid ground.

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<sup>42</sup> Chatham House interview, 22 December 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Abdulhadi, R. (2019), 'Iraqi protestors unite behind demands, not sectarian identities', Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 31 October 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iraqi-protestors-unite-behind-demands-not-sectarian-identities> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020); Bassam, L. and Al-Khalidi, S. (2019), 'Thousands take to Lebanon's streets in third day of anti-government protests', Reuters, 19 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-idUSKBN1WY0AC> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Khalidi, S. (2020), 'Jordan Parliament Passes Draft Law to Ban Gas Imports from Israel', Reuters, 19 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-jordan-israel-gas-idUSKBN1ZI0H2> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).



## Protests

The mass, sustained protests that have been seen across the region in the recent period – including in Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran and Iraq – confirm that the factors that gave rise to the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 onwards are still present. Although each case differs, one factor that is certainly common in the current wave of demonstrations is that young protesters, who comprise the majority of those taking to the streets, are still dissatisfied with their life chances, prospects and ability to shape their future. In Iraq and Lebanon, as already touched on, the protests since 2019 have in large part been driven by growing dissatisfaction with political systems that are perceived to be closed, corrupt, bankrupt, and serving only the interests of the elite or of external powers. What is evident in all cases is that the protesters' grievances cut across subnational divisions, and therefore hold the potential to create groupings or alliances based on core political, social, economic or environmental concerns, rather than identity politics.

## **Any regional security framework needs to take account of the growing gulf between those who govern and those who are governed.**

Whether or not the current round of protests can be characterized as the 'Arab uprisings 2.0', one point is clear: unless and until the fundamental political and economic issues that are driving the current unrest are addressed, mass protests and discontent will be a persistent feature of the region for decades to come. Even in those countries, such as Egypt and Bahrain,<sup>45</sup> where protests were brutally put down during the Arab uprisings, discontent will bubble beneath the surface and eventually break out once again. The shadow of the wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen might not be enough to dissuade public anger, elsewhere in the region, at state intransigence and brutality. Thus, what might be called a governance deficit may well hinder efforts at resolving conflicts in the region. This means that any regional security framework needs to take account of the growing gulf between those who govern and those who are governed. Unless the governance deficit is addressed, the likelihood will grow that states such as Iran will find space to intervene and capitalize on discontent to undermine sovereignty, especially in states where there are deep ethnic, social and economic cleavages to be exploited. Of course, this is not to suggest that Iran does not itself suffer from a legitimacy deficit, or that Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not equally seek to build on feelings of discontent there. However, Tehran has proved itself to be particularly adept at leveraging vulnerabilities in neighbouring states.

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<sup>45</sup> Miller, E. (2018), 'Egypt Leads the Pack in Internet Censorship across the Middle East', Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 28 August 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-leads-the-pack-in-internet-censorship-across-the-middle-east> (accessed 28 Nov. 2020).

## **Economic challenges**

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout, together with the ramping up of tensions between the US and China, have given rise to even greater insecurity in the Middle East, leaving it vulnerable to increased cycles of instability.

All the region's states are facing significant economic challenges, given the multiple pressures arising from persistent low oil prices; the broad impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; demographic change; inadequate education and training programmes; dependence on expatriate workforces; high unemployment; overdependence on rent – either as a hydrocarbon exporter or as a recipient of aid; vested business interests surviving on state contracts; and poor investment environments.

The remedies to address these economic challenges, as long prescribed by institutions such as the IMF,<sup>46</sup> are well known. But although some moves have been made to apply them, local conditions have made many leaders reluctant to do so, concerned that this will foster discontent and, in some cases, lead to protests that call into question the very basis of the social contract between the state and the citizens.

## **At the regional level, the COVID-19 pandemic has motivated states to cooperate and lend one another critical medical support, know-how and aid.**

COVID-19 has presented a major challenge to the region. It has opened up new opportunities, too. At a global level, the pandemic has fuelled debate about the 'end' of globalization and the emergence instead of economic 'decoupling'. At the regional level, however, it has motivated states to cooperate and lend one another critical medical support, know-how and aid.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the pandemic has made all regional economies vulnerable, and has tested the medical services in each country, serves as a form of leveller, and provides foundations on which new confidence-building measures can be built. These measures must be an essential component of any process towards establishing a regional security framework, as levels of trust in the region are at a critical low.

Although some of the region's states are strategically well positioned to leverage investment in major infrastructure projects, and have been able to draw Chinese interest into diversification efforts, foreign direct investment (FDI) flows predominantly favour the smaller, less populous states, at the expense of their larger and more populous neighbours. Saudi Arabia, for example, has performed badly in attracting FDI, whereas the UAE has secured significant FDI and has

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that the efficacy of some of the 'remedies' that have been advocated by the international financial institutions for many years, including privatization, liberalization and austerity measures, is contested, and such policies are said by dissenting voices to have increased the economic difficulties of the countries in the region. Mounting discontent with the socio-economic policies of governments of the region, implemented in line with the recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF, may well have contributed towards the feelings of discontent that led to the Arab uprisings, among other protest movements.

<sup>47</sup> Galeeva, D. (2020), 'The UAE's Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Iran', LSE Middle East Centre blog, 5 April 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/05/the-uaes-response-to-the-covid-19-outbreak-in-iran> (accessed 22 Dec. 2020)

itself invested heavily in North and South America, Europe and Asia.<sup>48</sup> Of course, conflict has had a major impact on the fortunes of states that are either hit by war or otherwise engaging in conflict beyond their own borders. For instance, Libya bears the overall price of its war, but the costs to the UAE, Russia and Turkey are also high. Total losses in the Syria war have been estimated at some \$442 billion over the period to 2018;<sup>49</sup> and for Saudi Arabia, the cost of the Yemen war was reported in 2017 to be at least \$5–6 billion per month.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, there are very few signs that the economies in the Middle East region will recover quickly from the pandemic and the impact of low oil prices. The likely exception is Qatar, whose tremendous hydrocarbon endowment will serve it well as a transition vehicle, and which has a very small population. Without an end to its multiple conflicts, the Middle East will remain trapped in a region-wide cycle of deadly violence, consigning it to decades of impoverishment and instability. There may be peace and prosperity for some countries, but the region's civil conflicts are unlikely to be contained within state borders, and the prospect of interstate war is fast growing. So now is the time to push for a regional security framework.

## Entrenched regimes

The political systems in the Gulf and across most of the Middle East have so far weathered the storm of the Arab uprisings, although the factors that gave rise to widespread protests a decade ago are still prevalent. Some efforts have been made to diversify economies, which has opened up some room for private enterprise, but state-led and state-dominated growth is still the model that drives forward economic change. In almost every case across the region, the space afforded to the business class has been carefully managed, ensuring that there is no prospect of linkage between economic liberalization and political reform.

In reality, there has been little sign of political reform in Middle East states, except perhaps in Tunisia and in some small steps undertaken by Morocco. Overwhelmingly, regimes have dug in deeper, and – with support from allies in Asia, such as China, India and Singapore, and in the neighbourhood, such as Israel – have intensified their efforts not only to limit room for political expression or manoeuvre, but also to root it out. The security formula that has guided most Middle East states since independence prevails, and is the one that all domestic decisions must fit. Obama's wavering at the time of the Arab uprisings, when he came to favour stability over rights after the fall of Mubarak and the descent into chaos in Syria, shored up old allies, and was then turbo-charged by the Trump administration. Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy drained what was left of democracy promotion and human rights dialogue, and effectively gave a green light to the

<sup>48</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2020), *World Investment Report 2020: International Production beyond the Pandemic*, [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2020\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2020_en.pdf) (accessed 22 Dec. 2020).

<sup>49</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2020), *Syria at War: Eight Years On*, Report, Beirut: ESCWA, <https://publications.unescwa.org/projects/saw/sdgs/pdf/en/Syria-at-War-8-years-on-Report-Final.pdf> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020). This figure is given as the sum of the estimated value of physical capital destruction (\$117.7 billion) and estimated losses in GDP (\$324.5 billion).

<sup>50</sup> Riedel, B. (2017), 'In Yemen, Iran outsmarts Saudi Arabia again', Brookings Markaz blog, 6 December 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/06/in-yemen-iran-outsmarts-saudi-arabia-again> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020).

region's security states to ramp up their disregard for the interests of citizens in their own and neighbouring countries. It served to further entrench regimes that had at one time at least paid lip service to reform.

## **A new US policy approach?**

The outcome of the 2020 US presidential election is seen as consequential for America's global engagement, especially with the EU and the UK, to address regional security challenges and contain geopolitical competition in the Middle East. It is hoped by the US's transatlantic partners that a Biden White House will result in a return to multilateralism, the promotion of shared democratic values and a commitment to human rights, a restoration of the transatlantic alliance, a re-entry into the JCPOA, and the ambition to bring equilibrium to regional relations.

The Biden administration has made it clear that it will reorient US foreign policy and put firmly back in place the values that have characterized its external dealings in the past.<sup>51</sup> This will set down a real challenge for the security states across the Middle East. Indeed, the US Congress may be divided on how the Iran nuclear file should be approached, but it seems united on the need to tackle security states such as Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Turkey. A change in US policy, therefore, could represent a moment to press all states in the region – which now, through a combination of factors, find themselves in a position of weakness – to work to enable a regional security framework, built on stronger foundations at home. These steps – identified as a set of interrelated tracks – will be set out in the chapters that follow.

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<sup>51</sup> Mandel, E. R. (2020), 'Will Biden Choose a Values-based or Transactional Foreign Policy?', The Hill, 25 November 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/527029-will-biden-choose-a-values-based-or-transactional-foreign-policy> (accessed 1 Dec. 2020).

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# 04

## Past regional security efforts

**A cooperative security model, whereby states work to manage regional challenges through consent, norms and codes of conduct, is needed to underpin conflict management. No such model has yet been successfully implemented in the Middle East.**

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During the interviews that were conducted as part of the research for this paper, respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged the urgent need for a regional security framework to manage and reduce conflict in the Middle East. However, they saw regional tensions, the multiplicity of conflicts, and divergent threat perceptions as impossible to resolve in a single top-down, externally imposed security framework. A number of policymakers who had been involved in the myriad past efforts expressed frustration over the prospect, with one noting that ‘more hasn’t worked than has worked’.<sup>52</sup> Despite such sentiments, 91 per cent of respondents did believe that further regional security discussions and confidence-building measures were urgently needed to de-escalate and build consensus towards the creation of a regional security process.<sup>53</sup>

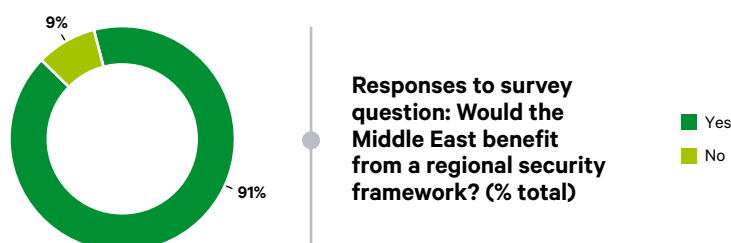
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<sup>52</sup> Research interview, 16 September 2020. All interviews for this paper were conducted on condition of confidentiality.

<sup>53</sup> For further research on regional security, see Jones, P. (2011), *Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options*, Report, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, p. 26, <https://www.sipri.org/node/1828> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020); Krepon, M. (1993), ‘Conflict Avoidance, Confidence-Building, and Peacemaking’, in Krepon, M., McCoy, D. and Rudolph, M. (eds) (1993), *A Handbook of Confidence Building Measures for Regional Security*, 3rd edn, Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center; Chen Zak Kane, C. Z. and Murauskaite, E. (eds) (2014), *Regional Security Dialogue in the Middle East: Changes, Challenges and Opportunities*, London and New York: Routledge; Gaub, F. (2016), *An Arab NATO in the Making? Middle Eastern Military Cooperation Since 2011*, The Letort Papers, US Army War College Press, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/300> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020); Kaye, D. D. (2018), *Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East*, Report, New York and Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, <https://tcf.org/content/report/can-it-happen-here> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

Reflecting on past regional security frameworks and processes is an important exercise that can help guide future steps forward. Many important academic and analytical contributions drawing on the limitations of regional security processes have been made, providing recommendations for future pathways.<sup>54</sup> Primary among them has been the critique that regional security efforts have not been all-inclusive, and instead have brought together regional states based on shared perceptions of security threats. What these initiatives have not yet managed to do is overcome mistrust and divergences in threat perceptions, address the principal issue of sovereignty, and build a common set of integrated interests among regional actors.<sup>55</sup> Previous models have sought to resolve specific conflicts, such as Israel–Palestine, or propose a collective security model – such as the 1981 formation of the GCC – where states work together to manage mutual threats.

**Figure 1.** Interviewees overwhelmingly supported the idea of a regional security framework for the Middle East



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

No successful cooperative security model, where states work to manage regional challenges through consent, norms and codes of conduct, has been implemented in the region.<sup>56</sup> Experts agree that this approach – which has underpinned the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, among others – has been lacking in the Middle East. As noted by Peter Jones, cooperative security models:

... do not in themselves end regional competition. They set standards of conduct and create mechanisms whereby they can be discussed.

They also create a means for discussion of issues before they become sources of conflict. Where conflicts do arise, these frameworks do not always result in resolutions; if the countries directly concerned do not wish to end a dispute, they cannot be forced to. In these cases, regional systems can help manage a conflict and prevent it from spreading—these are not trivial things.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Jones, P. (2020), 'It Is Time to Establish a Middle East Security System', *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 24 April 2020, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/it-is-time-to-establish-a-middle-east-regional-security-system> (accessed 1 Oct. 2020); Kaye (2018), *Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East*.

<sup>55</sup> Jones (2020), 'It Is Time to Establish a Middle East Security System'.

<sup>56</sup> For more on cooperative and collective security see Nolan, J. (ed.) (1994), *Global Engagements: Cooperation and Security in the 21st Century*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>57</sup> Jones (2020), 'It Is Time to Establish a Middle East Regional Security System'.



Ultimately, a cooperative security model is needed to underpin regional conflict management.

By our analysis, Middle East security efforts to date – be they regional or subregional – can be divided into three ‘baskets’, or groupings, based on threat perceptions: those directed to bolstering Arab unity and security; those seeking to address the Israeli–Palestinian peace process; and those focused on containing threats from Tehran. The models and initiatives discussed below share a common characteristic of being exclusive collective security efforts. In addition to these three groupings, external actors like the US and the former Soviet Union, during the Cold War and in the period after, used collective security organizations and initiatives to promote their own goals and wider competitive objectives in the region.

In the first basket, prioritizing the unity and security of the Arab states, sits the Arab League, formed in 1945, which has since its establishment become increasingly politicized, with repeated efforts at creating a joint military force failing to overcome regional competition. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) includes all regional actors other than Israel, along with other Muslim-majority countries outside the Middle East, but has no mediation structure.<sup>58</sup> Following the 1990 Gulf conflict, the Damascus Declaration brought together the GCC states, Egypt and Syria with the ambition to establish a robust security organization, but this grouping failed to resolve tensions over financing and trust.<sup>59</sup> The GCC, formed in 1981, remains subregional in scope, as a collective security initiative convened against Iran.<sup>60</sup> Despite efforts (both internal and external) to empower and unify the bloc, the GCC has not managed intra-organizational crises or security threats against the smaller states; nor has it been able to address contending views on cohesion – as evidenced by the impact, from 2017, of the Qatar crisis on the bloc’s ability to function effectively.<sup>61</sup> Most recently, the Trump administration sought to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), envisaged as a NATO-like Arab political and security organization, grouping the GCC states, Egypt and Jordan, with the objective of working together to stem Iranian regional activity. The MESA initiative failed to take shape because of challenges and disagreements among the Arab states over the goals, threat perceptions and structure of such an alliance.<sup>62</sup>

In response to tensions in the Persian Gulf resulting from Iranian escalation during 2019, a flurry of regional security ideas were put forward by external powers keen to de-escalate. The US led the establishment of the International Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation, which was joined by Australia, the UK, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, with the goal of protecting maritime security and freedom of navigation. However, the EU states, wanting to distance

<sup>58</sup> Gaub (2016), *An Arab NATO in the Making? Middle Eastern Military Cooperation Since 2011*.

<sup>59</sup> Cantori, L. J. (1994), ‘Regional Solutions to Regional Security Problems: The Middle East and Somalia’, *Middle East Policy*, 3(3): p. 28, <https://mepc.org/journal/regional-solutions-regional-security-problems-middle-east-and-somalia> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Koch, C. (2010), *The GCC as a Regional Security Organization*, Report, Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=ca542b43-1671-8fab-93f0-397e609e8919&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=ca542b43-1671-8fab-93f0-397e609e8919&groupId=252038) (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Cordesman, A. (2017), *Gulf Security: Looking Beyond the Gulf Cooperation Council*, Report, Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-security-looking-beyond-gulf-cooperation-council> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Farouk, Y. (2019), ‘The Middle East Strategic Alliance has a long way to go’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/08/middle-east-strategic-alliance-has-long-way-to-go-pub-78317> (accessed 1 Oct. 2019).

themselves from the Trump administration's Iran policies, chose not to join the coalition. Instead, they launched the European Maritime Situation Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), with the participation of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal.<sup>63</sup>

In the second basket are peace initiatives directed towards managing the Israel–Palestine conflict. Beyond the 1979 Camp David accords, which brought the normalization of ties between Israel and Egypt, the 1990s saw intensive peace negotiations in, successively, Madrid, Oslo, Shepherdstown and Camp David.<sup>64</sup> The only durable legacy of the latter period was the 1994 peace agreement between Jordan and Israel. These efforts critically failed to address imbalances towards the Palestinians in any meaningful way. The 2020 Abraham Accords brought together Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in new normalization agreements. These have been publicly sold as offering important bilateral economic, technological and commercial opportunities in a variety of sectors, among them energy, tourism, healthcare and ports. They also make official the long-observed, quiet collaboration under way since the 1990s between Israel and Gulf Arab states. Beyond the commercial and diplomatic opportunities, however, the agreement to normalize ties has its roots in wider Emirati and Israeli anxieties about the US's longer-term commitment to the region, and their mutual ambitions to directly manage the multiplying regional conflicts in areas where they share related concerns – potentially offering a new regional alignment.<sup>65</sup>

## **The agreement to normalize ties between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain has its roots in wider Emirati and Israeli anxieties about the US's longer-term commitment to the region, and their mutual ambitions to directly manage the multiplying regional conflicts in areas where they share related concerns.**

The Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS) was created in 1991 through the Madrid process, bringing together 13 Arab states, Israel and Palestinians to discuss regional security, arms control and wider CBMs. This was the only cooperative arrangement undertaken, and the closest the region has come to working towards a cooperative security model, but this effort also did not include all regional states. The parties began discussing a draft agreement of principles, but ACRS eventually folded because of challenges within the

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<sup>63</sup> Pejsova, E. (2020), 'What the European maritime initiative in the Strait of Hormuz tells us about Brussels's security ambitions', European Leadership Network, 27 March 2020, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/what-the-european-maritime-initiative-in-the-strait-of-hormuz-tells-us-about-brussels-ambition-and-capacity-as-a-security-actor> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Riedel, B. (2019), '25 years on, remembering the path to peace for Jordan and Israel', Brookings Order from Chaos blog, 23 October 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/23/25-years-on-remembering-the-path-to-peace-for-jordan-and-israel> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Bahgat, G. and Ferziger, J. H. (2020), *Israel's Growing Ties with the Arab Gulf States*, Issue Brief, Washington DC: Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/israels-growing-ties-with-the-arab-gulf-states> (accessed 2 Dec. 2020).

Israel–Palestine process.<sup>66</sup> Participants did succeed in establishing channels and communication protocols, including prenotification of military activities.

The third basket is made up of arrangements with a shared focus on constraining Iran's security and regional challenges, and that seek to manage and improve Iran's economic, political and security relationships in the region and international community. Fundamentally, the trade-off is that Iran reins in its most concerning security activities in return for Western economic benefits and reduced involvement in the region. UN Security Council Resolution 598, adopted in July 1987, succeeding in bringing together Iran and Iraq to end their eight-year war, with a ceasefire in 1988, and 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'.<sup>67</sup> This UN initiative has not yet manifested, but a number of interviewees saw this as a mandate to create a future process.

Following revelations of Iran's clandestine nuclear programme in 2002,<sup>68</sup> a series of initiatives emerged to manage tensions and the growing nuclear stand-off. From Iran's 'grand bargain' proposal to the George W. Bush administration in May 2003, offering to negotiate on nuclear and regional issues, to the October 2003 Tehran declaration and the agreement reached in Paris in November 2004,<sup>69</sup> these three efforts sought to avert, albeit unsuccessfully, a nuclear crisis.

A decade later, however, the JPOA and its broader finalized agreement – the JCPOA – did lay the groundwork for a successful multilateral agreement. Although solely focused on constraining Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief, the JCPOA was intended to lead to wider regional discussions. However, post-JCPOA inertia and, from 2016, uncertainty over the US's future commitment to the deal, prevented regional discussions from advancing.<sup>70</sup> There followed, in May 2018, as President Trump carried out his campaign threat to withdraw the US from the JCPOA, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's '12 demands', which unsuccessfully sought to roll back Iran's nuclear, ballistic and regional calculus.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> For more on ACRS, see Fahmy, N. (2001), 'Special Comment', *Disarmament Forum*, (2001)2: pp. 3–5; Jentleson, B. (1996), *The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security Talks: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Policy Paper 26, UC San Diego: Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97z9g13f> (accessed 21 Dec. 2020); Jones, P. (2005), 'Arms Control in the Middle East: Is It Time to Renew ACRS?', *Disarmament Forum* (2005)2; Jones, P. (2003), 'Negotiating Regional Security in the Middle East: The ACRS Experience and Beyond', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 26(3): pp. 137–154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390412331303095> (accessed 21 Dec. 2020); and Landau E. (2006), *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Restraints*, Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.

<sup>67</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987), 'The Situation Between Iran and Iraq', [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IQ%20IR\\_870720\\_Security%20Council%20Resolution%20598%20%281987%29.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IQ%20IR_870720_Security%20Council%20Resolution%20598%20%281987%29.pdf) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>68</sup> Davenport (2020), 'Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy With Iran'.

<sup>69</sup> Meier, O. (2013), *European Efforts to Solve the Conflicts Over Iran's Nuclear Programme: How Has the European Union Performed?*, Non-Proliferation Papers No. 27, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/EUNPC\\_no-27.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/EUNPC_no-27.pdf) (accessed 15 Mar. 2021).

<sup>70</sup> Einhorn, R. (2016), 'The JCPOA should be maintained and reinforced with a broad regional strategy', Brookings, 29 September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-jcpoa-should-be-maintained-and-reinforced-with-a-broad-regional-strategy> (accessed 5 Sept. 2020).

<sup>71</sup> The Heritage Foundation (2018), 'After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy', <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

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# 05

## Engaging multilaterally

**Separating and resolving active conflicts can, over time, and through confidence-building measures, increased communication and trust-building, set the basis for a cooperative security project to emerge.**

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Since 2019, Russia, China and Iran have all put forward proposals to establish a security framework for the region, and for the Gulf region in particular. Although each proposal emphasizes multilateral engagement, none has gained any real traction, and it is almost certain that all will come to languish alongside the many other tried, tested and failed initiatives of past decades. In essence, these proposals were broad brushstrokes of ideas, with very little detail to build on, rather than offering anything particularly new or substantive.

Russia's concept, first shared in a letter to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and members of the Security Council in July 2019, proposed consolidating 'in a single counter-terrorism coalition, all stakeholders interested in eliminating the hotbed of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East and ensuring sustainable political settlement in Syria, Yemen, other countries of the region'.<sup>72</sup> It recognized the need to mobilize public opinion 'in Islamic and other countries' in favour of its mission. Membership of the coalition, with the longer-term objective of creating a security and cooperation organization in the Persian Gulf (PGSCO), would include Russia, China, the US, the EU, India, the Arab League, the OIC and other interested parties. The coalition would adhere to the UN Charter, Security Council resolutions and international law. The proposal emphasized that a new regional security system would need to recognize the interests of all regional and other

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<sup>72</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2019), 'Russia's security concept for the Gulf area', 23 July 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](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) (accessed 2 Dec. 2020).

parties, and, in doing so, be universal and comprehensive in its scope.<sup>73</sup> Although no specific details were provided, it noted the importance of confidence-building measures for the process to succeed.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov further outlined the proposal when chairing the UN Security Council meeting on Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Comprehensive Review of the Situation in the Persian Gulf Region, held via videoconference on 20 October 2020.<sup>74</sup> It is unlikely, however, that the Russian proposal will move forward, as framing regional insecurity as a symptom of counterterrorism is problematic for so many reasons. First, it is far too simplistic a framework. Instead of placing human security at the centre of the paradigm, it omits it altogether. Making counterterrorism the core of a security framework would militarize the endeavour and only serve the narrow interests of regime elites. Second, the lessons learned from the failings of the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ are clear. The US focus on counterterrorism over the past two decades has not served the Middle East well, and arguably contributed to fostering current conflicts by prioritizing the security interests of regimes over the welfare of people. Amplifying such an approach into a security framework for the region, with buy-in from permanent members of the UN Security Council, would mean consigning its people to further decades of impoverishment, human rights abuses and conflict.

## **The US focus on counterterrorism over the past two decades has not served the Middle East well, and arguably contributed to fostering current conflicts by prioritizing the security interests of regimes over the welfare of people.**

At the same UN Security Council meeting, on 20 October 2020, China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi proposed the creation of a multilateral platform, with equal participation of all stakeholders, to de-escalate tensions in the region. The platform would work towards enhancing mutual understanding among stakeholders through dialogue, and exploring political and diplomatic solutions to security issues based on three organizing principles: first, applying and adhering to international law; second, utilizing the UN and regional organizations as mediators and seeking common ground and upholding good neighbourliness; and third, promoting fairness and justice to contribute to stability without the intervention of ‘biased’ non-Gulf players.<sup>75</sup> Like the Russian proposal, this initiative is not expected to move forward. It is predicated on some basic but essentially symbolic principles – given the context – and the prospect of excluding ‘biased’ non-Gulf players, which may be read as Israel,

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2020), ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Statement at a UN Security Council Meeting Held via Videoconference, Moscow, October 20, 2020’, 20 October 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/posledniye\\_dobavleniye/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdBqY/content/id/4396295](https://www.mid.ru/en/posledniye_dobavleniye/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdBqY/content/id/4396295) (accessed 2 Dec. 2020).

<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2020), ‘Wang Yi Attends UNSC Ministerial Meeting on the Situation in the Persian Gulf Region’, 21 October 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1825790.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1825790.shtml) (accessed 15 Mar. 2021).

the US, the UK and the EU, is a non-starter. There are echoes of the Iranian proposal put forward a year earlier, even though China would not be a part of that process.

President Rouhani introduced Iran's HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavour) initiative at the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2019. The initiative proposes building a collective security arrangement based solely on intra-regional dialogue. The foundations of the dialogue would be based on the principles of: respect for all participating parties' national, religious and historical sanctities and symbols; commitment not to participate in any military coalition or accord against participating parties; and cooperation to eliminate terrorism, extremism and sectarian tensions.<sup>76</sup> Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif has subsequently indicated that the initiative would entail dialogue, confidence-building, freedom of navigation, energy security, non-aggression, and non-intervention.<sup>77</sup>

Although an overwhelming majority of interviewees argued for a regionally led security process, Iran's proposal will go nowhere. First, there is the issue of the significant trust deficit, which would prevent Gulf Arab states stepping back from US support and directly into a dialogue with Tehran. Second, Gulf Arab states will never forgo the advantage of being part of a coalition that serves their collective security interests. Third, there is no commonly agreed definition of terrorism, and, for the most part, Gulf Arab states believe that Iran is a state-sponsor of terror. While the inclusion of dialogue, confidence-building, freedom of navigation and energy security might be welcome, the notion that Iran is willing to sign up to – let alone promote – non-aggression and non-intervention would be a point of bewilderment for most Gulf Arab leaders, given Tehran's support of proxies across the region. As such, the HOPE initiative is a non-starter.

## Pathways to de-escalation

Drawing together our assessment of the regional climate, the trajectory of tensions and past contributions to regional security in the region, the data gathered through our interviews suggest that regional security should be addressed through a de-escalatory process. There is certainly an urgent need for a regional security framework: as shown in Figure 2, a significant majority of respondents in all 15 countries saw this as being of critical importance. The lowest level of support was among Israeli respondents, 67 per cent of whom saw a regional security framework as a productive way forward. Respondents from Israel were perhaps more sceptical because they saw their country as having been more successful at managing its security independently. Overall though, while respondents overwhelmingly agreed that a larger process would be beneficial, they were consistently doubtful that one could emerge given, as one put it, 'the current competitive dynamics in the region'.<sup>78</sup> As such, our analysis suggests that an incremental conflict resolution process is needed initially. Separating and resolving active conflicts can over time, and through confidence-building measures, increased communication and trust-building, set the basis for a cooperative security project to emerge.

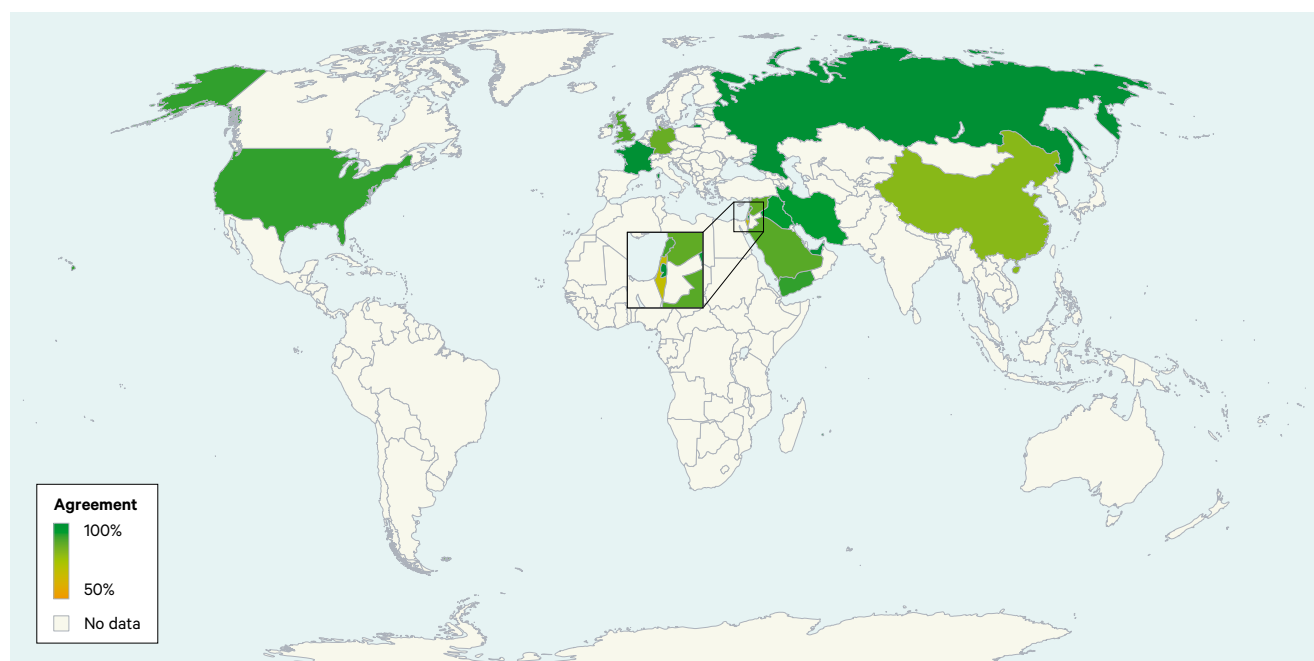
<sup>76</sup> UN News (2019), 'At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'', 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472> (accessed 2 Dec. 2020).

<sup>77</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (2020), 'A Conversation with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran, Virtual Meeting, 21 September 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-foreign-minister-mohammad-javad-zarif-iran> (accessed 2 Dec. 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Research interview, 15 August 2020.

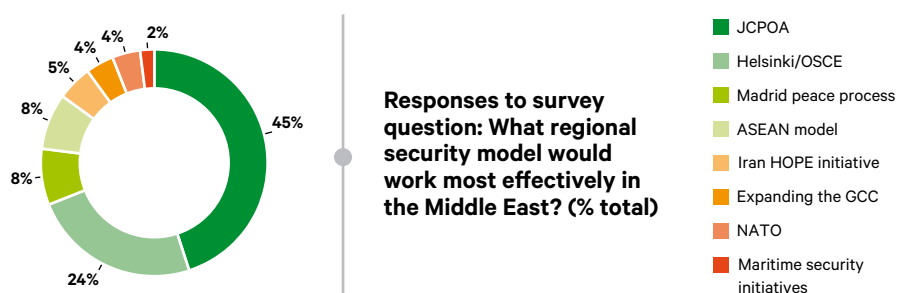


**Figure 2.** Country breakdown of responses to survey question: Would the Middle East benefit from a regional security framework?



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

**Figure 3.** Most effective regional security model



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

When asked to independently identify processes or steps that could be beneficial for the region (Figure 3), 45 per cent of responses singled out the US’s return to the JCPOA, and renewed compliance by Iran, as the most productive first step towards building regional security. 24 per cent of responses saw the OSCE model as a useful one that could be replicated to facilitate discussions with security, economic and social ‘baskets’; 8 per cent saw the Madrid peace process, with its bilateral and multilateral tracks, as a good template that could be emulated; and 8 per cent of respondents identified the ASEAN model, which prioritizes greater economic integration, as a productive example for the region. Iran’s HOPE initiative was identified in 5 per cent of responses. A NATO-like collective security model

was identified by 4 per cent of responses, as was the prospect of expanding the GCC. Just 2 per cent saw building on the multiple maritime security initiatives from 2019 as a useful step forward.

Drawing on these responses, two issues are particularly worth noting. First, the return to the JCPOA was seen by respondents as a critical move towards regional security. Second, respondents indicated that the OSCE was a useful model that could be applied to a wider regional process. The key to implementing both should not be seen as mutually exclusive, however. In fact, 62 per cent of responses saw parallel tracks as necessary to begin de-escalation in Yemen and Syria, and as critical to also addressing regional issues that were beyond the scope of the JCPOA. 'Anything that is too big and tries to address everything in one go risks overloading the system,' argued one German respondent.<sup>79</sup> Separating conflict areas and grouping them regionally, with focused negotiations that include only the relevant actors, was often mentioned as the best way forward.

## **The return to the JCPOA was seen by respondents as a critical move towards regional security.**

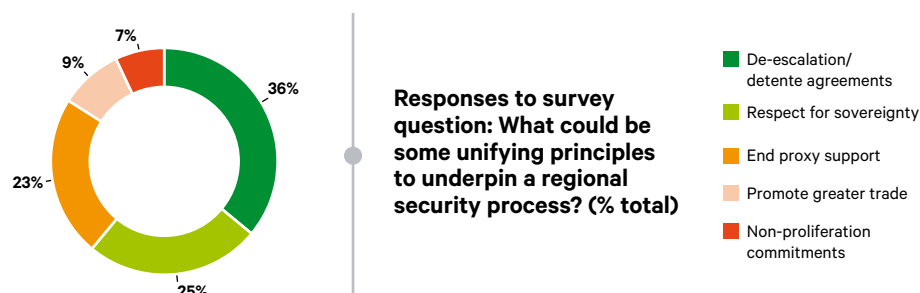
There is of course an argument to be made that it is necessary to start with the 'hard' issues first. A small number of respondents indicated that, as one put it: 'Without the hard issues, these efforts made will languish.'<sup>80</sup> Starting with a bigger process, though, would require regional states to be ready to sit down and discuss these most difficult issues. This was repeatedly seen as unlikely in the current climate where a number of countries do not even have formal diplomatic ties. The majority of interviewees considered that proceeding gradually, while not the most expedient strategy, was the best route to building a sustainable process.

Interviewees identified the following as critical principles to be upheld in a regional security process (Figure 4): committing to de-escalation and detente agreements, 36 per cent of responses; respecting sovereignty, 25 per cent; ending support for proxy groups, 23 per cent; increasing regional trade, 9 per cent; and adhering to nuclear non-proliferation, 7 per cent. Many respondents signalled that any process that did not tackle the tough issues of arms control, respect for sovereignty and ending support for non-state actors would be toothless, and ultimately ineffective. A regional view of these responses, captured in Figure 5, prioritizes a commitment to de-escalation as a crucial principle, with respect for sovereignty and ending support for proxy groups also receiving significant shares of all mentions. But, when weighing the climate of regional competition against these issues, it was repeatedly emphasized that regional actors currently have no incentive to compromise. The principles identified above, therefore, should be embedded at the end of a regional security process.

<sup>79</sup> Research interview, 25 August 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Research interview, 28 July 2020.

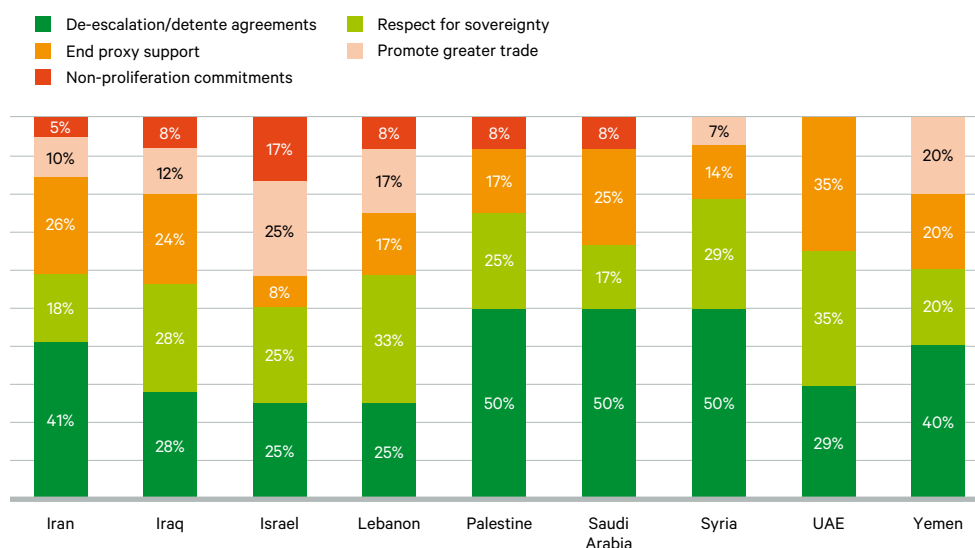
**Figure 4.** Unifying principles to underpin a regional security process



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

**Figure 5.** Middle East country breakdown of responses to survey question: What could be some unifying principles to underpin a regional security process? (% total)

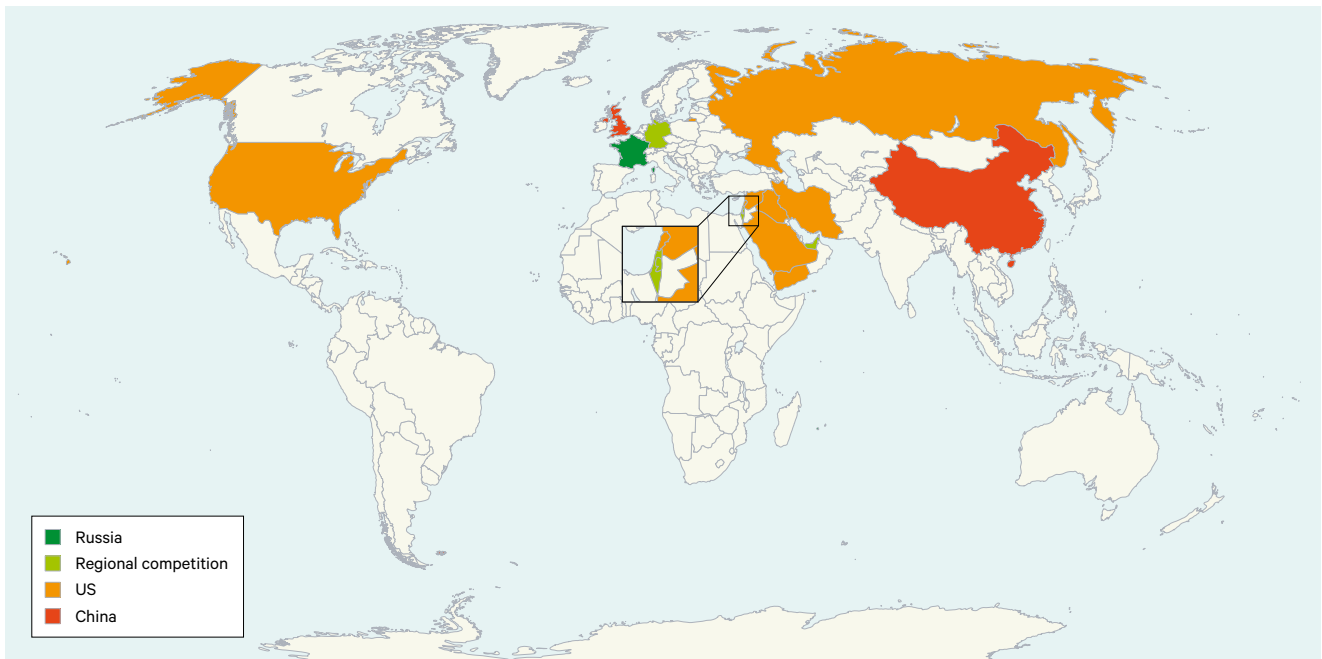


Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

Considering the role of external actors in any process, big or small (figures 6 and 7), respondents wholeheartedly agreed that geopolitical competition between the US, Russia and China is an important dynamic that exacerbates regional security and prolongs conflicts. 57 per cent of responses from Iraq, 50 per cent from the US, 45 per cent from Saudi Arabia, and 43 per cent from the UAE pointed to the role and commitment of the US as critical. Unsurprisingly, only 30 per cent of Iranian responses saw the US role as important.

**Figure 6.** Country breakdown of responses to survey question: What external factors impact regional security dynamics and Iran’s influence on the Middle East?



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

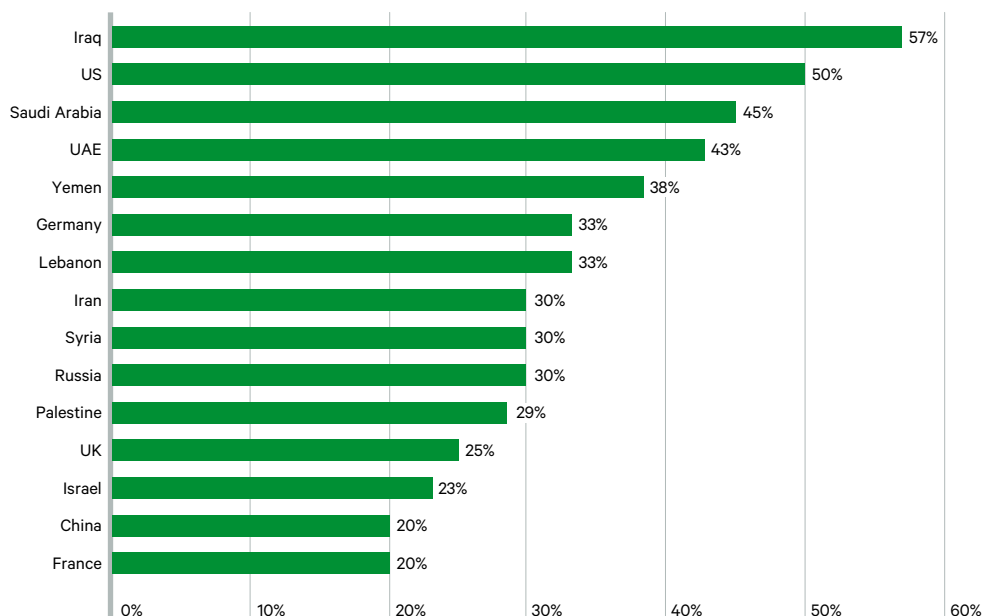
One Iraqi respondent stated: ‘The US needs to decide if it’s in or out. The middle ground is impacting everyone.’<sup>81</sup> Emirati and Saudi respondents expressed frustration over the US’s lack of consistency towards regional security; and Iraqi interviewees were resentful that the Trump administration ‘only saw Iraq through the prism of maximum pressure and Iran’.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, Russia’s presence – and thus influence – was touched on by only 12 per cent of responses, and China’s by 10 per cent.

Regional competition was identified by 26 per cent of responses as a critical factor limiting conflict resolution. As shown in the country-by-country breakdown in Figure 8, it was a consistent view among interviewees that regional competition remains an obstacle that needs to be managed, with 71 per cent of Palestinian responses pointing to regional competition as a challenge.

<sup>81</sup> Research interview, 18 September 2020.

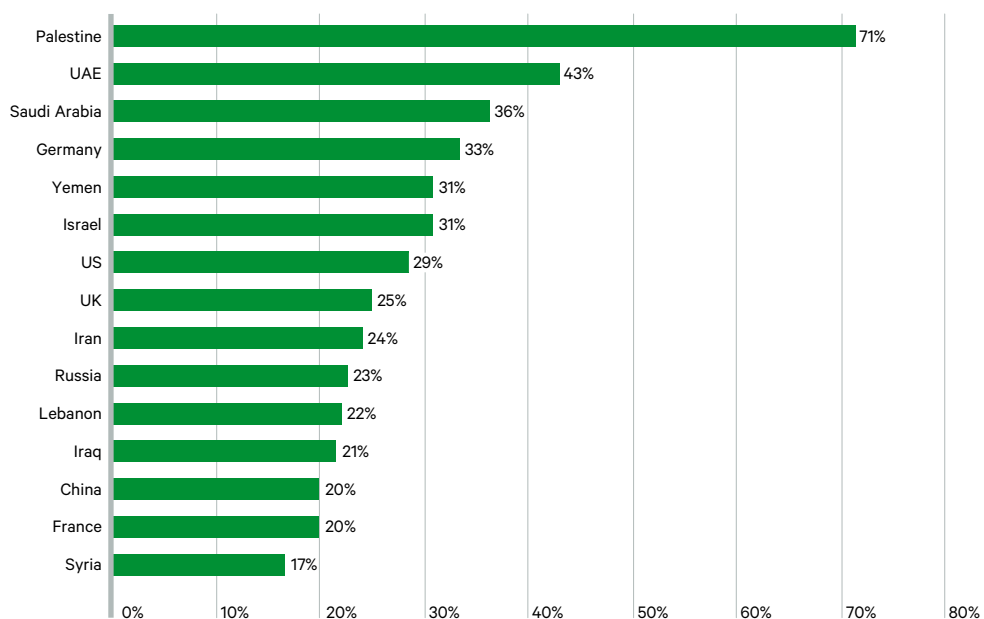
<sup>82</sup> Research interview, 8 September 2020.

**Figure 7.** Country breakdown of responses identifying the US as a factor impacting regional security dynamics and Iran’s influence on the Middle East (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

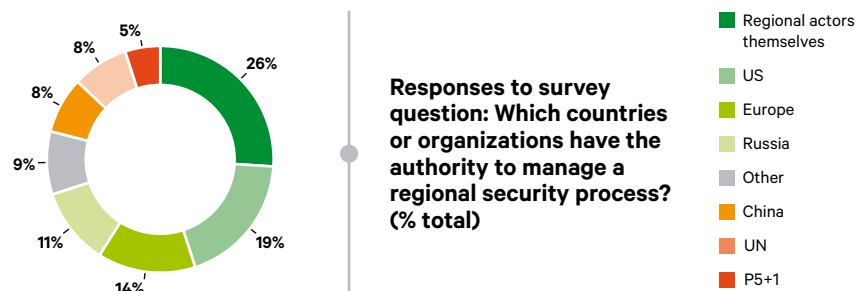
**Figure 8.** Country breakdown of responses identifying regional competition as a factor impacting regional security dynamics and Iran’s influence on the Middle East (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

When considering which parties should be involved in regional security (Figure 9), 19 per cent of responses saw the role of the US as vital; 14 per cent pointed to Europe (i.e. the EU plus the UK); 11 per cent Russia; 8 per cent China; 8 per cent the UN; and 5 per cent the P5 + 1. In all, 26 per cent of responses identified the engagement of regional actors themselves as essential to regional security building. The data clearly suggest that any process requires multilateral participation, coordination and sustained investment by many parties. Representation and involvement of all external actors – the US, Europe, Russia and China – could bring balance to the discussions. One Russian expert captured Moscow’s view, commenting: ‘Russia will be included in any negotiation process as long as it does not require significant investment and allows it to demonstrate an important role as a global power.’<sup>83</sup> A Chinese interviewee expressed Beijing’s focus as being broader than economic and energy-related factors: ‘Our security views fairness and justice for all parties as being sustainable.’<sup>84</sup> Another China analyst commented that ‘China doesn’t have the capabilities to be more assertive though, so multilateral solutions benefit Beijing.’<sup>85</sup> A multilateral process would be managed more effectively with bipartisan buy-in in the US, the UK and the EU, and an appointment of envoys from each of these to follow through the management and communication in each conflict.

**Figure 9.** Actors with the authority to manage a regional security process



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

The responses to this question also underscore that interviewees considered that regional actors themselves should manage a security process for the Middle East. Similar to other regional structures, a Middle East system must be managed regionally. Yet qualitative results show that the role of the US is deemed essential. Respondents repeatedly mentioned that the US was the only party that had the convening capacity and the diplomatic weight needed to rally all parties and bring them together. The US was also seen as the only actor that could represent and address Gulf security concerns. Effectively, the role of the US is critical to get the initiatives off the ground. The strategy of outreach and engagement from the Biden administration towards Iran as well as to the GCC states and

<sup>83</sup> Research interview, 1 September 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Research interview, 23 August 2020.

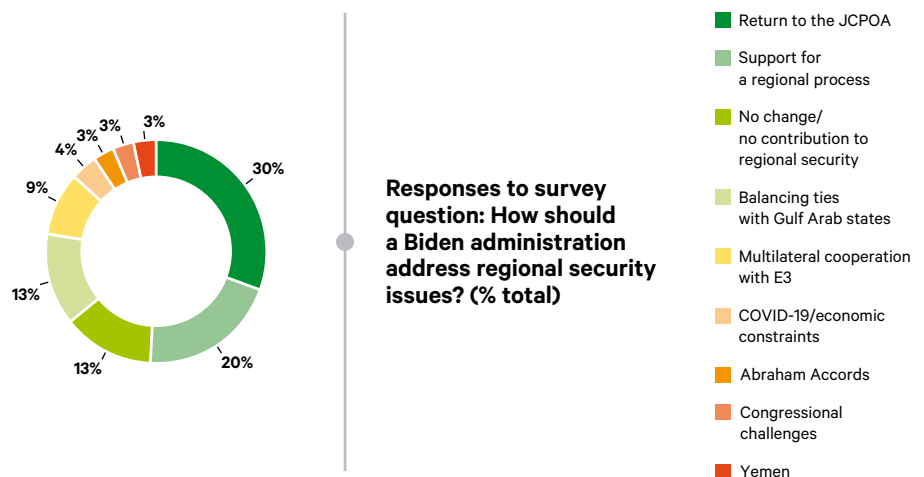
<sup>85</sup> Research interview, 12 October 2020.



to Israel was seen as important to ‘get right’. This could be done with balanced messaging but also sequencing on JCPOA re-engagement with a plan for parallel regional processes.

When asked how a Biden administration might address regional security issues (Figure 10), 30 per cent of interviewees’ responses envisaged the US re-entering the JCPOA. 20 per cent of responses anticipated that the new administration would also focus on a broader regional security process; 13 per cent predicted that Biden would look to rebalance relations with the GCC states; 9 per cent identified transatlantic ties as a key step; 3 per cent thought that Biden would broaden the Abraham Accords; and 3 per cent saw him concentrating on Yemen. Alongside these, 4 per cent of responses thought the impact of COVID-19, particularly on the US economy, would be a constraining factor on the president’s scope for engagement in the Middle East; 3 per cent were concerned that Biden would be faced with challenges from Congress; and 13 per cent stated that he would make no contribution to regional security. This range of responses reflects the diverse expectations regarding Biden’s Middle East policy.

**Figure 10.** Options for the Biden administration to address regional security issues

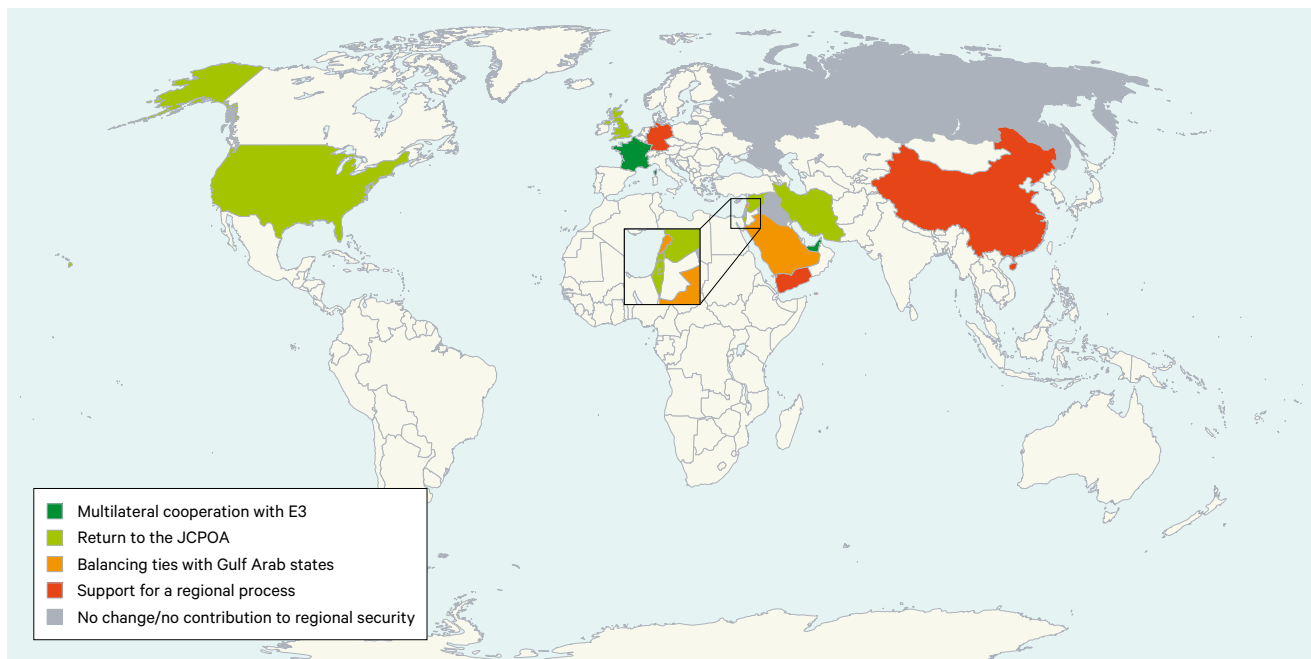


Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

Sequencing and confidence-building measures were overwhelmingly cited – in 78 per cent of responses – as important parts of a process enabling the establishment of a regional security framework. Drawing on the findings of the interviews conducted for this paper, the chapters that follow set out a de-escalation process – built on addressing Iran’s regional role, renewal of the JCPOA on a compliance-for-compliance basis, tackling the region’s multiple conflicts via parallel tracks, and establishing confidence-building measures – that should now be undertaken to enable real and durable progress.

**Figure 11.** Country breakdown of responses to survey question: How should a Biden administration address regional security issues?



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

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# 06

## Addressing Iran's regional role

**Western and Gulf Arab reliance on sanctions and containment measures is a reflection of limited creativity and capacity in developing more robust policies to address regional interference by Tehran.**

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Iran's regional role is a persistent factor in almost all Middle East conflicts, and addressing its activities across the region is an important contributory process to a broader JCPOA dialogue referred to as a 'more for more' approach. This bridging process is needed to protect the JCPOA from future subversion, and to address critical drivers of regional conflicts. Other regional states rightly view Iran's interference in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq as deeply destabilizing. To them, resolution can only be achieved through a negotiation process in which Iran concedes on these issues. What Arab states fail to publicly acknowledge, however, is that Tehran is one among many Middle East states engaging in disruptive activities. What was repeatedly noted by interviewees was that, as one put it, 'removing the Iranian variable would not miraculously resolve crises'.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, in any negotiation Tehran will inevitably make its own demands of regional states. If regional dynamics are to improve, therefore, Iran needs to recognize the counterproductive impact of its activities, while Arab states should also acknowledge that they too bear responsibility in driving conflict. Regionalizing solutions, as argued by a majority of interviewees, rather than isolating Iran, brings a greater chance of success.

Understanding Iran's operational capacity and identifying negotiating levers are necessary to build out a broader process. Iran's regional foreign policy, support for proxy groups, proliferation of weapons to these groups, and its ballistic missile programme all remain critical features of regional insecurity. Driven by its own threat perceptions with regard to the US and Israel, Tehran has pursued an asymmetrical, low-cost forward-defence strategy resulting in the penetration of states around

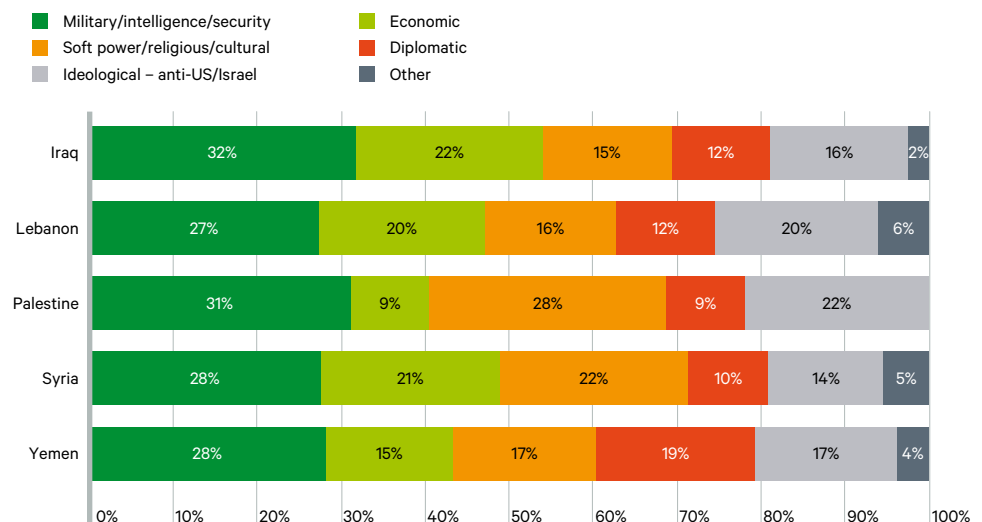
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<sup>86</sup> Research interview, 24 August 2020.

Israel. In the research process for this paper, interviewees were asked to define the factors driving Iran's regional assertion, and specifically in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. (Figure 12 shows the responses given in respect of each of these countries.) Respondents across the board clearly understood Tehran's regional strategy: 32 per cent of responses pointed to military/security-based relationships; 22 per cent identified economic ties as being essential to Iran's regional engagement; 16 per cent thought that ideological ties were important; 15 per cent noted soft power influence; and 12 per cent singled out Tehran's diplomatic relationships. Interviewees also saw Iran opportunistically using a diverse set of levers, sometimes taking advantage of crises to create dependencies while nimbly relying on the Qods Force and Hezbollah to build networks on the ground. 'Iran works both top down and bottom up,' noted one Syrian interviewee. Because of this approach, interview participants saw the full dismantling of Tehran's network of influence as highly unlikely.

Notwithstanding this clear awareness of how Iran operates in the region, there was no consensus on how to manage or constrain Iran's regional relationships. On balance, 65 per cent of interviewees came down against sanctions, and favoured a mix of dialogue and deterrence. Ultimately, however, in the qualitative analysis most analysts and policymakers did not offer detailed recommendations on rolling back Iran's regional role. This leaves us with the conclusion that with no one overarching pathway available, the best strategy would be to break the various areas and arenas apart.

**Figure 12.** Responses to survey question: What drives Iran's role in the following regional countries? (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

Iranian respondents saw the Trump administration's strategy of maximum pressure as driving Iran's deeper entrenchment. Tehran's response, through its maximum resistance strategy, has been to build leverage and widen economic linkages – two factors that have so far allowed Iran to withstand the impact of sanctions. One analyst suggested that through the reduction of pressure

and removal of most sanctions, Iran would have more breathing space: ‘It would be impossible to compromise on Iran’s military-based support when the threat level remains so high.’<sup>87</sup> In the view of another analyst: ‘If pressure is reduced and normal relations exist, then Iran’s regional policy would gradually change in the same way as it has gradually reached its current position.’ The same respondent elaborated that there is opposition within Iran to Tehran’s regional policies, so reducing pressure would allow an internal debate to emerge that could impact policy. Moreover, sanctions have clearly empowered hard-line elements like the IRGC, thereby reducing economic and political competition. Many analysts also commented that sanctions have not just failed to change Iranian behaviour, but have in reality made it worse. Here, respondents from the E3 countries saw their approach of engagement coupled with pressure as a necessary strategy to be deployed in any regional discussion.

**Figure 13.** Factors facilitating Iran’s interference in regional countries



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

In discussion of the factors that boost Iran’s capacity to interfere in regional countries (Figure 13), interviewees’ responses identified the following: Iran’s political system, 36 per cent; weak economic systems, 24 per cent; weak regional governments, 16 per cent; use of coercive force, 10 per cent; corruption, 7 per cent; ongoing regional wars, 5 per cent. Iran’s internal factional politics – between conservatives who see the effectiveness of Iran’s regional interventionist strategy and moderates who favour multilateral diplomatic policies and greater international engagement – was identified by a majority of respondents as driving its regional strategy. Internal inconsistency, coupled with the growing power of the IRGC and the limited influence of Iran’s president to influence change in the political system, was repeatedly mentioned in the interviews (62 per cent of responses). One French policymaker summarized the situation clearly:

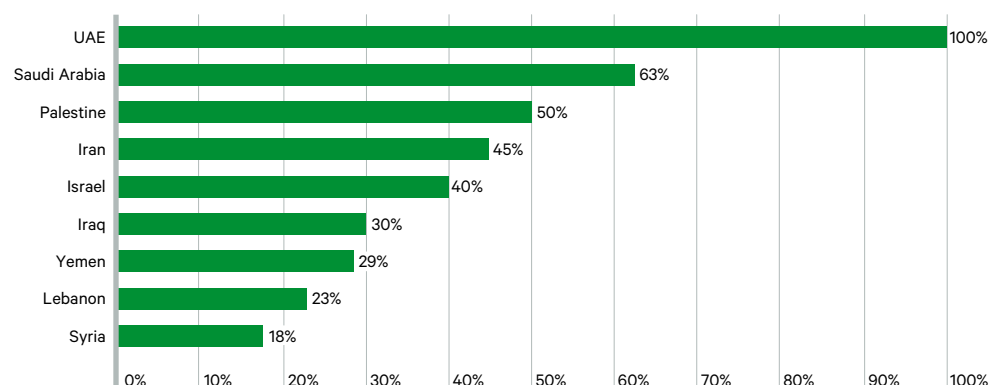
The people at the diplomatic level are not running the show on the ground. Western diplomats need to be talking to the right people in Tehran.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Research interview, 25 August 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Research interview, 17 September 2020.

Gulf Arab interviewees clearly saw Iran's system as the principal driver of regional instability (Figure 14), and one that would only continue in the absence of political or ideological change. This perspective was summed up by one Emirati analyst: 'The problem with Iran is that you are dealing with two Irans, one is the state and the other is the deep state.'<sup>89</sup>

**Figure 14.** Middle East country breakdown of responses identifying Iran's factional political system as a contributing factor of its regional strategy (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Other interviewees viewed what they described as Iran's predatory regional behaviour, especially in Iraq and Lebanon, as ultimately self-defeating. This is because Tehran does not invest in building sound political infrastructure, instead relying on infiltration and networks to exert pressure and influence. The protest movements in both Lebanon and Iraq seen since 2019 point to growing dissatisfaction with a status quo that supports elite interests over those of the people. Iran's role has also been targeted by the protests. 'No one loves the Iran model,'<sup>90</sup> said one American interviewee. A majority of respondents saw the protest movements as a constraint on Tehran's scope for manoeuvre. In Iraq, in the view of one Lebanese analyst:

Tehran is seen as enabling the larger kleptocratic system ... The criticism has forced Iran to take steps back. Protests should be supported.<sup>91</sup>

When considering how to respond to Iran's regional influence, interviewees offered a number of pertinent suggestions that we have grouped into three categories: country-level solutions; broader GCC engagement; and a mix of incentives and pressure. One analyst captured the predicament over Iran's presence thus:

What is not working is a comprehensive Iran approach. Each theatre has its own dynamics. Even though it all springs from the same well, you have to tackle each theatre individually.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Research interview, 17 August 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Research interview, 23 September 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Research interview, 2 October 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Research interview, 14 October 2020.



Another Iran analyst suggested: ‘If you want to limit Iran’s role, the solution should come from inside those countries.’<sup>93</sup> All of this requires a more nuanced understanding of local problems and greater empowerment of local governance and local actors. We discuss these issues and opportunities later in this chapter, drawing on the country-level analysis shared by expert interviewees.

There is a need for broader engagement in the region by the Gulf Arab states, not only to balance against Iran’s presence, but also to take on a more proactive and all-of-region strategy that is not solely predicated on containment. Respondents commented that continued Western and regional reliance on sanctions and containment policies is a reflection of limited creativity and capacity in developing more robust Iran policies. Interviewees saw the GCC members as having ‘washed their hands’ of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, withdrawing financial assistance but also limiting their political participation. While the GCC countries are indeed working to engage economically in Iraq, their strategy appears halting and slow. Gulf support does not have to be about ‘money only’, argued one Lebanese analyst. Engaging with a broader network of local actors and political players would be more effective than the current pattern of only talking to like-minded groups. Another analyst suggested that the GCC should ‘take a page from the Iranian playbook and engage with policymakers and actors across the political spectrum’.<sup>94</sup>

For their part, the US, the UK and the EU urgently need to develop a set of responses that goes beyond sanctions. Respondents recommended having a mix of carrots and sticks. Engagement, too, would broaden awareness and understanding of mutual red lines. Under the Trump administration, the red line for the US was loss of American life. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spoken directly about establishing red lines on Iran’s enrichment levels. One Iran analyst commented: ‘Iran responds well when they know the limits of restraint.’<sup>95</sup> Making those limits heard and understood would lessen tensions between Iran and Israel and with the GCC states. For instance, the GCC states have publicly called for revisions to Iran’s constitution so as to end a policy of exporting the revolution, alongside ceasing support for non-state actors. But such demands are essentially non-specific, and provide no clarity on achievable limits. Instead, the GCC states could state unequivocally that Qods force activity outside Iran must cease. Interviewees from the E3 countries and the US identified an end to lethal aid transfers as their red line demand to Iran.<sup>96</sup> Establishing deterrence was also cited as being effective, with one German analyst putting it starkly: ‘Killing [Qassem]Soleimani worked unexpectedly. It got their attention and taught them a lesson.’<sup>97</sup>

At the same time, interviewees considered that US engagement in the region should not be viewed solely through a military and security lens. Building economic, diplomatic and civil society relationships would result in stronger soft power ties that would improve perceptions of the US and strengthen local social bonds. These points have been also made by Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson

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<sup>93</sup> Research interview, 18 September 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Research interview, 25 September 2020.

<sup>95</sup> Research interview, 4 September 2020.

<sup>96</sup> Research interview, 13 September 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Research interview, 8 September 2020.

and colleagues.<sup>98</sup> Establishing communication channels or hotlines was often mentioned as an important element in progressing towards regional discussions. The creation of back-channels to reduce conflict between Iran and Israel, as well as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, was also repeatedly cited as a potentially constructive move towards de-escalation. The appointment of envoys to engage in shuttle diplomacy was additionally seen as a productive measure that could help in defining and managing negotiation parameters.

## **The appointment of envoys to engage in shuttle diplomacy was seen as a productive measure that could help in defining and managing negotiation parameters.**

Returning to the Iran analyst's comment, captured earlier in this chapter, that in order to limit Iran's influence, the solution should come from within target countries, it is clear that GCC states, in particular, need to develop a more nuanced understanding of their neighbourhood if they are to deepen their own engagement and curtail that of Tehran. The country-level analysis in the remainder of this chapter captures suggestions put forward by interviewees on how states can leverage their own advantages in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.

### **Iraq**

Most interviewees attributed the strategic importance of Iraq to Iran to the impact of the eight-year war between the two countries, which has left generations of Iranians with deep psychological scars.<sup>99</sup> In fact, many Saudi interviewees expressed a sympathy and understanding of Iran's trauma from that conflict. Nevertheless, the majority of Iraq experts interviewed for this paper argued that Iran's policy towards Iraq will come to undermine its interests, as it has helped reinforce a system of governance that is inimical to Iraq's long-term national interest. Thus, if Iran's interventions continue in the same vein, they will naturally hit a brick wall at some time to come. As one interviewee said: 'Iran doesn't realize that mitigating challenges in Iraq [is] in its interests.'<sup>100</sup> Helping Tehran understand that point, then, would better serve both Iraq and Iran. Indeed, interviewees suggested a number of measures to accelerate that understanding. Given that Trump's maximum pressure campaign failed to constrain Iran's actions<sup>101</sup> and resulted in even greater Iranian investment in militias, the Biden administration should learn from the US's past

<sup>98</sup> Kaye, D. D., Robinson, L., Martini, J., Vest, N. and Rhoades, A. L. (2021), *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA958-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA958-1.html) (accessed 24 Mar. 2021).

<sup>99</sup> Faily, L. (2018), 'Reflecting on the Iran-Iraq War, Thirty Years Later', Atlantic Council IranSource blog, 21 August 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/reflecting-on-the-iran-iraq-war-thirty-years-later> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Research interview, 3 October 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Toosi, N. (2019), 'Is Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Blowing up in Iraq?', *Politico*, 31 December 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/31/trump-maximum-pressure-iraq-091773> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

mistakes and build much wider networks in Iraq, engaging not only with government institutions and agencies but also with a wide range of civil society organizations across the whole country.

Instead of focusing primarily on security issues and prioritizing pushback against ISIS, the US should place more emphasis on economic and political development in Iraq. In other words, one way to counter Iran's influence is by buoying up Iraq's economy and tackling issues that affect the everyday lives of its people, especially young Iraqis. Listening to the demands of the protesters who want to see political change, greater transparency and job creation<sup>102</sup> would give the US and its partners fresh routes by which to engage with large sections of Iraqi society who feel marginalized as well as increasingly frustrated by Iranian influence.

Another recommendation to manage Iran's role in Iraq was the creation of 'accountable mechanisms for all actors operating in the Iraqi state. It needs cohesive accountable institutions that can stop violations of Iraqi law.'<sup>103</sup> Again, it was argued by a number of interviewees that, instead of investing in security, the US and the EU should take a longer-term approach to Iraq, and invest time and effort in helping reform – from within – its political system of checks and balances, without trying to engage in a state-building enterprise. Another interviewee developed this point, making the case that 'tactical US and GCC investment could create competition in the economic space'. It was further reinforced by an Israeli interviewee, who commented that Iraq cannot be expected to limit Iran's influence 'without alternatives'.<sup>104</sup> A number of respondents proposed that Iran, for its part, could engage more productively by supporting and engaging in annual strategic dialogues with Baghdad where grievances and opportunities for improved bilateral ties could be discussed.

## Palestine

None of the Palestine experts interviewed believed that Iran has significant influence in the West Bank or Gaza. It was repeatedly noted that Iran's influence is largely limited to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza, and that because of its support for the Assad regime in Syria it has alienated most Islamist parties in the Palestinian territories. However, Tehran has continued to reach out to Fatah, which is the dominant force in the West Bank, finding favour with some of its leadership,<sup>105</sup> as it has with leaders from other smaller 'secular' parties that continue to sympathize with the Assad regime and which welcome Iranian support. Most interviewees believed that Tehran's influence in the West Bank and Gaza could achievably be curbed, though not extinguished, by ensuring that other key regional actors – namely Jordan, Qatar and Egypt – are actively engaged in working with their Palestinian partners. Working to reduce Palestinian factionalism was another recommendation that could limit Tehran's influence.

<sup>102</sup> Halawa, H. (2020), 'Iraq's Protests: Durability and Sustainability', Middle East Institute, 31 January 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqs-protests-durability-and-sustainability> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Research interview, 13 October 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Research interview, 23 September 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Majidiyar, A. (2018), 'Iran and Hamas Seeking to further Boost Relations', Middle East Institute, 25 January 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-and-hamas-seeking-further-boost-relations> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

## Lebanon

Lebanon was commonly identified by interviewees as the country most penetrated by Iranian influence, as Tehran has successfully embedded its key regional ally, Hezbollah, in the country's political framework. Many respondents viewed the Tehran–Hezbollah axis as the most durable and important one across the region, although some suggested that Hezbollah could survive even without Tehran's financial help. However, a number of interviewees also argued that this factor itself had made Hezbollah vulnerable to the vagaries of the Lebanese political system: its leadership now has to share responsibility for the impending collapse of the state, and that would ultimately undermine its influence. Nevertheless, a number of measures could still be introduced to moderate Iranian influence in Lebanon, including, for the Biden administration, reinserting democracy promotion and human rights in US policy towards the country.

Respondents considered that the Trump administration had missed an easy win after 2019 by passing up multiple opportunities to support the protesters in Lebanon, and Biden could now make a clear commitment to do so. The US, the UK and the EU could invigorate programmes that both support civil society in building better local governance systems and help tackle corruption. Similar to the situation in Iraq, there is widespread dissatisfaction in Lebanon with the current political system, and an emergent nationalism among Lebanese youth intent on challenging the status quo from the ground up.<sup>106</sup> As some interviewees saw it, the Obama administration had ultimately relied on the region's dictators to restore order, but the Biden administration now has the opportunity to make amends and lend support to grassroots organizations that want to build a more sustainable political system. GCC states also have an opportunity here to engage more broadly within the Lebanese system.

## Syria

Syria experts interviewed for this paper suggested a number of ways to curtail Iran's influence. However, most Syrian respondents – whatever their political leaning – argued that Tehran would remain influential in the country, and that this could be welcome as long as its engagement is channelled through legitimate means and towards the economy, trade and culture rather than security. As set out in Chapter 8, Russia is seen as key to curbing Iran's influence in Syria. The US, on the other hand, was routinely criticized by interviewees for simply, as one put it, 'dumping money and weapons rather than investing in diplomacy'.<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, 67 per cent of Syria experts made clear that the US should now re-engage diplomatically with its international and regional partners, and also use its relationship with Israel to arrive at a broader understanding with Russia.

<sup>106</sup> Yee, V. (2019), 'Lebanon Protests Unite Sects in Demanding New Government', *New York Times*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/world/middleeast/lebanon-protests.html> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Research interview, 15 August 2020.

Israel's Syria policy was considered by many interviewees to be highly effective at enforcing red lines, and to have demonstrated the clear limits of Iran's capabilities – and indeed its vulnerabilities. Israeli interviewees emphasized that their objective in Syria is not to manage the conflict or even push towards a resolution, but to contain Iran and make sure Syria is not a safe haven for the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah. Other respondents noted that the GCC states are keen on re-engaging with Damascus in a bid to pull Syria not just from Iran's orbit, but out of Turkey's shadow as well. Over the past four years, however, US policy has continued to serve as a major constraint to these objectives.<sup>108</sup> To overcome this, before any substantive move can be made to better manage Iranian influence in Syria, an understanding must be reached between Moscow and Washington on Assad's future role.

## Yemen

Unlike Lebanon and Iraq, Yemen was identified by respondents as an area where Iran is relatively less invested, and where its influence could be rolled back at little cost to all parties – including Tehran. Most interviewees considered the ongoing UN-led diplomatic process to be the way to achieve this goal. Many respondents made the case that one option for the Biden administration to explore is pushing Saudi Arabia to end its military campaign in favour of a diplomatic route. The aim would be to develop an agreement that not only recognizes the legitimate right of the Houthis to share power, but also encourages Riyadh to underpin the deal with significant financial support.

To have the best chance of bringing this about, a number of interviewees believed that Qatar, Oman, Iran and even Hezbollah should be involved in the talks. It would be difficult to envision Hezbollah joining a negotiation track, but Iran's participation would help ensure that it is linked in with political discussions. This would mean Hezbollah's interests would be taken into consideration, and its chances of spoiling a final agreement better managed. Doha and Muscat were cited as being critical to any process, as they would have the ability to bring together all the warring parties, assist with implementation, and also take on some of the economic burden of reconstruction.

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<sup>108</sup> Jukhadar, Q. and Tsurkov, E. (2020), 'Caesar Act: The Syrian People Are Sapped while Assad Grows Stronger', Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 2 September 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/caesar-act-the-syrian-people-are-sapped-while-assad-grows-stronger> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

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# 07

## First step: reviving the JCPOA

**The US's return to the JCPOA will be a critical first step. But a follow-up agreement will be needed to lengthen and strengthen the 2015 deal, insulate it from partisan swings in the US or Iran, and ensure regional buy-in.**

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As identified by interviewees during the research for this paper, a return to the JCPOA, in line with the stated intention of the Biden administration, would have a number of important implications for regional security. By building a model of 'compliance for compliance', trust and confidence can gradually be restored between Tehran and Washington alongside the other JCPOA signatories. Respondents from the E3 countries saw this as a first step in a wider process that would have to be built with an investment of what one summarized as 'time, focus, coordination and discipline'.<sup>109</sup> 'Starting small,' as one American interviewee put it, 'would also help build regional ownership over multiple processes'.<sup>110</sup> Regional states like Iraq, which found themselves caught between the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy and Tehran's maximum resistance response, will also see benefits from such a de-escalation of tensions.

Regional dynamics changed dramatically over the four years of the Trump administration, and returning to the *status quo ante* of 2015 is impossible. There was a clear consensus among the interviewees that the JCPOA is fragile, and that a follow-up agreement is now needed, not least to help insulate it from further partisan swings in the US or Iranian system and to reflect the concerns of regional states such as Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Such an agreement will have to address wider sanctions relief; to facilitate Iran's access to the international banking system; and to increase the nuclear timelines set out in the initial deal. As we have shown from the data, a broader initial negotiation is not likely to yield critical

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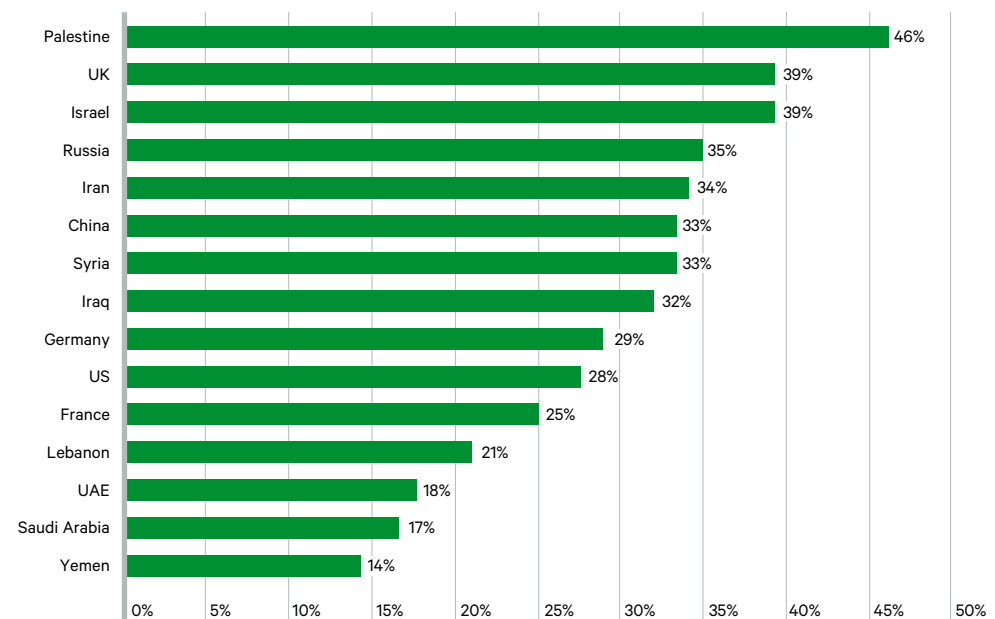
<sup>109</sup> Research interview, 16 August 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Research interview, 23 August 2020.



improvements to the deal but will instead entrench parties further. Moreover, a new nuclear negotiation has been categorically ruled out by Iran.<sup>111</sup> Tehran insists that returning to the deal can be a part of a wider process, but initial mutual compliance is needed before that process can take shape. With President Hassan Rouhani under significant domestic pressure from conservatives, who are expected to prevail at the presidential election due in June 2021, one Iranian respondent suggested that ‘sanctions relief and the resurrection of the JCPOA could potentially moderate electoral outcomes’.<sup>112</sup>

**Figure 15.** Country breakdown of responses identifying the US’s return to the JCPOA as an important step towards improving regional security (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

‘Broadening the discussions too early could doom the process to failure,’ in the view of one American analyst. It is thus critical that a JCPOA roll-out is accompanied by a clear plan of action to address the original deal’s deficiencies. To prevent a repeat of the mistakes made during the JCPOA negotiations, whereby Iran was able to expand its footprint in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria, respondents thought it crucial to establish a regional roadmap that would explain the next steps beyond the JCPOA and the parallel processes that would entail. With such a roadmap in tow, the Biden administration will be better able to placate congressional opponents and respond to regional concerns. With regard to the latter, it will be essential to commit to coordination and consultation, and to acknowledge the unease felt by Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. One Emirati interviewee suggested that the Biden team ‘should learn from Obama’s mistakes’.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, regional ‘buy-in for a wider regional plan is urgently needed, otherwise the whole scheme will fall

<sup>111</sup> Research interview, 17 September 2020.

<sup>112</sup> Research interview, 17 October 2020.

<sup>113</sup> Research interview, 10 October 2020.

apart', said one Saudi expert.<sup>114</sup> The challenge for Washington will be to prevent the Gulf states from playing the role of spoiler for a second time. Respondents recommended that the creation of parallel regional tracks, in addition to the focus on the JCPOA, would show GCC states and Israel that the Biden administration would be charting its own course rather than picking up where Obama left off.

Among the principal benefits of returning to the JCPOA is Iran's recommitment to nuclear compliance. Biden has also stated that restoring the JCPOA, with the US and Iran returning to mutual compliance, would also avoid a nuclear build-up in the Middle East.<sup>115</sup> This was identified by US and European interviewees as a significant step that would open the door to future regional discussions. Moreover, Israel experts also indicated that managing Iran's nuclear advancements was the principal security challenge for Jerusalem. Tehran has repeatedly stated that all of its nuclear breaches have been designed to be reversed.<sup>116</sup> A number of months will be needed for Iran to meet its 2015 commitments. It is expected that advanced centrifuges can be stopped, and higher levels of enriched uranium can be shipped to Russia, as was seen in the JCPOA implementation process. The only area that would be impossible to reverse is Iran's research and development advancements since 2019. However, as stated by one Iranian interviewee: 'Tehran has proposals prepared and in place for when those nuclear compliance discussions begin.'<sup>117</sup>

## **Biden has stated that restoring the JCPOA, with the US and Iran returning to mutual compliance, would also avoid a nuclear build-up in the Middle East.**

On the US side, compliance will be met by sanctions relief. Should the Biden administration choose to reverse the sanctions implemented since 2018, specifically those tied to the its predecessor's maximum pressure campaign, it will require a few months of due diligence to work through the more than 1,500 designations. As summarized by one interviewee: 'It won't be easy to do a clean reversal of sanctions.'<sup>118</sup> The Biden team will also have to make a decision on whether it will reverse human rights, counterterrorism and proliferation sanctions that were also applied by the Trump administration. Another respondent stated:

Dual-use sanctions that have been imposed from tracking Iranian proliferation of weapons, financing, support for terrorism or human rights violations will be sticking points, and make it harder for Biden to return to the *status quo ante*. Removing the foreign terrorist designation of the IRGC will be more difficult to accomplish because it will require Senate approval, and with divisions in the Senate being razor thin, it is hard to imagine that they will approve such a move.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Research interview, 13 July 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Friedman, T. L. (2020), 'Biden Made Sure "Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years"', *New York Times*, 2 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/opinion/biden-interview-mcconnell-china-iran.html> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>116</sup> United States Institute of Peace (2020), 'Iran's Breaches of the Nuclear Deal', *The Iran Primer*, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/oct/02/iran%E2%80%99s-breaches-nuclear-deal> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>117</sup> Research interview, 7 August 2020.

<sup>118</sup> Research interview, 23 September 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Research interview, 23 October 2020.

At the outset of the process, the Biden administration could provide assistance for COVID-19 vaccination programmes, or facilitate humanitarian transfers. Trade channels such as the European Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) or the Swiss Humanitarian Trade Arrangement – would allow Washington to make such exports while sanctions relief is in progress. Biden may also opt to remove some of Trump’s designations of financial institutions to facilitate critical humanitarian aid. This could include reversing secondary sanctions on Iranian banks, or revoking the classification of the Central Bank of Iran as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. These initial conciliatory steps would help foreign pharmaceutical companies seeking to do business in Iran in sectors not covered by US secondary sanctions. Moreover, in absence of the full sanctions relief that has often been demanded by Tehran, these efforts would be seen as important gestures of US intent.

Re-entry to the JCPOA would, moreover, be a necessary step to reinvigorate transatlantic relations. The E3 countries have been particularly aggrieved not only by the US’s unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, but also by the Trump administration’s bullying approach that forced Europe to comply with the sanctions imposed under Washington’s maximum pressure policy. As already noted, the E3 unsuccessfully lobbied against the US withdrawal, warning that this would result in greater instability. The return of US sanctions resulted in the withdrawal of international business from the Iranian economy and the blocking of Tehran’s access to the international banking system.

The E3 was able to remain united in the face of the Trump administration’s maximum pressure policy, and has been committed to upholding the JCPOA. Despite Iran’s repeated breaches, the E3 made use of the dispute resolution mechanism provided for in the 2015 agreement, as part of a strategy to buy time pending the outcome of the 2020 US election. However, all this required continued investment and coordination. One French interviewee expressed deep frustration over the amount of time ‘wasted’ – as they put it – on the JCPOA process during this period, that could otherwise have been diverted to dealing with the active regional conflicts.<sup>120</sup> Another spoke of having experienced ‘insulting’ levels of conversation and communication from members of the Trump administration, even suggesting that an apology was warranted.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, fearful of US reprisals, the E3 was not able to stave off US sanctions, leaving European companies no choice but to withdraw from the Iranian market.<sup>122</sup> It did initiate INSTEX, but the mechanism designed to facilitate transactions has not been operational due to similar issues of compliance with US sanctions. This transatlantic divide played out through 2019 and 2020, with the EU establishing its own Persian Gulf maritime security initiative, rather than joining the US operation, to avoid association with maximum pressure. Strikingly, the E3 refused to endorse US efforts to extend the Iranian arms embargo ahead of its scheduled expiry

<sup>120</sup> Research interview, 4 October 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Research interview, 10 September 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Niblett, R. (2019), ‘Trump’s Visit Is a Reminder That Europe Is Being Bullied by America – And It Is Working’, *Time*, 3 June 2019, <https://time.com/5598980/trump-europe-bullying> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

in October 2020, and rejected a request by the US for the imposition of snapback sanctions as incompatible with the E3's ongoing support for the JCPOA.<sup>123</sup>

Despite these efforts, the E3 was repeatedly accused by Tehran of not doing enough to push back against Washington. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei spoke witheringly of the Europeans in 2019, stating that they 'do not have the same capabilities, hegemony and facilities [as the US]; but, the mentality of the European leaders is the same as that of the US officials. They enter the scene as mediators, they negotiate, contact, make calls, make lengthy speeches, and make commitments, but they are not truthful.'<sup>124</sup> Even so, in the same speech he held open the possibility of dialogue: 'One point about Europe and the foreign policy affairs is that we have not closed the door for establishing relations and negotiating ...'.<sup>125</sup> One Iranian respondent expressed the view that the E3 has an important role to play as a 'convener' and an 'investor' in the Iranian market. This Iranian pressure strategy *vis-à-vis* the European signatories has been more about rhetoric than substance.<sup>126</sup> Tehran has also leveraged the E3's support for the JCPOA and opposition to Trump-era policies to foster international public sympathy.

## **The E3 states have been greatly frustrated in their position as guarantors of the JCPOA, by the pressure from both Tehran and Washington, by the escalation of regional tensions, and by the reactivation of Iran's nuclear programme.**

For the Biden administration, restoring multilateral cooperation on Iran should be seen as an essential element in the compliance-for-compliance process. The E3 states have been greatly frustrated in their position as guarantors of the JCPOA, by the pressure from both Tehran and Washington, by the escalation of regional tensions, and by the reactivation of Iran's nuclear programme. Moreover, many respondents from the E3 expressed resentment at not having been able to focus more on regional security issues such as the wars in Yemen and Syria, alongside Tehran's detention of dual nationals, developments within its missile programme, and arms proliferation around the region.

In summary, reviving the JCPOA would be a foundational and necessary step towards a regional security process. As part of the compliance-for-compliance negotiations and implementation, all parties should commit to participation in the second phase. Iran can be incentivized to participate with the promise of additional sanctions relief or investment. Securing Tehran's commitment will be critical to alleviating regional concerns. 'It is important that the JCPOA compliance process does not give Iran

<sup>123</sup> Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2020), 'E3 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the JCPOA', 20 August 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/e3-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-jcpoa> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>124</sup> Khamenei.ir (2019), 'Vicious European countries should not be trusted: Imam Khamenei', 26 September 2019, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/7066/Vicious-European-countries-should-not-be-trusted-Imam-Khamenei> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Research interview, 18 August 2020.

regional immunity,’ as one an Israeli respondent put it.<sup>127</sup> Interviewees from the UAE and Saudi Arabia shared this view. Such a commitment will be important for the E3, too. French respondents worried that E3 unity might fracture, with France resuming the harder line seen in the initial JCPOA negotiations. UK respondents were unsure how the outcome of the US election, together with the repercussions of Brexit, might impact E3 solidarity. German, UK and French interviewees viewed the maintenance of the collaborative E3 approach as one of the positive outcomes of the Trump period that should be maintained. Biden could also draw on Tehran’s commitment to the process to placate opponents in the US Congress as the ground is laid to tackle the harder issues needed to lengthen and strengthen the deal and address broader deficiencies in the agreement as arrived at in 2015.

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<sup>127</sup> Research interview, 22 August 2020.

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# 08

## Parallel tracks: resolving regional conflicts

**Essential to the resilience of the ‘JCPOA plus’ process will be a set of crisis-resolution tracks, focusing on the wars in Yemen and Syria, Israel–Palestine, and rebuilding solidarity among the GCC states.**

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A follow on step, as identified by the majority of participants in the interviews for this paper, requires working towards resolving key conflicts. Yemen was considered to be the least difficult to resolve, but equally important are the Israel–Palestine and Syria conflicts. Respondents also discussed the significant security implications of the rift in the GCC, which was unresolved at the time the interviews took place.

### **The Yemen track**

The majority of interviewees’ responses (52 per cent) suggested that there are relatively straightforward gains to be made in terms of resolving the conflict in Yemen, with many referring to the ‘low-hanging fruit’ to be harvested there. It was argued in 25 per cent of responses that Iran is far less invested in Yemen than it is in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria; and that the Houthis remain fiercely independent and – unlike other Iranian-backed proxies – are much less likely to consider Tehran’s calculus in their own decision-making. Moreover, 37 per cent of responses noted that whereas Tehran considers Iraq to be critical to its national security, and Lebanon essential to the regime’s legitimacy, Yemen has so far been an opportunity that it has been able to exploit with relative ease.



Respondents drew a distinction between the relationship shared by the Houthis and Iran, and that of the Houthis with Hezbollah. 22 per cent of interviewees' responses made the case that, compared with Tehran, Hezbollah has in fact instrumentalized its relationship with the Houthis to greater effect, by offering regular support via logistics and operations; command and control; arms and munitions; and missile technology and know-how. While 77 per cent of Saudi responses expressed fears that if the Houthis become part of the formal governing apparatus in Yemen they will resemble Hezbollah in Lebanon – which is a legitimate concern – 28 per cent of responses overall considered that Iran shares no such an objective. The latter argued that the Iranian regime's legitimacy has rested on investing heavily in building Hezbollah in Lebanon, and, by doing so, it has been able to challenge Israel directly – something no Arab state has been able to do since 1973 – and, more recently, shore up the Assad regime in Syria. As such, Tehran's investment has served its national interest; threatening Israel's security is an action intended to mobilize public support behind the regime, and is also used to justify domestic policies and failures.

Supporting the Houthis, on the other hand, does not serve the same purpose for Tehran. Indeed, the Houthis are a major thorn in Saudi Arabia's side, and a means of threatening the kingdom's security. The continuing barrage of Houthi missiles targeting the kingdom's infrastructure and cities prove this point.<sup>128</sup> They also act as a major drain on Riyadh's resources, but there is no real desire or indeed benefit for them in fomenting a revolution or overthrowing the Al Saud. As such, Iran is content to provide limited support to the Houthis to create grave discomfort, or even embarrassment, for the Saudis, but it has little motivation to intensify its efforts or sponsor a deeply embedded proxy force or forces, as it has done in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>129</sup> It has thus left much of the operational, organizational and materiel support for the Houthis to Hezbollah, which currently has its own issues of overstretch in both Lebanon and Syria. For the time being, Hezbollah's capacity is constrained by its own major commitments; and the near collapse of the state in Lebanon has meant that its leadership is under severe pressure. Moreover, the vulnerability of high-profile Iranian figures, against whom Israel has carried out a campaign of assassinations, also poses a serious threat to Hezbollah's leadership. This in itself will likely curtail some of the group's adventurous dealings in the region.

In all, 68 per cent of Yemen expert responses asserted that the Houthis are neither an imported group, a proxy drawn from another country or region, nor a group willing to submit itself to Iran's imperatives. They are an integral part of Yemeni society; and although they took part in six wars with the previous Saleh government between 2004 and 2010,<sup>130</sup> they did so under their own aegis and without major external support. In other words, they are a group with a distinctive Yemeni identity, act in their own immediate interests, and – notwithstanding an increase in support from Hezbollah and Iran since 2015<sup>131</sup> – are not beholden

<sup>128</sup> Reuters (2021), 'Yemen's Houthis attack Saudi oil heartland with drones, missiles', 8 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-saudi-int-idUSKBN2B00I2> (accessed 24 Mar. 2021).

<sup>129</sup> Johnston, T. et al. (2020), *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2500/RR2551/RAND\\_RR2551.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2551/RAND_RR2551.pdf) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>130</sup> Boucek, C. (2010), *War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace No. 110, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war\\_in\\_saada.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/war_in_saada.pdf) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>131</sup> Transfeld, M. (2017), 'Iran's Small Hand in Yemen', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sada blog 14 February 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

to external actors. 84 per cent of Yemen expert responses considered the Houthis to be an independent group that has resisted interference from domestic and external actors, including Iran – especially when Tehran has issued requests to the Houthi leadership to exercise restraint in the conflict with the Saudi-led coalition. Iran's ability to command and control the Houthis was repeatedly questioned by respondents.

## **68 per cent of Yemen expert responses asserted that the Houthis are neither an imported group, a proxy drawn from another country or region, nor a group willing to submit itself to Iran's imperatives.**

Among all interviewees, 65 per cent were of the opinion that although Iran places little strategic importance on Yemen, Saudi Arabia views it differently. For Riyadh, Yemen is a foreign policy priority, given its proximity and shared geographic, demographic, economic, familial and historical connections. Interviewees emphasized its importance in the eyes of the Saudi leadership, pointing to the number of conflicts that have taken place between the kingdom and combatants in Yemen over the years. Some regional experts argued that whereas Saudi Arabia had once had strong tribal ties with Yemeni society, as well as deep links within its security networks, these had been squandered in recent times. Furthermore, the policies of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had effectively diminished Riyadh's ability to influence Sanaa. At the same time, most respondents argued that his hasty entry into the war in 2015 had cost the kingdom dearly, including through the loss of political and diplomatic influence. Along with direct costs estimated at \$6 billion per month since the start of the war, there has been increased insecurity in border areas and population centres such as Yanbu and Jeddah,<sup>132</sup> and the intervention has contributed substantially to the humanitarian disaster in Yemen.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, war fatigue is growing among the Saudi people, who are increasingly frustrated by the ongoing missile attacks in the kingdom. Important as it is to Saudi Arabia, Yemen has in reality become a major drain on the kingdom's resources, reputation and political capital. And especially under a Biden White House, it threatens to damage Riyadh's relations with Washington. Hence, Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud proposed a 'new' ceasefire plan in coordination with the new US special envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, in late March 2021.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Houthis launched a series of missile attacks against Riyadh and the surrounding area between February 2017 and July 2018. Other, longer-range targets have included Jeddah, Taif, Yanbu, and King Fahad airbase near Taif. Saudi Arabia has reported some attacks in this region as targeting the holy city of Mecca, though the Houthis have rejected this. See Williams, I. and Shaikh, S. (2020), *The Missile War in Yemen*, Report, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Williams\\_MissileWarYemen\\_WEB\\_FINAL\\_v2.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Williams_MissileWarYemen_WEB_FINAL_v2.pdf) (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>133</sup> Jayant, Z. (2018), 'Prospects for Peace in Yemen', Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 26 July 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/prospects-for-peace-in-yemen> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020); Nasser, A. (2018), 'Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis Persists, despite Humanitarian Funding', Atlantic Council MENASource blog, 3 October 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/yemen-s-humanitarian-crisis-persists-despite-humanitarian-funding> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>134</sup> Middle East Eye (2021), 'Yemen war: Saudi Arabia proposes peace initiative but Houthis say little new in it', 22 March 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-saudi-arabia-offers-houthi-rebels-ceasefire-end-fighting> (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

Iran's perception of Yemen as a lower-order foreign policy priority, combined with Saudi Arabia's desire to extricate itself from a costly war but still secure its interests there, was considered by 58 per cent of responses to be the key to unlocking the conflict. However, Iran has no incentive to ease the pressure on Saudi Arabia by drawing down support for the Houthis and encouraging Hezbollah to do the same unless Riyadh can offer something meaningful in return. Saudi Arabia has little scope to do this in Yemen, but there are other areas in the region where Riyadh could be in a position to 'trade'. For example, 42 per cent of responses noted that, for Saudi Arabia, its interests in Syria are of a lower order of priority than is the case for Iran. Therefore, progress in one theatre, such as Yemen, could begin to unlock movement in another. That is to say, given that Iran is not highly invested in Yemen and attaches limited strategic importance to it,<sup>135</sup> Tehran will be much more likely to take part in negotiations to help end the conflict there if Saudi Arabia is willing to either curb support for forces opposing Iranian influence, withdraw support for sanctions against Tehran or deploy diplomatic capital positively in countries that Iran considers of a higher priority. To that end, Yemen represents a critical de-escalatory track.

## The GCC track

Divisions among the GCC states were regarded by 41 per cent of interviewees' responses as a major regional security challenge, not just because these divisions limit the implementation of a coordinated Iran policy, but also because political competition between Doha and Abu Dhabi has created a regional proxy conflict in its own right. As one of the parallel tracks to addressing regional security, the GCC crisis was cited in interviews as important to resolve.

In late 2020, there were indications that a bilateral resolution between Riyadh and Doha could be forthcoming.<sup>136</sup> Then, on 5 January 2021, the six GCC states met at Al Ula, Saudi Arabia, where they signed a security and stability pact that officially ended the rift. As part of the agreement, the Quartet states that had led the blockade (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) agreed to open air, land and sea routes to Qatar. Doha, for its part, would rescind pending lawsuits against the four countries.<sup>137</sup> Collectively, they agreed to restore diplomatic ties and to desist from negative media coverage and work towards mending their rift, which had caused immense reputational, social, financial and political damage for the GCC. While the GCC had continued to function at a lower level after the blockade was imposed in 2017, the rift exposed ideological and political divergences and competitive dynamics within the bloc that, without acknowledgment or meaningful repair, could easily resurface.

<sup>135</sup> Juneau, T. (2016), 'Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A limited Return on a Modest Investment', *International Affairs*, 92(3): pp. 647–663, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599> (accessed 3 Dec. 2020).

<sup>136</sup> Nissenbaum, D. and Said, S. (2020), 'White House Aide Kushner to Hold Talks in Saudi Arabia, Qatar', *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 November 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-aide-kushner-to-hold-talks-in-saudi-arabia-qatar-11606680001> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>137</sup> Al Jazeera (2021), 'Gulf reconciliation agreement: What we know so far', 6 January 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/6/blockading-nations-drop-13-demands-on-qatar-sources> (accessed 24 Mar. 2021).

Washington had made some efforts at mediating between Doha, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh after 2017, but not in ways that would have compelled the parties to end their rift.<sup>138</sup> The Trump administration saw resolution of the crisis as being tied to its Iran strategy. Respondents also saw the crisis as having benefited Tehran. Under the blockade, Doha had been paying Iran for use of its airspace, meaning that the latter was less isolated. Although Qatar, which shares the North Field/South Pars gasfields with Iran, has long maintained a pragmatic but cautious relationship with Tehran, there has been a consensus among the GCC countries that containing Iranian regional interference, in a sign of unity, particularly in Gulf affairs, is a priority. And, as seen during the Iran–Iraq war, GCC states have come together to manage external shocks.<sup>139</sup> Notably, GCC leaders released a joint statement urging the UN to extend the arms embargo against Iran, ahead of its scheduled expiry in October 2020.<sup>140</sup>

At the heart of the crisis have been deep tensions between Abu Dhabi and Doha. The UAE sees Qatar not only as an ambitious competitor, but as one that has sponsored, particularly since 2011, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups across the region. Emirati leaders see the Muslim Brotherhood as being on the same destabilizing spectrum as radical Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Qatar's support for actors in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen and Libya, together with its growing relationship with Turkey and pragmatic ties with Iran, has brought it into open competition with the UAE. These dynamics have not been limited to the Gulf region: they have played out in Yemen, Syria and Libya, where Doha and Abu Dhabi have supported rival non-state groups. As one Emirati interviewee commented: 'The more fragmented the GCC is, the more the competition between Doha and Abu Dhabi is projected outward, leaving the region more vulnerable.'<sup>141</sup>

The crisis within the GCC also revealed concerns on the part of Oman and Kuwait over more assertive Emirati policies. These two countries have recently undergone succession, following the death of their long-standing leaders, Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah, in 2020. Both men were respected for their roles as mediators, and the loss of their influence has left both states more vulnerable to pressure.

Thus, as part of this track, GCC discussions should be supported and encouraged so that all six states work systematically with one another. For the parties to agree to accept the principles of sovereignty, an opening of borders and airspace, and mutual respect in media reporting were all identified as important climb-down and face-saving solutions during the interviews (which took place before the January 2021 pact was agreed). The Quartet, however, will need to accept that Doha will not turn its back on its strong relationship with Ankara, nor on its lesser one with Tehran. Furthermore, healing the rift will require social and political investment to soothe nationalist reactions and ease hardened popular perceptions.

<sup>138</sup> Ibish, H. (2020), 'The Time Seems Right for Qatari-Saudi Reconciliation', 4 December 2020, Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-12-03/time-ts-ripe-for-a-saudi-qatar-reconciliation?sref=tp95wk9l> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>139</sup> Kinninmont, J. (2019), *The Gulf Divided: The Impact of the Qatar Crisis*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/05/gulf-divided-impact-qatar-crisis> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>140</sup> Reuters (2020), 'GCC unites to seek UN extension of Iran arms embargo', 9 August 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iran-sanctions-gulf/gcc-unites-to-seek-un-extension-of-iran-arms-embargo-idUKKCN2550I6> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>141</sup> Research interview, 23 August 2020.

## The Israel–Palestine track

It has long been argued that the Middle East will only be peaceful and prosperous when the Israel–Palestine conflict is resolved. This assumption has been severely tested over the years, and especially now the region has become the site of so many other persistent conflicts. However, working towards a resolution of this decades-long conflict appears to be far out of reach, given continuing political uncertainty in Israel following four sets of parliamentary elections over the past two years; Netanyahu’s active pursuit of a narrowly defined national interest; the Palestinian leadership’s political weakness; and the impact of moves undertaken by the Trump administration such as relocating the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem,<sup>142</sup> cutting funding to UNRWA (which the interim US envoy to the UN, Richard Mills, said in late March 2021 would now be restored<sup>143</sup>), and sidelining the Palestinians in any discussion of a peace deal.

### The signing of the Abraham Accords has effectively undermined the Palestinian leadership once again, and placed agency in the hands – partially – of regional players including the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan.

Nevertheless, the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, and Israel and Bahrain, in September 2020<sup>144</sup> – at the time the interviews for this paper were taking place – was presented by a number of respondents as paving the way for a new initiative. It is clear that the normalization deals between Israel and these Gulf states, and which will at some point include Saudi Arabia as well, mean a paradigm shift for how the Israel–Palestine conflict will be approached in future. Although the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, and former Saudi ambassador to the US Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud have emphasized that Riyadh will only seek normalization on the terms agreed at the 2002 Arab Summit in Beirut, known as the Arab Peace Initiative,<sup>145</sup> it appears that the future of the two-state solution (based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338)<sup>146</sup> is in peril. There is an increasing likelihood that a resolution to the conflict may be reached, but it will be one that is imposed on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza by regional states and accepted by a new Palestinian leadership supported by those same states.

<sup>142</sup> Farrell, S. (2018), ‘Why Is the U.S. Moving Its Embassy to Jerusalem?’, Reuters, 7 May 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-israel-diplomacy-jerusalem-explai-idUSKBN1I811N> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).  
<sup>143</sup> UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. BBC (2018), ‘US Ends Aid to Palestinian Refugee Agency UNRWA’, 1 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45377336> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

<sup>144</sup> Goldberg, J. (2020), ‘Iran and the Palestinians Lose Out in the Abraham Accords’, *The Atlantic*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/winners-losers/616364> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

<sup>145</sup> *Guardian* (2002), ‘Arab Peace Initiative: Full Text’, 28 March 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/28/israel7> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

<sup>146</sup> Djerejian, E. P., Muasher, M. and Brown, N. J. (2018), *Two States or One? Reappraising the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse*, Report, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CarnegieBaker\\_Palestine\\_Final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CarnegieBaker_Palestine_Final1.pdf) (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

The Palestinians spent many years taking ownership of their issue, which had once (most specifically in 1964–88) rested in the hands of regional players, rather than an independent Palestinian leadership. Now, the signing of the Abraham Accords has effectively undermined the Palestinian leadership once again, and placed agency in the hands – partially – of regional players including the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan. Jordan and Egypt have long been influential players and partners of the Palestinian Authority (PA), but the 2020 accords have changed the dynamic. It is no secret, for example, that the UAE would like to influence who succeeds Mahmoud Abbas, and has long backed former security official Mohammed Dahlan as the prime contender. Israel, for its part, would be more than comfortable with Dahlan becoming the next PA president, and so sees eye to eye with Abu Dhabi on this issue. The Abraham Accords, therefore, hold the possibility not only of imposing a new agenda on Israel–Palestine relations, but also of influencing Palestinian politics and shaping the PA’s future choices of action. This opens up new opportunities for reaching a resolution. However, it risks serious miscalculation as the core interests of Palestinians themselves may be completely overlooked, and without their buy-in any agreement will be quickly derailed and present a gift to the region’s many spoilers.

Although Saudi Arabia has yet to sign a normalization agreement with Israel, there are clear signs that a deal is imminent. That Mohammed bin Salman was reported to have met with Netanyahu in Neom in November 2020<sup>147</sup> sent a strong signal of the crown prince’s desire to reach an accord, even if it remains out of reach while his father, King Salman, is alive. The kingdom’s younger generation of leaders are less beholden to the Palestinian cause, and are critical of the Palestinian leadership for missing so many opportunities in the past. For example, Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud, former Saudi ambassador to the US, and father of the current Saudi ambassadors to Washington and London, made clear his disappointment with successive Palestinian leaders in an extensive interview with the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television channel in October 2020.<sup>148</sup> His comments can be considered to reflect the views of the younger Saudi leadership; and, based on our interviews, are representative of those of many Saudis in influential government positions.

If the UAE and Saudi Arabia take the lead on the Palestine issue, and also lend significant financial support to underpin the development of the Palestinian territories, then a resolution of sorts could be reached. Without doubt, they would face resistance not only from Palestinian groups, but also from Jordan, Qatar and Iran. All of these would require significant diplomatic engagement and management. For example, Jordan’s key interests – which, after four years of neglect, will once again feature prominently in the US administration’s thinking – would need to be taken into account, including its continued guardianship of Jerusalem’s Islamic and Christian holy sites, preventing the annexation of the Jordan Valley, and ensuring that any final resolution does not come to resemble or lead to a ‘Jordan is Palestine’ outcome.

<sup>147</sup> Holmes, O. (2020), ‘Netanyahu Holds Secret Meeting with Saudi Crown Prince’, *Guardian*, 23 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/23/benjamin-netanyahu-secret-meeting-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).

<sup>148</sup> Al Arabiya English (2020), ‘Full Transcript: Prince Bandar bin Sultan’s Interview on Israel-Palestine Conflict’, 5 October 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/10/05/Full-transcript-Part-one-of-Prince-Bandar-bin-Sultan-s-interview-with-Al-Arabiya> (accessed 5 Dec. 2020).



The extent of Iran's ability to influence events in Palestine is important, too. A large majority of experts on Palestine (84 per cent of responses) argued strongly that Iran's influence on Palestinian politics and society is marginal, though it can act as a spoiler. They pointed to relations between Iran and the PIJ, notably in Gaza, but all those interviewed characterized them as limited. Furthermore, Hamas's dominance over smaller groups such as the PIJ has made it particularly difficult for Iran to penetrate Gaza and cultivate significant or sustained support among its population. Whereas Iran may have had more influence on Hamas in the past, its intervention in Syria to shore up the Assad regime has all but alienated the Hamas leadership. The cost of material support is just too high to endure. At the same time, Qatar has maintained a strong relationship with Hamas<sup>149</sup> as well as with Palestinian institutions in Gaza;<sup>150</sup> and although pragmatic *vis-à-vis* Iran, it exercises an independent policy – and one that is actively coordinated with Israel.<sup>151</sup>

The fact that Iran has some influence, albeit limited in scope, opens up the possibility of trade-offs to be made between the different conflict zones in the region. So far, we have established that Iran is highly invested neither in Yemen nor in the Palestinian territories, and that it could therefore be open to negotiations on either issue that would not entail its having to make significant concessions. In such a scenario, compromises could then be reached by other players – such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE – in other theatres. Working towards an agreement on Israel–Palestine, however, requires buy-in not only from Palestinians and Israelis, but also from external actors to help guarantee it.

All of this would entail a fresh approach, and risk further compromising Palestinian sovereignty and more deeply entrenching the division between the West Bank and Gaza. But as Anwar Gargash – until February 2021 the UAE minister of state for foreign affairs – has argued, the current impasse between Israel and the Palestinians has caused a continuous erosion of Palestinian land, rights and prospects, meaning that new thinking is required before it is too late.<sup>152</sup> As such, the Abraham Accords could help catalyse efforts towards a solution on Israel–Palestine, though that would require transforming the conflict and redefining the parameters of what is acceptable and workable to all parties.<sup>153</sup> For two reasons, however, some 65 per cent of expert policymakers and analysts expressed scepticism. First, many considered the intent behind the Abraham Accords as being to meet the challenge from Iran; and second, neither the UAE nor Bahrain (nor in time Saudi Arabia) has the agency with Israel or the Palestinians to reach a deal, let alone enforce it.

<sup>149</sup> Roberts, D. (2019), *Reflecting on Qatar's "Islamist" Soft Power*, Policy Brief, Washington DC: Brookings, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP\\_20190408\\_qatar\\_roberts.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190408_qatar_roberts.pdf) (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>150</sup> *Guardian* (2019), 'Qatar to Send \$480m to Help Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza', 7 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/07/qatar-send-480m-help-palestinians-west-bank-gaza-israel-ceasefire> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>151</sup> Stephens, M. (2020), 'Israel and the Gulf States: Normalisation and Lingering Challenges', Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 15 September 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/israel-and-gulf-states-normalisation-and-lingering-challenges> (accessed 6 Dec. 2020).

<sup>152</sup> *Arab News* (2020), 'Gargash: UAE-Israel agreement will not be at the expense of the Palestinian issue', 9 September 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1732011/middle-east> (accessed 22 Dec. 2020).

<sup>153</sup> Conflict transformation is a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict. See Miall, H. (2004), *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task*, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, p. 4, <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/conflict-transformation-a-multi-dimensional-task> (accessed 26 Mar. 2021).



Very few of those interviewed for this paper placed much faith in previous efforts at resolving the Israel–Palestine conflict, especially the ‘Deal of the Century’ promised by Trump while he was in office. The majority of responses (68 per cent) believed that the deal amounted to the imposition of a settlement on the Palestinians, which would not only compromise their interests, but also pose a threat to neighbouring states including Jordan. However, the deal is likely to be left behind now the Biden administration is in office.

## The Syria track

Although the majority of interviewees’ responses (81 per cent) considered Syria to be in the category of ‘too difficult to solve’, 57 per cent argued that a new US administration could bring with it an opportunity not only to re-engage with Iran on ‘JCPOA plus’ issues, but also to work with other external conflict actors present in Syria, i.e. Russia and Turkey. Most US experts (71 per cent of responses) anticipated that a Biden administration would adopt a harder policy against Moscow, especially on issues such as Belarus and Ukraine, but saw scope for some cooperation on Syria, given Russia’s ability to influence the regime there.

Counterintuitively, the Syria process – or more accurately processes – could present opportunities to align domestic and regional interests if the major external actors, Russia, China, the EU and the US, commit to driving forward a regional process. As already noted, they all have an interest in arresting state collapse in Syria; and, in their own ways, they have in common an ability to influence local actors as well as regional ones. For example, most Syria analysts argued that Russia is the dominant external actor in the country, and that it will be the ultimate arbiter in ending the conflict because it has invested heavily in securing its interests there – and has done so largely unopposed. As one analyst described it: ‘Russia will continue to settle the political process in Syria, with an emphasis on calling on the international community for economic reconstruction.’<sup>154</sup>

**As the majority of respondents argued, it is not unreasonable to believe that Moscow can, if it coordinates closely with the US and the EU in particular, work towards ending the Syrian conflict.**

The majority of interviewees who discussed Russia’s role in the region believed that Moscow is committed to upholding state sovereignty, Syrian institutions (however defined) and the regime. Upholding the latter, however, does not extend to Assad, and therefore, when the time is right, Russia will undercut its support for him. If he remains a block to a settlement that recognizes Russia’s interests, then a move against Assad by rivals within the regime would be allowed to go ahead. In other words, should the US, the EU and China reach an accommodation with Russia

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<sup>154</sup> Research interview, 17 October 2020.

and guarantee that its key interests – identified by interviewees as securing access to the Mediterranean and to military bases and energy resources, among others – are met, then an end to the conflict could be in reach.

Moreover, Russia experts noted that if Moscow gains the recognition it seeks from the other major powers, then it is more likely to ‘deliver’ on Syria and be in a position to play a constructive role in other conflicts. Russia exercises a large degree of influence over Turkey at present – even though the two countries back different sides in Libya – and has when necessary been able to curtail Iranian influence in Syria. Thus, as the majority of respondents argued, it is not unreasonable to believe that Moscow can, if it coordinates closely with the US and the EU in particular, work towards ending the Syrian conflict. ‘Moscow has accepted that without some kind of relationship with Iran it is impossible to pursue its own interests in Syria,’<sup>155</sup> observed one Russian expert. Furthermore, Israel’s efforts to deconflict its military strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets inside Syria that it deems to pose a direct threat to its own security demonstrates the pivotal role played by Moscow in most aspects of the conflict. As a dominant force in the Syrian theatre, Russia is able to exert influence over its allies inside the country to both enable and curtail their activities there, as well as permitting third-country strikes against Iranian assets by Israel.

A successful coordinated approach to ending the Syrian conflict would not, however, be a case of the major powers dividing up the spoils of war and drawing up spheres of influence. Instead, it would involve creating a framework where the legitimate interests of external powers can be realized in accordance with the sovereign interests of the Syrian state (i.e. not those of the present regime). Indeed, many interviewees who might be considered Syrian opposition argued that external actors such as Iran would continue to have legitimate economic interests in Syria, but that these interests should be realized through formal diplomatic means.

Very few respondents doubted Russia’s ability to hold simultaneous, meaningful relationships with the regional powers engaged in Syria, while also exercising leverage over the Syrian regime. To that end, many interviewees from the region argued that Russia should play a leading role in helping resolve not only the Syrian conflict, but others in Middle East as well.

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<sup>155</sup> Research interview, 7 September 2020.

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# 09 Confidence- building measures

**Building trust in areas such as health diplomacy, shared religious sites, climate cooperation and freedom of navigation can over time allow the rival parties to discuss more complex and divisive issues like arms control and Iran's support for regional proxies.**

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During the interviews that have informed this paper, confidence-building measures (CBMs) were repeatedly cited as important to regional de-escalation. CBMs, designed to establish a predictable record of deliverable outcomes, were used during the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) process – the forerunner to the OSCE – that facilitated dialogue and negotiation between East and West during the Cold War. The objective of CBMs is to build trust incrementally by addressing ‘softer’ issues, and thus over time allow the parties to discuss more complex and divisive issues. They can be informal, tacit and private agreements as well as formal mechanisms,<sup>156</sup> although experts agree that for CBMs to be consequential they should be connected to a wider process, rather than evolve to become a process in themselves.<sup>157</sup>

Interviewees’ responses identified a variety of important CBMs that could be adopted to build trust and gradually de-escalate tensions across the Middle East region (Figure 16). 17 per cent saw increasing trade linkages as important; 15 per cent singled out arms control; 12 per cent identified climate cooperation as urgent; 12 per cent pointed to energy linkages; 12 per cent noted maritime

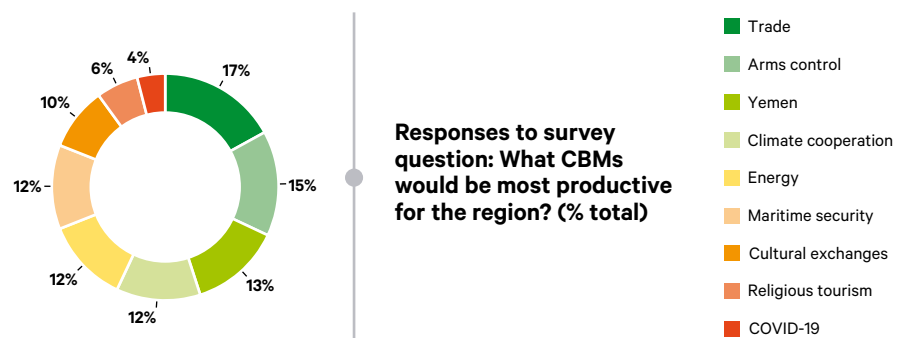
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<sup>156</sup> Krepon, M. (1993), ‘The Decade for Confidence Building Measures’, in Krepon, M., McCoy, D. and Rudolph, M. (eds.) (1993), *A Handbook of Confidence Building Measures for Regional Security*, Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, [https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Krepon%20-%20A%20Handbook%20of%20Confidence%20Building%20Measures%20For%20Regional%20Security%20\(Searchable\)%20.pdf](https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Krepon%20-%20A%20Handbook%20of%20Confidence%20Building%20Measures%20For%20Regional%20Security%20(Searchable)%20.pdf) (accessed 15 Sept. 2020).

<sup>157</sup> Lachowski, Z. (2004), *Confidence and Security Building Measures in the New Europe*, Research Report No.18, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRIR18.pdf> (accessed 27 Sept. 2020).

security; 10 per cent wanted to promote cultural exchanges; 6 per cent saw religious tourism as productive; 4 per cent identified COVID-19 diplomacy as an avenue to build greater trust and cooperation; and 13 per cent mentioned resolving the Yemeni war (an aspect discussed in detail in Chapter 8). We see all of these as important areas for establishing CBMs; and, as we recommended in a previously published paper,<sup>158</sup> a pyramid structure of CBMs should be employed. Michael Krepon has noted, too: ‘A building block approach to CBMs is more appropriate when little foundation of trust exists in tense regions.’<sup>159</sup> As with all efforts to resolve conflicts, sequencing is the key to achieving a satisfactory outcome for all parties.

**Figure 16.** Most productive CBMs for the region



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

Figure 17 provides an insight into the varied country perspectives on CBMs. Saudi respondents saw maritime security and Yemen de-escalation as important to pursue. Unsurprisingly, Emirati interviewees prioritized maritime security. Arms control was seen as a priority by Israeli, Palestinian, Yemeni and Lebanese respondents. Iraqi, Lebanese and Iranian participants identified improved trade ties as an important CBM for the region.

Starting with less contentious issues like health diplomacy would be useful in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and could boost cooperation on future responses and vaccine distribution. Religious tourism is another important CBM. A commitment to guarantee safe passage to religious sites has been a useful CBM that has depoliticized religious observance in the past – not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also between Iran and Iraq.

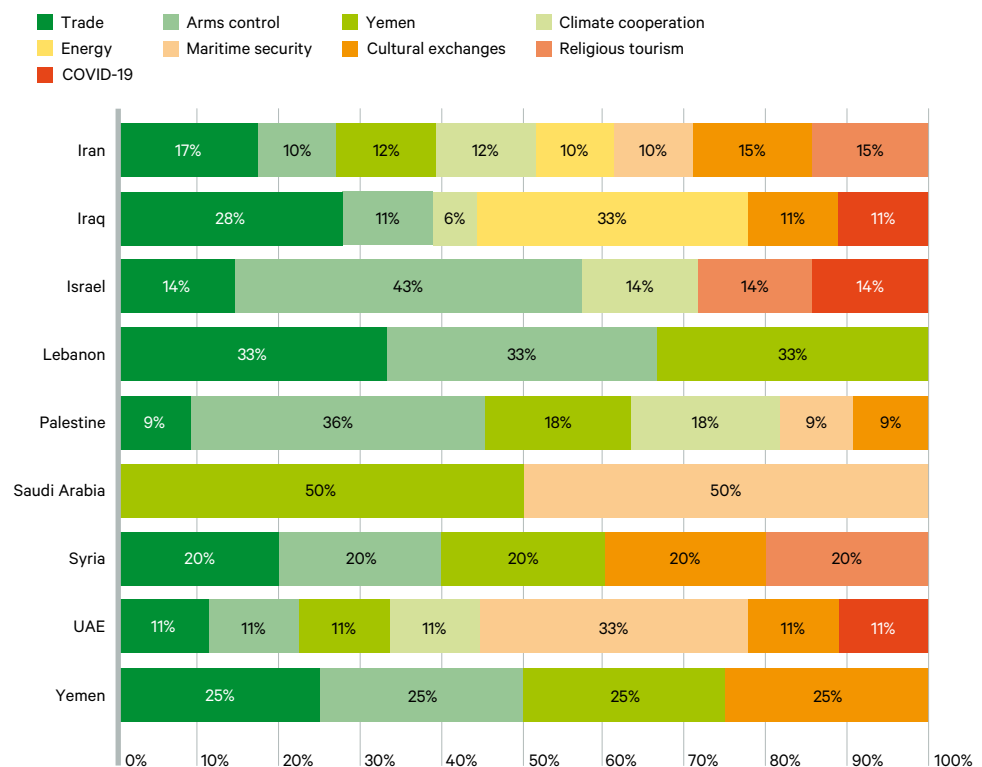
Climate cooperation was repeatedly referenced by interviewees as a regional imperative. Heightened global attention to the climate emergency, alongside calls within the region to address climate challenges, provides an opportunity for Middle East states to begin discussions and make commitments to work together on specific issues in this space. Energy diplomacy has a major role to play in aligning the

<sup>158</sup> Quilliam, N. and Vakil, S. (2020), *A Pyramid of Multilateral Confidence Building Measures in the Middle East*, IAI Paper, Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2033.pdf> (accessed 4 Dec. 2020).

<sup>159</sup> Krepon (1993), ‘The Decade for Confidence Building Measures’, in Krepon, McCoy and Rudolph (eds.) (1993), *A Handbook of Confidence Building Measures for Regional Security*.

interests of the region's oil and gas producers in anticipation of declining global demand for hydrocarbons, so that all are better able to coordinate mitigating approaches, including developing alternative energy sources and pursuing wider economic diversification.

**Figure 17.** Middle East country breakdown of responses to survey question: What CBMs would be most productive for the region? (% total)



Source: Chatham House interviews (July–November 2020).

Note: Interviewees were able to identify multiple options in response to this question.

Maritime security, particularly in the climate of tensions in the Persian Gulf, would be an essential area for CBMs. Freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal and Bab al-Mandeb remain important to the safe and stable passage of ships through these vital waterways. A commitment to maintaining this principle would allow for the uninterrupted flow of energy and trade, and protect food security.

Regional defence asymmetries mean that arms control will undoubtedly be the hardest area of CBM discussion. Tackling this issue requires negotiations on weapons proliferation; addressing development and investment in indigenous civilian nuclear programmes to protect the region from burgeoning and unchecked nuclear programmes; the role of 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. This is by far the most complex and potentially intractable set of discussions to have. Forging a series of successful discussions and CBMs ahead of tackling arms control issues would help build trust, awareness and understanding of the divergent security needs and perception gaps among all parties.

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# 10 Recommendations for the way forward

**A regional security framework for the Middle East can be arrived at only if all regional actors, enabled by critical external partners, fully commit to participate in an incremental process that is driven by the regional actors themselves.**

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It is clear that a regional security framework is urgently needed to lower tensions, resolve wars, and reduce regional competition across the Middle East. We have argued through this paper, based on our analysis of interviewees' responses and recommendations, that regional stability can and must be built, but that rather than starting with a top-down process, it can only be arrived at through mutual commitment to participation in an incremental process driven by regional actors themselves. Breaking apart regional conflicts, with the focused, multilateral participation of relevant actors, can build trust from the ground up and promote smaller-scale solutions. Only through de-escalation and conflict management can the ground be laid to begin discussions on regional security processes.

Although not all of equal weight or importance, Iran has developed deep regional networks that are multifaceted. Unravelling its ties – with Hezbollah for example – will be extremely difficult. The Trump administration's strategy of maximum pressure has served to deepen Iran's regional reach, as Tehran has doubled down on these networks to demonstrate strength, develop leverage and offset the impact of sanctions. Tehran has operationalized its ability to develop nimble networks, and has capitalized on political crises in ways that are both opportunistic and cost-effective. Because this approach is low-cost, mutable and defensive in

orientation, Tehran has not needed to make positive infrastructure investments or seek to develop local capacity. As such, its activities and influence are seen as predatory, and will over time become counterproductive.

There is no one clear pathway to addressing Iran's role in the region. What can be achieved is a series of agreements in multilateral conflict areas that would see concessions from Tehran alongside other regional actors. Rather than marginalizing Tehran and allowing it to play the role of a spoiler, all actors should accept that Iran needs to be involved in multilateral regional discussions in the key conflict arenas of Syria and Yemen. Tehran's influence in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon can be curtailed through regional empowerment and support of local governance and multilateral economic and civil society investment in these countries.

## **Tehran's influence in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon can be curtailed through regional empowerment and support of local governance and multilateral economic and civil society investment in these countries.**

As set out in this paper, the foundational step will now be the US's re-entry to the JCPOA and Iran's return to compliance. Critically, however, this is not an end in itself. The deal as signed in 2015 is fragile, and committed efforts are needed to secure regional buy-in and ensure the agreement's long-term resilience. This entails a commitment by JCPOA signatories to engage in multilateral regional security processes. The follow-on step, then, involves parallel tracks for Yemen, the GCC, Israel–Palestine and Syria. And allied to all these processes are the confidence-building measures that have the potential, over time, to enable critical issues like Iran's support for militias, proliferation of missiles and lethal arms, and its ballistic missile programme to be addressed. Through a pattern of increased cooperation, trust can be built and nurtured. Boosting intra-regional trade should be seen as an important path to tying in shared investments and outcomes.

The role and commitment of the US is a critical variable in managing and motivating a regional security agenda. The new administration under President Joe Biden presents an opportunity to turn the page on four years of transactionalism under Donald Trump, in favour of multilateral engagement and conflict stabilization. But the US can neither shoulder nor shepherd through this strategy alone. Focused American engagement should be complemented by that of Europe, Russia and China, all of which have expressed concerns over regional security dynamics and put forward their own recommendations to manage regional tensions.

Regional states have a role in and responsibility for regional security dynamics, or lack thereof. For too long, conflicts have continued unabated, and competitive dynamics between regional states have reached new lows. The impact of COVID-19, the deepening economic downturn that acutely impacts energy-rich Middle East states, and the climate crisis are all resetting fortunes and redistributing the



costs of regional tensions. This is a critical juncture for the region, and a unique time-sensitive moment at which the international community is reinvesting multilaterally. Regional buy-in and participation to support conflict management is urgently needed. Without investment in new thinking and de-escalation processes, the Middle East could descend into protracted decline.

Drawing on the findings of our research, we conclude this paper with a set of recommendations to key external and Middle East stakeholders involved in, and impacted by, the regional tensions and security challenges.

## For the US

Unequivocal and sustained US engagement is needed to lessen the scope and scale of regional conflicts. Military drawdown and planned departures have resulted in the loss of US regional leverage. Countries like Iran have no incentive to engage regionally, and Gulf Arab countries are increasingly anxious. A clear US commitment to regional stabilization and multilateral engagement on regional conflicts is a necessary precondition to managing Middle East security.

- Regular bipartisan congressional consultation and buy-in is needed to shield agreements such as the JCPOA from electoral and partisan swings and to build a sustainable JCPOA.
- Restoration of transatlantic ties and multilateral cooperation with the E3 and the EU more widely should be seen as a precursor to any JCPOA and regional security discussions. Multilateral engagement can prepare the ground for the parallel-track regional processes.
- Outlining a clear regional roadmap to address wider issues with Iran, alongside stabilizing the wars in Yemen and Syria, will help align messaging and secure support from Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Regular communication with Israeli and Gulf Arab policymakers will be important to manage and address their security concerns, understand their red lines and offset their ‘spoiler’ effect.
- To manage the multiple tracks, bipartisan envoys should be appointed to shepherd and bring consistent voices and engagement to the various discussions.
- Regional conflicts should be looked at holistically but dealt with separately. Viewing the Middle East through the prism of Iran, and thus subjecting regional states such as Iraq and Lebanon to one ‘Iran policy’, should be understood as destabilizing and counterproductive. Military and security engagement should be complemented with economic and civil society assistance and investment. Nurturing support for local governance and accountability across the region will empower local actors.
- Policy towards Iran itself should include a more diverse toolkit that goes beyond sanctions. Establishing clear red lines and deterrence alongside a strategy of engagement can, over time, build a more transactional relationship with Tehran. Expectations that short-lived agreements can be transformational are counterproductive, and play into Tehran’s security fears. Regime change –

as policy, threat or rhetoric – should, more than four decades on from the Iranian revolution, be laid to rest. In exchange, Iran should be asked to drop its inflammatory calls like ‘death to America’.

- Considering the bleak human rights record of most Middle East states, human rights issues should be regionalized. The release of all dual nationals held in Iran should be secured as a precondition for sanctions relief.
- Preparing the ground to provide Tehran with incremental sanctions relief is a necessary precondition to move this time-sensitive process forward.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licences to allow trade and investment in Iran are granted in a productive and timely manner.
- Russia and China must be included in these interlinked multilateral processes. Involving them in discussions early on, and encouraging them to engage and work as a back-channel with their regional partners, will support dialogue and de-escalation.

## For the E3

Due to its proximity to the Middle East, Europe’s security is more directly impacted by Middle East conflicts and instability. Dedicated long-term engagement in drawing down tensions and stabilizing conflicts should be seen as a priority for European domestic, economic and security interests.

- As the Biden administration defines its regional approach, the E3 should be ready to turn the page on the Trump period and work collaboratively with Washington. Congressional outreach would be important to support the Biden strategy of JCPOA re-entry.
- In anticipation of movement from Washington on renewal of the 2015 nuclear agreement, an E3 JCPOA strategy and regional security plans need to be not only already in the pipeline, but actively developed to an advanced state, with E3 red lines clearly established.
- Maintaining alignment among the E3 states is necessary to securing the JCPOA and the follow-on regional processes. France might resurrect its hard-line position seen in the JCPOA negotiations. The UK, distracted by the impact of Brexit and the need to secure global trade deals, might see Middle East security as less of a priority. However, like its partners in the JCPOA, the UK government should outline a strategy for the region that includes engagement on regional security – and with a view to a wider commercial interest, too.
- The E3 should prepare the ground for aligning Middle East regional strategy with Moscow and Beijing. Discussion on Middle East security should be separated from wider European divergences over responses to Russia and China.
- Regionalizing demands with regard to human rights violations, missiles programmes and militia support will be more productive than singling out Iran or Saudi Arabia.

- The appointment of E3 envoys and a European commission envoy would provide consistent investment to this multi-track multilateral process.
- Given its record of maintaining more balanced relationships around the Middle East, Europe should take the lead in managing the CBM steps.
- European policymakers should engage with diverse policy actors across the Iranian political spectrum. Regional and European economic engagement with Iran should be encouraged to lower the threshold of tensions and build sustainable economic linkages. The E3 should work to ensure that INSTEX is able to function as intended.
- Local engagement with civil society actors, the private sector and multiple political players across the Middle East can broaden networks with a common goal of working towards governance and accountability.

## For Iran

- Develop and promote coherent policy positions that derive from an internal consensus reached across all agencies and government departments.
- Recognize that current policies focused primarily on security carry a high cost, and will ultimately undermine any gains enjoyed by Iran today. Tehran thus needs to engage and invest more constructively in the region in ways that win public support and ultimately lead to greater regional integration.
- Avoid grandstanding at the negotiating table and be a productive actor. All negotiators appreciate Iran's negotiating skills, but it is essential to move beyond posturing to address the core issues on the table.
- Understand that all around the negotiating table are aware of Iran's past trials and, indeed, its glorious past. However, they are equally aware of transgressions carried out by Iranian-supported non-state actors. Play neither the victor nor the victim, and negotiate in good faith.
- Recognize the connectivity between regional policies and the JCPOA, and that regional destabilization is not an effective leverage-building strategy. Rather, increased missile activity, as seen in Iraq and from Yemen, emboldens those arguing against the removal of sanctions.
- Realize that human rights will be a more central feature of US foreign policy under the Biden administration, and that it will apply to all countries across the region. It is an opportunity to reset and re-engage, and to ensure that all regional actors give careful consideration to human rights. Tehran can take the initiative by releasing all dual nationals currently in detention in Iran.
- Desist from further developing and deploying precision-guided missiles against targets in neighbouring states. Iran's asymmetric capabilities are well understood, and exercising restraint in accordance with a coherent policy shaped by internal consensus will better support an environment conducive to successful talks.

- Comprehensive sanctions relief can only be granted if broader regional negotiations are undertaken and compromise solutions are found.
- Be aware that Saudi, UAE and Israeli economic ties with Asia are strengthening; and that, in a zero-sum competition, Tehran will lose out. Washington's increasing focus on its competition with China in the Indo-Pacific will create political and economic space for Asian powers. In other words, a shift in US priorities will hurt rather than help Iran.

## **For the GCC countries**

- Recognize that Middle East fatigue is growing across the international community, and now is the time for GCC states to reconcile their own differences and capitalize on renewed US mediation efforts to make the most of opportunities available.
- Consider that without a stable regional environment, GCC diversification plans that require significant foreign investment will be unable to move forward.
- Focus on the long game. Engage directly with Iran now, rather than relying on the US to take and maintain the initiative.
- Continue to invest in and develop diplomatic capability, in order to be ready to sit and negotiate with multiple actors at the table.
- Invest more energy and effort in better understanding Iran, and develop more creative policies towards it. In doing so, accept that, after 40+ years, regime change is not an option.
- Adopt a more transactional approach to regional politics, and identify a hierarchy of issues on which all sides can agree or disagree without undermining efforts to reach a broader agreement. In other words, cultivate policy options that move away from zero-sum demands.
- Accept that Iran has a regional role, and that, while curtailing its influence might be a goal, its ties cannot be completely rolled back. Identify which aspects of Iran's regional role are acceptable and unacceptable, and work towards helping realize the former and deterring the latter.
- Recognize that conflict in regional states fosters the development and spread of radicalism, which presents a threat to the security of the GCC and Iran alike. There is a common interest in preventing the causes and spread of radicalism.
- Prioritize collective over cooperative security, and desist from independent military engagement. Learn lessons from independent action taken in Libya, Yemen and other theatres, and develop new GCC mechanisms drawing on cumulative conflict resolution experience acquired in Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia, among other conflict zones.
- Understand that cooperative security arrangements with Israel will not address Iran's influence in the region. Israel's objectives differ substantially from GCC goals.

## Steps to enable a Middle East regional security process

Reviving the JCPOA, de-escalating conflicts and building trust

- Promote trade between the GCC and Iran; and encourage and support people-to-people exchanges, such as business associations, educational programmes and cultural visits. The GCC countries and Iran are home to unique and distinctive tourist destinations, all of which would benefit enormously from mutual investments and the dialling-down of regional tensions.
- The development of collaborative climate change policies is urgently needed to reduce the impact of global heating and environmental degradation.
- Adopt a more holistic approach to engagement, and seek to foster relations with a wide range of actors in Iran.
- Do not gamble on the outcome of the 2024 US presidential election. The moment to strike out for regional agreement is now, before Middle East fatigue takes further hold and Washington focuses on its competition with China solely in the Indo-Pacific.

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Cover image: A man on the street in Tehran, Iran, reading a newspaper showing information on the US elections, on 9 November 2020.

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