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Seizing MENA's moment

How to build
a sustainable forum for
region-wide cooperation

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Summary

- A historic opportunity to build sustainable multilateralism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is emerging. Shifting geopolitical currents and domestic pressures are encouraging MENA countries to find their own mechanisms to reduce conflict. Policymakers inside and outside the region should capitalize on this moment before it passes.
- This paper argues that the establishment of a new official multilateral forum for sustainable dialogue and engagement is now achievable, and that such a forum can add a critical *cooperative layer* to the region's largely competitive security architecture.
- Our survey of existing initiatives demonstrates new dynamism and interest among MENA states to boost cooperation and reduce diplomatic tensions, but also reveals the significant limitations of current mechanisms.
- To address these gaps, we recommend launching a new forum, which could be called the MENA Forum (MEF). The MEF could initially consist of a small grouping of Arab states – members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, Iraq and Jordan – as well as Türkiye, with the aim being to include the entire MENA region over time.
- The work of this forum could initially focus on three thematic areas that are highly important to regional governments but less politically divisive: climate change; energy cooperation; and joint responses to emergencies such as natural disasters and pandemics. The idea would be that success in these areas could prompt wider cooperation in others in the future.
- A group of regional foreign ministers could convene in a MENA capital to formalize the establishment of the MEF. The launch summit could issue a founding declaration outlining key principles for regional cooperation, and committing the parties to regular meetings and substantive engagement on areas of common concern.
- To secure political buy-in from around the region, the initiative must remain MENA-made and MENA-led. However, high-level international backing is also critical, preferably from the European Union and other middle powers in Europe and Asia. This is to avoid the possibility of the platform becoming, or being perceived to be, a venue for competition between the United States and China. At the same time, it will be important for the US, China, and other external powers and multilateral institutions like the United Nations to see value in the forum and play supporting roles.

Introduction: MENA's moment

A historic opportunity to build sustainable multilateralism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region¹ is emerging. Changing geopolitical currents – including a perception that the US is less engaged in the region – and domestic pressures have prompted Middle Eastern governments to approach their foreign policy more independently, and in many cases to be proactive in mending ties with former rivals. This trend coincides with growing recognition that transnational challenges such as climate change and emergency response require increased cross-border collaboration. In this research paper, we argue that it is imperative for regional leaders to capitalize on this moment of de-escalation before it passes.

Specifically, we propose adding a *cooperative layer* to the region's largely competitive security architecture through the creation of a new region-wide forum for sustainable dialogue and engagement on issues of common concern. We offer concrete ideas for moving towards the establishment of an official regional forum that is more sustainable and inclusive than current or past efforts.

Given the failures of previous multilateral initiatives and the entrenched mistrust and animosities between many MENA states, we argue that cooperation is most likely to succeed if it starts small, with a limited but expandable set of initial participants and a focused agenda addressing high-priority but less divisive issues – we propose climate action, energy cooperation, and responses to natural disasters and similar emergencies. Unlike many current initiatives, the membership and substantive agenda would be designed to promote cooperation for the benefit of the wider region and its people, not as an axis to target or exclude a specific country or to advance the agenda of a particular external power.

Why now?

At first glance, the suggestion that this is 'MENA's moment' for cooperation might seem questionable. The rest of the world is looking distinctly *uncooperative*, as geopolitical dynamics have become more fractured in recent years. Relations between the US and China are confrontational, Russia's war on Ukraine has created political and economic instability in Europe and beyond, and politics in many countries is becoming more insular and nationalistic.² The fraying international order is straining long-standing multilateral institutions.³ In this difficult global climate, why would Middle East states attempt to create a region-wide framework for multilateral dialogue and cooperation? Moreover, why would such an initiative work now when others have not worked in the past?

¹ This paper adopts a restrictive geographical definition of the MENA region which includes Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

² Intensifying US–China competition, coupled with the expansive political and economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is making cooperation among global powers far more difficult, if not impossible. A related trend is the rise of minilateralism and the weakening of multilateral institutions. Small groups aligning like-minded states are becoming more common. One example is the 2021 trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS). In contrast, long-standing multilateral institutions such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are facing existential crises.

³ For an overview of current strains on multilateral institutions such as the OSCE, as well as their continued value, see Kinninmont, J. (2022), 'Managing mistrust and multipolarity: what the Middle East can glean from past OSCE approaches', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 10 October 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/managing-mistrust-and-multipolarity-what-the-middle-east-can-glean-from-past-osce-approaches>.

Ideas for cooperation in the MENA region are not new. An official multilateral process emerged in the early 1990s in the context of Arab–Israeli peacemaking, and unofficial and semi-official ‘track 2’ and ‘track 1.5’ initiatives involving experts and policymakers from across the region have also discussed cooperation in various forms for decades.⁴ And yet such efforts have not generated an official, fully inclusive and durable region-wide cooperation forum similar to those that exist in most other areas of the world.

Sceptics argue that such forums are not possible in the Middle East: that there is too much mistrust, too many power imbalances, and that leaders see regional relations in zero-sum terms. Critics also argue that models from other regions cannot readily be transferred to the Middle East, given its distinct history and culture as well as multiple political, economic and security barriers.⁵ However, such views seem less credible in today’s changing regional context, where cooperation now appears more attainable with a wave of de-escalation replacing a prolonged period of competition, conflict and foreign intervention.

MENA leaders may now be linking their own power and legitimacy to the delivery of tangible economic progress and security – this suggests that the incentives for more cooperative foreign policy are increasing.

Geopolitical shifts ranging from the war in Ukraine to tensions between the US and China, as well as rising socioeconomic challenges, are incentivizing the MENA region to find its own mechanisms to reduce conflict.⁶ A flurry of recent developments illustrate the trend. These include: the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023; the reset in relations between the Gulf states and Türkiye; the end of the Qatar blockade in January 2021; and the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and between Israel and Bahrain, through the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020. MENA leaders may now be linking their own power and legitimacy to the delivery of tangible economic progress and security – this suggests that the incentives for more cooperative foreign policy are increasing. Given the cross-border nature of so many global challenges today – from climate change to food security to maritime security – regional cooperation has become an imperative, not a luxury.

⁴ See Kaye, D. D. (2022), ‘A Helsinki process for the Middle East? Key questions for mobilizing cooperative security in a changing region’, MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 1 September 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/a-helsinki-process-for-the-middle-east-key-questions-for-mobilizing-cooperative-security-in-a-changing-region>.

⁵ For an overview of previous regional integration efforts and the challenges facing regionalism in the Middle East, see Legrenzi, M. and Calculli, M. (2013), *Regionalism and Regionalization in the Middle East: Options and Challenges*, Research Report, International Peace Institute, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep09496>.

⁶ For arguments that increased great power competition may be facilitating more regional dealmaking, see Harrison, R. and Vatanka, A. (2023), ‘The Middle East Might Be Moving Toward Stability’, *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/26/iran-saudi-arabia-china-middle-east-diplomacy/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921.

These positive signs do not necessarily mean that regional de-escalation *will* prove durable.⁷ Authoritarian, transactional and competitive security mindsets continue to prevail among policymakers across the region. As one regional expert put it, the Middle East needs a 'diversification of dialogue' and more sustainable processes that can outlive the 'moods of leaders'.⁸ In other words, politicians, policymakers and other stakeholders need to find ways to exploit this moment of de-escalation before the regional currents shift again. The challenge is to leverage the current interest in engagement, and the calming of regional tensions, into official mechanisms that can endure.

Politicians, policymakers and other stakeholders need to find ways to exploit this moment of de-escalation before the regional currents shift again.

To be clear, we are not offering a comprehensive blueprint for peace in the MENA region. Such an outcome is not feasible through any single regional initiative. Nor can cooperation replace competitive regional balancing and alliances, or preferences for bilateral arrangements among some regional powers – both tendencies that are particularly prevalent in the Gulf. Cooperation in isolation from more traditional strategic or hard security considerations has not proven to be realistic in other regions and contexts, and it certainly will not be possible in the Middle East either. For example, East–West cooperation and detente through the Helsinki process during the Cold War evolved alongside the active participation of countries in competitive security alliances – namely NATO and the Warsaw Pact.⁹ Similarly, in Asia, a cooperative security forum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has long coexisted with a competitive regional architecture and bilateral security alliances. What such initiatives did achieve, however, was to *add a cooperative diplomatic layer to the regional security architecture*.¹⁰

This is the layer that is missing in today's Middle East, where the security architecture remains largely competitive and transactional. Cooperative dialogues do not end conflict, but they may at least mitigate the damage when conflicts occur. Such dialogues can also help to prevent military clashes by raising the costs of conflict, and provide security and economic benefits that ensure political leaders have more to lose from confrontational policies.

⁷ See Kaye, D. D. and Wehrey, F. (2023), 'Arab De-escalations and Realignment Amid Multipolarity', in Wehrey, F. (ed.) (2023), *Disruptions and Dynamism in the Arab World*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/05/03/arab-de-escalations-and-realignment-amid-multipolarity-pub-89527>. Also see Hilterman, J. (2023), 'Is the Middle East's Makeover a Mirage? Why a Spate of Diplomatic Deals Won't End Conflict', *Foreign Affairs*, 1 August 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/middle-east-makeover-mirage>.

⁸ Remarks made at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule, Muscat, January 2023.

⁹ See Jones, P. (2022), 'A Middle East regional security dialogue process: Getting the ball rolling', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 14 September 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/a-middle-east-regional-security-dialogue-process-getting-the-ball-rolling>.

¹⁰ See Zhang, Y. (2022), 'Constructing a regional security architecture in the Middle East: ASEAN as inspiration', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 29 September 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/constructing-a-regional-security-architecture-in-the-middle-east-asean-as-inspiration>.

About this paper

With the above context in mind, this paper synthesizes the findings from over a year's worth of regional workshops, meetings with experts, and interviews under the Chatham House Rule¹¹ – all conducted as part of a joint project between Chatham House's MENA Programme (MENAP) and the Burkle Center for International Relations at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). We also draw on a series of articles commissioned for this project and published on our institutions' respective websites.¹²

The aim is not only to assess where cooperation initiatives in the region stand today, but also to consider what might be practical in terms of developing a new official regional forum in the future. We believe the vision presented here is realistic and achievable, but that it will take time for a new forum to establish itself and gain the confidence of participants.

Careful implementation will be needed to ensure that any new mechanism is sensitive to regional concerns and political agendas at the highest levels. Given the current realities, it is unlikely that one regional institution will emerge that is able to include all players at the outset. But the goal of a more inclusive and cooperative regional architecture is achievable, and this moment of detente is the opportune time to start building towards it.

Can a region-wide forum emerge from existing initiatives?

Several existing initiatives have attempted to bring together regional governments and experts to address shared challenges. While the demand for regional cooperation and engagement has certainly increased, none of the current approaches are fully inclusive. Nor are they able on their own to provide a sustainable cooperative forum for dialogue and conflict management. Figure 1 illustrates the range and limited participation of MENA countries in select regional forums and dialogues.

¹¹ 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.' Chatham House (undated), 'Chatham House Rule', <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>.

¹² Chatham House (2023), MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/tags/cooperative-regional-security>; and UCLA Burkle Center for International Relations (undated), 'Building a Cooperative Regional Security Architecture in the Middle East', <https://www.international.ucla.edu/burkle/irsa>.

Figure 1. MENA countries' participation in select regional forums and initiatives

	Abraham Accords/ Negev Forum	Arab Maghreb Union	Baghdad summit	East Mediterranean Gas Forum	GCC	GCC+2 dialogue	Red Sea Council
Algeria		●					
Bahrain*	●		●		●	●	
Egypt	●		●	●			●
Iran			●			●	
Iraq			●			●	
Israel	●			●			
Jordan			●	●			●
Kuwait			●		●	●	
Libya		●					
Morocco	●	●					
Oman*			●		●	●	
Palestine				●			
Qatar			●		●	●	
Saudi Arabia			●		●	●	●
Tunisia		●					
Türkiye			●				
UAE	●		●		●	●	
Yemen							●

*Bahrain and Oman only participated in the second Baghdad summit which took place in Jordan in December 2022.
Source: Chatham House.

The sections below review the strengths and limitations of the most promising, largely governmental, current regional initiatives.

The 'Baghdad summit' process

The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, a French-supported initiative, gathered regional representatives in Baghdad in August 2021 and again in Amman in December 2022 to discuss how to strengthen economic and political stability in Iraq. The two conferences were notable for assembling high-level representatives from a broad array of competing regional actors – with Iran among the participants. This indicated a significant level of political buy-in from across

the region. Where states could not agree on broader topics for discussions, both meetings reinforced a regional consensus on the need to preserve Iraqi economic and political stability. The conferences also provided an important opportunity for engagement and reconciliation after years of strained relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, Türkiye and the UAE, and Türkiye and Saudi Arabia.¹³

At the first summit in Baghdad, the delegates consisted of heads of state and foreign ministers from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and the UAE. At the second summit, participation expanded to include representatives from Bahrain and Oman. The fact that Iran participated in both summits, despite its opposition to the principle of external actors managing regional security, marked a deviation from its formal position on this issue.

Because of the sensitive political dynamics, participants agreed to focus their public discussions on Iraqi stability. As such, the final communiqué from the first Baghdad summit mainly showcased a commitment to supporting the Iraqi federal government. However, it also portrayed a desire for wider cooperation, as participants 'acknowledged that the region faces common challenges that require the countries of the region to deal with them on the basis of joint cooperation and mutual interests in accordance with the principles of good neighbourliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, and respect of national sovereignty'.¹⁴

Political challenges associated with the formation of a new government in Iraq following the October 2022 elections meant that the second forum needed to convene in Amman. While no political breakthroughs were achieved, this summit was widely seen as a confidence-building measure signalling that regional states were keen to continue convening.¹⁵ The communiqué from Amman reiterated the message of solidarity for Iraq's stability. It called for measures 'supporting Iraq's central role in expanding regional economic cooperation and building bridges of dialogue to end tensions and establish regional relations of mutual benefits'.¹⁶

The French continue to play an important supporting role in this initiative, and are working to hold a third conference in Baghdad in late 2023. The intention, should consensus be achieved, is to introduce thematic discussions to the dialogue. Such a focus could enable shared climate- or trade-related concerns to be explored, building much-needed confidence and trust, and moving the dialogue beyond what many view as a largely performative function to date.

Notwithstanding this continued momentum, the Baghdad process has several limitations. The absence of Israel and Palestine means that the format cannot be considered to provide an inclusive cooperative security structure. The French convening role has also raised concerns and questions about the objectives of the effort – which is arguably vulnerable to the perception that the French government

¹³ Remarks made at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule, Muscat, January 2023.

¹⁴ Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in London (2021), 'Final Communiqué of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership', 28 August 2021, <https://mofa.gov.iq/london/en/2021/08/28/final-communique-of-the-baghdad-conference-for-cooperation-and-partnership>.

¹⁵ Remarks made at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule, Muscat, January 2023.

¹⁶ Jordan News (2022), 'Final communiqué released at conclusion of second Baghdad Conference', 21 December 2022, <https://www.jordannews.jo/Section-109/News/Final-communiqu%C3%A9-released-at-conclusion-of-second-Baghdad-Conference-25961>.

is using the platform to promote its own interests in the region. Finally, the focus on Iraqi stability renders the format vulnerable – in terms of both participation and agenda – to political fluctuations in Iraq.¹⁷

GCC-focused initiatives

The United Nations and non-governmental institutions have looked to build on cooperation among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and expand into a format with wider participation. The International Crisis Group, among others, has advocated the creation of a Helsinki-inspired dialogue focused on the Gulf subregion to help reduce tensions with Iran, arguing that while such dialogues should eventually include all regional stakeholders, the ‘chances of success likely would be higher if an initiative were to start small and test ideas ahead of launching a broader process’.¹⁸ A Crisis Group report recommends starting regional de-escalation efforts with the GCC states, Iran and Iraq, supported by a core group of external states. The UN, where the Crisis Group initially presented its report at a special session dedicated to regional security, has similarly focused on this ‘GCC+2’ formulation as a starting point for regional dialogue.¹⁹

Another example of Gulf-centred initiatives can be found in the activities of the Gulf Research Center (GRC), a Saudi-based think-tank. The GRC hosts workshops and conferences that foster GCC cooperation with Iran, Iraq and Yemen on a variety of regional political, social and economic issues. Working alongside other organizations, it has expanded dialogues to include civil society participants and a younger generation of experts, creating a Gulf-based community that has vested interests in cooperation and an understanding of its value – though such concepts have gained less traction with official decision-makers.²⁰

These GCC-focused projects are undoubtedly more practical than some wider-ranging regional cooperation efforts, as it is easier to start with a small group of like-minded states and avoid the complications of a larger forum where agreement may be more difficult. And with the centre of political gravity in the Middle East having moved towards the Gulf over the past decade, concentrating on this subregion is in tune with regional trends. The GCC platform has also been

¹⁷ These critiques of the Baghdad process were expressed at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule, Oman, January 2023.

¹⁸ See International Crisis Group (2020), *The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown*, Report No. 212, 27 April 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/212-middle-east-between-collective-security-and-collective-breakdown>. A more recent Crisis Group commentary also focuses on the Gulf subregion as a starting point for regional dialogue: International Crisis Group (2023), ‘Gulf: Promoting Collective Security through Regional Dialogue’, Commentary, 31 January 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/gulf-promoting-collective-security-through-regional-dialogue>.

¹⁹ Author discussions with UN officials, 3 October 2022, New York. The UN Security Council special session on regional dialogue convened in October 2020. See United Nations (2020), ‘Remarks at the Security Council Meeting on the ‘Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Comprehensive Review of the Situation in the Persian Gulf Region: Speech, António Guterres, Secretary-General, UN Security Council, New York’, 20 October 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-10-20/comprehensive-review-of-situation-persian-gulf-region-remarks-security-council>. Robert Malley, then head of the International Crisis Group, presented the group’s report on the topic at the UN session: International Crisis Group (2020), ‘Gulf Tensions Could Trigger a Conflict Nobody Wants’, Speech: Robert Malley, 20 October 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/gulf-tensions-could-trigger-conflict-nobody-wants>.

²⁰ Author discussion with regional experts, 20 March 2023, Geneva. A Belgium-based institution, the European Institute of Peace (EIP), also runs track 1.5 dialogues that include the GCC, Iran and Iraq.

able to include states outside the subregion that have similar interests on some matters – such as Egypt and Jordan – and has proven a useful mechanism for re-anchoring Iraq's foreign policy to the common interests of its Arab neighbours. Moreover, Iranian participation as part of a GCC+2 format is compatible with Iran's long-standing preference for regionally based dialogues that exclude external powers such as the US and – within the MENA region – Israel.²¹

However, subregional mechanisms are no panacea. Transnational issues such as climate change, food security and migration extend beyond the Gulf's geographical boundaries. Moreover, a Gulf format that includes Iran but excludes Israel cannot be used to translate existing areas of productive functional cooperation between some GCC states and Israel into wider improvements in political relations.

Subregional mechanisms are no panacea. Transnational issues such as climate change, food security and migration extend beyond the Gulf's geographical boundaries.

Perhaps most critically, the argument that subregional Gulf solutions are somehow 'easier' overlooks the deep-seated mistrust and competition between the GCC states themselves. It also downplays their continued preference for bilateral and unilateral arrangements and external security guarantees.²² Such factors make agreement even among a smaller grouping challenging. The lingering impact of the 2017–21 blockade of Qatar has, despite resumed diplomatic ties, continued to slow GCC coordination. Economic and diplomatic competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is also on the rise as Riyadh pushes forward on its ambitious domestic 'Vision 2030', an economic diversification and privatization plan that could, over time, draw investment and resources away from Dubai.²³

It is thus not surprising that a recent UN effort to support a Gulf dialogue through the GCC+2 format managed only a 'lunch not a launch' among the participating countries' permanent representatives in New York.²⁴ That said, UN officials are exploring further meetings with this grouping to advance dialogue within the Gulf region.²⁵

²¹ For Iran's views of regional cooperation, see Azizi, H. (2022), 'Iran and multilateralism in the Middle East: Possibilities and constraints', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 27 October 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/iran-and-multilateralism-in-the-middle-east-possibilities-and-constraints>.

²² Vakil, S. (2022), 'Understanding the GCC Collective Security Mindset', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 30 November 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/understanding-the-gcc-collective-security-mindset>.

²³ Continuing intra-GCC tensions and mistrust emerged as a major theme in a project workshop in Muscat, Oman in January 2023.

²⁴ Remarks made at a workshop in Geneva, March 2023.

²⁵ Author email exchange with UN official, August 2023.

Abraham Accords/Negev Forum initiatives

The Abraham Accords – a set of normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain announced in August 2020 – have signalled a shift in regional politics that culminated in the first formal recognition of Israel by any Arab state since Jordan's 1994 agreement. (Morocco followed the UAE and Bahrain in recognizing Israel in December 2020; Sudan has also committed in principle to doing so but the process has been delayed due to the civil war.²⁶) The Abraham Accords not only established diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, and between Israel and Bahrain, but also normalized economic ties between Israel and both partners. This has encouraged cooperation in fields that include tourism, education, healthcare and technology.

Gulf Arab economic cooperation with Israel has focused on joint water and energy projects, the expansion of defence relationships, and technological and surveillance exchanges. Despite significant criticism, principally over the abandonment of Palestinian peace initiatives as a precondition for the normalization of relations with Israel,²⁷ the Abraham Accords have enabled more inclusive bilateral and multilateral discussions to take place as a result of Israeli participation.

A prime example is the Negev Forum, the inaugural meeting of which took place in Israel in March 2022. The forum brought together Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the UAE and the US to build and support the normalization agreements through economic and security cooperation. However, because of the lack of progress on Palestinian peace negotiations, Jordan was notably absent from this gathering.

Borrowing both from the format of the 1991 Madrid peace process and that used by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the participants agreed to make the meeting a rotating forum with a steering committee. The idea is that, with time, the Negev Forum will enable greater cooperation on hard and soft security issues and form the basis for a broader, more formalized institutional framework. Six working groups were also established – on education, energy, food and water security, health, security and tourism – with the goal of building cross-regional cooperation in these areas.²⁸ The working groups also aspire to coordinate steps to improve living conditions in the Palestinian Territories.

Members of the Negev Forum convened again in Bahrain in June 2022 to establish the structure for future dialogue and cooperation. It was agreed that the working groups will meet three times a year.²⁹ In January 2023, the groups convened in Abu Dhabi to begin preparations for a planned March 2023 meeting in Morocco,

²⁶ Yaari, E. (2023), 'The Fighting in Sudan Threatens Peace Efforts with Israel', Policy Analysis, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 April 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fighting-sudan-threatens-peace-efforts-israel>.

²⁷ 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>.

²⁸ Bassist, R. (2022), 'Negev Summit steering committee hatches plans in Bahrain', *Al-Monitor*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/negev-summit-steering-committee-hatches-plans-bahrain>.

²⁹ Nashar, K. (2023), 'Negev Forum's Working Groups Meeting – Host's Summary', Emirates News Agency, 10 January 2023, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303117696>.

subsequently postponed twice due to political tensions over Israel's expansion of settlements in the West Bank.³⁰ The meetings have received track 2 support from the Atlantic Council and other institutions.

The Negev Forum remains hampered by a number of regional challenges. Among these are perceptions, particularly in some Gulf states, that the participants are motivated by a common agenda of curbing Iran's expansionist ambitions. The fear is that this could prompt Iranian retaliation against targets in Gulf Arab countries. Also problematic is a perception that the grouping is too exclusive, and that it exists largely to enhance Israel's integration with other countries in the region, running counter to a substantial segment of popular opinion across the Middle East which sees such integration as coming at the expense of Palestinian peace. Yet without progress on a Palestinian peace process, sustained regional cooperation as well as the Israeli goal of further normalization – including with Saudi Arabia – appears harder to achieve. Because of these political challenges, the Negev Forum risks being obstructed by broader regional dynamics and tensions, and could be reduced to episodic meetings.³¹ Finally, the fact that the US is a signatory to the forum brands it as an American effort, limiting the initiative's regional legitimacy and wider international appeal.

Minilateral initiatives

'Minilateralism' has taken off in the Middle East as a number of smaller country groupings have emerged organically to tackle specific challenges. This type of diplomatic approach has the advantage of being more targeted and more flexible, and allows a focus on specific goals while also filling strategic voids unaddressed by other formats. Compared to more ambitious multilateralism, which has been difficult to coordinate in the region and remains vulnerable to polarizing political divides, minilateral groups are nimbler and can build focused relationships.

Smaller groups of countries often achieve progress on issues related to economic development or other topical issues. Such groups have included the Amman Summit, which in 2021 brought together Jordan, Egypt and Iraq to discuss regional security cooperation and economic ties. Similarly, the Cyprus Government Initiative for Coordinating Climate Change Action in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East provides a thematic, focused forum for technical specialists from around the region, including from Iran, Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.³² The East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) gathers representatives from Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories – as well as from France, Italy and Greece – in a regional dialogue on gas market security and decarbonization.³³

³⁰ The steering committee's gathering in Abu Dhabi was the third since the inaugural Negev Forum summit in March 2022. The committee previously met in Bahrain in June 2022 and online in November 2022. See Naar, I. (2023), 'Negev Forum working group meetings conclude in Abu Dhabi', *The National*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/01/10/negev-forum-working-group-meetings-conclude-in-abu-dhabi>.

³¹ See Quilliam, N. and Vakil, S. (2023), *The Abraham Accords and Israel-UAE normalization: Shaping a new Middle East*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/abraham-accords-and-israel-uae-normalization>.

³² Efron, S. (2022), 'A MENA regional approach to address the implications of climate change', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 20 October 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/a-mena-regional-approach-to-address-the-implications-of-climate-change>.

³³ East Mediterranean Gas Forum (2023), 'Homepage', <https://emgf.org>.

There is also a Red Sea Council, which promotes maritime security mainly among the littoral states of the Red Sea (although Israel is conspicuously not a member),³⁴ and a Russia-backed 'Astana process' that has tried to promote alignment between Iran, Syria and Türkiye.

In some cases, minilateralism has brought in extra-regional actors. Along with the EMGF mentioned above, another example is the I2U2 initiative involving Israel, India, the UAE and the US.³⁵ Building on this trend, Middle Eastern states have also gained membership or observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Despite the array of emergent groupings, minilateral initiatives should not be seen as a replacement for multilateral diplomacy. Minilateral gatherings reflect a need for expedient transactional cooperation that is narrowly focused, and their agendas and effectiveness often depend excessively on the positions of individual leaders and national agendas at any given time. As such, minilateralism has yet to provide a channel for more sustained and inclusive cooperation.

A pathway to a new regional forum

As the above examples illustrate, none of the current initiatives fills the gap in providing for inclusive and wide-ranging official cooperation across the MENA region. Current initiatives are either associated with the agenda of a particular country (e.g. Iraqi stability or Israeli integration) or are largely designed around exclusionary and transactional groupings to confront a specific challenge. Many are also associated with external powers, increasing the risk of great power competition complicating regional cooperation or triggering the development of 'counter-coalitions' by rival powers.³⁶

What is missing is a forum designed solely for the purpose of fostering sustainable and inclusive regional cooperation and conflict prevention, rather than competitive alliance-building. Most regional actors would see value in a forum specifically structured to promote regional stability and economic prosperity. Many external powers would also likely support such a forum, provided they did not perceive it as benefiting their rivals.³⁷

As we argued at the outset, any new cooperation format will not replace or fully overturn the inevitable power-balancing that has dominated regional politics. However, an *additional cooperative* layer to the region's largely competitive security

³⁴ Arab News (2020), 'Saudi Arabia and 7 countries form council to secure Red Sea and Gulf of Aden', 6 January 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1609121/saudi-arabia>.

³⁵ Alhasan, H. and Solanki, V. (2022), 'The I2U2 minilateral group', IISS Online Analysis, 11 November 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/11/the-minilateral-i2u2-group>.

³⁶ For example, such tension is emerging in the maritime arena as China's role in regional affairs appears to be growing following the Chinese-brokered Iranian–Saudi normalization agreement in March 2023. Reports suggest that China may be facilitating talks between Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to create a joint naval protection force, a potential counter to the US-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) that largely focus on Iranian threats in the Persian Gulf waters. See All Arab News (2023), 'Iran to form new maritime alliance of Gulf States', 4 June 2023, <https://allarab.news/iran-to-form-new-maritime-alliance-of-gulf-states>. For an analysis of China's interests in an expanded role in the Gulf region, see Baabood, A. (2023), 'Why China is Emerging as a Main Promoter of Stability in the Strait of Hormuz', Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 May 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2023/05/24/why-china-is-emerging-as-main-promoter-of-stability-in-strait-of-hormuz-pub-89829>.

³⁷ For example, in discussions with the authors and at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule in June 2022 in London, US officials suggested they do not oppose cooperative efforts organized by other external parties, even if US priorities continue to focus on containing Iran and on Arab–Israeli normalization.

architecture could bring benefits not readily available through other initiatives. Specifically, this layered approach could reduce the incentives for countries to act as ‘spoilers’ in regional relations and could also, over time, appeal to a wider cast of participants.

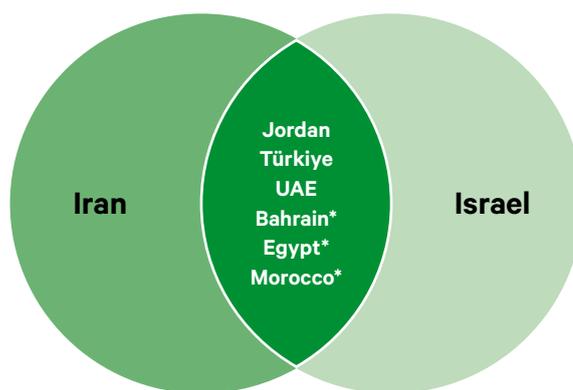
The design of a new forum will be challenging. It must take account of pre-existing regional and global tensions, and be structured in such a way as to be insulated from the agendas of potential spoilers. Above all, the design of a new dialogue needs to consider three central questions: (1) **who** should participate, (2) **what** the agenda should be, and (3) **how** actors in the region should go about building it.

Who should participate?

By definition, an inclusive regional forum would aim ultimately to involve the entire MENA region – including the Arab states, Iran, Israel and Türkiye. This all-in approach will not be possible at the outset, however. When it comes to Iranian and Israeli involvement, it would be impossible to extend participation to both countries simultaneously.³⁸ Yet since many stakeholders in the region would view the participation of one state without the other as a competitive containment effort, an either/or approach would also be unworkable if the eventual goal were the establishment of an inclusive process.

Consequently, a more feasible pathway forward seems to be to start building cooperation around a group of countries that participate in *other* cooperative forums with Iran, Israel or both. A group of this nature would be able to draw on a range of existing linkages between participant states and non-participants (including Iran and Israel), thereby ensuring a measure of indirect engagement with almost all regional actors.

Figure 2. MENA states with diplomatic ties with Iran and Israel



*Bahrain, Egypt and Morocco are in the process of restoring ties with Iran.
Source: Chatham House illustration.

³⁸ Conflict resolution in Syria and Yemen is a necessary precondition that could lead to their gradual inclusion.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, a number of MENA countries – Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Türkiye and the UAE – either already have diplomatic relations with both Iran and Israel, or have official ties with Israel and are in the process of restoring ties with Iran as well. As one of the articles published for this project argued, a key concept in ‘getting the ball rolling’ for a cooperative dialogue is to ‘begin with what (and who) you can begin with’ – in other words, start with a smaller number of interested parties and expand over time.³⁹

Cooperative regional forums in other parts of the world have evolved using a similar approach. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began in 1967 with only five members and a short general declaration committing participants to regular meetings, strengthening regional cooperation, and recognizing mutual interests in addressing common problems.⁴⁰ With time, ASEAN expanded to include additional institutional frameworks and member states. Its development included the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994, which incorporated regional and extra-regional adversarial states such as the US and North Korea. ASEAN is not without its critics and limitations, but it has provided an indispensable cooperative layer that, over several decades, has helped turn a theatre for great power rivalry and conflict into a more prosperous and peaceful region.⁴¹ ASEAN has also served as a useful forum for managing relations with external powers, and thus offers lessons for the Middle East as it navigates great power competition.⁴²

A new cooperative process in the MENA region could emulate this strategy, starting with a small group of founding participants. With the exception of Iran, MENA states are largely not trying to push external powers out of the region.⁴³ But they have made it very clear that they do not want to choose sides or have great power rivalries play out on their doorstep in ways that undermine cooperation or increase the prospects for conflict.

Given rising geostrategic rivalries between the US, China and Russia, any new inclusive forum should therefore minimize the role of the major powers. This constraint also makes the involvement of the P5 or P5 + 1 – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany – unfeasible, though UN backing for layered regional cooperation through the appointment of an envoy could lend important institutional support to a new organization. Facilitator or partnership roles for smaller external powers – whether in Europe or Asia – or for the European Union as a bloc could be more helpful, particularly in functional areas where external actors have particular competence and vested interests. Still, a new forum is more likely to succeed and endure if the momentum and branding are MENA-made and MENA-led.

³⁹ Jones (2022), ‘A Middle East regional security dialogue process: Getting the ball rolling’.

⁴⁰ ASEAN (1967), ‘The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration)’, 8 August 1967, <https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf>.

⁴¹ Zhang (2022), ‘Constructing a regional security architecture in the Middle East: ASEAN as inspiration’.

⁴² Kausikan, B. (2023), ‘Southeast Asia between Major Powers: Lessons for the Middle East’, *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, June 2023, <https://jstribune.com/kausikan-southeast-asia-between-major-powers>.

⁴³ Despite its ostensible opposition to external participants, in practice Iran has agreed to join forums such as the Baghdad process, which has included an active French role and the involvement of other Western states. For an overview of Iranian positions towards regional cooperation, see Azizi (2022), ‘Iran and multilateralism in the Middle East: Possibilities and constraints’.

Because much of the recent political de-escalation has originated in the Gulf, a 'GCC plus' formulation could form the starting point for a new initiative. GCC states also have the financial resources and incentives to foster regional cooperation. As explained above, a forum limited to Gulf affairs alone would not easily expand into the sort of inclusive region-wide organization that is ultimately necessary. A better starting point might be a formula that includes the GCC states, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Türkiye. If a representative of the Arab Maghreb Union⁴⁴ were also added to the grouping, alongside an envoy from other regional initiatives, this could showcase the broader intent of inclusivity.

A grouping of this type would include countries with close ties to Iran, such as Iraq, as well as states that have normalized ties with both Iran and Israel (such as Jordan, Türkiye and the UAE). To avoid the appearance of taking sides on political and territorial disputes in North Africa, as in the case of Algeria and Morocco, an official from the Arab Maghreb Union could initially represent that subregion. Above all, the hope with this sort of formulation is that using a small initial group to foster wider linkages with other MENA countries could lead to its expansion to include adversarial states in the future.

A forum limited to Gulf affairs alone would not easily expand into the sort of inclusive region-wide organization that is ultimately necessary. A better starting point might be a formula that includes the GCC states, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Türkiye.

As mentioned, such a pathway implies that some important regional states – notably Iran and Israel – would not join high-level meetings initially. However, there would still be the possibility of lower-level engagement through issue-specific working groups in functional areas of common concern. Even adversarial states that do not recognize each other could participate in technical or non-governmental activities under the cover of a multilateral 'umbrella'.

A good example of technical cooperation succeeding where formal diplomacy has failed can be found in the Oman-based Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC). This multilateral research institution focuses on addressing freshwater scarcity, and is the only remnant of the multilateral Middle East peace process of the early 1990s. MEDRC continues to operate, with Israeli participation, even though Oman, the host nation, and some other participants do not recognize Israel.⁴⁵ Similarly, on climate policy, scientists from Iran, Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories participate in a forum hosted by the Cyprus Institute, despite Israel's adversarial relations with the three other parties.⁴⁶ Scientists from Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan and Türkiye also participate in a research initiative,

⁴⁴ The members of the Arab Maghreb Union are Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

⁴⁵ Regional participants, listed publicly on the MEDRC website, comprise Oman, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Qatar. See <https://www.medrc.org>.

⁴⁶ This effort is part of the Cyprus Government Initiative for Coordinating Climate Change Action in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. See Efron (2022), 'A MENA regional approach to address the implications of climate change'.

the Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), established in Jordan in 2017 under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁴⁷

In other words, adversarial states can cooperate on certain functional topic areas or even in certain multilateral formats without such joint activities needing direct, official recognition from government. Consequently, the idea of starting 'where you can' with a smaller grouping of regional states does not preclude attracting additional participants with creative diplomacy as such cooperation evolves. Ultimately, a smaller grouping is necessary at the outset to create the vision and momentum necessary to attract broader high-level support.

What should be on the agenda?

A new regional forum would need to demonstrate its value to participating states by producing tangible benefits. One of the main critiques of the 'Baghdad summits', for instance, has been their inability to translate impressive high-level participation by a large number of regional states into meaningful action. During the research for this paper, participants at multiple project meetings stressed the need to avoid 'performative' cooperation in which high-level summitry does not generate sustainable and concrete results; the region does not need another unproductive multilateral institution.

Consequently, it will be imperative to design a process that allows for cooperation on functional issues among both official and non-governmental subject matter experts. One option could be to draw on the discussion formats of previous multilateral initiatives. For example, the Middle East peace process operated working groups broadly modelled on the concept of thematic 'baskets' of issues, as used for the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The working groups focused on five areas: arms control and regional security; economic development; water; the environment; and refugees.⁴⁸ The current iteration of multilateral Arab–Israeli cooperation through the Negev Forum is similarly structured to allow for the holding of working-level meetings on six functional topics between higher-level summits. The working group structure on functional and thematic areas allows progress to be made in some areas even when efforts are stalled in others.⁴⁹

There is no shortage of topics that could usefully be taken up in a new regional forum. The main requirement is that issues should appeal to a wide range of participants and that action should require cross-border cooperation. But there should not be too many topics, as this would risk diluting policy activity and would create organizational complexity – potentially burdensome in the early stages of establishing and trying to build momentum behind a new forum. Identifying a smaller number of common issues to address may prove more feasible.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See Kaye, D. D. (2001), *Beyond the Handshake: Multilateral Cooperation in the Arab–Israeli Peace Process*, Columbia University Press.

⁴⁹ Peter Jones calls this the 'geometry variable' concept. See Jones (2022), 'A Middle East regional security dialogue process: Getting the ball rolling'.

The challenge is to identify issues that are not immediately divisive yet are recognized as important for regional security. An underlying principle, and a lesson that has emerged from other global experiences, is that the definition of 'security' should be broad enough to accommodate a wide range of issues with potential impacts on regional peace and stability. In other words, security should not just be seen as being about so-called 'hard' issues such as weapons and troop numbers. It is also affected by economic disparities, climate change, migration, technology and public health crises. While regional leaders still value traditional concepts of hard security, there is a growing recognition that 'soft security' issues pose significant threats to national interests and regional stability.

In recognition of both this shift in regional views and the prior experiences of other dialogues, we recommend largely avoiding the replication of previous agendas where issues like arms control were included at the outset. Allowing other regional and global forums to address more contentious issues – such as the idea of creating a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East – would be more productive than trying to tackle these topics within a new effort.⁵⁰ This should not, however, preclude taking up certain elements of prior topics where much productive discussion has already occurred – such as on water and environmental challenges – and adapting those agendas to the current context.

As a starting point, we recommend focusing the substantive agenda of a new multilateral effort on three areas that emerged as priorities during our project discussions and workshops. These areas, which are gaining high-level attention among regional governments, are: (1) coordination on climate change; (2) energy cooperation; and (3) emergency response (including cross-border coordination between authorities dealing with public health crises, earthquakes and maritime incidents).

This list is certainly not exhaustive. It could be refined and expanded once a process is launched. Tourism cooperation, for example, is likely to attract region-wide support, particularly when linked to economic development planning. Missile proliferation is another area of widespread concern that will eventually need a region-wide solution. But there was a convergence of opinion among the experts we engaged that the three proposed topics meet the essential criteria of urgency, region-wide interest and feasibility. Tackling issues that are relatively uncontroversial but still important offers a useful starting point for further cooperation. Moreover, climate action, energy policy and emergency response all lend themselves to region-wide linkages, including between the Gulf and North African states.⁵¹

A further rationale for this starting agenda is that, because mistakes or policy gaps in these fields often have substantial negative effects beyond the MENA region – even globally – this increases the incentives for constructive extra-regional support and disincentivizes potential spoilers. That said, even seemingly less contentious issues

⁵⁰ One notable effort in this space is the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) project on a Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFFZ), funded by the EU, <https://www.unidir.org/programmes/middle-east-weapons-mass-destruction-free-zone>.

⁵¹ For Maghreb perspectives, see Wehrey, F. (2023), 'Security dialogues and architectures in the Maghreb: Lessons from the past, opportunities for the future', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 7 February 2023, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/security-dialogues-and-architectures-in-the-maghreb-lessons-from-the-past-opportunities-for-the-future>.

are not necessarily easy to address cooperatively; every issue can be politicized and create friction, particularly given inequities across the region and the inevitable prospect of participating countries jostling for a greater say on one aspect of policy or another. Nonetheless, we believe these are issues where transnational cooperation has the potential to create win-win outcomes visible to people on the ground, not just to officials at negotiating tables.

Here are specific examples for a cooperative agenda in the three proposed topic areas:

Climate cooperation

In terms of urgency, managing the impacts of climate change is widely seen as a regional priority. Throughout our research conversations and workshops, climate-related discussions emerged as an area in which regional cooperation can and should be fostered. The MENA region is a climate change hotspot: it is warming at twice the average global rate, with some parts of the region likely to be unliveable by mid-century.⁵² Leaders can try to make progress from inside national policy silos, but the negative impacts of climate change inevitably cross borders, increasing the need for regional cooperation.⁵³ The timing on cooperation is also optimal, given the region's current prominence in the international debate on climate change: Egypt hosted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's high-profile COP27 conference in 2022, and the UAE will host COP28 in late 2023.

The Middle East is a climate change hotspot: it is warming at twice the average global rate, with some parts of the region likely to be unliveable by mid-century.

A recent article published as part of this project proposed a number of ideas for climate cooperation in the MENA region, including: the creation of a research, development and innovation hub along the lines of the Cyprus Initiative; a regional food security initiative; joint action on preserving the Mediterranean marine environment; a collaborative forum on climate migrants; and the establishment of early-warning systems for climate-related natural disasters such as flooding.⁵⁴ Regional countries with experience in particular areas, or with strong incentives to promote action on them, could take the lead in coordinating governmental and non-governmental efforts within relevant working groups. (Potential examples could include Oman playing a prominent role on water security, or Egypt on food security.) External states or international organizations could partner with regional states to offer support in their own areas of competence.

⁵² Efron (2022), 'A MENA regional approach to address the implications of climate change'.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Energy cooperation

Energy cooperation also offers potential long-term mutual benefit for participating states. The subject is gaining more attention given recent natural gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as the efforts of Gulf states to diversify their oil-based economies. An article in our MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series argues: 'Energy diplomacy has proven to be highly effective at encouraging cooperation among hostile states and, in turn, enhancing overall regional security. Given the centrality of energy to the well-being of states, energy diplomacy, when deployed deftly, can leverage common vulnerabilities, and stimulate shared economic interests.'⁵⁵

There is a body of existing activity to build on. A number of regional energy deals have emerged in recent years. These include a solar power and water exchange agreement between Israel, Jordan and the UAE, and an Israel–Lebanon maritime border agreement that allows for new gas exploration in Lebanese waters and the potential for further regional energy cooperation.⁵⁶ Energy relationships are also growing between Egypt, Israel and Jordan, increasing economic integration between the three countries. In the future it might even be possible to include Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states in the EMGF, which would strengthen linkages between Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean security.⁵⁷

Israel's membership of the EMGF is significant, as the country's inclusion in regional energy dialogue will become essential over time, even if popular resistance to cooperation is likely to remain for the foreseeable future due to Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. As one regional expert put it, 'Israel holds the key to energy cooperation in the region' because its neighbours will likely have to buy its water or desalination technology in the coming years.⁵⁸ Thus, energy cooperation may provide a way of naturally and incrementally incorporating Israel into inclusive regional forums as they expand, without letting high-level political obstacles impede engagement in technical areas.

Emergency response

Finally, the need to improve emergency response coordination and capabilities in the MENA region is generating widespread interest, making this another potentially constructive area for dialogue. A range of issues could be addressed under the umbrella of emergency response. In public health, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for improved coordination between health authorities in different countries. Oman convened a regional meeting in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, but the effort was a one-off that did not lead to subsequent meetings.⁵⁹ The need for more sustainable efforts in this area is clear given the widespread assumption that further public health crises will arise

⁵⁵ Quilliam, N. (2023), 'Regional security in the Middle East: The creative force of energy diplomacy', MENA Cooperative Security Policy Series, 26 January 2023, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/regional-security-in-the-middle-east-the-creative-force-of-energy-diplomacy>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Author meeting with a French government official, Paris, February 2023.

⁵⁹ Author meeting with a UN official, New York, September 2022.

in future. The devastating earthquake in Syria and Türkiye in early 2023 was another reminder that the lack of regional coordination during disasters, whether natural or man-made, is costing lives and damaging livelihoods.

Emergency response to maritime incidents is another obvious target for region-wide cooperation. Notable progress was made on this topic as part of the multilateral peace process in the early 1990s, and the need to improve preparedness continues to generate interest at the non-governmental level. One track 1.5 initiative sponsored by the Swiss ministry of foreign affairs and two NGOs – Search for Common Ground and the EastWest Institute – convened a meeting of former naval officers and maritime experts from nine countries (including Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) to discuss how to prevent unintentional incidents at sea. Participants also included representatives from external powers (including China, India and the US) that operate warships or military aircraft in the sea areas surrounding MENA states. The participants agreed to a document on incidents at sea; in the view of the organizers of the initiative, the document is now ready for track 1 action.⁶⁰

How should regional actors build a 'layered' cooperation format in practice?

Taken together, the three above-mentioned areas – climate change, energy and emergency response – offer a robust menu for regional cooperation. However, the most challenging part of building a new forum will be to put theory into practice. Agreeing on an organizational structure and convening format, on the scope of activity and specific policy areas to be addressed (and avoided), and above all on membership will be a cooperation challenge in its own right. In this section, we provide a menu of options for guiding this process and allowing regional states to capitalize on the current de-escalatory political environment.

Moving beyond theoretical discussions to make a new forum operational will require regular ministerial engagement from all initial participant states. Without this buy-in and consistent high-level investment of time and political capital, the effort risks emulating other 'performative' initiatives and summitry, rather than creating productive channels of communication and cooperation.

Although the initiative must be MENA-led and -managed, international envoy-level backing from the EU or UN will be needed to shepherd the process.⁶¹ Former political leaders and respected diplomats from Europe or Asia could be called on to facilitate back-channel negotiations, or to engage in shuttle diplomacy to build commitment and coordination. Such facilitators will need extensive experience of Middle East affairs, and will also need to have built up a wide base of trust around the region. Leaders from 'middle powers' such as Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea or Switzerland, rather than from the great powers, are most likely to be seen as non-aligned and are therefore more likely to be trusted. Being seen to be neutral will be key to building confidence that external players – despite their necessary facilitating role – do not have an ulterior agenda beyond that of supporting the cooperative process.

⁶⁰ Remarks made at a workshop held under the Chatham House Rule, Geneva, March 2023.

⁶¹ Presentation at a workshop under the Chatham House Rule, Oman, January 2023.

To demonstrate inclusive intent and transparency, these envoys and participant states should communicate their plans and objectives to all states and organizations in the region, making it clear that inclusivity is the priority and ultimate goal. Representatives from the 'Baghdad summit', Negev Forum, Arab Maghreb Union and Arab League could be invited as observers; this would demonstrate a commitment to cooperation across the region.

Agreement on core principles in a founding document will be essential.⁶² Principles such as respect for sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of other members could inform a joint code of conduct to be observed by all. The founding declaration could also state the parties' commitment to preventing armed conflict, resolving disputes peacefully, and promoting cooperative relationships and norms through dialogue mechanisms and action on common regional challenges. Confidence and trust should be reinforced by agreeing how the forum would protect and uphold such principles.⁶³ Agreement on a definition of cooperative security would also have value in outlining the initiative's broader vision and objectives. Above all, a founding document for a new forum, which could be called the MENA Forum (or MEF), should commit the parties to regular dialogue and leave the door open to other countries to join as and when they are ready to adhere to the norms it embodies.

It will also be necessary to roll out a specific coordination process for the thematic areas of climate, energy and emergency response, harnessing existing technical and track 2 discussions. It could be useful to emulate track 2 and 1.5 discussions in other contexts, where such channels have been used to draft documents that serve as a reference on common principles.⁶⁴ The founding charters or related documents of other regional organizations or non-governmental efforts could help guide and shape the founding charter for the MEF. A ministerial meeting could then be convened at which the initial members of the new forum could announce the pre-negotiated wording of a founding declaration.

Lastly, identifying a MENA location – agreeable to all participants and perceived as neutral – at which to convene the first meeting will build confidence in the process. Ideally, participants could agree on one location for regular meetings, but alternatively a rotating format could be adopted in which each participant state would host the forum in turn.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

This research paper has offered preliminary ideas on building a more inclusive and sustainable regional cooperation forum. Our proposals are based on extensive feedback from actors in the MENA region, lessons from other global experiences, and our professional assessment of what is and is not feasible in the Middle East's current political and security environment. Should regional leaders and policymakers initiate such a process and find value in these suggestions, they will no doubt formulate their

⁶² Jones (2022), 'A Middle East regional security dialogue process: Getting the ball rolling'.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Jones, P. (2022), 'A Middle East Cooperation and Security System: Has the Time Come?', *Middle East Policy*, 29(1), pp. 74–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12620>.

own answers and seek to define the features and operating principles of any new platform accordingly. Nonetheless, as a starting point for debate and exploratory work, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Political leaders and policymakers in the MENA region should capitalize on the current wave of regional de-escalation to launch an official region-wide forum for cooperation. This could be called something like the 'MENA Forum' (or MEF).
2. Work on creating the MEF could be initiated at a high-level meeting in a MENA capital agreeable to all participants and perceived as neutral, at which a group of regional foreign ministers would announce the formation of the new dialogue platform. At this launch summit, the initial set of participating countries could issue a joint founding declaration outlining principles for cooperation. This charter should commit the parties to regular meetings and substantive cooperation on areas of common concern. High-level regional buy-in and political support will be essential for a successful launch.
3. The effort should be branded as MENA-made and MENA-led. A state or group of states from the MENA region should take the lead in establishing the forum. However, international backing, particularly from envoys from Europe or the UN, will also be critical.
4. To 'get the ball rolling', it is important to begin with a smaller grouping of Arab states plus Türkiye, as this combination would offer better chances of success than a more expansive format at the outset. The longer-term objective would be to include the full MENA region. Because Türkiye and several of the proposed founding Arab participants maintain ties to both Iran and Israel, the MEF has greater potential to expand cooperation to the entire region over time.
5. Preventing great power competition from hijacking the initiative will be key. This rules out direct participation by the US and China, at least as founding members. However, success would still depend on both countries providing political support, as well as mutually accepting the other's role in the initiative. If either the US or China is seen as more closely aligned with the new forum, there would be an increased risk of it becoming a platform for global competition.

These recommendations are intended for politicians, policymakers and researchers throughout the MENA region, particularly in the countries we have identified as potential founding participants. Elements of our proposals would also need to be taken up by external governments and international organizations. It will be necessary to draw on both regional and global expertise so that practical ideas can be developed for moving from concepts to concrete actions. By outlining a feasible path forward and a vision for a more cooperative future that is in the interest of every nation in the MENA region, and indeed the international community, we hope to demonstrate why the political will necessary to implement these ideas is so critical, and why the time for regional leaders to meet this moment is now.

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About the 'Building a Cooperative Regional Security Architecture in the Middle East' project

This project, in partnership with the Burkle Center for International Relations at UCLA, has aimed to provide viable options for mobilizing an inclusive multilateral cooperation forum in the MENA region. This initiative has taken stock of prior efforts and has explored opportunities in the current geopolitical environment to jumpstart a more inclusive and sustainable official process that aims to bring together regional states on a regular basis to reduce tensions, agree on norms of conduct and engage in cooperative activities that can bring tangible benefits to the region. Drawing on expert interviews and workshops as well as published commissioned articles, this project has drawn on best practice from other regional and global cooperative efforts, tried to discern regional preferences and constraints in regard to a new dialogue platform, identified key functional areas that could be conducive to cooperation, and assessed the broader global interest and capacity to support such a process.

The project website can be found at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/middle-east-and-north-africa-programme/building-stable-regional-security>.

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Cover image: National flags of the Arab League countries during the 29th Summit of the Arab League in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on 15 April 2018.

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