



The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown

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Principal Findings

What's new?* Middle East tensions spiked in the past year following attacks on oil tankers and Saudi oil facilities, the U.S. killing of a senior Iranian commander and Iranian military retaliation. Some of Washington's allies, losing confidence the U.S. will reliably extend military protection, have started making cautious diplomatic overtures to Iran.

Why does it matter? While these tentative steps toward de-escalation are welcome, they risk being inadequate, particularly in the absence of regular, high-level communication channels among potential conflict actors. Existing UN-led mechanisms for resolving individual conflicts, such as Yemen, are worthwhile but insufficient to lessen region-wide tensions.

What should be done? Diplomatic efforts are needed to both de-escalate tensions and make progress toward resolving regional conflicts. Gulf actors, supported by external stakeholders, should consider launching an inclusive sub-regional dialogue aimed at reducing the risk of inadvertent conflict by opening new communication channels.

** Crisis Group conducted the fieldwork for this Report before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some dynamics examined in this publication may have changed in the meantime. Moving forward, we will be factoring the impact of the pandemic into our research and recommendations, as well as offering dedicated coverage of how the outbreak is affecting conflicts around the world.*

Executive Summary

The Middle East is, arguably, in as dangerous a condition as it has been in its modern history. A single incident could spark an escalation, which – uncontrolled – could set off a chain reaction of violent confrontations, involving local, regional and extra-regional powers. Established mechanisms for bringing individual conflicts, such as the wars in Syria and Yemen, to a peaceful resolution are making only halting, if any, progress. When a crisis of this magnitude crests, but before it erupts into full-blown war, the attention it attracts can create new opportunities for preventive action. The notion of a collective and inclusive security dialogue that aims to diminish tensions has been around for many years, focused on the Gulf sub-region. The time to launch one is overdue. The first step is to produce concrete ideas and international support for such a dialogue, which can open new channels of communication. To maximise chances of success, the effort should start modestly, possibly initiated by smaller Gulf states with the active diplomatic backing of a group of European and other governments.

Underlying current tensions is the four-decade rivalry between the U.S. and Iran. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and launch of a "maximum pressure" campaign of economic sanctions against Iran in 2018 already has given rise to several violent incidents. These include attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman in May and June of 2019; Iran's 20 June downing of a U.S. surveillance drone that may or may not have entered Iranian airspace; the large-scale missile and rocket attack on Aramco installations in Saudi Arabia on 14 September; the 3 January 2020 killing, in a U.S. drone strike, of Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Qods Force – a special forces unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy head of Iran-backed paramilitary forces in Iraq; and a tandem of tit-for-tat attacks in Iraq between an Iran-backed paramilitary group and U.S. forces on 11 and 12 March.

Any of these incidents could have triggered commensurate retaliation, setting off a dangerous spiral. Reportedly, President Donald Trump was minutes away from responding to the drone incident in June 2019 by ordering an airstrike on Iranian military assets. Many in his administration also were pushing for retaliation after the Aramco attack. Iran retaliated for the Soleimani killing by firing missiles at Iraqi military bases on which U.S. troops were co-located, yet because no American was killed and because Tehran immediately communicated that this was the extent of its response, the U.S. did not escalate further.

This and other rivalries – between Iran and its allies on one hand and Israel on the other, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia – are colouring ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, turning civil wars into proxy wars. These wars increasingly intersect, if not on the ground, then certainly in the way outside actors view them. The wars in Syria and Yemen, in particular, illustrate this dynamic, but so, too, do less violent events in Iraq and Lebanon, where Iran has cast popular uprisings in pursuit of local objectives as instigated by the U.S., while Washington has characterised the protests as principally directed against Iran. Even the outbreak of COVID-19 triggered a spasm

of mutual recriminations between Tehran and Washington – when humanitarian cooperation could provide a face-saving way to reach across the aisle and ease hostilities.

UN-led negotiations have at times made some progress in containing individual conflicts, notably in Yemen. But they have yet to resolve them. These conflicts' perpetuation increases the odds that they metastasise, generate fresh grievances and embolden adversaries to engage in ever riskier games of brinkmanship, testing each other's red lines. Worse, these red lines appear blurred in the absence of functioning communication channels. Poor communication in turn increases the likelihood of accidental conflict – a war the principal actors say they do not seek but into which they may sleepwalk.

Today's crises in the Middle East call for a new approach, one that addresses the weaknesses of the solutions presently on offer and takes into account the situation's growing complexity. The region has undergone a dramatic shift since the 2011 Arab uprisings, and any attempt to tamp down its turbulence likely will require an analytical and operational paradigm shift. A more effective process would approach the region more comprehensively and its individual conflicts as interlinked; even as it addresses ways to reduce immediate dangers, it also would offer a vision for, and path toward, an eventual collective and inclusive regional security arrangement.

By mid-2019, governments in fact began floating initiatives to tackle the burgeoning region-wide crisis, responding to fears that the threat of a major war had become acute. But so far none has taken decisive steps toward kick-starting a collective and inclusive process aimed at reducing tensions. Whatever has happened so far has been ad hoc and uncoordinated – or, worse, based on the construction of hostile alliances that feed, not fight, regional escalation, such as the Middle East Strategic Alliance and the U.S.-led Middle East conference in Warsaw in February 2019. President Emmanuel Macron of France has tried to prevent the worst by nudging Iran and the U.S. back to the negotiating table, but his efforts have yet to bear fruit. France has also sought to lower tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, through which flows a good proportion of the world's oil, through a maritime security initiative. Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues involving Saudi and Iranian participants have aimed to open new channels of communication. Yet the region continues to teeter on a knife edge.

Governments in the Gulf sub-region that are least involved in hostilities but could be harmed the most if fighting erupts, notably Kuwait and Oman, should consider jointly taking the initiative to bring their more powerful and more directly involved neighbours – Iran and Saudi Arabia – into an informal effort to lessen tensions. Such an exercise, in the form of an inclusive security dialogue, ought to be based on core principles all can accept; focus on a combination of hard- and soft-power concerns they all share; and start modestly. This beginning alone could further open communication channels whose limited nature thus far has raised the risk of conflict through miscalculation. If successful, it could also by extension serve to ease tensions between the primary adversaries: the U.S. and Iran.

Any such regional dialogue almost certainly will not come about without external support, especially from the U.S. Yet as long as Washington remains intent on pursuing its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, it is unlikely to back any initiative that involves engaging Tehran. Governments in Europe and elsewhere, however, whose security interests would be harmed by a wider conflagration but whose poli-

cies in the region Gulf states might not perceive as threatening could take the lead in preparing the ground. They might begin by reaching out to Gulf states to explore their readiness for an inclusive security dialogue, drawing inspiration from the successful negotiations that led to the 1975 Helsinki Accords during the Cold War.

The time to lay the groundwork for such an initiative may well have come. To generate political will to act, the worst of times may offer the best opportunity, and conditions in the Gulf arguably have reached that point. Although negative developments may yet occur that seemingly undermine prospects for such a collective effort, they should not be reason to give up. Indeed, while the U.S. and Iran engaged in mudslinging over the pandemic, some Gulf states opted for a different course, providing assistance to an Iran battling an acute health crisis. Because of such unpredictable events, any inclusive process should be of long duration, be immune to the day's breaking news, and continue to move toward a gradual lessening of tensions through dialogue and steadily widening communication channels regardless of potential – indeed, inevitable – setbacks.

Riyadh/Abu Dhabi/Tehran/Muscat/Doha/Brussels, 27 April 2020

The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown

I. Introduction

No major player in the Middle East appears to want to start a war with its adversaries, but events in 2019 have showcased risks of an inadvertent conflict. The danger is commensurate with tensions arising from competition between the U.S. and Iran, heightened by the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposition of economic sanctions, as well as between Israel and Iran and between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The 2019 attacks on shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, as well as on oil pipelines in Saudi Arabia; the shooting down of a U.S. drone by Iranian fire; the devastating strikes on Saudi Arabian oil and gas facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in September; and the 3 January 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, a top Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a senior commander of the Iran-backed Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary groups in Iraq – all these incidents brought simmering tensions to a hard boil.

The fallout from these events was contained, a major reason being President Donald Trump's reluctance to fight another war and Iran's reluctance to take on a more powerful adversary directly, but there is no guarantee that this won't change. With so many actors and conflict drivers in play, the margin of volatility and unpredictability is wide.

There are lessons to be learned from the past. At the height of the Cold War, the world found ways of lowering risks of confrontation. Differences with today's Middle East are vast, but the idea that took hold then – that a collective effort, inclusive of all the major powers on both sides of the divide, could reduce tensions through dialogue and the establishment of confidence-building mechanisms – is relevant nonetheless. That effort, embodied in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), came to fruition in the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which preserved the peace and gave rise to a collective mechanism that would ensure that it stayed that way, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The memory of that success has remained alive through a number of exercises, often led by non-governmental organisations and think-tanks, with a focus on other unstable parts of the world, including the Middle East. One example of this last genre is a report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in 2011, outlining a collective process.¹ In recent years, think-tanks have organised workshops

¹ "Toward a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, October 2011. Other examples include Christian-P. Hanelt and Christian Koch, "A Gulf CSC Could Bring Peace and Greater Security to the Middle East", Bertelsmann Stiftung, July 2015; Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, "Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 October 2015; and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East", The Century Foundation, 18 January 2018. For current initiatives, see Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai, "Tafahum: An Ideational Fundament on Which to Build a Security Roadmap for West

about the need for a Middle Eastern security architecture, at times drawing in expertise from the Cold War era.

Prompted by tensions in the Gulf, in 2019 governments began to take an active interest in the need for, and possibility of, a similar collective exercise. In July, Russia floated its idea of a security concept for the Gulf region and organised a workshop in Moscow in September to flesh it out.² Iran laid out similar ideas in its Hormuz Peace Endeavour, launched at the UN General Assembly in late September, and invited Arab Gulf states to join it in a collective exercise.³ Shortly thereafter, the Iraqi foreign minister proposed convening a regional security conference focused on Iraq, contacting his counterparts in Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait to press the idea.⁴ Baghdad's leadership made sense, as Iraq is the seam of the Middle East, straddling the Sunni-Shiite divide and forming a bridge between Arabs and Persians. While the idea received EU backing, it was stillborn – at this writing, Baghdad was still awaiting Riyadh's response.⁵ Moreover, it was soon overtaken by mass protests in Iraq that paralysed and eventually brought down a government that was dysfunctional even in more propitious times.⁶

These initiatives underline both the need for and timeliness of a concerted effort to reduce tensions in the Gulf. Optimally, states on the Gulf littoral would help initiate a collective process inclusive of all stakeholders. The Middle East and its various parts arguably has become ripe for collective security exercises that aim to reduce

Asia and the Arabian Peninsula”, CARPO and the Gulf Research Center Foundation, 17 July 2019; and Dina Esfandiary, “Bridging the Divide between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula”, The Century Foundation, 11 March 2019.

² “Russia’s Security Concept for the Gulf Area”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 23 July 2019. The proposal envisions “a single counter-terrorism coalition” that would embark on “a long-term programme of action” in pursuit of “a security system in the Gulf area”. It is based on a number of sensible principles. But it then posits ambitiously that: “Progress toward the establishment of a security system should be achieved on a step-by-step basis starting with most relevant and urgent problems. This concerns, first and foremost, combat against international terrorism, the settlement of the Iraqi, Yemeni and Syrian crises, and the implementation of all agreements reached on the Iranian nuclear programme”.

³ “Rouhani’s UN address to focus on JCPOA, sanctions, regional security”, Mehr News, 25 September 2019. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif summarised the initiative in an article in the Arab media; the English translation is available on the Iranian foreign ministry’s website. Iran has long argued for a collective security dialogue in the Gulf, backed by the international community, basing itself on UN Security Council Resolution 598 (1987), which laid the groundwork for the ceasefire that would end the Iran-Iraq war almost a year later. Paragraph 8 states that the Security Council “[f]urther requests 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”. At the Manama Dialogue in 2004, Iran floated a plan for a “Persian Gulf collective security framework” (International Institute for Strategic Studies, *A Decade of the IISS Manama Dialogue*, 2014, p. 14), and at the 2007 World Economic Forum it offered a ten-point proposal for promoting cooperation, security and development in the Persian Gulf region (Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, “Iran unveils a Persian Gulf security plan”, *World Bulletin*, 3 September 2018).

⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Iraqi official, February 2020.

⁵ “Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at joint press event with the Foreign Minister of Iraq”, European External Action Service, 13 July 2019.

⁶ Iraqi politicians were still trying to form a government in April 2020. See also Alissa J. Rubin, “Oil prices crash, virus hits, commerce stops: Iraq is in trouble”, *The New York Times*, 29 March 2020.

tensions. This report focuses on the Gulf sub-region because, while the Middle East as a whole has become increasingly interconnected, chances of success likely would be higher if an initiative were to start small and test ideas ahead of launching a broader process.

This report began as a Crisis Group presentation to the UN Security Council on 21 March 2019 (an informal interactive dialogue hosted by France), followed by a 24 May conversation in Crisis Group's New York office, in which diplomats from a range of Middle Eastern states participated, focused on the need for a collective security dialogue in the Middle East, starting in the Gulf sub-region. With feedback from those discussions, and building on earlier Crisis Group work on intersecting conflicts, we produced a White Paper in July that brought these ideas together and which we distributed to selected governments.⁷ This paper triggered further meetings with a number of regional and other stakeholders to gauge receptivity to the idea and assess whether the timing was right to launch an initiative. The present report reflects these many conversations.

⁷ The previous work is published as International Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, 22 December 2017.

II. A Dual Problem in Search of a Single New Approach

In tackling the proliferation of conflicts, conflict drivers and actors in the Middle East, a divided international community faces two primary challenges. One is the situation's growing complexity, as conflicts increasingly intersect; the other is the limited tools it has at its disposal for de-escalating and containing them.

A. An Increasingly Complex Tangle of Conflicts

The 2011 Arab uprisings channelled popular demands for greater political participation, better governance and social justice. When authorities failed to deliver on these demands, and in several cases responded ruthlessly, the stage was set for more intense upheavals. At the same time, these were externalised, leading to far greater levels of violence. The most dramatic example is Syria, where an embattled regime used extreme brutality to suppress popular protests. The regime's response gave rise to a civil war, which attracted outside intervention, turning it into a regional proxy war.⁸ In Yemen, an autocratic regime collapsed, but so did a subsequent effort to establish a new government through dialogue, opening the way to civil war and external military intervention.⁹

What happened in Deraa or Deir al-Zour, Sanaa or Saada affected state interests in Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, to name but a few. The responses formulated in regional capitals inflected these conflicts as they unfolded. Washington and Moscow were drawn in when they saw their interests come under threat or detected opportunities to advance them. The result has been a web of overlapping responses to an interlocking set of conflicts involving multiple actors and cross-cutting alliances, compounded by outside military intervention. The array of players includes states weakened to the point of looking like non-state actors, and several potent non-state actors, some of which have assumed the trappings of sovereignty within a given territory, acting as if they are states. None holds a monopoly on the means of violence within established borders.¹⁰ The interplay among various conflicts, both on the ground and in stakeholders' perceptions, makes individual conflicts harder to address, and heightens the risk that external diplomacy and assistance will have adverse unintended consequences.

⁸ See, for example, the following Crisis Group Middle East Reports and Briefings: Briefing N°47, *Russia's Choice in Syria*, 30 March 2016; Report N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014; Report N°143, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, 27 June 2013; Briefing N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012; and Report N°109, *The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide*, 13 July 2011.

⁹ See, for example, the following Crisis Group Middle East Reports and Briefings: Report N°203, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, 18 July 2019; Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016; Briefing N°45, *Yemen at War*, 28 March 2015; Report N°154, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014; Report N°145, *Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown*, 25 September 2013; and Report N°102, *Yemen between Reform and Revolution*, 10 March 2011.

¹⁰ See Crisis Group, *Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts*, op. cit.

B. *A Breakdown in Workable Conflict Resolution Tools*

Efforts to bring Middle East conflicts to a peaceful conclusion have tended to fizzle, notwithstanding intensive diplomacy in some cases. Decades of failed Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking are usually mentioned in this regard, but post-2011 UN-led initiatives in Syria, Yemen or Libya also have fallen short. They have proceeded in fits and starts, and whatever progress they have made has often been undone by renewed military escalation by one of multiple actors with a stake in the conflict's outcome.

A number of factors have contributed to the growing ineffectiveness of international tools available for conflict prevention and resolution:

A great-power standoff. The rise of a multipolar world has produced a great-power standoff that has politicised multilateral institutions.

- Dysfunction marks the UN Security Council, much as it did during long stretches of the Cold War.¹¹ As global and regional powers disagree fiercely about individual conflicts, they have not only *not* thrown their weight behind UN peace processes but the P5 (and others) also have used the Security Council for a decade as space to defend their allies in the Middle East and control or limit diplomacy rather than look for real solutions (Yemen being a partial exception). The result is Security Council inaction or watered-down resolutions. An individual superpower's support for one side in a conflict, as in the case of the U.S. in Yemen and Russia in Syria, has given the beneficiary a sense of impunity and even leverage vis-à-vis its sponsor when the latter wants to moderate its proxy's behaviour, because the sponsor cannot afford to let its proxy fail. UN mediation efforts in the region are largely meant to cover up for lack of P5 unity, and the UN's role often is to buy everyone time and mitigate violence rather than resolve it.
- The standoff among great powers has politicised and undermined previously functioning institutions and agencies. One example is the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), a partnership between the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the UN established by UN Security Council Resolution 2235 (2015). Russia's refusal to accept the JIM's November 2017 conclusion that the Syrian regime was responsible for the 4 April 2017 chemical attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun led it to use its Security Council veto to block the renewal of the JIM's mandate in November 2017.¹²

¹¹ See Richard Gowan, "Navigating the Storms at the UN Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 February 2020. On UN dynamics regarding the Middle East during the Cold War, see Bruce D. Jones, "The Security Council and the Arab-Israeli Wars: 'Responsibility Without Power'", in Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, Jennifer Welsh and Dominik Zaum (eds.), *The Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice Since 1945* (Oxford, 2008).

¹² See UN Security Council, "Security Council Fails to Renew Mandate of Joint Investigative Mechanism on Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, as Permanent Member Casts Veto", 24 October 2017. (The vote was in October 2017, just ahead of the official release of the JIM's report on Khan Sheikhoun in November. It took effect later in November when the JIM's mandate expired.)

The absence of a powerful arbiter. At this stage, no country with real clout is in a position to play the role of arbiter able and prepared to pressure conflict actors when negotiations reach a stalemate, provide security guarantees when they contemplate a ceasefire or peace agreement, and dedicate significant resources to resolving the conflict.

- ❑ Arguably, the U.S. has played this part at times. But more recently, it has taken a step back with regards to diplomatic efforts, taken sides even more clearly than in the past (in the case of Iran with its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and imposition of “maximum pressure”, and in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by rewriting the terms of a potential settlement), or sent confusing messages about its goals (in Syria and Libya in particular). While it has somewhat stepped up its involvement in some conflicts, such as Yemen, it has not acted decisively to help end them.
- ❑ Russia has used its military power to shape diplomatic settlements, but has focused its efforts on shoring up one side against the other rather than seeking genuine compromise.¹³ Moscow has positioned itself as a player in the wider Middle East, fostering good relations with an impressive array of parties, including those in conflict with one another – including Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and Egypt. While its relations facilitate communication and talks (for example, on both Syria and Libya), Moscow so far has been either unable or unwilling to translate them into meaningful steps to sustainably end conflicts. In the Syrian case, its support for the regime is driven in part by its belief that Damascus regaining full control would produce the most stable outcome, deter future uprisings and mark a significant Russian success in the region.
- ❑ The EU, the global actor that arguably has felt the impact of Middle East wars most directly, has been unable to insert itself diplomatically into the region in a manner that can help mediate an end to its conflicts. It is hobbled by internal divisions, for example on Libya, and its potential for mediation is complicated by member states selling weapons to one side, as in the Yemen war. It is also weakened in its resolve by internal political turbulence and the divorce with Britain.¹⁴

¹³ Syria and Libya are the two most prominent examples. As illustrated most recently in Idlib, Russia appears intent on helping the regime restore its writ over the entirety of the country through a mix of violence and short-lived agreements. See, for example, Crisis Group Commentary, “Deadly Clashes in Syria’s Idlib Show Limits of Turkey’s Options”, 29 February 2020. In Libya in 2019-2020, operatives of the Russian private security company Wagner Group played a role in Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s military offensive against the government in Tripoli even as Moscow ostensibly participated in the UN-led process to end the war. See Crisis Group Statement, “Libya: Turning the Berlin Conference’s Words into Action”, 22 January 2020; and Crisis Group Commentary, “What Prospects for a Ceasefire in Libya?”, 18 January 2020. On the Wagner Group’s involvement in Libya: Crisis Group interviews, military officers, Benghazi, May and October 2019; government officials, Tripoli, September-December 2019. See also “Putin-linked mercenaries are fighting on Libya’s front lines”, Bloomberg, 25 September 2019; and David Kirkpatrick, “Russian snipers, missiles and warplanes try to tilt Libyan war”, *The New York Times*, 5 November 2019.

¹⁴ The EU’s high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, showed awareness of the problem. In a February 2020 commentary, he said Europeans “must deal with the world as it is, not as they wish it to be. And that means relearning the language of power and combining

- For now, China appears uninterested in playing a political role in the Middle East, seemingly content to see its global rivals weakened and expending resources through their own involvement. Its principal interests arguably are in developing economic and trade relations and ensuring safe access to Gulf oil; the U.S.'s strong presence in the area so far has sufficed to achieve the latter goal.¹⁵

Weak regional frameworks. In the Arab and Islamic worlds, regional mechanisms also function far below par. The Arab League (which excludes key Middle Eastern actors such as Iran, Israel and Turkey) is so deeply politicised and polarised as to foreclose an effective role in resolving most conflicts. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (which is more broadly inclusive of Middle East states except for Israel) has not developed strong conflict mediation capabilities. Even regional alliances, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, have found it difficult to fashion a common position on the region's conflicts, being internally divided and prone to exporting their competition to external arenas.¹⁶

Arms transfers undermining peace efforts. Arms-producing states selling weaponry to one or more of the warring sides help fuel wars they profess to want diplomacy to end. The Yemen war and the humanitarian catastrophe it has wrought stand as among the most striking examples.¹⁷

Non-inclusive peace negotiations. Several peace efforts have been hobbled by the exclusion on political grounds of one or more important stakeholders. The January 2014 decision by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to withdraw his invitation to Iran to participate in the Syria peace talks in Geneva ("Geneva II"), despite its prominent role in the Syria war, almost certainly contributed to the ineffectiveness of those talks. Likewise, Turkish pressure led to the exclusion of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) from the Geneva talks, a decision at odds with the militia's important role in Syria's north east. Excluded parties are likely to both hinder achievement of a peace deal and seek to spoil any eventual agreement.

the European Union's resources in a way that maximizes their geopolitical impact". Josep Borrell, "Embracing Europe's Power", Project Syndicate, 8 February 2020.

¹⁵ The Chinese government published its first "Arab policy paper" in 2016. The paper shows a multi-dimensional approach to the region, heavily tilted toward development cooperation and trade (as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative). "Full Text of China's Arab Policy Paper", Xinhua, 13 January 2016. See also Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, "China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon", Rand Corporation, 2016, which argues that China's involvement in the Middle East is "driven primarily by economic interests" and that "Beijing is very reluctant to expand its level of security cooperation with the United States or Middle East states because it fears being embroiled in regional tensions and controversies" (p. x).

¹⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°206, *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact*, 19 September 2019.

¹⁷ In Libya, too, states professing to be supporting a negotiated solution to the conflict have fanned the flames by supplying one or the other side with weapons and other forms of military support.

Political fragmentation. The weakening of Arab states and proliferation of armed non-state actors – both a result of and a contributor to political fragmentation – is also complicating stabilisation and peacemaking efforts. In Yemen, for example, the fracturing of the government into multiple competing groups has hobbled its ability to form a common front against their shared enemy, the Huthi movement (Ansar Allah), either to fight more effectively or to forge a durable peace. In Iraq, the rise of Iran-backed paramilitary groups is preventing a dysfunctional state from establishing monopoly over the means of violence and thereby stabilising a country traumatised by repeated upheavals. In Palestine, a deep rift between the two principal political movements, Fatah and Hamas, has undermined the Palestinians' negotiating position vis-à-vis Israel and accentuated the geographic division between the West Bank and Gaza.

III. Steps toward a Collective and Inclusive Regional Security Dialogue

A. *The Need for a Comprehensive Approach*

The growing complexity of the Middle East's intertwined conflicts, coupled with the inadequacy of the tools the international community has employed to address them, make a powerful case for a new approach. One possibility would be to shift toward initiatives by "coalitions of the willing/like-minded" or "groups of friends" that enjoy the support of larger institutions such as the UN, EU, Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). A key would be to view and deal with the Middle East's conflicts as interconnected, the ignition of any part of which could produce a more general conflagration.

Such an approach would need to take into account how most of the region's wars started locally and radiated outward, drawing in regional and even global actors in concentric circles; Syria and Yemen, in particular, followed this pattern. One way to end the wars would be to reverse the process. If Russia and the U.S. were to reach a shared understanding of how to resolve the Syrian conflict, they could more plausibly constrain the actions of local and regional actors; likewise, if Iran and Saudi Arabia were to stop fuelling the conflict in Yemen and emboldening their respective local allies, the odds of an intra-Yemeni settlement might get better. The end of negative outside interference would likely not be a sufficient condition for successful conflict resolution, but it is almost certainly a prerequisite. The reality of outside interference does not mean that parties ought to postpone efforts to resolve local conflicts until global and regional powers find ways to accommodate their competing interests. They can lay important groundwork in the meantime. Local actors could even shape the agenda toward a solution.

B. *What a Region-wide De-escalation Process Could Look Like*

1. Start of a dialogue in the Gulf sub-region

A sensible way forward would be to design a process that helps stakeholders minimise risks of an inadvertent outbreak of hostilities through a broadly inclusive dialogue aimed at de-escalating regional tensions. Such a process ought to be incremental, starting in the Gulf sub-region and broadening to include other Middle East actors as the dialogue progresses. States external to the Middle East should be invited from the outset to provide support.

An inclusive dialogue could begin in a relatively limited fashion, namely in the Gulf sub-region, involving the six GCC members (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain) along with Iran and Iraq – all principal actors in the Gulf, where tensions arguably are highest and pose the greatest risk of escalating to all-out war. While the main antagonists most likely to trigger a war are the U.S. and Iran, a successful dialogue between the two, however desirable, still seems far off. In the meantime, because these two powers maintain webs of alliances in the Middle East, lessening tensions among Gulf actors could reduce the likelihood of a U.S.-Iran conflict and start a process of broader de-escalation.

Iran has already floated a proposal for an inclusive Gulf dialogue – its Hormuz Peace Endeavour.¹⁸ Tehran is not the best placed to initiate or lead a Gulf dialogue, because it is a direct party to Middle East conflicts, not a neutral mediator. It would be better if smaller Gulf states with a relatively neutral profile – namely Kuwait and Oman – could take the initiative. They might issue invitations to a conference to discuss ways to increase mutual understanding on a broad range of issues of common concern, especially in the security field. There is historical precedent for this approach: in the CSCE process that culminated in the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the initial invitation came from Finland, even though organising a conference across the East-West divide was originally a Soviet idea, and most of the talks took place in Switzerland.¹⁹

To varying degrees, GCC members have expressed alarm at developments in their neighbourhood and desire for mechanisms that would allay risks of war. Qatar has been explicit about it.²⁰ The UAE, and possibly Saudi Arabia as well, also put out feelers to Iran in the second half of 2019.²¹ Some Gulf officials even hint that they want to develop a security policy less dependent on the U.S., realising that Washington may not always be willing to protect them.²² Yet officials from key Gulf Arab states also have made clear that their governments will not initiate or participate in such a collective exercise including Iran without Washington backing them. Fear of alienating the U.S. takes precedence in their strategic thinking, and they are wary of any initiative that does not enjoy a minimum level of U.S. support, as well as agreement among

¹⁸ See fn 3 above. The Iranian leadership sent a message to the six GCC governments in October 2019 inviting them to join its Hormuz Peace Endeavour; only Kuwait, Qatar and Oman replied positively or acknowledged receipt; Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain refrained from responding. “Rouhani sends letter on Iran’s Hormuz Peace Endeavor to Arab leaders”, Mehr News, 2 November 2019. The text of Iran’s initiative states that all sides “need to commit to respect each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the inviolability of our international borders and the peaceful settlement of disputes” and “should categorically reject any threat or use of force or participation in coalitions against each other”. Unmentioned is Iran’s use of non-state proxies, which has fuelled its adversaries’ suspicion that it is seeking to establish regional hegemony.

¹⁹ See Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, 2018), pp. 75, 87 and 108-109.

²⁰ The Qatari foreign minister told the European Parliament that his country favours a binding collective security agreement in the Middle East that “must encompass all countries in the region for peace to be effective”; it should also “be based on agreed principles of security, developed with rules of governance, dispute resolution and accountability, respectful of sovereignty and equality among its members, and a commitment of non-interference in [other states’] internal affairs”. “Remarks by Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani”, European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 19 February 2020.

²¹ UAE security officials have visited Iran several times since the June 2019 escalation in the Gulf, and Iranian security officials have visited the UAE as well in response. Crisis Group interviews, Iranian and Gulf officials, August-December 2019. A report in *The New York Times* suggested that: “The Emiratis began their secret talks with Iran after concluding that they could play a unique role lowering temperatures and that they had little confidence in the Trump administration’s approach to Iran, according to American and other Western officials. ... The Saudis also explored a diplomatic breakthrough with Iran using Iraqi and Pakistani intermediaries”. Mark Mazzetti, Ronen Bergman and Farnaz Fassihi, “How months of miscalculation led the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war”, *The New York Times*, 13 February 2020.

²² Crisis Group interview, Gulf academic, January 2020.

GCC members.²³ Saudi Arabia has indicated that it will not engage in dialogue with Iran until Iran “changes its behaviour” in the region. A senior Saudi official put it most bluntly:

The Omanis and the Kuwaitis and Pakistanis tried to open channels between us and Iran, but we are not talking with the Iranians. Who should we talk to? Rouhani and Zarif have no authority. And the IRGC wants to kill you. ... We do not need a back channel with Tehran. We need Iran to change its behaviour.²⁴

The Gulf states certainly do not accept the notion of Iran taking the lead through, for example, its Hormuz Peace Endeavour. An Emirati official commented that even should GCC states agree to engage with Iran, they see the initiative as an unacceptable attempt by Tehran to isolate one part of the problem – regional security – from issues of global concern, such as Iran’s nuclear or ballistic missiles program. Instead, this official said, the challenge Iran poses should be addressed as a package.²⁵ Ebtesam Al Ketbi, an Emirati academic with close ties to the UAE leadership, added:

What Iran really conceals in this proposal is the fact that it considers itself as the most powerful and pivotal element in such envisioned structure and the party that has the final say in it. In other words, Iran seeks to gain international recognition for its right to establish and lead a regional security regime, and to exercise veto power over it.²⁶

2. A U.S. role

U.S. tolerance, if not full support, of a dialogue process in the Gulf in which its allies would participate may well be a precondition for its successful launch. At the moment, this seems inconceivable. The Trump administration is engaged in anti-Iran alliance building and in coercive diplomacy in the form of financial and economic sanctions.²⁷ To the extent that the potential for direct negotiations existed in 2019 – the two sides appeared to inch toward a meeting between their presidents in New

²³ Crisis Group interviews, Gulf officials, December 2019–March 2020.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, December 2019. As examples of how Iran could change its behaviour, the official mentioned a halt to providing weapons to the Huthis and Hizbollah, removing its operators from Yemen and encouraging a prisoner exchange between the Huthis and Saudi Arabia.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, March 2020. Bahraini and Saudi officials expressed a similar sentiment. Crisis Group interviews, Bahraini official, Manama, March 2020; senior Saudi official, Riyadh, December 2019. The negotiations that led to the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the Iran nuclear deal – covered only Iran’s nuclear program, not its ballistic missiles or regional power projection. The Trump administration’s 2018 unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and articulation of twelve demands on Iran to alter its regional and defence policies opened up the possibility, at least in theory, of new negotiations over a more-for-more deal. “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy”, U.S. State Department, 21 May 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group email communication, Ebtesam Al Ketbi, president, Emirates Policy Centre, 17 February 2020.

²⁷ In 2019, the U.S. created the Warsaw Process in collaboration with Poland in an undisguised attempt to muster international support for its effort to isolate, ostracise and sanction Iran. The Warsaw conference that kick-started the process took place on 13-14 February 2019. Whether it achieved its primary objective is a matter of opinion. See Katie Rogers, “At Trump forum, countries share a foe (Iran) and awkwardness (a lot of it)”, *The New York Times*, 14 February 2019.

York at the end of September – it vanished with the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran’s Qods Force, in January.

During the remainder of 2020, Washington likely will continue to ramp up pressure on Iran in an attempt to topple its leadership or force it to the negotiating table on terms favourable to the U.S. Other, more dangerous scenarios are plausible, possibly triggered by further attacks by Iran and/or its allies in the region.²⁸ The next opportunity for diplomacy, in other words, likely will come after the November 2020 presidential election. A Democratic administration likely would directly re-engage Iran, but even a re-elected President Trump – bereft of a viable off-ramp and facing Tehran’s refusal to negotiate under pressure – could conceivably agree to preliminary dialogue between U.S. Gulf allies and Iran to test the possibility of regional de-escalation and pave the way for direct U.S.-Iran talks.

While the U.S. remains the most powerful actor in the Middle East and its role in any dialogue ultimately will be critical, it does not need to be fully involved from the outset. During much of the CSCE process, the U.S. belittled it as useless, while focusing on securing bilateral nuclear arms control deals with the Soviets. Yet it did not block its European allies from engaging in negotiations, and sent its own delegation to participate, which generally made a constructive contribution. Only toward the end of the process, when it showed signs of success, did Washington have a change of heart, seeing the exercise’s value in reducing tensions in Europe and thus shielding its allies from military confrontation. Once it did, its diplomatic push made the final accords a swift reality.²⁹ This example illustrates how an initiative could arise from the ground up – from regional states, including U.S. allies, backed by a group of outside powers.

3. Support of an external core group

Given the unlikelihood that Gulf Arab states will engage in an inclusive dialogue without U.S. backing or that a U.S. green light is forthcoming under current political conditions, alternatives are needed, at least until Washington’s policy shifts. Other external powers should use this period to start exploring ways in which they can assure Gulf states of international interest in, and support for, a collective exercise initiated by them and prepare the ground for the eventual launch of a dialogue. They could start by fashioning a group of like-minded states (henceforth referred to as the external “core group”).

Alarmed by developments in the Gulf in 2019, a number of European governments have already started discussions among themselves in an attempt to test the waters,

²⁸ A U.S. official said: “All our warnings are blinking red. We are convinced that Iran or its proxies will take action against us in the region in an effort to push the U.S. out of the Middle East”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, February 2020.

²⁹ In 1972, Henry Kissinger, in his capacity as U.S. national security adviser (1969-1975), warned President Richard Nixon of the “dangers of holding grandiose conferences”, instead favouring back-channel talks with Moscow to end the arms race and the export of communism. Morgan, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 60 and 88. Kissinger also served as U.S. secretary of state (1973-1977) during the latter part of the CSCE negotiations.

building on prior work by non-governmental organisations and think-tanks.³⁰ They have a clear interest in helping lessen tensions in the Gulf through dialogue, not least because of the region's importance to the global economy's health. As Bahrain's foreign minister noted in November 2019:

In securing the region, regional countries cannot go it alone. ... [J]ust as the international community benefits from the region, it also shoulders its share of responsibilities towards it. Global powers are an integral part of the regional architecture and in an interconnected world, that will remain the case.³¹

The mutuality of interest is even clearer, and more pressing, with the outbreak of COVID-19, whose spread has left no country unaffected and threatens to dampen commercial activity, if not severely damage entire economies, including in the Middle East. Iran has been hardest hit, but Iraq and other countries – many plagued by an overstretched health care infrastructure, poor governance, corruption or other factors – are likely to follow. European governments, fearing a knock-on effect in the form of mass migration to their countries, have directed humanitarian assistance toward strengthening Middle Eastern states' capacity to cope with the pandemic.³²

The EU and European governments are also troubled by a Trump administration whose policies in the Middle East they see as raising tensions, and some are seeking to develop a greater degree of foreign policy autonomy from the U.S. within the bounds of the transatlantic alliance. At a UN Security Council debate on peace and security in the Middle East in late August 2019, government representatives made emphatic reference to the need for a collective effort at reducing tensions in the Gulf.³³ In an extraordinary EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting responding to the spike in U.S.-Iran violence in Iraq, convened on 10 January 2020, EU foreign ministers gave

³⁰ Crisis Group discussions with government officials in various European countries, July 2019-March 2020. Some of the NGO efforts are mentioned in fn 1 above.

³¹ Speech by Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, Bahrain's minister of foreign affairs, at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, 23 November 2019.

³² Crisis Group interviews, March-April 2020. In late March, the EU pledged to provide Morocco with €150 million and Tunisia with €250 million to help them fight the pandemic and blunt its socio-economic impact. "Tunisia: EU supports national efforts to fight against Covid-19", EU press release, 30 March 2020; and "Covid-19: EU mobilisation in support of Morocco's efforts", EU press release, 31 March 2020. The EU also provided €240 million in aid to Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq to strengthen these states' capacity to deal with the virus's spread among Syrian refugees whom they are hosting. "EU approves close to €240 million to strengthen resilience in neighbouring countries hosting Syrian refugees in light of the coronavirus pandemic", European Commission, 31 March 2020.

³³ The UK ambassador to the UN said that, following events in the Gulf, the international community should find a way to address the region's challenges collectively, including by launching a "serious, inclusive dialogue between regional and international actors" concerning the situation in the Strait of Hormuz. The German representative reported that Berlin, Paris and London were "looking into options of how to foster regional cooperation on maritime security" in the Gulf. And a representative for the UN Secretary-General declared that "[t]he first order of business must be preventing the most acute flashpoints in the region from boiling over. Keeping the channels of communication open needs to be priority number one, followed by confidence-building measures to move parties away from confrontation towards dialogue". UN Security Council meeting record, 8600th meeting, "Maintenance of international peace and security: Challenges to peace and security in the Middle East", UNSC S/PV.8600, 20 August 2019.

the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, a mandate to "carry out diplomatic efforts with all parties in order to help secure a de-escalation of tensions in the region, to support political dialogue and to promote a political regional solution".³⁴ Laying the groundwork for a process that could eventually earn U.S. backing would be a step in that direction.

For now, European governments are reluctant to be seen to be mounting a collective effort at persuading Gulf states of the need for an inclusive dialogue. For their part, Gulf officials express scepticism that Europe is well placed to do so.³⁵ Still, even as they agree that any dialogue should be locally owned and initiated by Gulf actors, European governments make clear that they believe such an effort is necessary and that Gulf states are unlikely to do so without the backing of external powers. European governments are therefore using the present time to start discussing preparatory issues of participation (who should join an external core group at this stage, including non-European states), approach (how to convince Gulf states to participate), timing and prerequisites for a successful launch.³⁶

4. Principles guiding a dialogue process

A principal aim of a Gulf-based security dialogue should be to reduce tensions by establishing communication channels. Discussions could focus on shared principles governing their relations and cover each side's motivations, core concerns and threat perceptions. They could then evolve toward decisions on concrete confidence-building measures.

Initially, relatively modest steps could include agreement on reducing inflammatory rhetoric; issuing unilateral statements in support of dialogue and joint statements outlining shared principles and interests; or opening multiple direct (even if confidential) communication channels, such as a de-confliction hotline among Gulf states and with outside actors whose military assets are deployed in the Gulf. The sides could also initiate technical discussions on matters of shared concern, such as cross-border adverse effects of climate change (extreme heat, droughts, water scarcity), deteriorating water quality, disaster preparedness, the spread of COVID-19, maritime security and religious tourism/pilgrimages. If and when initial discussions start to yield results, they could be scaled up to focus on ways to de-escalate tensions through shared security mechanisms (eg, prior notification of troop movements and military exercises; allowing adversaries to send military experts to observe such manoeuvres).

Eventually, Gulf parties could explore ways of fostering a durable cooperative regional security framework that includes all main stakeholders. In order to keep expectations in check, this objective might not be made explicit at the outset. By the same token, the goal at the initial stage ought not to be a "grand bargain", whose achievement is desirable but highly unlikely under current circumstances. The purpose of a security dialogue, apart from whatever concrete progress can be reached

³⁴ Council of the European Union, 5173/20, 10 January 2020.

³⁵ According to a Gulf official, "There is very little Europe can do on this issue if the U.S. is not on board. Just look at the issue of INSTEX". Crisis Group interview, March 2020. INSTEX is the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, a mechanism that enables non-U.S. dollar transactions, established by European countries in 2019 in response to U.S. sanctions on Iran.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, European capitals, 2019-2020.

on above-mentioned issues, should be to lower tensions by opening communication channels, and thus reduce risks of a deliberate or inadvertent major war.

Past experiences in negotiating international agreements may offer useful ideas, despite significant differences in geopolitical configurations and conditions. For example, one could draw positive and negative lessons from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) that led to the 1975 Helsinki Accords or even the negotiations that yielded the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.³⁷ The use of relatively neutral powers to initiate a process is one such lesson; others are mentioned below.

A process aimed at de-escalating tensions and establishing mechanisms to reduce chances of stumbling into war could be guided by the following broad principles:

Dialogue as a process. Attempting regional dialogue ought not to be a one-off affair. The CSCE talks took almost three years from start to finish (not counting a long preparatory period), with negotiators hunkered down at a conference centre in Geneva throughout most of this time.³⁸

The importance of process versus outcome. Setting clear objectives at the outset about the desired outcome may be less important than the dialogue itself. In the process of talking, tensions may diminish as participants share information and perspectives and some converging views might emerge.³⁹ It would be important to maintain a running draft non-paper on overlapping positions and near-agreements.

The region's governments should want to own such a process even if they cannot muster the political will to initiate it by themselves. By contrast, outside imposition would breed resistance in the form of foot-dragging or outright rebellion. The CSCE process provides an example of a situation in which two sides in conflict found it advantageous to start talking.⁴⁰ The moment may come when Gulf actors reach the same point.

³⁷ See Morgan, op. cit., for a historical analysis of the process that brought about the 1975 Helsinki Accords; and Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy and Brendan Simms, *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East* (London, 2018), for lessons that can be drawn from the negotiations that helped end the Thirty Years' War in Europe.

³⁸ The talks began in November 1972 and concluded in June 1975 with the signing of the final act. See "The Helsinki Process and the OSCE".

³⁹ Michael Cotey Morgan, author of a seminal history of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe that produced the Helsinki Accords, said: "Was there a grand design at the outset of the CSCE? That is the crucial question. The answer is yes and no. There was a perception of a domestic and international crisis, and that some kind of broad comprehensive response was needed. The CSCE was a key component of this response. ... The back and forth about how to go about a conference went on for years (ie, until 1972), and then the negotiations took nearly three years to produce the Final Act. At the start of the negotiations, none of the participating states could predict what would emerge from them. The result reflected a combination of grand strategic goals and improvised bargains". Presentation at Crisis Group office, New York, 24 May 2019 (based on notes, approved by Michael Cotey Morgan).

⁴⁰ Morgan, op. cit., pp. 18-49.

Over time, such a process should be as inclusive as possible. A principal goal should be to limit the risk that those excluded or unwilling to participate will become spoilers. A dialogue process should start in the Gulf and be extended to other regional players only once it gains momentum and a modicum of success.⁴¹

The process should be predicated on consensus-based decision-making. The goal should be to maximise buy-in.⁴²

Keep proceedings out of the limelight. It would be difficult to shield any such large-scale process from international attention, but every effort should be made to keep proceedings closed to anyone but the stakeholders in order to increase chances of progress.⁴³ Participants could establish a media committee to update the public daily and address media questions in order to achieve maximum transparency without hindering the process.

The UN should take a limited supporting role. It would be unrealistic to expect the UN to be able to assume a major role, at least as long as the Security Council remains as dysfunctional as it is at present, whereas working through the UN General Assembly and member states would recreate an unwieldy process. Yet it would be important to have the UN's blessing. The UN Security Council could give its imprimatur under Resolution 598 (Paragraph 8) of 1987, which provides a legal basis for a formal UN role in a regional dialogue.⁴⁴ Iran, Kuwait and Russia, all of whom advocate a direct UN role, have referred to the resolution in the past. The UN has

⁴¹ The CSCE process included all main stakeholders across the East-West divide, comprising 35 nations: Warsaw Pact members, all Western European states, the U.S. and Canada. On the Eastern Bloc side, Albania refused to participate; on the Western European side, Monaco joined only at a late stage, signing the final act. Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 108. Likewise, Milton, Axworthy and Simms say that negotiations that ended the Thirty Years' War demonstrated that "a peace settlement reached at a congress at which all parties are represented ... is less likely to be broken at the nearest opportunity than a set of bilateral or sectional arrangements". *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

⁴² The CSCE strictly observed the consensus rule. Morgan reports: "Granting every state a veto over every decision increased the risk that the proceedings would end up stalemated, but it also protected participants from unpalatable results and gave the resulting agreement a political weight that it would not have enjoyed if decisions had been taken by majority vote". *The Final Act*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109. Morgan also recounts that when the small Western European island nation of Malta – a country that "had fewer people than many European cities" – threatened to throw a last-minute spanner in the CSCE's wheels by conditioning its signature to a final agreement on certain concessions in the Mediterranean from its Western allies, it got what it wanted. In Morgan's words, however infuriating Malta's "antics" were to other participants in effectively taking the conference hostage, the CSCE's influence "depended in part on its universality. ... Scrapping the rule of consensus would have undermined the CSCE's implicit claim that international affairs in Europe were governed as much by rules ... as by power", ie, the implication that "some states mattered, but others did not". *The Final Act*, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-200.

⁴³ Morgan recalls that the CSCE talks unfolded behind closed doors, and that: "Out of the media spotlight, the diplomats in Helsinki and Geneva created a culture of their own. ... Through many months and thousands of meetings, they came to respect and even like one another". While this familiarity did not eliminate the political conflicts, he writes, it "may have blunted [them]". *The Final Act*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴⁴ See fn 3 above.

been a useful venue for early discussions on the topic, and UN officials may be able to nudge actors in the region in the right direction. The UN also remains the sole non-partisan actor with the requisite expertise to guide a conflict to a peaceful conclusion and assist in the post-conflict transition. It could play a useful auxiliary, mostly technical, role. The aim should not be a UN-led process but a process that the UN can support.

Do not start at the leadership level. To avoid politicisation during the initial exploratory stages, the level of participation could be held relatively low in the early stages, involving perhaps formal and informal political advisers to senior policymakers before graduating to leadership circles.

Be flexible. If, for example, representatives of adversaries refuse to meet face to face, proximity talks – in which they are located in separate venues with a mediator shuttling back and forth – or discussions through lower-level officials (whose participation may be less controversial) might be possible until conditions ripen.⁴⁵

Obtain “no objection” (nihil obstat) declarations from fence sitters. If certain external stakeholders are not prepared to back the envisioned collective exercise, participants should seek to secure their agreement not to block the process.

Parallel efforts. Because of the precarious nature of any collective effort and the multiple obstacles and challenges it faces, concerned actors should not hesitate to engage in parallel bilateral efforts to reduce tensions. Such efforts should be mutually supportive, however. Coordination is therefore critical. Of many experiments, one can hope that at least one will succeed.

⁴⁵ At Westphalia, the peace congress was convened in two separate cities for this reason. See Milton, Axworthy and Simms, *op. cit.*, p. 112, who say that by such means, “the most unpalatable encounters could be avoided, if necessary”, while preserving inclusivity.

IV. Favourable and Unfavourable Conditions

While a discussion regarding the optimal timing for a regional security dialogue is important, it should not distract the parties from the overriding concern that the crisis in the Gulf and wider region is acute and that all avenues for reducing tensions should be explored urgently.

A. *Factors Conducive to Starting a Process*

With the U.S. placing “maximum pressure” on Iran, now may not be the time to launch a process aimed at de-escalating tensions. Yet it also arguably is precisely the right moment, as the political will to engage in risky diplomatic exercises tends to rise when dangers of military confrontation are highest. Conditions in the Middle East are at a potential tipping point. The situation lends itself to sudden and rapid escalation, possibly triggered by non-state actors or rogue elements with no stake in maintaining calm. Dialogue may help states desirous of avoiding confrontation use the sense of crisis to achieve progress in negotiations. The fact that the UAE opened a direct channel of communication with Iran in July 2019 is one such indication; the apparent eagerness of European governments to support a Gulf-based process is another.

Tensions in the Gulf are marked by significant polarisation and mistrust. Yet there are also factors that suggest the potential for dialogue.

A rough power balance. Iran made dramatic gains in the wake of state collapse in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, scaring Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf states, and ringing alarm bells in Israel. Iran prides itself on its ability to provide its own security, while Saudi Arabia has a powerful international protector in the U.S. More recently, U.S. sanctions have weakened Iran’s economy and arguably drawn a circle around its regional reach even as U.S. inaction after the September 2019 Aramco attacks suggests that Saudi Arabia may be unable to count on consistent U.S. protection.⁴⁶ The U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani in early January and Iran’s somewhat limited military response may have restored a fragile mutual deterrence in their interaction. Combined, these various factors may enable dialogue on a more level playing field.

States favouring diplomacy. States not directly responsible for increasing tensions but highly vulnerable to fallout from war have been giving signals that they prefer diplomacy over belligerence. These include both regional states (notably the UAE, which is directly involved in the standoff and has backed U.S. sanctions on Iran) and European governments, which see threats to their stability if the Middle East descends into war. In Asia, Pakistan also has given clear signals of concern, and has offered to use its relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran to mediate between the two. European governments have funded, quietly, NGO-led dialogues to explore ways to lessen tensions; in addition, today, they exhibit a keenness to become directly involved.

⁴⁶ Hossein Mousavian and Abdulaziz Sager argued as much in a joint op-ed. “It’s time for the leaders of Iran and Saudi Arabia to talk”, *The New York Times*, 14 May 2019.

Quiet dialogue. NGO-led Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue exercises have kept communication channels between adversaries open, even if in a limited way. These surrogate efforts have clarified misunderstandings and passed messages; they have also laid the foundation for a jump to Track 1 negotiations once conditions ripen.⁴⁷

The COVID-19 crisis. Humanitarian crises may offer opportunities for dialogue and even cooperation. The COVID-19 outbreak may provide such an opportunity. Iran confirmed its first cases of infection on 19 February and, so far, has become far and away the most badly affected country in the MENA region.⁴⁸ Some of the smaller Gulf states responded. Qatar, not surprisingly, but also the UAE and Kuwait dispatched medical aid to Iran in February and March.⁴⁹ These gestures are politically significant, and the parties could build upon them to open further channels of communication. Progress toward dialogue is not a given, because efforts to stem COVID-19's spread have prompted states to close their borders, while meeting in a common space will probably be impossible for a while. Yet the memory of good-will may linger and pay off politically down the road.

B. *Obstacles and Challenges*

While certain conditions are necessary and may be present for the launch of a collective security effort in the Gulf, it would face tremendous obstacles as well. Most importantly, even if a window is open at any given time, it could rapidly close again due to a new escalation.

An Arab perception of power imbalance does not help. While objectively the power balance appears relatively even, as discussed, a main reason why Saudi Arabia has refused to engage in direct talks with Iran so far is its sense that Tehran would be negotiating from a position of strength. Saudi officials have long insisted that they need to roll back Iranian influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon before engaging in any talks.⁵⁰ Washington's unreliability also adds to Riyadh's sense of vulnerability despite the pressure under which Tehran is suffering. The Saudis also are highly reluctant to act in any way contrary to the Trump administration's desires at a time when they believe Tehran is trying to drive a wedge between Riyadh and Washington. For now, at least, the kingdom says it will follow Washington's lead in backing "maximum pressure" rather than diplomacy.⁵¹ Entering into talks with Iran in these

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°76, *Flattening the Curve of U.S.-Iran Tensions*, 2 April 2020.

⁴⁹ There are pre-COVID-19 examples as well, of course. Following the deadly crush in Mecca in 2015, in which over 2,000 pilgrims died, including more than 400 Iranians, Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in technical talks to calm tensions and recommence peaceful pilgrimages. Following the December 2003 earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam, the U.S., which had designated Iran as a member of the "axis of evil" the year before, shipped medical aid to Iran by military cargo plane. "U.S. airlifts disaster aid into Iran", CNN, 30 December 2003.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, February 2020, December 2019, September 2019.

⁵¹ A senior Saudi official said: "We know that Iran wants to drive a wedge between us and the U.S. by initiating a dialogue. But we cannot afford there being any daylight with Washington and for that reason we will support maximum pressure and avoid any official engagement with Iran". Crisis Group interview, February 2020.

circumstances therefore would require both a change of heart and a leap of faith. It remains an open question whether and when the Saudi leadership might undergo the former and be willing to make the latter.

V. Initial Steps

Outside actors can encourage but should not determine what happens next, as attempts at imposition or other forms of undue pressure likely will fail. Ideas ought to arise organically and be locally owned. The following proposed steps are therefore offered merely as preliminary and provisional ideas:

- ❑ European and other states willing to take the first step could establish a core group to express their support for an inclusive dialogue among Gulf states.
- ❑ Policymakers from states participating in this external core group could initiate discussions with Gulf states and the U.S. to explore the possibility of such a process being launched from within the Gulf sub-region.
- ❑ If these discussions prove successful, Gulf states that are keenest to proceed down this path could start informal talks with governments in the Gulf sub-region – the six GCC states, Iran and Iraq – and, when they deem the time ripe, extend an invitation to them to launch preparatory talks in order to set the agenda and rules of procedure of an eventual conference, and discuss initial ideas for feedback and support. The external core group would provide diplomatic support for this effort.
- ❑ Based on this feedback, the Gulf actors could work out a preliminary plan for ways to manage a conference, including by setting up mechanisms to regularly brief the media and outside governments about the proceedings.

VI. Conclusion

As the risk of a military confrontation in the Gulf grows, it is imperative to find ways to de-escalate tensions. The main threat the region faces today is not so much a war of choice but an inadvertent one that results from miscalculation, misinterpretation or lack of timely communication. Key actors in the Middle East have refined the game of brinkmanship to the point of playing it right up to the edge. The result has been the fraying of the thread dividing war from no war.

An inclusive, collective regional security dialogue aimed at lessening tensions may have only a small chance of success. But in the current circumstances it would be irresponsible not to give it a try.

Riyadh/Abu Dhabi/Tehran/Muscat/Doha/Brussels, 27 April 2020

Appendix A: Map of the Middle East Region



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Charles Koch Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Korea Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, UniKorea Foundation, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

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Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

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Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

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Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, Middle East Report N°207, 11 October 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS, Middle East Report N°208, 18 November 2019.

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Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

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Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°73, 4 March 2020 (also available in French).

Iran/Yemen/Gulf

Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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