

## Navigating Protracted Conflicts in a Multi-Aligned World: Closing the Chatham House XCEPT Research Programme

Chatham House, London | Thursday, 12 June 2025 | 09:00–14:00 BST

Modern conflicts are no longer neatly contained within national borders but are increasingly shaped by complex, transnational geoeconomic systems. This event marks the culmination of a five-year Chatham House research programme under the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy, and Trends (XCEPT) initiative funded by UK International Development.

The research explores the evolving dynamics of transnational conflict ecosystems across the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, and parts of West and East Africa. The programme investigates how conflict economies — sustained by both licit and illicit supply chains — are reshaping regional power structures and challenging the effectiveness of traditional Western policy responses. As regional middle powers pursue pragmatic, issue-based alignments and military actors evolve into significant political players, the urgency for a more adaptive and strategic Western approach grows.

This event's discussions unpack the key findings of this research and explore how policymakers can better respond to the complex realities of a multi-aligned global order.

### Agenda

09.00 – 09.30 Reception

09.30 – 10.00 Three spotlight sessions on XCEPT case studies

In this set of short sessions, research leads will present case studies from the XCEPT research programme, highlighting transnational dimensions of conflicts in their respective research areas.

- ***Libya/Sahel spotlight session:*** *How conflict in Libya has enabled the transnational expansion of migrant smuggling and trafficking.*

#### **Speakers:**

Tim Eaton, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

- ***Iran/Iraq/Levant spotlight session:*** *How armed groups in the Middle East operate across borders - the transnational nature of conflict in the region.*

#### **Speakers:**

Renad Mansour, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme; Project Director, Iraq Initiative, Chatham House

Hayder Al-Shakeri, Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

- ***Sudan/Ethiopia spotlight session:*** *The cross-border dynamics of conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia and their transnational impacts.*

#### **Speakers:**

Ahmed Soliman, Senior Research Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

Dr Suliman Baldo, Founder, Sudan Policy & Transparency Tracker

Dr Abel Abate Demissie, Associate Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

10.00 – 10.15 Break

10.15 – 10.20 Welcome and opening remarks

Dr Sanam Vakil, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Sophie Stevens, Conflict Research Lead, Research & Evidence Directorate, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

10.20 – 11.30 Plenary session 1: An overview of five years of XCEPT research

Conflicts such as those in Israel-Palestine, Libya, and Sudan remain stubbornly unresolved, with political settlements proving elusive and often short-lived. This enduring instability is a consequence of a rapidly evolving global order, where governments no longer adhere strictly to traditional geopolitical alignments or 'spheres of influence.' Instead, these conflicts unfold within a complex transnational ecosystem, where allies in one dispute may find themselves adversaries in another. Middle powers intervening in these conflicts often support Western interests on certain issues while opposing them on others. The intricate dynamics of these multi-aligned states contribute to a fragmented and unpredictable international arena, where alliances are fluid and transcend national borders. This new reality poses a significant challenge to Western policy instruments, which are rooted in binary frameworks that have become increasingly obsolete. In this panel, the culmination of a five-year research project, experts will explore how conflicts in Sudan, Libya, and Israel-Palestine persist without political resolution amidst a transforming global order.

The discussion focuses on key questions including:

- How has the erosion of traditional geopolitical alignments reshaped the international response to conflicts like those in Libya, Sudan, and Israel-Palestine?
- Is multi-alignment inherently destabilizing, or can it offer creative diplomatic openings that traditional alliances cannot?
- How have local actors in these conflicts adapted—or resisted—the influence of transnational alliances and foreign interventions?
- Given the increasing obsolescence of binary policy frameworks, how should Western actors recalibrate their conflict engagement strategies?
- How might we imagine sustainable conflict resolution in a world where national interests are no longer clearly aligned, and consensus is elusive?

**Speakers:**

Professor Jonathan Goodhand, Professor in Conflict and Development Studies at SOAS, University of London

Dr Renad Mansour, Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House; Project Director, Iraq Initiative

Dr Sanam Vakil, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Mark White, Director, First Call Partners Ltd; Conflict, Security, and Governance Expert

**Moderator:**

Dr Leslie Vinjamuri, Director, US and Americas Programme, Chatham House

11.30 – 11.45 Break

#### 11.45 – 13:00 Plenary session 2: Multi-alignment and transnational conflict: policy challenges and implications

As global and regional powers navigate an increasingly multipolar world, multi-alignment has become a defining feature of international relations—particularly in conflict zones where state and non-state actors intersect. Conflicts are becoming increasingly interconnected, and challenging traditional policy frameworks. This high-level session brings together policymakers and experts to discuss how governments are adapting to these evolving dynamics and consider the strategic, diplomatic, and security implications of multi-alignment in today's interconnected conflicts. How should states engage with partners who balance competing interests? What are the risks and opportunities for conflict resolution and security cooperation? Which policy frameworks and tools are proving most effective and which need updating to better address the current context?

The discussion focuses on key questions including:

- What are the strategic trade-offs involved in engaging with partners who simultaneously cooperate and compete across different conflict theatres? How do security partnerships adapt when allies may be adversaries in parallel arenas of conflict?
- To what extent are contemporary conflicts—such as those in the Sahel, Middle East, or Horn of Africa—interlinked through transnational actors, arms flows, or strategic interests? What challenges does this interconnectedness pose for traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that are state-centric or regionally bounded?
- Which existing policy frameworks or diplomatic tools remain effective in this complex environment, and which are proving inadequate?
- What kind of policy innovation is needed to ensure that responses to interconnected conflicts remain both agile and principled?
- How should policymakers think about alliances and partnerships over the next decade in light of these shifting dynamics?

#### **Speakers:**

Ambassador Mary Catherine (Molly) Phee, Former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, United States Department of State

Professor Mary Kaldor, Director of the Conflict Research Programme, LSE IDEAS

Sheku Tejan Sesay, Senior Political and Reporting Officer, Conflict Management Directorate, Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department, African Union Commission

Dr Bader Mousa Al-Saif, Assistant Professor, Kuwait University (*via Zoom*)

#### **Moderator:**

Maryam Nemazee, Journalist, news anchor, and broadcaster

#### 13:00 – 13:05 Closing remarks

Dr Sanam Vakil, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

#### 13:05 – 14:00 Lunch

Please note that this is an in-person-only event. However, all plenary sessions will be livestreamed on Chatham House's YouTube channel and the event webpage.

All times listed in the agenda are in BST (GMT +1).