



Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts

International Crisis Group | 22 December 2017

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Principal Findings

What happened/What's happening? Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, conflicts of divergent origins across the Middle East have intersected and metastasised. This has drawn in regional and international powers, poisoning relations between them, creating more local conflict actors and greatly complicating the task of policymakers to respond effectively.

Why does it matter? Policy responses that treat conflicts in isolation and ignore their root causes may end up doing more harm than good. Stabilising war-torn states or de-escalating crises requires an understanding of the interconnectedness and the deeper drivers of regional conflicts.

What should be done? A new methodology is required to effectively address the Middle East's post-2011 conflicts. Two analytical concepts – conflict clusters and concentric circles – can help policymakers disentangle the region's conflicts, provide greater clarity in diagnosis and accompany a simple principle that should underpin all approaches: first, do no harm.

Joost Hiltermann, the lead contributor to this paper, would like to thank the following for providing essential background research: Crisis Group consultants Dimitar Bechev, Ali Fathollah-Nejad and Sebastian Sons, and Crisis Group's senior analyst for Israel/Palestine Ofer Zalberg; also, many thanks are due to Crisis Group's entire MENA team for providing insights and data, and for reviewing the results, for which the lead contributor remains wholly and solely responsible.

Tackling the MENA Region's Intersecting Conflicts

I. **Overview: A New Way of Looking at MENA Conflicts**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) does not lend itself to quick analysis. Post-2011 events, occurring at dizzying speed and full of apparent contradictions, compound the problem. Widening and increasingly intersecting conflicts are having a deleterious impact on the region's social fabric and its people. As a result, what happens in the region is no longer confined to it: radiating crises have started to infect relations between regional and global powers, forcing policymakers in world capitals to respond in pursuit of their nations' strategic interests. The challenge is to untangle the knot of conflicts analytically: to understand how various historical strands have interacted to create the bewildering composite of conflict drivers and actors that pose myriad threats to local, regional and even global stability and then to articulate policy responses that chart paths toward de-escalation and, eventually, more sustainable arrangements for states' and communities' peaceful coexistence. Most importantly, they should not make matters worse.

Grasping the roots and primary characteristics of the region's swift-changing complexion requires a new way of looking at it. We can no longer simply study conflicts in isolation, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict. This remains important, but we need to add new dimensions: how a single conflict has yielded secondary conflicts to form conflict "clusters"; how conflicts within a cluster have started to bleed into conflicts in another cluster; and how individual conflicts in the MENA region have broadened to suck in, first, regional powers and, then, global actors as a result of power and security vacuums created in the chaos of war.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, which dates from Western powers' decision a century ago to support the creation of a Jewish state in the Middle East (first enunciated in the Balfour Declaration), has sprung the confines of the territory known as Israel and Palestine to cover new terrain, in particular Lebanon, and sprout new conflict actors, such as Hizbollah. Today, Hizbollah participates in the Syrian civil war, which has roots outside the Israel-Arab conflict, and is allied with Iran, whose ascendancy in the region following the failed 2011 popular uprisings has provoked destabilising responses from Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, especially in Yemen. Meanwhile, these same states are projecting influence in North Africa to prevail in what was originally a separate struggle between competing political expressions of Sunni Islamism, involving the Muslim Brotherhood. To make matters worse, the suppurating Syrian and Yemeni wars have infected global powers such as Russia and the U.S., who are deploying their tremendous weight on behalf of one side but are so far unable to do so decisively and forge durable settlements.

Policy responses directed toward individual events in individual conflicts – say, the Libyan migrant crisis, or the rise of jihadists in Syria – may end up doing more harm than good. Not only because such policies tend to be rushed and overly securitised, but also because they ignore the deeper drivers behind these individual events, thereby aggravating them. External military support of certain Kurdish parties in the fight against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a good example: it boosted Kurdish hopes of outside support for their longstanding aspiration for greater autonomy, even independence. They chose to become outside powers' willing proxies to advance their own agendas. This, in turn, gave rise to new and additional crises instead of lowering regional tensions.

A new methodology is needed to address these post-2011 conflicts through both analysis and policy. The risk of pursuing policies that do further harm has increased, especially as conflicts of different origins metastasise and intersect, creating a new generation of non-state conflict actors and drawing in both regional and global powers. I propose two analytical concepts to help bring greater clarity, one new, the other old: conflict clusters and concentric circles. I then explore how these interact with external interventions of various sorts.

Instead of policy prescriptions for individual conflicts, I place the perplexing array of intersecting MENA conflicts and conflict actors in a framework that elucidates what motivates these actors and what drives their conflicts. And I will suggest a set of principles that should undergird any approach by global and regional powers toward these conflicts, based on the need to contain the current situation without making matters worse. This study is based on years of field research in the MENA region by me and my colleagues at the International Crisis Group.¹

¹ All references to “interviews” concern interviews done by either me or my Crisis Group colleagues.

II. Conflict Lineages and Conflict Clusters

A historical approach to MENA conflicts suggests at least five separate conflict clusters that emerged from the trauma of World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, each with its own genealogy and violent progeny:

- ❑ the dysfunctional post-World War I state system (which evolved significantly over a hundred years but never overcame its troubled beginnings);
- ❑ the Israeli-Arab conflict, precipitated by the 1948 creation of the state of Israel;
- ❑ the rise of Iran and attendant Sunni-Shiite sectarian spiral, triggered by the 1979 Islamic Revolution;
- ❑ Sunni radicalisation, given impetus first by the Arab armies' defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel and then by the Saudi response to the 1979 siege of Mecca; and
- ❑ the 2011 Arab uprisings as region-wide popular challenges to the existing order/disorder, and their collapse into either regime retrenchment or civil war (with Tunisia as an uncertain exception).

A. Cluster I: *The Arab Order/Disorder*

It is important to place today's conflicts in historical context: namely the current nation-states' troubled birth in the mayhem of World War I and the death throes of the Ottoman Empire, the "sick man of Europe". The trauma was profound: the empire was reduced into the state of Turkey, which abolished the caliphate. The region is still reeling from these setbacks to its worldly and religious power. Separately, the Persian Empire was also reduced, albeit in power, not territory, and laid open to Western penetration and influence.

The history of the Arab world – and to some extent that of Turkey and Iran – is therefore a chronicle of societies seeking to cope with constant interference from more powerful external actors: to resist these actors or, when possible, transform them and make them their own. The hybrid nature of the states that resulted – partly driven by imperial interests, partly reflecting pre-existing local structures and practices – introduced a persistent legitimacy crisis.

Yet attempts to replace the post-Ottoman order/disorder have failed and the search for Arab unity has remained elusive. This is mainly because the visions on offer failed to tackle the region's deep social and economic challenges, but also because outside powers never stopped meddling. In a hundred years, state systems in the region, whatever their ideological veneer, were almost invariably based on minority rule, militarised and repressive, which in many cases brooked no opposition to outside powers' extractive hunger.

Military coups became the best means to obtain power. Autocratic rulers used military-security institutions to control societies, which crushed political life and, in a vicious cycle, disabled mechanisms ensuring the peaceful and regular rotation of power. As regimes were changed by force, civil institutions built by the colonial powers, however deficient, were further degraded, removing any semblance of checks and balances or technocrat-driven service provision, leaving in place unaccountable kleptocracies fed directly or indirectly by oil rents.

To compound the problem, the tectonic shift that brought about the end of an empire and its replacement by colonial projects set off a series of earthquakes, each generating its own separate conflict cluster.

B. Cluster II: The Israeli-Arab Conflict

The first earthquake was the 1948 creation of the state of Israel, which the local population, but also the wider region, saw as evidence of an ongoing Western project to divide and weaken the post-World War I Arab world. Israel's conflicts with both the indigenous population and states and non-state actors in the region have had separate nationalist and religious dimensions, which over time, with the weakening of secular politics, have become intermingled and at times almost indistinguishable.²

The struggle for an independent state, with the holy city of Jerusalem as its capital, has been led by a mix of secular and religiously inspired political groups. To Muslims and Jews worldwide, Jerusalem remains sacrosanct; to Palestinians and Israelis, the land of Israel/Palestine is part of their national patrimony; each sees the other as unwanted intruders. This means that no independent Palestinian state will emerge without a mutually acceptable arrangement for Jerusalem, land and borders.

Since agreement remains far-off, and the evolving situation on the ground increasingly militates against the very possibility of one, the conflict festers, spawning repeated rounds of fighting and infecting politics in the entire region.

C. Cluster III: The Islamic Revolution and the Rise of Iran

The second earthquake came in 1979. Iran's Islamic Revolution also reflected a response to Western imperial attempts to keep the region dependent, divided and ruled by repressive regimes.³ It replaced the Shah's monarchical system with a republic. Its Islamist form emerged in opposition to that system's mimicking of the West's secular ideology and practices and its harsh suppression of dissent, including the followers of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was exiled. Inspired by Khomeini, the revolutionaries established a new religion-based political order (*velayet-e fakih*) that entrenched domestic power. They also tried to export the revolution, but while they found allies and proxies, not all were Shiites and few embraced their ideology.

The revolution's popular nature and republican dimension electrified the entire Muslim world and frightened secular regimes – both republican and monarchical – that were as repressive as the Shah's had been. These regimes subsequently were further shaken by Iran's championing of Shiite political activism among their own Shiite communities,⁴ which many in the Arab world saw as guise for Iranian ambitions to recreate the Persian Empire.

² Ofer Zalzberg, "In Ireland, Israel's Religious Right Engages with Ideas for Peace", Crisis Group commentary, 21 September 2017.

³ The people in the street remembered very well that the U.S. and UK overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953, after he tried to nationalise the oil industry. See Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

⁴ Bahrain and Iraq are the only Arab countries with a Shiite majority; in Lebanon, Shiites are the largest group, while Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have sizable Shiite minorities. Yemen is the only modern Arab country (before Iraq's 2005 elections) to have experienced nominal Shiite rule, during

Iran's alliance with Hizbollah in Lebanon, a group it helped create, was defensive (protecting Lebanon's Shiite community) as well as offensive: both Iran and Hizbollah championed the defence of the oppressed, including Palestinians, and repeatedly declared an ambition to liberate Jerusalem. This stance put Iran and its Lebanese ally in confrontation with Israel. Later, Iran began to develop a prestige nuclear program, which it claimed was for peaceful purposes but which its enemies interpreted as a drive to acquire nuclear weaponry. As a result, the enmity with Israel became more pronounced, and Tehran started to consider Hizbollah its "forward defence" – a way to deter Israel or the U.S. from attacking its nuclear program and/or trying to effect regime change. Instrumental to the Iran-Hizbollah relationship was an arms supply line that ran via Damascus (by air from Iran and overland into Lebanon).

Israel fought wars with Hizbollah in 1993, 1996 and 2006. Each time, destruction in Lebanon was more extensive, and each time, Hizbollah's rockets reached further into Israel. After the 2006 war, the two sides, realising the capacity each possessed to inflict serious harm on the other and their respective civilian populations, acquiesced to a situation of mutual deterrence. This has kept the peace, more or less, since then.

When Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria came under threat in 2011, Iran and Hizbollah rushed to his defence to preserve their arms supply line. Iran then used its proxy battle against the Islamic State (ISIS) to consolidate its position and extend its reach in Iraq. This triggered its adversaries' suspicions that Iran intended to forge land routes to the Mediterranean that could – apart from any economic benefit – supplement, or if need be replace, its air and sea corridors to Hizbollah.⁵

D. *Cluster IV: Sunni Radicalisation*

Resistance to the order/disorder that arose from colonial powers' post-war manipulations long took the form of secular Arab nationalism. Yet over time, an Islamist discourse of resistance evolved as well, targeting both Western domination of the Arab world and the failure of Arab nationalists to defend Arab lands from constant outside interferences, especially during Cold War proxy conflicts. Then, the Islamists received a sudden lift, not from their own prowess or persuasive message, but from the Arab states' defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel, which was humiliatingly labelled the "Six-Day War". This was a turning point, following which Arab nationalists, led by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, went into a sharp decline and the Islamists began their rise, though this would not become evident for another decade.

In the same year as the Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia, with its Muslim holy sites and majority-Sunni population, also experienced upheaval, not with a broad, popular base, but fomented by a band of Islamist puritans, who in November 1979 seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Saudi security forces managed to wrest back control with considerable French help, but the event gave impetus to a radicalising spiral inside the Sunni Muslim community that produced, over time, intolerant puritanical movements, as well as jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State,

the Imamate, but Yemen's Shiites, the Zaidis, are substantially different in religious practice from Twelver Shiism in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, more closely resembling mainstream Sunnism.

⁵ Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq: The battle to come", *NYR Daily*, 1 July 2017, and "Syria: The hidden power of Iran", *NYR Daily*, 13 April 2017.

that were additionally nourished by their direct opposition to the Shiite revival unleashed by the Iranian revolution.

The Saudi ruling dynasty responded to the events in Iran and this violent challenge from within by shoring up its Wahhabist base.⁶ The battle was directed at both Shiism and the rising Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Though it has radical roots in Egypt, by the 1980s the Brotherhood had become mainly a middle-class movement, led by educated professionals, such as doctors and engineers, whose mainstream iteration champions a republican form of government and parliamentary politics. But Arab regimes considered it a growing threat as the only group with grassroots support in Egypt, empowered by the potential suggested by the Iranian revolution. They targeted it for either suppression or pre-emptive cooptation.⁷

In response to its perception of a growing dual threat from the Brotherhood and Iran-backed radical Shiism, including in its own eastern province, Saudi Arabia stepped up Wahhabist missionary activity by building mosques, paying clerics' salaries and distributing religious literature throughout the Muslim world; it also began championing (Sunni) Islamist causes, such as the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, encouraging its restless and radicalised youth to join the mujahidin, a policy warmly supported by the Carter, Reagan and Bush administrations, as well as other Arab regimes. This "weaponisation" of Wahhabism helped rally the faithful against the Iranian/Shiite surge but also served to externalise a brewing domestic legitimacy crisis.⁸

Throughout the Arab world, states faced endemic crises of legitimacy based on their repeated failure to uphold the social contract – the tacit understanding reached between rulers and ruled that the latter's acquiescence in authoritarian governance could be bought with security, jobs and basic services (Cluster I). Their inability to deliver derived from the nature of the post-Ottoman state system and how it evolved: economic dependence on powerful metropolises (and the vagaries of the world economy more generally), autocratic and often military rule characterised by blatantly undemocratic practices (for example, manipulated elections and hereditary successions in republics), conspicuous corruption and suppression of even mild forms of dissent through pervasive informant-based policing in a situation of depleting resources and a growing youth bulge. So-called rentier states dependent on oil sales for the bulk of their foreign-exchange earnings used money to buy time by buying consent, but they never could buy loyalty.

Such problems and practices may have provided radical actors with opportunities, but they were not sufficient to give them a mass base. They merely fertilised the

⁶ Wahhabism, a Salafi variant, started out as a reform movement in 18th-century Najd. A deal between local Wahhabists and the House of Saud stands at the foundation of the modern Saudi state. See Guido Steinberg, "The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present", in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (London, 2006).

⁷ In Jordan, the Hashemite king sought to pre-empt an Islamist challenge to his secular rule by co-opting the Brotherhood, allowing the group to stand in elections and bringing it into government. Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°118, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan*, 12 March 2012. Much of the UAE's policy in the region is driven by fear of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise.

⁸ In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other states, the repeated failure to uphold the social contract and constant efforts to suppress dissent provided space to radical interpretations of Islam as cure-all.

field of grievances. Dispatching the restless young to the battlefields of Afghanistan provided temporary reprieve for sclerotic regimes incapable of instituting overdue reforms. When these fighters – now known as Afghan Arabs – returned victorious, however, they had added military skills and a sense of empowerment to their ideological convictions. Moreover, they were received as heroes, exemplars of successful resistance to a foreign invasion of Muslim lands. This triggered more intensive state repression.

The group that assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981 morphed into the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, part of which, under Ayman al-Zawahiri, joined Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and its transnational agenda in the mid-1990s. Al-Qaeda was focused on bringing down godless local rulers, purportedly kept afloat by imperialist powers, including by inducing the U.S. to withdraw from the region and removing its appetite to ever set foot in Muslim lands again. Bin Laden's political ideology was an adapted, religiously-infused version of anti-"crusader" anti-colonialism after earlier ideological frameworks had failed to deliver freedom from external domination.⁹ This approach provided a new legitimacy and a fresh appeal to mobilise a relatively small number of people, notwithstanding, or perhaps helped by, the grotesque violence that some of al-Qaeda's most spectacular attacks entailed.

Eventually, the erosion and breakdown of state institutions and the eruption of violent conflict, in Iraq after 2003 and elsewhere after 2011, supplied radical Islamist groups with the oxygen they needed to grow. The subsequent emergence of ISIS internationalised crises in Iraq and Syria by drawing foreign intervention.

E. *Cluster V: The Arab Uprisings and After*

The last earthquake, the 2011 popular uprisings, were a region-wide popular challenge to the dysfunctional Arab order that had evolved fitfully over the preceding one hundred years. They came suddenly, as a cascading set of events triggered in Tunisia in late 2010. Their principal driver was a deeply felt sense of social injustice: the perception of conspicuous corruption by a kleptocracy; unresponsive and unaccountable governance (failing technocratic institutions); and an intrusive and arbitrary police state that controlled the issuance of various administrative licenses by demanding cooperation and imposed itself by meting out petty humiliations.

The uprisings brought hope of profound social change, then disillusion as change proved cosmetic or worse. Three things happened, sometimes in combination: the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as the only organised alternative to discredited political parties and elites; foreign intervention aimed at protecting embattled regimes or, to the contrary, effecting regime change; and state breakdown and civil war. A Saudi and Emirati-assisted counter-revolution saw the overthrow of Egypt's elected Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi in 2013 and then the movement's retreat throughout the region amid growing domestic polarisation and repression. The

⁹ Jihadists regularly use the term "crusaders" to designate Western states. For Bin Laden's first published speech, see Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," 23 August 1996, http://www.terrorismfiles.org/individuals/declaration_of_jihad1.html. See also, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, "The Militarization of Islamism: Al-Qā'ida and Its Transnational Challenge", *The Muslim World*, vol. 10, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 311-312.

Gulf states' interference in Syria helped turn a popular revolt that faced brutal suppression by an unsteady regime into a regional proxy war. Because of these events, the Arab uprisings' strong aftershocks have the potential to further undermine the Arab state system, namely if chaos spreads beyond the current conflict theatres to engulf Egypt and the region's monarchies.

III. Concentric Circles

From 2011 onward, locally generated conflicts began to spin out of control. Desperate actors – rulers and rebels – summoned the aid of powerful regional allies. They were the region's non-Arab states – Iran, Turkey and Israel – as well as the Arab Gulf states, who stepped into the breach, understanding this to be the only way to preserve their security and strategic interests. Partly by default and partly because it saw itself directly threatened by Iran's rise, Saudi Arabia, in alliance with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has assumed an unabashedly assertive foreign policy role with, in Yemen, even a military dimension. Yet Saudi Arabia faces its own difficult economic challenges and an unresolved legitimacy crisis over a social contract under severe stress.

Each intervention should be examined on its individual merits to determine whether the intervening power acted defensively or opportunistically, although in most cases it was probably a little of each. The direct and indirect interventions in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Egypt and Iraq have common features, yet differ in important respects. Variances must be properly understood if policymakers are to formulate workable responses that help de-escalate rather than aggravate ongoing conflict.

A. *Regional Rivalries*

Regional actors, in particular, have had an enormous stake in developments, and their actions matter. There may be nothing they fear more than a vacuum next door, and they may be sucked in against their better judgment regarding their intervention's long-term benefits. Once they are in, however, the calculation changes, and depending on their fortunes may even suggest that a long-term stay is not just necessary but advantageous: to settle old scores, gain access to resources, control strategic pathways and pipelines, forge new alliances and accumulate wealth, power and influence.

More important than the actual fortunes may be the perception thereof: a sense of triumphalism on the part of an upstart state or group over its success in breaking out of isolation and gaining ground (Iran, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK); and a weak state's fear that its rival is an ascendant power with hegemonic ambitions (the Saudi view of Iran). In both cases, the responses are excessive, driven by the perception more than a dispassionate analysis of threats and opportunities: the losers strike out blindly and become trapped (Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen), while the winners overreach and must search for a viable exit strategy (the PKK in northern Syria, and possibly Hizbollah and Iran in Syria). Cornered actors make desperate moves, and plead for help from higher powers – the U.S. in Yemen, Russia in Syria.

Along with military action – sometimes taking the form of military support and advice to local partners and proxies – comes a narrative justifying it, which evokes normative imperatives or, more coldly, the necessity of self-defence. It may highlight a sense of encirclement and siege mentality,¹⁰ plumb the depths of serial victimhood

¹⁰ Both Saudi Arabia and Iran claim they see themselves as encircled. See Hiltermann, "Syria: The hidden power of Iran", *op. cit.*

(perhaps even evoking genocides real or imagined)¹¹ and propose a you're-with-me-or-against-me approach toward sceptical allies and neutral parties.¹² The result is more havoc, not less. Local conflicts are further inflamed and given a different course; they cannot be settled peacefully without – as a necessary precondition – a de-escalation among the intervening regional players.

1. Iran¹³

Iran has long nurtured a feeling of civilisational superiority toward the Arab world. While Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz, through which some 40 per cent of world oil exports pass, its post-1979 leadership also sees Iran as encircled by the U.S., Gulf states bulked up with billions in dollars of Western weaponry, and a nuclear-armed Israel. These states responded to the threat they saw emanating from the Iranian revolution by trying to overthrow the new order in Tehran, first by supporting Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran, then by damming in a resurgent Iran that pushed out Iraqi forces and pursued the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime for six more years of pointless bloodshed. The result was stalemate, but Saddam's subsequent attempt, in 1990, to shake down his creditor Kuwait set off a chain reaction from which Iran ultimately proved the main beneficiary.

In response to the Iran-Iraq war, Iran developed its own (far smaller but highly effective) military-industrial complex with an expanding ballistic missile arsenal and strengthened alliances with non-state actors, such as Hizbollah, or proxies, such as Shiite militias in Iraq.¹⁴ These assets combined with Iran's ability to enrich uranium, its ideology and its support of anti-U.S. and anti-Israel groups in the region, have stood at the heart of why the West has been determined to isolate Iran.

Iran's help in creating, and subsequent alliance with, Hizbollah has been fundamental to what it calls its "forward-defence" strategy vis-à-vis Israel (Clusters II intersecting with Cluster III). To sustain that alliance, Iran reinforced its relationship with Syria, establishing a stable supply line. The 2011 Syrian uprising posed a daunting threat: should the regime be replaced with one hostile to Iran, Tehran would lose its easy access to Hizbollah, rendering both more vulnerable to Israeli attack. Yet Iran/Hizbollah's entry into the conflict also presented a tantalising opportunity: it increased their deterrent capability by extending the front line with Israel from Lebanon into Syria.¹⁵

Through their military entrance into the Syrian conflict and Iran's recruitment of Shiite fighters from across the region, Iran and Hizbollah contributed to the war's

¹¹ Joost Hiltermann, "Deep Traumas, Fresh Ambitions: Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War", *Middle East Report*, January 2011.

¹² A typical example is the June 2017 dispute between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on one side, and Qatar on the other.

¹³ This sub-section relies on additional research conducted by Ali Fathollah-Nejad.

¹⁴ Iranian officials like to point out that Iran is the only state in the region that provides in its own self-defence. Interviews, 2015-2017.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°175, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, 14 March 2017; and Crisis Group, "Statement on a Syrian Policy Framework", 27 April 2015.

sectarianisation.¹⁶ Their effort was mirrored by Gulf and Turkish support of Syrian rebels, and attendant sectarian rhetoric. Over time, a domestic political conflict in Syria thus became part of a larger sectarian-tinged regional power competition.¹⁷

In post-2011 Iraq, Iran showed little interest in reversing the U.S.-established sectarian (and highly corrupt) political order, which indeed Tehran sustained through its full-throated support of Shiite Islamist parties' political dominance.¹⁸ The current generation of Iranian leaders emerged hardened not only from the Islamic Revolution, but also from the battlefields of the war with Iraq, which was an eight-year nightmare for both states.¹⁹ It is then that these leaders realised that Iran needs an aligned Iraq as strategic depth. They therefore favour a weak political system friendly to Tehran that can preserve Iraq's territorial unity, but that Iran can control through its tried-and-tested divide-and-rule method and influence in the security and intelligence apparatus.²⁰ Yet Tehran's preferences have compounded Iraq's fragmentation and its post-2014 recruitment of Shiite militias that engaged in massacres and forcible removals of Sunnis while fighting ISIS further alienated the Sunni population.²¹ Iran opposed the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017, and supported the Iraqi government and Iran-backed militias in retaking control of disputed territories held by the Kurdistan regional government. Iranian officials declared that, in doing so, Iran had helped preserve the territorial integrity of both Iraq and Turkey, and prevented the region's "Balkanisation".²²

As these militias reached the Iraq-Syria border in 2017, Iran made significant headway in opening what its foes see as a land corridor to the Mediterranean that could supplement its air supply line to Hizbollah.²³ Its advance appeared driven less by deliberate strategy than convenient opportunity, and it may not achieve a stable contiguous route. Moreover, Iranian officials state that they have not seen Iran's growing military presence in the region translate into greater political influence. They deny that Iran seeks to become a hegemonic power, having calculated the cost. But they warn that Iran will not permit the re-emergence of forces that intend to attack Iran or provide a base for those who want to do so.²⁴ Regardless, Iran's military

¹⁶ The recruitment was successful because of the argument that Shiites needed to defend themselves as a community against depredations committed by Sunni jihadists in Syria (and separately in Iraq). Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum*, op. cit., pp. 4-11.

¹⁷ Intra-Gulf rivalry contributed to the Syrian insurgency's fragmentation and radicalisation. See Aron Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition", The Century Foundation, 17 October 2017.

¹⁸ In 2003, the sectarian architecture introduced by the U.S. in Iraq created the conditions for the establishment of a Shiite-Islamist-dominated government, supported not just by Washington but also by Tehran, which benefitted from it, much to Saudi Arabia's dislike. For its origins and early evolution, see Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006. Riyadh has long failed to exert political influence in Iraq; it reopened its Baghdad embassy only in January 2016.

¹⁹ See Hiltermann, "Deep traumas", op. cit.

²⁰ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°38, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, 21 March 2005.

²¹ "Marked with an 'X'", Human Rights Watch, 13 November 2016.

²² Interviews, December 2017.

²³ See Hiltermann, "Syria: The hidden power of Iran", op. cit.

²⁴ Interviews, December 2017.

manoeuvres in the region have fuelled an anti-Iran animus that Israel shares with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and this may magnify whatever confrontations result.

Iran's ruling elites have held two diverging views regarding Saudi Arabia. One side has argued for improving relations, understanding that Iran's global standing thus could benefit from the Saudi role in global energy markets and its close integration in a Western-dominated international system. Others view Saudi Arabia as a competitor for the regional status to which Iran aspires, one that needs to be confronted on the basis of a zero-sum game rationale.²⁵ Shortly after his election in August 2013, Rouhani called for fostering ties with Iran's "friend and brother",²⁶ later adding that strong Tehran-Riyadh ties are key to regional security.²⁷ Yet instead the region has seen an ever-widening rivalry that accelerated as the P5+1 – the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany – negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran, and even more so after the arrival of the Trump administration.

On the ground in Syria, Iran has kept the upper hand, strengthened by Russia's September 2015 military intervention (precipitated by the perception that the regime's collapse was imminent). Its dominance has deepened a sense of grievance and anti-Iran sentiment among the region's Sunnis. While the Syrian conflict and chaos in Iraq have turned Iran into a regional military power, Iran remains limited in its hegemonic possibilities by having chosen to play the Shiite card as a mobilising tactic. Former U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker famously referred to Shiite/Persian Iran's influence as "self-limiting", as the country projects itself into a predominantly Sunni Arab world.²⁸

2. Saudi Arabia²⁹

Since the late 1970s, the House of Saud has seen two strategic threats to its legitimacy and rule: Iran (Cluster III) and political Islam, including the Muslim Brotherhood, its most organised version (Cluster IV). These threats have been primarily political: it sees Iran as seeking hegemony as a regional superpower, while the Brotherhood purportedly backs a republican form of government and parliamentary politics, features the Gulf states lack. In both cases, there has been a religious/ideological overlay: each champions a particular interpretation of Islam, and for each this has been a way to mobilise popular support. Iran's Shiite-based political ideology has also served as a focal point for Saudi Arabia and its allies to push back.

In its policy and choice of allies, Saudi Arabia has had to strike a balance between these two threats. This was quite possible before 2011, but the Arab uprisings empowered both Iran and the Brotherhood – in different ways. They also triggered a partial retreat of Saudi Arabia's primary sponsor, the U.S., which appeared keen to reduce its footprint in the region both militarily and politically, starting with the 2011 troop withdrawal from Iraq. In the Saudi and Emirati view, if the Obama administration would not go to bat for key allies such as Mubarak's Egypt, what might it do vis-à-vis the Gulf states, especially in light of persistent suggestions that Saudi

²⁵ Interviews, Iranian officials, Tehran, 2015-2017.

²⁶ "Iranian president: Saudi Arabia is a 'friend and brother'", Al Arabiya, 19 September 2013.

²⁷ "Iran-Saudi Arabia ties key to Mideast security: Rouhani", Press TV, 3 March 2014.

²⁸ Quoted in David Ignatius, "Jousting with Iran", *Washington Post*, 7 November 2010.

²⁹ This sub-section relies on additional research conducted by Sebastian Sons.

Arabia had contributed to the 9/11 attacks by nurturing the ideology that inspired al-Qaeda?³⁰

This complicated matters to the point that the Saudi and Emirati leaderships decided to dramatically overhaul their regional strategy. The counter-revolution was hatched in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.³¹ The two states struck out at the Brotherhood throughout the region and began a pushback against Iran. Yet they failed to resolve the essential challenge of simultaneously confronting two enemies requiring two separate strategies; this led to frequent contradictions.

At first, success: in Egypt, Saudi and Emirati support was instrumental in the 2013 coup that overthrew the elected Brotherhood-led government of Mohammed Morsi.³² Morsi's successor, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, unleashed violent repression against the Brotherhood. At the same time, he has refused to be a Gulf pawn, expressing support for Bashar Assad and maintaining good relations with Iran.

The predicament the Saudis and Emiratis faced in fighting two enemies at once was even more evident in Syria. In the uprising's early days, King Abdullah sought to modify Assad's behaviour, issuing a statement in his support. By August 2011, the king had given up, condemning the violence and actively contributing to efforts to remove the regime, which it increasingly saw as Iran's puppet (Cluster V intersecting with Cluster III). It provided weapons and money to Syrian rebel groups to prise Syria from its Iranian embrace and bring it "back into the Arab fold". Yet it supported only those who competed with Brotherhood-aligned groups, which were receiving Turkish and Qatari support.³³ This approach backfired. Intra-rebel rivalries and the regime's increasingly brutal means of warfare enabled the rise of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Nusra Front, and then ISIS. The Saudi leadership subsequently curbed its support for Syrian rebel groups, fearing these chickens might come home to roost.³⁴ The Saudis were also preoccupied with the war in Yemen and realised the equation in Syria had changed with the September 2015 Russian intervention and the regime gains that followed. Finally, in July 2017, Trump's decision to end the CIA's covert rebel support program removed the political cover and much of the co-ordination infrastructure for arming vetted rebels that had been in place since 2014.

Saudi Arabia and UAE arguably fared even worse in their response to the Yemen crisis that unfolded in 2014-2015, when Huthi rebels stormed into the capital and removed the government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in power since a post-2011 accord brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Cluster V). At the time, the Gulf states viewed with growing alarm the prospect of a successful deal between Iran and the P5+1 that would curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting interna-

³⁰ Simon Henderson, "What We Know About Saudi Arabia's Role in 9/11", *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2016.

³¹ Guido Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (2014).

³² Interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, May 2017.

³³ "Saudi-Backed Jarba Defeats Qatar's Point Man in Syria Opposition", *Middle East Online*, 6 July 2013.

³⁴ There have been attacks on Shiite mosques in Qatif and Dammam since 2015; a major attack took place simultaneously in Jeddah, Medina and Riyadh on in July 2016. See also, Elizabeth Dickenson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home", *Brookings Institution*, 6 December 2013.

tional sanctions and consequently allow Iran's return to the energy market and gradual reintegration into the community of world states. From a Saudi perspective, the P5+1 was giving Iran *carte blanche* to unleash its Revolutionary Guards Corps in the region. As Exhibits A and B, it cited Iranian support for Assad and the Huthis, which it viewed as Tehran's proxies.

To appease its Gulf allies and arguably to forestall any attempt to undermine the chances of a deal, the Obama administration sought to reassure Riyadh and Abu Dhabi by offering some support for their March 2015 military intervention in Yemen aimed at restoring Hadi to power.³⁵ In prosecuting the war, the Saudis and Emiratis have incurred great financial cost, with no prospect of achieving victory on the ground or at the negotiating table, while facing international condemnation for alleged war crimes and a humanitarian catastrophe precipitated by a tightly enforced blockade.³⁶ At the same time, their exaggeration of Iran's role appeared to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more they asserted the Huthis were an Iranian proxy and the more they brought war to Yemen in response, the more Iran benefited and, over time and with the help of Hizbollah, stepped up its support of the Huthis in the form of more training and more sophisticated weaponry. Yet hard evidence of significant external support for the Huthis remains lacking.³⁷

The election of Donald Trump offered the Saudis and Emiratis an opportunity to reinforce relations with the U.S.; both tried hard to shape the incoming administration's agenda. Trump's decision in May 2017 to go to Riyadh for his first foreign trip vindicated their efforts. Emboldened, the Saudis and Emiratis escalated their anti-Iran rhetoric, then placed a diplomatic and commercial boycott on their nominal ally Qatar, accusing it of "supporting terrorism", especially through its Al Jazeera media outlet.³⁸ The dispute, which focused on Qatar's support of the Brotherhood, quickly evolved into a stalemate (Cluster IV). The cost could be high: the GCC's fragile unity, tying together the Gulf monarchies, may have been irrevocably broken, while Tehran gained from its adversaries' wrangling by solidifying its influence in Iraq and Syria.

Regional blundering and internal power struggles in late 2017 made it all the more pressing for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to find a face-saving way to extricate

³⁵ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

³⁶ Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia's mounting security challenges", *Al-Monitor*, 28 December 2015; Sebastian Sons, "Der Junge schafft das nicht", *Zenith*, Winter 2015, pp. 34-35; UN Security Council, Letter dated 27 January 2017 from Panel of Experts on Yemen to President of Security Council, S/2017/81, 31 January 2017; and "The State of the World Human Rights", Amnesty International, 2017; Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Briefing N°52, *Instruments of Pain I: Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, 13 April 2017; and "UN leaders appeal for immediate lifting of humanitarian blockade in Yemen – lives of millions are at risk", World Health Organization, 16 November 2017.

³⁷ Mareike Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen", Carnegie Endowment, 14 February 2017; and Joost Hiltermann and April Longley Alley, "The Huthis Are Not Hezbollah", *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2017. In November 2017, Reuters reported that a confidential UN report alleged that remnants of ballistic missiles fired by the Huthis into Saudi Arabia appear to have been designed and manufactured by Iran. Colum Lynch, "U.N. Panel Finds Evidence of Iranian Hardware in Yemeni Rebels' Missile. And American", *Foreign Policy*, 8 December 2017.

³⁸ Shireen Hunter, "Saudi ambitions threaten to inflame Middle East", *Lobelog*, 8 June 2017; Marc Lynch, "How Trump's alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE is inflaming the Middle East", *Washington Post*, 7 June 2017.

themselves from the Yemen war, whose cost was draining financial reserves. Their apparent strategy was to draw the U.S. further into the conflict as a way of turning stalemate into victory, or at least a negotiated settlement on their terms.³⁹ Domestically, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's promises of economic reform, relaxed social freedoms and an end to high-level corruption were long overdue, but come at significant risk: they could stir powerful enemies among the conservative clergy and within the royal family.

3. Turkey⁴⁰

Once oriented mainly toward Europe and no more than a (wary) bystander in the MENA region, Turkey became one of the MENA region's aspiring heavyweights in just over a decade. Due to a series of miscalculations in response to swift-moving events beyond its control – the Arab uprisings – Turkey lost almost all it had gained in the way of political and commercial relationships. By late 2017, it found itself largely alienated from its NATO allies, subjugated to Russian dominance in its regional dealings and increasingly polarised internally.

Turkey's stunning economic growth stems from the 2002 election victory of the Justice and Development party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who proceeded to lead the country first as prime minister, then as president. The AKP's Muslim Brotherhood-inspired ideology fuses Islamic principles with participatory politics and free-market economics. AKP leaders and the conservative intellectual elites close to the government cast Turkey as a natural leader of the Islamic *umma*, or global Islamic community, and view the country's borders with Iraq and Syria as an artificial imposition (Cluster IV). At the same time, Erdoğan and his supporters have internalised the Kemalist vision of a strong state capable of deterring and overpowering internal and external enemies.⁴¹

One of Turkey's primary internal challenges, one that poses a threat to its territorial integrity and ties its fate to that of its neighbours, has been the Kurdish question (Cluster I). From the 1980s onward, following the founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), this has involved ferocious fighting with tenacious separatists punctuated by deceptively peaceful lulls and even hesitant attempts at reaching across the aisle. The conflict, now in its fourth decade, has been tremendously costly and damaging to all sides, and especially to civilians.⁴²

Soon after gaining power in 2002, the AKP pivoted Turkish foreign policy toward its neighbourhood, including MENA. The economy took off. This allowed Turkey to appoint itself as the region's order setter (*düzen kurucu*). That was the essence of the "zero-problems" policy enunciated by Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic who went

³⁹ Crisis Group Commentary, "A Huthi Missile, a Saudi Purge and a Lebanese Resignation Shake the Middle East", 10 November 2017; and April Longley Alley, "The Killing of Former President Saleh Could Worsen Yemen's War", Crisis Group Commentary, 6 December 2017.

⁴⁰ This sub-section relies on additional research conducted by Dimitar Bechev. A longer version was published in the *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Fall 2017.

⁴¹ On the merger of political Islam and Turkish nationalism, including the *Millî Görüş* ("National Outlook") tradition from which the AKP stems, see Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (Princeton, 2014).

⁴² See Berkay Mandıracı, "Turkey's PKK Conflict Kills almost 3,000 in Two Years", Crisis Group commentary, 20 July 2017.

from being Erdoğan's foreign policy advisor to foreign minister, then to prime minister during the heady years of Turkish economic expansion.⁴³ As an important component of what some referred to as this emerging "neo-Ottomanism",⁴⁴ Ankara believed it could parlay its new popularity, economic strength and growing regional networks into diplomatic muscle deployed in furtherance of conflict resolution.⁴⁵ Yet the AKP's Brotherhood-infused ideological outlook soon generated contradictions in its peace-making efforts, and by 2011 its regional strategy was in shambles.

The Brotherhood's failure to capitalise on the popular uprisings throughout the region then dealt this strategy a death blow. In Egypt, the military, backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, toppled the Brotherhood-led government in July 2013; Turkey responded by cutting diplomatic ties. In Tunisia, seeing the writing on the wall, the Al-Nahda government resigned pre-emptively, agreeing to its replacement by an interim government led by technocrats and subsequently to a power-sharing arrangement with secular forces.⁴⁶ In Syria, Assad clung to power, which required Turkey to continue investing in an insurgency that never ceased to fragment and radicalise, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE undermined Turkey and Qatar's support of Brotherhood-aligned rebel factions. The 2015 Iranian nuclear deal diminished Turkey's value to Tehran as a bridge to the West (as well as a way around the sanctions). The combined effect was, as many quipped, that Turkey had moved from zero problems with neighbours to zero neighbours without problems.

It was in Syria – where the stakes for Turkey are incomparably high – that its aspiration to refashion the MENA region suffered its most dramatic crash. Turkey faced a triple challenge: from the PKK, whose Syrian affiliates were exploiting the vacuum in the north to carve out a self-rule entity along the length of the Turkish border;⁴⁷ from ISIS, which emerged from the chaotic Turkey-supported Syrian rebel scene and in 2015-2016 carried out repeated attacks on Turkish soil, taking hundreds of lives; and from 3.2 million (registered) Syrian refugees, who somehow had to be accommodated and cared for.⁴⁸

The dual threat from the PKK (Cluster I) and ISIS (Cluster IV) presented a particularly knotty dilemma. Ankara felt the PKK posed the greater menace: the group had built up a formidable guerrilla force and was seeking a political transformation

⁴³ Ahmet Davutoğlu used the term *düzen kurucu bir ülke* ("an order-setting country") in his *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu* ["Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position"] (Istanbul, 2001).

⁴⁴ On neo-Ottomanism as a foreign policy doctrine, see Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism", Carnegie Papers, No. 10, Washington (September 2008).

⁴⁵ Simon Waldman and Emre Çalışkan, *The New Turkey and Its Discontents* (Oxford, 2016); and Ibrahim Kalın, "Turkey's foreign policy in 2011: an assessment", in Dimitar Bechev (ed.), *What Does Turkey Think*, European Council on Foreign Relations (2011), pp. 51-57.

⁴⁶ Issandr El Amrani, "Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet Set a Powerful Example", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 October 2015.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017.

⁴⁸ "Number of Syrian refugees in Turkey reaches 3,2 million", *Daily Sabah*, 4 October 2017. See also, Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Report N°241, *Turkey's Refugee Crisis: The Politics of Permanence*, 30 November 2016.

in, if not secession of, Turkey's south east.⁴⁹ The July 2015 collapse of a Turkey-PKK ceasefire brought a sharp escalation in fighting in Kurdish cities in Turkey's south east and a more aggressive Turkish military approach toward the PKK and its affiliates in Syria and Iraq.⁵⁰ While Ankara did not align itself with ISIS, it benefited from the group's presence in Syria, where its fighters fought the regime (but also other Syrian rebel factions) and attacked the Kurdish self-rule area. ISIS's October 2014 seizure of the Kurdish border town of Kobani triggered a U.S.-backed military response from the YPG – the PKK affiliate – over strenuous but eventually fruitless Turkish opposition: Ankara did not want to see the PKK make military gains on its southern border and accumulate Western credit in the process.⁵¹

In early 2015, Turkey saw a glimmer of hope that Assad might yet fall, but Russia's military intervention in September ended any prospect of regime change in Damascus. Worse, after the Turkish air force shot down a Russian fighter jet, the Kremlin imposed tough sanctions on Turkey, reversing what had been a stable economic relationship.⁵² The combined power of Russia, Iran and Hizbollah, and what remained of the Syrian army, pushed back hard against Turkey-backed rebels. As the YPG extended its control in the north, seeking to connect the areas east of the Euphrates with Afrin north of Aleppo, Erdoğan realised he had little choice but to reconcile with Moscow and re-engage Iran. In return, he received tacit approval to move military forces and Free Syrian Army units into Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield, launched in August 2016), ostensibly to fight ISIS but really to stop the YPG's bid to take control over the entire 900km border.⁵³ Together with Russia, Turkey brokered the rebels' surrender in East Aleppo in December and sponsored several rounds of Moscow-initiated peace talks in Astana, with Iran as co-host.

A year later, Turkey's role in Syria was much diminished. In August 2017, it agreed with Russia to establish a jointly monitored de-escalation zone in Idlib province, which had come under the near-exclusive sway of an – apparently autonomous – al-Qaeda affiliate, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front). Ankara appeared motivated as much by the possibility of containing the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the YPG, in Afrin as by the desire to prevent a new refugee flow into Turkey as a result of a future Syrian regime assault on Idlib. Ankara's only hope was that U.S. military support of the YPG was linked to the fight against ISIS. With ISIS's approaching defeat in late 2017, Ankara may have hoped that Washington would cut, or at least

⁴⁹ The PKK has its headquarters in northern Iraq's Qandil mountain range, and has bases along the length of the Iraq-Turkey border. On the PKK's ideology, see Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice*, pp. 3-5.

⁵⁰ For background on the talks' collapse, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°77, *A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks*, 17 December 2015.

⁵¹ Turkey ultimately allowed the transfer of Kurdish peshmerga fighters from northern Iraq to Kobani. Al Jazeera, 29 October 2014. The U.S. also delivered heavy weapons through this route after Barzani and the U.S. promised Turkey they would not be passed on to the PKK or its Syrian affiliate, the YPG. *Rudaw*, 25 October 2014.

⁵² Selin Girit, "Turkey faces big losses as Russian sanctions bite", BBC News, 2 January 2016. See also Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe* (Yale, 2017), chapter 5.

⁵³ Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice*, op. cit.; and Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up", op. cit.

reduce, this support,⁵⁴ but the Trump administration has signalled it may continue to maintain its presence and alliances in northern Syria for at least the next one to two years, and perhaps beyond.⁵⁵

In Iraq, Turkey hardly fared better. ISIS's capture of Sunni Arab areas in June 2014, including the city of Mosul, drew Iraqi Shiite militias – some funded, trained and equipped by Iran – to northern Iraq, a traditional Turkish sphere of influence. To make matters worse, the PKK also made major inroads in northern Iraq, challenging the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Turkey's ally, by moving into Sinjar. In the U.S.-led campaign to wrest control of Mosul from ISIS, Turkey was little more than a bystander. Ankara's post-2008 relationship with the KDP, which had enabled the Kurdish region's integration into the Turkish economy, suffered a severe blow in September 2017 with President Masoud Barzani's decision to stage an independence referendum over its strenuous objections.⁵⁶ Sanctions followed but more importantly, Ankara closed its eyes to a subsequent move by Iraqi security forces supported by Iran-backed Shiite militias to restore federal control over the disputed territories (the borderlands between majority-Kurd and majority-Arab areas), including Kirkuk and its oil fields. These developments were a strategic disaster for Turkey, which saw an almost decade-long investment in a seemingly reliable Kurdish partner collapse overnight and its rival Iran improving its strategic position in Iraq.⁵⁷ But it appeared willing to bear the cost if it could block a Kurdish move toward independence – its overriding concern.⁵⁸

Being *in* but not truly *of* the region – to use Churchill's adage about Britain and Europe – Turkey had long succeeded in living with conflicts next door without incurring inordinate costs. Presenting itself as a neutral third party, at least initially, in the Israel-Palestine conflict (Cluster II) and Iran's standoff with the West (Cluster III) gave it a regional profile as peace mediator, even if some in the West saw Turkey as abandoning its staunchly pro-Western alignment. Sunni radicalisation in the region (Cluster IV) was a boon for the AKP early in its tenure; it gained legitimacy in the West's eyes as a "moderate Islamist" party at a time when it was locked in a life-or-death struggle with the Kemalist "deep state". The Arab uprisings and their violent aftermath (Cluster V) unravelled the edifice that AKP leaders had built in the region, however. Most of the gambles the AKP took, starting from the mid-2000s but especially from 2011 onwards, boomeranged. Turkey's challenge today is to restore equipoise in its regional relations and in particular to prevent any further negative spillover from the conflicts and vacuum in Syria and Iraq, while finding ways to

⁵⁴ "Trump tells Turkish president U.S. will stop arming Kurds in Syria", *Washington Post*, 24 November 2017.

⁵⁵ Interviews, U.S. officials, October-November 2017.

⁵⁶ On the day of the September 2017 referendum, Erdoğan went so far as to warn Barzani that if the Kurds failed to "go back on this mistake as soon as possible, they will go down in history with the shame of having dragged the region into an ethnic and sectarian war". Quoted in Martin Chulov, "Iraq: Kurdish leader Barzani claims win in independence referendum", *The Guardian*, 26 September 2017.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Briefing N°55, *Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis*, 17 October 2017.

⁵⁸ Independence for Iraqi Kurdistan had its supporters in Turkey, but they lost out to opponents after Turkey and the PKK returned to fighting in 2015 and the KDP proved incapable of containing its Kurdish rival. Interview, Turkish analyst, November 2017.

address both increasing tensions with Washington and its own worsening internal convulsions.

4. Israel⁵⁹

The Arab uprisings presented two primary threats to Israeli interests: the unpredictability and instability arising from the swift flow of events; and the rise of its enemies Iran and Hizbollah in vacuums that opened up as Arab states collapsed or became beleaguered, especially in Syria. The uprisings had no evident link to the Arab-Israeli conflict (Cluster II), but Israel was concerned about the stability of its Arab peace partners, Jordan and Egypt. Contrary to general impressions (reinforced by research by Crisis Group and others) that the protests were spontaneous and stubbornly immune to any form of organisation,⁶⁰ the Israeli leadership saw the Muslim Brotherhood as the principal driving force behind them.⁶¹

Viewing the Tahrir uprising through this prism, the dominant Israeli perception was one of threat. Indeed, no one around Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw significant opportunity in the events, but hoped they would helpfully divert international attention from the Palestine question.⁶² Mubarak's resignation was not in Israel's interest, but leaders took heart when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took charge to reduce popular pressure and, in their view, ensure "a continuation of the same governing junta".⁶³ Israeli officialdom's top echelon consistently argued that the Brotherhood would not become more moderate if it came to power, repeated this when it did, and has done so ever since.⁶⁴

Israel's two main policy concerns vis-à-vis Egypt were Sinai and Gaza. In Gaza, it learned that Egyptian state interest that the territory not end up as its responsibility superseded any ideological affinity between Morsi and Hamas.⁶⁵ Indeed, Morsi mediated a Hamas-Israel ceasefire to the 2012 Gaza war that barely improved Hamas's situation.⁶⁶ When General Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi ousted Morsi in July 2013, he placed new restrictions on travel between Gaza and Egypt and set about flooding or destroying the tunnels that constituted Gazans' commercial lifeline under an enduring Israeli siege, but that Egypt viewed as passageways for militants and arms.

⁵⁹ This sub-section relies on additional research conducted by Ofer Zalberg.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°101, *Egypt Victorious?*, 24 February 2011, and Nathan Brown, *When Victory Becomes an Option: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Confronts Success*, Carnegie, January 2012.

⁶¹ Interview, Likud minister, Jerusalem, 1 March 2011.

⁶² Interviews, two cabinet ministers as well as defence, foreign ministry and intelligence officials, Jerusalem, March-May 2011.

⁶³ Interview, Likud minister, Jerusalem, 1 March 2011.

⁶⁴ "When foreign visitors raise the notion that the Brotherhood may become more moderate in power, [Maj. Gen.] Amos Gilad [Israel's lead on relations with Egypt by virtue of his position as the defence ministry's director of policy and political-military affairs] almost bites their head off". Interview, defence official, Tel Aviv, April 2013. A member of Israel's national security council said the Brotherhood is an "Islamist totalitarian" movement that should be "beaten back and, ultimately, defeated". Interview, Jerusalem, May 2015.

⁶⁵ Interviews, Likud minister, defence official, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, November 2012.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°133, *Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East*, 22 November 2012.

In Sinai, Israel's primary concerns were recurrent insurgent attacks on the pipeline supplying gas to Israel and Jordan, Israeli tourism (which came to a halt in 2011 as jihadist attacks multiplied) and arms smuggling to Gaza.⁶⁷ These were hardly allayed by Sisi's takeover. Israeli leaders attributed Sisi's failure to stamp out Sinai jihadists to incompetence more than lack of will or interest, and ramped up military support of Sisi by deploying drones in Sinai.⁶⁸ The insurgency appears ever more deeply entrenched, however, feeding on resentment from decades of Egyptian neglect.⁶⁹ A jihadist attack on a mosque in Sinai in November 2017 drove home the point.⁷⁰

As for Syria, Israeli leaders initially rejoiced at the setback that the Assad regime, Iran's ally, suffered. But as soon as popular protests turned into violent conflict and jihadist groups emerged to exploit the chaos, any sense of opportunity turned into dismay at seeing Syria – a nominal foe but stable and predictable neighbour for years – fall prey to two dynamic adversaries: Iran/Hizbollah and al-Qaeda/ISIS.⁷¹ The common refrain in Tel Aviv has been: "Don't make us choose between cholera and the pest. We dislike both and want both risks eliminated".⁷² Yet Israel's diplomatic thrust has been to warn against any anti-ISIS efforts that would enlist Iran as a partner.

On the ground in Syria, Israel has stood aside as long as no one crosses its red lines: spillover of violence into Israel, provision of high-precision, long-range rockets from Iran to Hizbollah via Syria and any attempt by Iran and/or Hizbollah to establish a significant offensive presence in the Quneitra area.⁷³ Following Russia's September 2015 military intervention to rescue Assad's faltering regime, Israel saw Syria slide further into the hands of Iran and Hizbollah, with Moscow as an uncertain potential mediator. Israel's main concerns are the possible construction of an Iranian naval base on the Mediterranean (which would render Israeli gas rigs and maritime commerce vulnerable to attack), a multiplication of Iran/Hizbollah military bases in Syria and a potential Tehran-Beirut land bridge supplementing the existing air corridor.⁷⁴ In response, Israel sent warning signals to the Syria regime in the form of airstrikes against Iranian and Hizbollah targets,⁷⁵ and increased diplomatic engagement with Moscow in an effort to curb their adversaries' military presence and influence over Assad, but with no clear success.

One important flashpoint is southern Syria, where the equation involves not just Hizbollah/Iran and Israel, but also Jordan, a neighbour with which Israel has a peace treaty and maintains close intelligence ties. In September 2017, participants in the Astana peace talks delineated borders of four "de-escalation zones", including

⁶⁷ Interview, defence official, Tel Aviv, August 2013.

⁶⁸ Interviews, Western intelligence official, Tel Aviv, September 2015; Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, October 2015.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°61, *Egypt's Sinai Question*, 30 January 2007.

⁷⁰ "Egypt mosque attack death toll climbs above 300", CNN, 26 November 2017.

⁷¹ Interviews, Likud minister, defence official, Jerusalem, November 2012.

⁷² Interview, senior foreign ministry official, Jerusalem, November 2012.

⁷³ A foreign ministry official involved in designing the policy said Israel set these red lines as part of a broader strategy to ensure its two paramount interests: keeping control of the Golan Heights and safeguarding the stability of Jordan and Lebanon. Interview, foreign ministry official, Jerusalem, October 2016.

⁷⁴ Interview, defence official, Tel Aviv, April 2017.

⁷⁵ "Israeli PM threatens Syria over Iranian presence", BBC Monitoring, 27 November 2017.

one along the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Should southern Syria come unstuck – under whatever Syrian scenario – Jordan, already fragile, would be negatively affected. It is for this reason that Netanyahu has exercised relative restraint at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade (Cluster II): he has come to appreciate how delicate this is for Jordan's King Abdullah at a time of grave regional instability.⁷⁶

In the wider region, Israeli leaders discern four “camps”: an Iranian-led one that includes Hizbollah, Assad and Iraqi Shiite militias; a jihadist camp of al-Qaeda, ISIS and kindred groups; a Muslim Brotherhood camp comprising Turkey, Qatar and Brotherhood-linked parties across the region (including Hamas); and the so-called Sunni Arab pragmatic camp, which includes Saudi Arabia, most other GCC states, Egypt, Jordan and Israel itself.⁷⁷ Israel considers the first three camps as hostile (yet has a longstanding, if frayed, relationship with Turkey⁷⁸). The fourth camp's coherence is tenuous. Israel is a member only to the extent it shares their opposition to Iranian regional hegemony. This, and the fact that Arab states cannot afford to be seen in alliance with Israel, renders joint Israeli actions with its Arab “partners” strictly reactive and pre-emptive, and usually covert.⁷⁹

In 2017, a Saudi Arabia emboldened by declared support from the Trump administration appeared determined to escalate confrontation with Iran and its regional allies. In November, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation in Riyadh, clearly under duress (once he was able to return to Beirut, he rescinded the decision), in a move interpreted as a Saudi attempt to isolate Hizbollah.⁸⁰ Yet this hardly set the stage for an Israeli attempt to subdue Hizbollah. Israel tends to set its own agenda in Lebanon and determines the timing of its actions. Israeli intelligence has been monitoring closely Hizbollah's attempts to build underground facilities for manufacturing precision missiles – clearly one of its red lines – and appears content that work for now has been frozen. An Israeli pre-emptive strike against Hizbollah cannot be ruled out, but would be dictated by a perceived violation of one of its red lines.

So far, Hizbollah has acted with restraint in the face of the Saudis' political manoeuvring in Lebanon and refrained from ill-timed provocations when many of its fighters remain tied down in Syria.⁸¹ Israeli leaders expect to fight another war with Hizbollah eventually but appear to prefer to hold off for as long as they can.⁸²

⁷⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°48, *How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade*, 7 April 2016.

⁷⁷ Eran Lerman, “The Game of Camps: Ideological Fault Lines in the Wreckage of the Arab State System”, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 21 September 2016. Lerman was deputy head of Israel's national security council under Prime Minister Netanyahu in 2009-2016.

⁷⁸ Only a minority among the Israeli leadership see the June 2016 reconciliation agreement with Turkey following the May 2010 Mavi Marmara incident as more than a patch on a festering wound. Interview, defence, foreign ministry and intelligence officials, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, January-July 2017.

⁷⁹ A Likud minister said that Netanyahu had travelled to Riyadh in late 2015. Interview, Jerusalem, March 2016; I have been unable to verify this claim. In Riyadh, I found a new buoyancy on the heels of the May 2017 Trump visit to forge more cordial ties with Israel in order to confront Iran, on condition that Israel recognise an independent Palestine. Interviews, Riyadh, May 2017.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group Commentary, “A Huthi Missile”, op. cit.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Interviews, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 2017.

For now, Israel is content to stay on the sidelines, but hyper-alert, ready to pounce at the merest threat to its fundamental interests.

B. External Actors and Interventions

The region's lack of unity at birth has remained the leitmotiv of its troubled existence, with its divisions attracting yet further foreign interventions which generate yet further divisions, as well as conflict. Generally resource-rich but institutions-poor (with a fair degree of variance between individual states), the region has been unable to ward off outside domination and exploitation. From their side, outside powers have had multiple interests in the Middle East and North Africa: its stability, its hydrocarbon resources, individual states' allegiance in superpower rivalries (for example, during the Cold War), its markets and at times its products and its labour.

Interventions interact with conflicts in their various clusters, often compounding them, either wittingly or inadvertently, and helping break down the notional boundaries between them. Their role and impact on how conflicts evolve must be understood from the perspectives of the intervening/providing as well as the targeted states. External intervention by states has come in many forms: hard/military and soft/civil, ranging from security to development, humanitarian aid or diplomatic engagement. It can also come in the form of arms sales, including through private suppliers. All these forms are intrusive, though they differ widely in impact. Some are imposed; others are carried out with a degree of consent or even by invitation, and may involve a degree of participation and partnership. But invariably, all are done primarily out of the intervening states' self-interest; recipients perceive even an intervention greatly beneficial to their own interests as part of a (primarily) Western effort to divide the region (to ensure control) or pacify it (to facilitate resource extraction), but short-term benefit trumps their long-term concerns.

Carefully designed and often well-intentioned "partnerships" are nominally equal but in reality rarely so, with the outside actor holding the purse and setting the terms. Interactions are shaped by an inherently unbalanced power relationship.⁸³ Failure to grasp this essential fact can lead to serious misunderstandings and ill-conceived and ill-designed policy responses when things turn sour. Moreover, military action outside the framework of a political strategy that takes into account post-conflict stabilisation and governance will also make things worse.

1. The U.S.

Since inheriting custody of the West's MENA brief, incrementally, from the UK and France after the Second World War, the U.S. has been the region's global policeman, at times subcontracting its assumed responsibilities to local allies. Its primary strategic interests have been energy security for itself and its allies, and the defence of Israel (Cluster II). Falling regimes and shifting alliances forced constant adjustments and, at times, undercover action or military intervention to either overthrow enemies or prop up allies (Cluster I). In the 1990s, with Iraq neutralised, the U.S. and

⁸³ See, for example, Iran's repeated calls that it be treated with dignity and respect by external powers. Speech by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Rome MED 2017 Conference, Rome, 30 November 2017.

Israel increasingly came to see Iran's rising power and nuclear ambitions as a major threat (Cluster III).

The 9/11 attacks compelled the U.S. to adjust its approach toward the region (Cluster IV). Pursuit of the perpetrators was militarised from the outset, first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq. The irony was that al-Qaeda was not present in Iraq until after the U.S. occupied the country; witness the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, whose attacks on Shiites did much to precipitate a sectarian war (2005-2008).⁸⁴ The invasion had important unintended consequences: the empowerment of Iran – through the removal of an anti-Iran Sunni/Arab bulwark, the staging of elections that brought to power Shiite Islamist parties friendly to Iran, and the U.S. failure to stabilise the country – and ultimately Iraq's fragmentation.

The U.S.' disastrous Iraq experience led President Barack Obama, who as senator and presidential candidate had opposed the invasion, to re-evaluate U.S. MENA policy. He started out by pursuing a settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict (an effort that collapsed in short order), rhetorically reaching out to the "Muslim world" to convey his rejection of the "clash of civilisations" notion,⁸⁵ withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, and seeking to reach a deal to address Iran's nuclear program. Soon, however, he frittered away much of the goodwill he had created, at least among the region's young who sought radical change, by remaining inert in the face of the 2011 popular uprisings (Cluster V), caught in the vise of having to stand by U.S. allies while being sympathetic to the protesters' demands.⁸⁶ In Libya, the U.S. was content to "lead from behind", leaving the UK and France to take charge politically, even if it remained militarily crucial to NATO's efforts to protect civilians from Muammar Qadhafi's forces and, ultimately, remove his regime.⁸⁷

As the uprisings were suppressed or dissolved into civil war, the U.S. increasingly took the position that it would not let itself be dragged into the region's disputes if its own strategic interests were not jeopardised. It signalled that although it would not abandon its allies, it also was not prepared to fight their battles for them.⁸⁸ U.S. allies read this differently, especially when Washington initiated (initially secret) negotiations in the context of the P5+1 with Iran over its nuclear program following the election of President Hassan Rouhani in mid-2013. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel, in particular, saw this as a betrayal of everything their alliance with the U.S. had meant to them, and they made vigorous attempts to undermine the talks. In part to placate Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the U.S. provided military support to their joint Yemen venture from March 2015 onward. The nuclear talks were brought to a successful conclusion less than three months later, a stunning example of the power of multilateral diplomacy in resolving complex problems with global ramifications.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, op. cit.

⁸⁵ He did so in a famous speech in Cairo early in his presidency, in June 2009. "Text: Obama's speech in Cairo", *The New York Times*, 4 June 2009.

⁸⁶ Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East", op. cit.

⁸⁷ "Nato operations in Libya: data journalism breaks down which country does what", *The Guardian*, 22 May 2011; Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "Seeing limits to 'new' kind of war in Libya", *The New York Times*, 21 October 2011.

⁸⁸ Aaron David Miller, "A Defense of Obama's Middle East 'Balancing Act'", *Foreign Policy*, 15 August 2016.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group Statement, "The Triumph of Nuclear Diplomacy", 14 July 2017.

The war in Syria proved particularly damaging to U.S. standing in the Middle East. Having signalled a desire to see Bashar al-Assad gone after the experiences of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the U.S. encouraged its allies to arm and train the Syrian opposition, and played a similar role itself. Yet this support proved insufficient to bring down the regime, and instead induced Assad's backers to escalate. Seeing no direct strategic U.S. interest at play – the Assad regime posed no external threat – Washington mostly stood by. As regime atrocities mounted, Obama drew a line on chemical weapons use. When the regime ignored the U.S. red line, Obama wavered, then opted for dismantling Syria's chemical weapons program over military strikes which, arguably, might have had little more than symbolic impact.⁹⁰ To U.S. allies this was further evidence of Obama's unreliability, and they turned against him.

Diplomatic initiatives to end the fighting remained stranded as all sides believed they might prevail in a constantly shifting conflict. Eventually, in September 2015, as the regime grew weaker, Russia intervened militarily to protect its ally, prevent a U.S.-led "regime change" that it may have feared could threaten Russian President Vladimir Putin's hold on power in Moscow, and increase its influence in the growing vacuum the U.S. had left in the Middle East.

Ultimately, the primary U.S. interest in Syria became the rise of jihadist groups in the chaos of civil war, especially groups with transnational agendas. Pursuit of the al-Qaeda affiliate the Nusra Front, as well as the group that subsequently broke off from it, ISIS (a reincarnation of Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq), brought the U.S. military directly into the Syrian war. Its choice of allies in that fight – the PKK's Syrian affiliate the YPG over the Turkish military – led to a souring of U.S.-Turkish relations; Turkey's top priority was to fight the PKK, not ISIS.

This was the situation when Donald Trump entered the White House. Almost one year into his administration, the U.S.' MENA policy remains unclear. Yet there appears to be continuity in the desire to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda – in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere – and a hardening of the U.S. position on Iran, assuming overtly bellicose tones. The new administration has signalled its intent to shrink Iran's growing footprint in the region, an approach warmly applauded by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and to undermine the Iran nuclear deal, possibly by provoking a crisis with Iran. Saudi Arabia, in particular, appears to have received a blank check.⁹¹ The June 2017 Qatar crisis was a direct result of Saudi leaders' reawakened enthusiasm for their alliance with Washington, but it brought other Gulf alliances into contradiction and threatened to break up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the very body created as a common Arab front against Iranian encroachment. In Syria, the absence of a shared understanding between the U.S. and Russia on how to bring the war to an end helped assure the repeated failure of UN-mediated talks. Such an understanding may not have been sufficient, but it certainly was necessary to bring the war to a close. In 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran launched a separate negotiating track (the "Astana" process), with the U.S. mostly absent.

⁹⁰ For Obama's explanation for why he responded in the way he did, see Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama doctrine", *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

⁹¹ The U.S. has exercised little or no restraint on Saudi actions in Yemen, has been unable to persuade Riyadh to reverse course in its confrontation with Qatar, and stood by as the Saudis pressed Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign (in November 2017).

The 2003 Iraq invasion and its messy aftermath was the beginning of the end of the U.S.-centred unipolar system that had shaped events in the MENA region during the preceding fifty years. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does international politics. The space left partially vacant by the relative U.S. retreat from MENA has encouraged a range of ambitious actors to initiate military ventures in the region. These will further complicate the desperately needed de-escalation.

2. Russia⁹²

Once nearly invisible in the post-Cold War MENA region except for a minor military foothold in Syria based on its old and enduring relationship with the Assad regime, Russia returned with a splash in September 2015. Its Syria intervention reversed the regime's downward trajectory, while giving Russia a prominent new role in not just Syria but potentially the region. However, for all the talk of the Cold War returning, Russia has neither the capacity nor the will to fully replace the U.S. as the principal arbiter in MENA conflicts; its footprint, while growing, is likely to remain limited.

Russia's global policy under President Vladimir Putin has three principal drivers: regime preservation, curbing Western (U.S./EU/NATO) encroachment into former Soviet space and regaining at least nominal great-power status as a way to legitimise the regime and perhaps also distract from economic conditions at home. Today, Russia is content to do business with anyone; its arms deals in MENA extend across the region.⁹³

A key driver of Russia's policy in MENA (and elsewhere) is resistance to the notion of U.S.-induced "regime change". Russian officials attribute the current chaos in North Africa to Western states' failure to maintain regimes that, however autocratic, at least jointly ensured regional stability.⁹⁴ Most critically in their view, whether in eastern Europe or the Middle East and irrespective of whether it results from military intervention or from orchestrated or tolerated popular uprisings, a domino effect could eventually lead to Moscow.⁹⁵ They were therefore alarmed over the 2011 fall of Hosni Mubarak, seeing it as resulting from the Obama administration's machinations rather than from a spontaneous popular outburst.⁹⁶ They were particularly suspicious of Western calls for military intervention in Libya on behalf of embattled

⁹² This sub-section relies on additional research conducted by Dimitar Bechev.

⁹³ Several MENA countries are major importers of Russian-made arms: Syria, Algeria, Iran and, more recently, Iraq and Egypt, and there is potential for expansion of sales to the Gulf. Moreover, Russia's military intervention in Syria has been an opportunity to test and showcase its weapons in battle conditions. Leonid Bershidsky, "Syrian war gives Russia a chance to test weapons", *Bloomberg*, 15 October 2015; and Nikolay Kozhanov, "Arms Exports Add to Russia's Tools of Influence in Middle East", *Chatham House*, 20 July 2016.

⁹⁴ Interview, Russian official, Moscow, March 2016.

⁹⁵ Pavel K. Baev, "Russia's Counter-Revolutionary Stance toward the Arab Spring", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2011), pp. 11-19.

⁹⁶ Interview, Russian official, Moscow, February 2016. The official claimed that this was the majority view with the foreign ministry's MENA team, including Russian ambassadors based in the region. Even those in Moscow who acknowledge the uprising's popular roots still argue that Obama, by withholding support from Mubarak as his rule tottered, precipitated the Egyptian leader's downfall, inaugurating a period of chaos and rule by the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that is anathema to Russian leaders' secular instincts, and unleashing forces of disorder that are impossible to control. Interview, Russian official, Moscow, March 2016.

civilians in Benghazi under the rubric of the “responsibility to protect” (R2P), and reluctant to condone or even endorse it. It has regretted ever since its decision not to block the intervention in the UN Security Council, having seen the stated reason become a pretext for the forcible removal of Muammar Qadhafi, Libya’s mercurial leader, by Western hands.⁹⁷

The Libya experience profoundly informed Russia’s response to the Syria crisis, which crystallised these arguments. Russia’s strategy had several objectives: propping up Assad and thus preventing U.S.-induced “regime change”; gaining leverage vis-à-vis the U.S. and EU in the wake of the Ukraine crisis as a way to earn sanctions relief; recouping ground in the MENA region, lost following the Soviet Union’s dissolution, and regaining, if possible, the standing of a global superpower; and fighting jihadists, a number of whom had migrated to Syria from the North Caucasus to fight the Assad regime and establish a caliphate, and who might come home afterward to fight against their own rulers in Moscow.⁹⁸

To further these objectives, the Russian government has used various instruments: its veto power in the UN Security Council to block resolutions condemning the Assad regime; weapons supplies (including advanced air-defence systems) and military advice to Assad; and the dispatch of its military forces, in September 2015, when it appeared that the regime might not survive on its own. Yet, from the start, mindful of the lessons of its Afghanistan intervention, Moscow was wary of “mission creep” and an over-commitment that would prevent it from extricating itself without heavy losses and political defeat. It has limited itself mainly to providing air support to Assad’s forces and their allies, relying on others (Iran, Hizbollah, various militias and the regime itself) to provide ground forces.⁹⁹

Military victories put Russia in the driver’s seat. Its air force has been free to act almost at will; while the U.S.-led coalition’s airplanes attacked the jihadists of ISIS

⁹⁷ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Line in the Sand on Syria: Why Moscow Wants to Halt the Arab Spring”, *Foreign Affairs*, 5 February 2012. See also, Hugh Roberts, “Who said Gaddafi had to go?” and subsequent debate, *London Review of Books*, 17 November 2011. Russia’s foreign minister, Sergej Lavrov, referred to this explicitly again in December 2017. Speech, Rome MED 2017 Conference, Rome, 1 December 2017.

⁹⁸ Russia’s objectives in MENA are listed in Angela Stent, “Putin’s Power Play in Syria”, *Foreign Affairs*; (Jan/Feb 2016), pp. 106-113. Also, Dmitri Trenin, “Why Russia supports Assad”, *The New York Times*, 9 February 2012. Fighting jihadists may not be Russia’s primary interest in Syria but it presents a powerful narrative for the domestic public. Interviews, Moscow, February 2016. The rise of jihadism in Syria and Iraq has provided an opportunity to export home-grown jihadists and fight them far from Russia. Currently, there may be as many as 7,000 fighters from North Caucasus and Central Asia in the Middle East; several gained top positions in ISIS. “North Caucasian fighters in Syria and Iraq and IS propaganda in Russian language”, Europol Counter Terrorism and EU Internet Referral Unit, The Hague, September 2015 (declassified). Russia’s export policy could boomerang, however – on Russia but also on Turkey. The April 2017 bombing of the St Petersburg metro was allegedly carried out by an Uzbek born in Kyrgyzstan who had been deported to Russia from Turkey. The June 2016 attack against Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport was carried out by a group involving nationals of the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Some or all of the perpetrators of these attacks had spent time with ISIS in Syria. See Crisis Group Europe and Central Asia Report N°238, *The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?*, 16 March 2016.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°47, *Russia’s Choice in Syria*, 29 March 2016.

and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),¹⁰⁰ Russia attacked Syrian rebels and jihadists of all stripes. The Assad regime, which had lost significant ground in preceding months, including in Idlib, regained the military initiative. Over time, Russia gained the upper hand on the diplomatic front as well, largely bypassing the U.S. and engaging in talks with Iran and Turkey, both powers with arguably a more direct interest in the war's outcome than Moscow. Following a devastating onslaught on rebel-held east Aleppo, the trio oversaw its surrender to Assad's forces in December 2016 and initiated peace talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana, which ratified Russia's newly-won status.¹⁰¹

These were significant accomplishments for the Russian leadership even if they fell short of Russia's overall objectives. To be respected as a global power, Russia needs a Syrian peace on its terms. While it has supported and even initiated peace talks, however, it has not provided evidence that it can bring along, much less transform the regime. Knowing that Russia does not want their regime to fall gives the Syrian leadership significant leverage over their sponsor.¹⁰² Russia also may find, now that it is effectively in charge, that its presence entails responsibilities, such as preventing a confrontation between Iran/Hizbollah and Israel in southern Syria.

Moscow's preferred roadmap for Syria is a burden-sharing arrangement whereby Russia remains in charge of security, the UN supports Russian-led mediation efforts toward a political settlement and the EU and Gulf states take care of reconstruction.¹⁰³ It faces three additional challenges. One is managing its relationship with Israel in view of Hizbollah and Iran's growing military strength, which Tel Aviv views as a looming threat and counts on Moscow to mitigate.¹⁰⁴ Whether Russia will be so inclined remains unclear, but it appears keen to strengthen ties with Israel, home to 1.5 million Russian-speakers from across the former Soviet Union.¹⁰⁵ Russian defence officials claim Russia delivers weapons to Hizbollah only after it has signed end-user agreements limiting their use to the Syrian theatre, and that Moscow tightly monitors compliance. In response, Israeli officials say they have seen no meaning-

¹⁰⁰ A notable exception was a U.S. air attack in May 2017 against regime and regime-allied units near Al-Tanf in eastern Syria, close to the Iraqi and Jordanian borders. The U.S. has been training Syrian rebels there in preparation for the fight against ISIS in Deir el-Zour and environs.

¹⁰¹ Noah Bonsey, "Peace Talks in Astana?", Crisis Group Commentary, 24 January 2017.

¹⁰² President Vladimir Putin reportedly told Assad in December 2017 that in Moscow's view Syria cannot return to pre-2011 days, and that Assad would need to accept a more diverse post-conflict regime. Interview, Moscow, December 2017.

¹⁰³ This is what Russian officials reportedly communicated to EU counterparts. Interview, Brussels, February 2017; and "Russia asks world powers to pay for Syria reconstruction", *Financial Times*, 23 February 2017. In addition, China expressed interest in assisting with reconstruction. Speech by Fu Ying, chairperson of the foreign affairs committee, National People's Congress of China, Rome MED 2017 Conference, Rome, 30 November 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Interviews, Tel Aviv, September 2016.

¹⁰⁵ From Israel's perspective, a closer Russia-Israel partnership would comprise: diplomatic engagement at the highest level (regular summits between Putin and Netanyahu); agreed rules (for example, Russia not to deliver weapons to Hizbollah and not protect it from Israeli airstrikes); Israel's acceptance of Assad and of Russia's military role in Syria; and close economic cooperation. Seth Frantzman, "Despite Syria, Israel-Russia relations are the warmest in history", *Jerusalem Post*, 25 March 2017.

ful constraints on Russian arms transfers, and that Hizbollah has transferred Russian-supplied weapons to Lebanon with Moscow's full knowledge.¹⁰⁶

A second challenge for Russia is balancing between Turkey and the PKK's Syrian affiliates. The 2015 rebel downing of a Russian jet allowed Moscow to put Ankara in "its place"; Turkey, which has proved ready to make major concessions in exchange for help in suppressing the PKK, in 2016 agreed to drop support for rebels in eastern Aleppo in exchange for permission to move its troops into northern Syria to block the YPG's westward advance.¹⁰⁷ Russia then shaped the battlefield further by forcing Kurds to rely on the regime to travel between eastern districts and Afrin. Russia derived benefit from the YPG's fight against ISIS and, until December 2016, against rebels in and around Aleppo. In return, it has helped deter Turkish attacks on Afrin and signalled some openness to the Kurds' demands for self-rule,¹⁰⁸ though it has insisted that they negotiate any change in status with Damascus.¹⁰⁹

Russia's third challenge is managing its alliance with Iran. Tehran and Moscow's primary interests in Syria converge: they both seek to protect the Assad regime. This has brought their security relationship to an all-time high. They also need each other to balance and hedge against the U.S. Yet, despite participating in the Astana process, it is not clear to what extent Iran supports Russia's vision of a power-sharing arrangement underwritten by a broad coalition of regional and global powers.¹¹⁰ In turn, Russia does not wish to be seen as partial to the Iran-led alliance opposing Saudi Arabia and its partners in Middle Eastern conflicts,¹¹¹ and would like to expand its trading relations with the Gulf states.

A frustrated former superpower, Russia is trying to exploit a relative U.S. retreat from global affairs to make a comeback in post-Soviet guise. But regional actors distrust Russian as much as U.S. motives. Moscow's support of Assad, for example, is not popular among members of the anti-Iran alliance. Russia, however, is generally seen as less threatening because it has less political and military weight than the U.S. It is also regarded with less distrust as a relative newcomer in the region (as Russia, not the Soviet Union), which has not (yet) demonstrated overly strong political preferences, apart from its support of Assad and antagonism toward Islamists. Indeed, autocratic regimes obviously are pleased with Moscow's endorsement, and Russia has stayed out of the conflicts in Iraq and Yemen.

¹⁰⁶ Interviews, Russian diplomat, Tel Aviv, October 2016; defence official, Tel Aviv, April 2016. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains an active dialogue with Putin. Russia's response to repeated IDF strikes against Syrian regime and Hizbollah targets has been low-key. From Moscow's side, Russia would try to prevent Iran and/or Hizbollah from coming too close to the Golan, and be prepared to use diplomacy and its good relations with both Israel and Iran to prevent a direct confrontation between them, but will not interfere in any military tit-for-tats, such as Israeli air strikes in Syria on Iranian bases. Interviews, Moscow, December 2017. Iranian officials expressed confidence that Moscow would not allow a confrontation between Israel and Iran in Syria to escalate. Interviews, December 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up", op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ See Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey waiting ... and waiting ... to intervene in Afrin", *Al-Monitor*, 14 July 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, senior Russian official, Moscow, April 2017.

¹¹⁰ Interviews, Moscow, December 2017; and with Iranian officials, December 2017.

¹¹¹ See the series of articles in Russian International Affairs Council, *Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future* (2016).

In the final analysis, Russia is a status quo power that sees the worsening situation in the region as a threat and blames the West for having fuelled disorder by supporting the Arab uprisings. It prefers the option of upholding autocratic regimes, however sclerotic, instead of recognising their loss of legitimacy and the urgent need for reform. It may be willing to act in concert with others, but it distrusts Western states' motives. Moreover, with an unpredictable president in the White House and U.S.-Russia distrust mounting, any serious talks, much less a collaborative approach, remains purely notional.¹¹²

3. The European Union and its member states

The EU has important strategic interests in MENA but has shied away from playing a political role commensurate with those interests or with its economic weight. Its one outstanding foray into MENA conflict mediation concerned the Iran nuclear crisis: the high representative's office was prominent in helping secure the 2015 nuclear deal between the P5+1 – also known as the EU3+3 – and Iran. The EU has participated in other mediation attempts: it is a member of the Quartet in Israel-Palestine, and in Syria the EU has said it intends to use reconstruction aid as leverage to achieve a viable political process around what the high representative has called a “common landing point” – a basic consensus that begins to address the main stakeholders' core interests.¹¹³ But these efforts do not add up to an active diplomacy.

This is because the EU's alliance with the U.S., a global player with its own strategic interests in the region, has enabled it to play more of an economic than a political, or certainly a military, role. In the panoply of European states, the former colonial powers of Britain and France (and Italy in Libya) have had an edge, especially via arms sales, but as a bloc Europe has been an economic heavyweight in its own right. The EU has promoted commercial relations, dispensed important humanitarian, reconstruction and development assistance, and pushed for economic integration and democratic reform.

A complicating factor is the absence of a unified European foreign policy. Member states pursue their individual interests in MENA, and in so doing often work at cross-purposes. Their diverging policies toward the region's crises and conflicts undermine the possibility of effective solutions while at the same time undermining the EU as an institution with a coherent approach.¹¹⁴

Europe's strategic interests are energy security, political stability enabling access to markets and limiting the fallout from the region's crises. The main European players, the UK, France, and Germany, have responded separately and differently to the migrant/refugee crisis and the jihadist threat, and at times have found themselves on different sides of conflicts, and at variance with stated EU positions. In Libya, Italy and France, in particular, have acted at cross-purposes. In Yemen, the EU played a constructive role in assisting impartial UN mediation, but its efforts were undermined by member states, the UK and France, in particular, who sided with the Saudi-led coalition, provided it with arms and helped it obtain a one-sided UN Security Coun-

¹¹² Interviews, Moscow, December 2017.

¹¹³ Interview, EU officials, Brussels, April 2017.

¹¹⁴ Joost Hiltermann, “Europe's Middle East myopia”, *Politico*, 12 August 2015.

cil resolution (Resolution 2216) in April 2015.¹¹⁵ In Libya, the UK, France and Italy have not coordinated their actions and interventions; this has not contributed to UN efforts to bring about a government of national accord accepted by all key players.¹¹⁶

Two other, related, problems stand out: short-termism and overly militarised responses. On the military front, the EU has tended to follow Washington's lead, and its member states joined the U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria. While this was understandable, one should question the single-minded pursuit of this strategic objective at the expense of addressing other conflict drivers. Moreover, military action in Iraq and Syria has been conducted outside an overarching strategic framework that anticipates post-conflict stabilisation and peacebuilding requirements. One example is unquestioned military support of local allies, such as certain Kurdish parties,¹¹⁷ while neglecting to address Sunni Arab grievances. The scourge of ISIS can be eliminated only through a strategy of helping Iraqis rebuild their destroyed towns and institutions based on principles of inclusivity and participation.

The need to show short-term deliverables (including and especially military ones) to impatient parliaments and publics determines resource allocation and militates against MENA conflict prevention efforts that in the medium to long term could be a great deal more effective in tackling current threats. Indeed, short-term fixes could even undermine that goal and thus harm European states' strategic interests in MENA. For example, the eagerness with which European states, particularly Italy, have sought to stem the migrant flow through Libya, while understandable, stands out in contrast to their reluctance to tackle the more important longer-term objectives of finding a political solution to the Libyan conflict and stabilising the economic and security situation. Addressing these issues together offers the best solution for both ensuring migrants' safety and discouraging them from undertaking the hazardous journey to Europe.¹¹⁸

Finally, to be an active mediator, the EU should be open to speaking to all parties, even if it profoundly disagrees with a government's or group's political outlook. There are exceptions, of course: groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS that refuse to engage in politics are beyond the pale, even if dialogue on humanitarian issues ought to be considered on a case-by-case basis. But mainstream Islamists who support participatory politics and the peaceful rotation of power have become an inescapable part of the MENA landscape. The EU's inability or unwillingness to engage with such

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°170, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4 November 2016. In mid-2017, for instance, tensions arose between France and Italy after the newly elected French president, Emmanuel Macron, invited General Khalifa Haftar, eastern Libya's strongman, to Paris alongside the country's recognised prime minister, Fayed Serraj, in an attempt to broker a peace agreement. Italy, whose main interests in Libya are in the west, viewed with suspicion France's overtures to Haftar, its military aid to his forces in Benghazi in 2016, and its close relations with his key patrons, Egypt and the UAE.

¹¹⁷ When German weapons surfaced in fighting between the KDP and YPG in Sinjar in May 2017, Germany told the KDP not to use Germany-supplied weapons in non-ISIS-related conflicts; reportedly, the KDP complied. Germany supplied military assistance to Iraqi federal forces as well. Interview, German official, Berlin, July 2017.

¹¹⁸ See Crisis Group Commentary, "Quick Fixes Won't Block Libya's People Smugglers for Long", 14 September 2017; and Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°179, *How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border*, 31 July 2017.

groups to explore ways out of conflict pushes them to become major spoilers blocking the way toward a negotiated settlement and encourages younger members to choose the path of violence.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Egypt is a case in point, with the Muslim Brotherhood, repressed with unprecedented violence after the July 2013 coup, finding no support in Europe and, increasingly, no interlocutors despite the group's continued political relevance in Egypt and elsewhere. Interviews, Muslim Brotherhood members, EU officials, 2015-2017. See Crisis Group Commentary, "Keeping Egypt's Politics on the Agenda", 30 April 2017.

IV. How to Tackle the Growing Conflict Tangle

A. *Intersecting Conflict Lines and External Interventions*

A bird's eye view of MENA suggests a region with violent conflicts raging almost everywhere, crossing natural and human-made boundaries, slicing up countries, ravaging cities, killing countless people, generating population flows and drawing in new – panicked and/or opportunistic – actors.¹²⁰ While the region was never without armed conflict, the extent to which it is affected by violence today is unprecedented.¹²¹ This is because locally generated conflicts have jumped borders and in some cases started to bleed into one another. In the process, original drivers are being subsumed and disguised by new grievances and objectives, championed by upstart conflict actors and packaged in appropriately modified self-serving narratives. As actors multiply and fragment, they engage in novel, at times surprising, alliances of convenience based on temporary convergences of interest, and accordingly are compelled to dilute their political ideologies to attract fresh manpower outside their immediate group and effectively rule the territories they acquire.¹²²

As conflicts from separate clusters intersect, they mutate, yet their original drivers and primary actors persist. If we fail to address both new and old, with a full understanding of their individual genealogy and internal logic, we risk tackling symptoms instead of causes, aggravating rather than alleviating conflicts, and will fail in helping local actors design workable conflict settlements.

This complex situation is compounded by external interventions of whatever type and however motivated. Harmful unintended consequences are likely, as positive impacts in one cluster could cause adverse effects in another. Examples in MENA usually relate to outside actors' two top priorities: fighting al-Qaeda and ISIS, and stemming the flow of migrants and refugees. Western states' (but also Russia's) overly securitised counter-terrorism policies have led to the muscling up of local actors who confront jihadists while also pursuing their own agendas based on how they see their primary interests within their own conflict cluster. This inflames local conflicts and thus complicates policy planning.

¹²⁰ Not incidentally, the persistence of violent conflict indefinitely postpones the possibility of addressing imperative questions such as climate change and economic reform.

¹²¹ Some have drawn historical parallels with the Thirty Years' War and its ravages in Europe (1618-1648). Michael Axworthy and Patrick Milton, "A Westphalian Peace for the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, 10 October 2016; and Pascal Daudin, "The Thirty Years' War: The First Modern War?", *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, 23 May 2017.

¹²² This is true to some extent for the YPG/PYD and the Nusra Front (later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) in Syria. In Libya, the manner in which various groups responded to the emergence of ISIS and its seizure of the city of Sirte in 2015 illustrates these contradictory impulses. Sirte, a city associated with the fallen (stridently anti-Islamist) Qadhafi regime, was isolated and disarmed after 2011, and initially found in ISIS a protector from its revolutionary enemies. More generally, the mainstream actors in the Libyan conflict have sought alliances of convenience at regular intervals, particularly in areas distant from the conflict's main east-west axis. See Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°178, *How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, 24 July 2017; and Crisis Group Report, *How Libya's Fezzan*, op. cit.

1. Example: Syria

Although conflict clusters have interacted and intersected before – witness the 1982 creation of Hizbollah in response to Israeli actions in southern Lebanon (II) but enabled by the Iranian revolution (III) – the collapse of several Arab states in the wake of the failed uprisings accelerated and magnified the process. The Syrian war is unique in that it embodies the convergence of all five clusters: the 2011 challenge to the regime (V, based on I) drew in Iran and Hizbollah (II and III), as well as pro-Brotherhood Turkey and Qatar, which compete with Saudi Arabia and the UAE (IV); the war has fomented intra-Sunni radicalisation, allowing al-Qaeda and ISIS to thrive (IV), turning a popular revolt into an increasingly sectarian-tinged regional proxy war (III), while Syrian Kurds, aided by the PKK, have been emboldened to make self-rule demands (I). To top it off, the rise of jihadists provoked military intervention by the U.S. and its Western allies; the threat of Assad falling drew in Russia; and the PKK's progress in northern Syria, through its local affiliates, triggered Turkish intervention (I).

Intersecting conflict clusters compounded by external interventions produce strange bedfellows. The U.S., which along with the EU and Turkey deems the PKK a terrorist organisation, has worked in close cooperation with the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the YPG, to drive ISIS out of northern Syria. This has shaken the Turkish establishment, which had taken Turkey's relationship with Western states and its NATO membership for granted. In response, Ankara stepped up its support for Syrian rebels, including jihadist elements with whose ideology it profoundly disagrees, in pursuit of its additional goal of pushing back against the YPG's territorial advances. In other words, it deployed a Cluster IV adversary against what it saw as its primary threat: a Cluster I enemy.

What these intersecting clusters imply is that reaching a Syrian settlement today will be more elusive than it would have been to resolve the original conflict, which was “merely” the popular rejection of an autocratic regime. That basic confrontation (citizens vs Assad) remains and will need to be addressed in a future political transition to produce a stable arrangement based on a new social contract and constitution (V). Other issues will need to be tackled as part of a larger settlement, or compartmentalised and dealt with individually. For example, the Kurdish question in Syria will need to be folded into a political transition as a constitutional matter, but may first require a separate arrangement between Turkey and the PKK (I) – ie outside Syria.¹²³

The matter of Iran and Hizbollah's presence in Syria is even knottier. These two players will remain for the foreseeable future; how they profile themselves (level of sophistication of weapons supplied to Hizbollah) and where they deploy their forces (near the Golan?) may determine whether a new Israel-Hizbollah war breaks out, this time fought in Syria as well as in Lebanon (II + III). If instead a political transition takes place, the question of who negotiates with the regime will partly be determined by how the Turkey/Qatar vs Saudi Arabia/UAE rivalry plays out: will Syrian

¹²³ Of course, the Kurdish question in Syria could be “resolved” in an altogether different fashion as well, namely if a resurgent Assad regime re-imposes itself on the Kurdish region. Such an eventuality could take different forms, as yet unpredictable. See Sam Heller, “The signal in Syria's noise”, *War on the Rocks*, 30 June 2017.

Brotherhood-affiliated groups get a seat at the table (IV)? Finally, a successful political process will hinge on whether global powers are satisfied: for the U.S. and Europe this means defeating the transnational jihadists and organising a transition that culminates in Assad's departure; for Russia, it signifies regime preservation, defeating jihadists and a Moscow-managed transition.

2. Other examples from MENA

The same logic applies in other MENA conflicts: actors look at their current opportunities as well as their longstanding claims and want to use their new circumstances to satisfy these claims or at least avoid additional harm. Examples:

□ **Iran's ascendancy:** Saudi Arabia asserts that Iran has no business interfering in Arab states' internal affairs, certainly not by exporting its *velayet-e fakih* governing model across Shiite populations (Cluster III), including those in Syria and Lebanon.¹²⁴ Yet, Iran's support of Hizbollah and the Assad regime is driven primarily by its forward-defence strategy to counter a threat it perceives as emanating from Israel (II), not by the mere presence of a Shiite population in southern Lebanon, or by its relationship with Saudi Arabia, which it does not view as a dangerous foe. (Moreover, if it has had any intention of exporting its political model, this has been a signal failure.) Likewise, Turkey sees Iranian moves in Syria and Iraq as a threat to its interests (I) because these actions bring Iranian proxies close to the Turkish borders, whereas for Iran, Turkey is not an adversary. In short, the Iran-Israel standoff has dragged Saudi Arabia and Turkey into the melee – each for reasons based on its own historical development and not necessarily on the same side.

Iran's presence in Iraq has nothing to do with Israel and everything to do with the aftermath of their 1980s conflict (the Iran-Iraq Cluster III war) and the opportunity presented by the 2003 U.S. intervention to keep Iraq weak (a non-threat) and under the control of Shiite Islamist parties and associated militias, Iran's nominal allies.¹²⁵ Saudi Arabia views this as a direct threat to its security. In other words, Tehran's need to protect its "near-abroad" is perpetuating its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which deems Iran's presence in Iraq as Tehran's revenge for Iraq's Saudi-backed 1980 invasion. This has played out as a sectarian-tinged Sunni-vs-Shiite conflict in Iraq (III). That rivalry has spilled into the Kurdish region, with Saudi Arabia placing itself, along with Turkey, on the side of Barzani's KDP (until Barzani's referendum strategy backfired in October 2017) and with Iran maintaining working relations with the Suleimaniya-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the PUK's breakaway, the pro-reform Gorran movement, as well as the PKK (I).¹²⁶

Any discussion of Iran's role in the region will have to take these intersecting dimensions into account. Iran could take steps to persuade Turkey and especially Saudi Arabia that it does not have hegemonic ambitions for the region. This

¹²⁴ Interview, Saudi scholar, Berlin, May 2016. The Iranian response to this is, according to an Iranian official: "Arabs say, 'Iran can't be in Arab space'. But it wasn't my aunt who invaded Iran [in 1980]". Interview, December 2017.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Iran in Iraq*, op. cit.

¹²⁶ On Saudi relations with the KDP: Interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, May 2017.

could involve confidence-building steps to reduce tensions in areas where there is no direct relationship with Iran's primary struggle against Israel (for example, in Yemen and Bahrain) or where this struggle will not be significantly affected (in northern Iraq and northern Syria).¹²⁷ In return, Saudi Arabia could help lower the temperature by moderating its anti-Iran rhetoric and initiate a high-level dialogue with Tehran over the two countries' respective roles in the region. Moreover, to manage the conflict between Iran and Israel and mitigate the chances of a dangerous escalation, signatories of the nuclear deal – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – must continue to implement the accord in both letter and spirit.

- **The Yemen war:** In Yemen, Saudi Arabia intervened to counter the alliance between the Huthis and the former autocratic leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was eased out of power by the GCC following the 2011 uprising (V), and killed by the Huthis in December 2017. Riyadh sees the Huthis as Iranian proxies and finds their success *as such* intolerable (III).¹²⁸ Sectarianism did not drive these events (there was no Shiite vs Sunni narrative in Yemen until the war) but is beginning to as local combatants increasingly label opponents in sectarian terms and local dynamics become intertwined with the more intractable Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict.¹²⁹ Saudi Arabia's main partner in the Yemen war is the UAE, which, however, objects to the role of Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood's local spinoff and a significant political player (IV).¹³⁰ This weakens the GCC's military confrontation with the Huthis and could complicate attempts to construct a post-conflict power-sharing government in Sanaa. It is only when the regional standoff between Iran and Saudi Arabia eases and when Gulf states put aside their misgivings about Islah that negotiations about the country's future can succeed and lead to a settlement that addresses the thorny questions raised by the 2011 upheaval (V based on I).¹³¹

Western military support compounds the problem and appears self-defeating. The U.S. siding with, and along with the UK and France providing weapons to, Saudi Arabia and the UAE has helped intensify a Cluster III war whose primary beneficiary may prove to be al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (IV), which is fighting on the same side as the Saudi-led coalition without being part of it. The conflict is increasingly unlikely to result in the type of stable political transition that these same Western actors should pursue with greater vigour (V). A more nuanced approach to arms transfers (providing defensive weapons only and linking weapons use to laws-of-war compliance) and more dexterous use of diploma-

¹²⁷ Yet Iran seems inclined toward triumphalism in Iraq (as Qods Force Commander Qasem Soleimani strides across the land his allied forces have wrested from ISIS in western Syria) and, generally, overreach in the region, moving into areas not required for legitimate self-defence.

¹²⁸ Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen", op. cit.; and Hiltermann and Longley Alley, "The Huthis Are Not Hezbollah", op. cit.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit.

¹³⁰ After the forces of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh broke with the Huthis in December 2017 (a decision that precipitated a clash in Sanaa during which the Huthis killed Saleh), Saudi Arabia and the UAE initiated a rapprochement with Islah as a way of strengthening the anti-Huthi alliance. Al Arabiya, 14 December 2017.

¹³¹ Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit.

cy and other forms of soft power (inclusive of all conflict parties) could provide a face-saving way for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to extricate themselves from the war and enable a ceasefire and peace talks.

- **Instability in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia:** Regime collapse in North Africa (V) unleashed internal power struggles in which the Muslim Brotherhood became a pivotal player (IV). This triggered a response from Saudi Arabia (in Egypt) and the UAE (in Egypt and Libya) – faraway battlegrounds for actors that only rarely engage in this type of muscular (or outright military) intervention.¹³²

In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE fomented the 2013 anti-Brotherhood coup that brought General Sisi to power (IV), overturning the changes ushered in by the popular uprising (V). In Libya, the conflict has not been ideological but a battle over access to resources and power and, more broadly, about a new social contract (I and V). Yet Libyan actors have adopted a pro- and anti-Brotherhood discourse that fits into, and feeds on, the regional Cluster IV contest between Turkey/Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE. In Tunisia, the Saudi/Emirati axis has tried to nudge Tunisia out from Qatar's financial embrace through a combination of incentives and intimidation aimed at reducing the influence of An-Nahda (IV).¹³³

The attempted stigmatisation and exclusion of the Brotherhood from political participation and governing arrangements in the region is short-sighted, given the movement's significant popular support and role as a buffer against jihadism. For things to settle down in Libya, the UAE and Egypt, rather than trying to stamp out or marginalise the group, will need to allow Libyans to carve out a viable and proportional role for it. They should also help the UN, in concert with other states (jointly, the "Friends of Libya"), in jump-starting economic and military dialogue tracks – the main casualties of the 2015 Shkeirat process – to reach a sustainable settlement that addresses the root problem: reform of the state and its relations with citizens (V).

An-Nahda in Tunisia showed the way after the 2013 coup; what it and fellow Tunisian parties did then should stand as a model for a deeply divided region.¹³⁴ So far, the power-sharing arrangement has survived, despite mounting challenges that trace back to questions raised in 2011 (V). Eventually, North African countries, each in its own way, will need to address such questions without outside interference. Conversely, the Egyptian and Libyan branches of the Brotherhood and An-Nahda in Tunisia (which has already distinguished itself formally from the Brotherhood) may have to reassure the UAE and Saudi Arabia that they do not seek to interfere in the two countries' domestic affairs by backing local variants of the Brotherhood or like-minded Islamist movements there.

- **Saudi Arabia/UAE vs Qatar:** Intra-GCC competition came to a head in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed a boycott on Qatar, making a series of demands regarding its alleged support of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.

¹³² The 1960s Yemen war saw Saudi Arabia and Egypt spar.

¹³³ Youssef Cherif, "The Gulf crisis threatens Tunisia's stability", Atlantic Council, 8 November 2017.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Briefing N°37, *The Tunisian Exception: Success and Limits of Consensus*, 5 June 2014.

The crisis illustrated that when two conflict clusters (III and IV) collide, parties that are trying to straddle the divide may come to face a dilemma: by issuing ultimatums to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may have intended to force Qatar to choose between declaring loyalty to them or enduring sanctions for maintaining ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, Saudi Arabia itself has supported Brotherhood affiliates in the past, including in Yemen.¹³⁵ In sum, the crisis has shown that the GCC is a good deal less than the sum of its parts; each country continues to pursue a foreign policy driven by domestic interest. That inability to form a common front against Iran because of differences over the Brotherhood is sustaining Iran's influence.¹³⁶

- **An anti-Iran alliance:** It is hard to conceive how Saudi Arabia could engage in an anti-Iran alliance with Israel (III) without Israel first making genuine progress toward a settlement with the Palestinians (II), lest popular anger throughout the region further undermine the Saudi claim to leadership – and perhaps its stability. This may be why the Saudi leadership mooted the possibility of a new peace initiative in November 2017.¹³⁷ Yet while a serious initiative would be critical for the well-being of not only Palestinians and Israelis but also the region as a whole, the current chances of success are slim.¹³⁸ What remained of the peace process was further undermined by President Trump's December 2017 unilateral decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which Saudi Arabia had little choice but to condemn, given the sensitivity of this issue in the Arab street.¹³⁹

Arab-Israeli peace-making requires a sustained diplomatic approach, not application of a mere band-aid for reasons unrelated to curing the patient. Recurrent failure to effect peace deepens cynicism about the possibility of a workable settlement and allows the conflict's multiplying wounds to continue infecting the region.

Another complicating factor in any anti-Iran alliance would be Egypt. Sisi would be reluctant to give it anything more than his token support, despite his reliance on critical Saudi financial aid and Israeli military support against jihadists in the Sinai. This is for three main reasons: 1) he cannot afford for Egypt to be seen as a Saudi lackey, especially after his concession on the Red Sea islands; 2) he is open to being viewed as anti-Iran and anti-Hizbollah, but only to a limited extent, due to Iran's relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Gaza and their direct impact on vital Egyptian interests in Sinai, as well as the need to reassert Cairo's autonomy from, and leverage over, Riyadh, with which it has histori-

¹³⁵ Saudi Arabia supported Islah against the Huthis until the 2013 Sisi coup in Egypt; it then turned against Islah – but only for a year until the Huthis rushed into Sanaa and removed the Islah-backed government. See Gabriele vom Bruck, "Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia as anti-hero?", *Le Monde diplomatique*, 27 June 2017.

¹³⁶ For example, the Saudi/UAE blockade on Qatar has closed off three sides of the country from access to the outside world. The only remaining channel is toward Iran, thereby increasing Qatar's reliance on its neighbour across the Gulf.

¹³⁷ Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "The upstart Saudi prince who's throwing caution to the winds", *The New York Times*, 14 November 2017.

¹³⁸ See Nathan Thrall, *The Only Language They Understand* (New York, 2017).

¹³⁹ "Saudi Arabia condemns Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as capital of Israel", Reuters, 7 December 2017.

cally competed for regional leadership; and 3) Sisi the autocrat has not concealed his admiration for Assad, Saudi Arabia's enemy (III), for successfully stifling a popular uprising (V) and preventing a Sunni Islamist coalition from coming to power (IV), a scenario far more threatening to Sisi than Iran's role in Syria.¹⁴⁰

B. *Concentric Circles in Reverse*

If conflicts start locally, draw in regional actors to prop up faltering allies or proxies in resulting power vacuums, and in turn attract intervention by global powers as these regional players are stalemated, the logical way to tackle these conflicts is to reverse the process. Only when Russia and the U.S. reach a shared understanding of the Syrian conflict will regional actors have the freedom from external manipulation to tackle their disputes; and only when regional powers stop interfering will local actors reach the measure of alignment or shared vision needed to settle their conflicts.

Put differently, outside powers cannot solve local conflicts, but local actors cannot find solutions if outside powers do not let them. This should not mean that efforts at resolving local conflicts should be postponed until global and regional powers find new ways to accommodate their competing interests. Much important groundwork can be done in the meantime. But realistically, no material progress will be reached unless and until global and regional conditions have become less inopportune.

In Syria, Russia and the U.S. have attempted a modus vivendi short of military cooperation, which took the form of "de-conflicting" air operations. This worked up to a point. Russia de facto controlled most of the skies from September 2015 onward, and was quite content to see the U.S.-led coalition attack ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (later renamed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham). Problems arose when pro-regime forces approached bases of U.S.-trained rebels, such as at Al-Tanf in May 2017: when U.S. forces bombed the advancing column, Moscow briefly suspended the de-conflicting arrangement in what appeared to be mainly a symbolic act of protest.¹⁴¹

Shared enmity toward jihadists is one area of common ground between the U.S. and Russia. Syria's territorial integrity and preservation of state institutions are others. But waning U.S. interest in a political transition and growing anti-Russian sentiment in the Washington establishment over Moscow's role in the 2016 presidential elections may prevent cooperation. The U.S. has stayed largely out of the Astana process and the de-escalation scheme agreed there. This experience shows that when there is convergence between the global powers, or one of them steps back, things can begin to move on the diplomatic front with the main regional stakeholders.¹⁴²

The U.S.' receding interest in shaping events in Syria and the Middle East generally provides an opportunity for the EU to step in and play a role it has resisted playing, in part because it long recognised that the MENA region has been first and

¹⁴⁰ See Feras Abu-Helal, "Explaining the Egyptian-Iranian 'rapprochement'", *Middle East Monitor*, 9 November 2016; and Eman Ragab, "Egypt's relations with Iran", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 23 July 2015.

¹⁴¹ Moscow had suspended the de-confliction arrangement one time before, following a U.S. missile strike at a Syrian airfield in response to the regime's 4 April 2017 chemical attack on Khan Sheikhouh.

¹⁴² Leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey met in Sochi on 22 November 2017, announcing agreement on holding a conference aimed at finding a peaceful settlement of the Syrian war. President Putin met with President Assad shortly before the meeting of the three heads of state. "Russia, Turkey and Iran propose conference on postwar Syria's future", *The New York Times*, 22 November 2017.

foremost a U.S. strategic priority – for good or for ill – even if the stakes were high for the EU as well. The EU can now turn its relative political absence from MENA into an asset: while in the region's eyes European states may be tainted by their colonial past, their role has long been superseded by U.S. global dominance (and before that by the U.S.-Soviet Cold War competition). The EU's political irrelevance has allowed it to accumulate credentials of relative impartiality; it also has the economic power to shape developments, though in military might the union continues to play third fiddle to the U.S. and Russia.

This offers the EU an opportunity to step up to the plate, use its good offices to lay the diplomatic groundwork for political breakthroughs between conflict actors and focus on short-term measures that do not require its 27 member-states' stamp of approval. While the EU still lacks the capacity to rise above its political constraints, it should at least do more to target its considerable resources toward relieving the plight of populations under stress, especially in Yemen, and of refugees, with a focus on children's education. It should also nudge authoritarian regimes toward reform, especially of the security sector, help strengthen rule-of-law institutions, do more to support UN-led mediation efforts to de-escalate violent conflicts, and use its economic leverage vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia to persuade the two sides to engage in dialogue. In pursuing such an approach, the EU should ensure that money spent does not detract from but instead contributes to its long-term goals of conflict prevention and stabilisation.

In the current world order/disorder, the UN retains a residual yet non-negligible role through its various agencies and mechanisms. A political stalemate among Security Council members, especially Russia and the U.S., has encouraged unilateral steps outside the UN's framework. This is the case in Syria, where Russia replaced Geneva talks with the more limited Astana track. Groupings such as the Friends of Libya or Friends of Syria have proved to be unwieldy structures whose effectiveness is accordingly limited.¹⁴³ Weak, insufficiently supported mediation efforts by the UN Secretary-General's special representatives contribute to the problem. Yet the Libya case highlights the possibility of making headway at a local level when global and regional powers are more or less aligned.¹⁴⁴

Yet the UN still enjoys a reputation for neutrality and has accumulated technical expertise it can bring to the table. The same can be said for regional multilateral institutions, such as the OSCE. And while the goals must be modest given the complexity of today's crises, functioning multilateral institutions could still play a critical role in at least de-escalating individual conflicts in the absence of some degree of international or regional convergence. In MENA, unfortunately, the Arab League and GCC, both suffering from severe internal splits, have proved incapable of playing an effective mediating role in most of the region's conflicts.

The fading from the scene of a predominant arbiter, such as the U.S., which through its monopoly on global violence was able to give a decisive turn to events, endows the regional level with greater importance. When conflict clusters intersect, it is tempting to explore the possibility of "grand bargains": regional approaches that

¹⁴³ Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up", *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Speech by Ghassan Salamé, special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Libya, Rome MED 2017 Conference, Rome, 2 December 2017.

acknowledge their interconnectedness. Officials in the Obama administration apparently contemplated this in the Syria and Yemen wars, seeing in both the hands of Iran and Saudi Arabia – more of Iran's in Syria and Saudi Arabia's in Yemen. Iran-Saudi competition suggested Yemen could not be solved without solving Syria. The idea was to strike a bargain in which Iran would withdraw support from the Huthis and Saudi Arabia would do the same with its Syrian rebel allies. While such a deal may have appeared attractive, it failed to consider the multiplicity of players in the Syrian war compared to the Yemeni one. Saudi Arabia opposed the idea, saying that because Iran had no business being in Yemen, the kingdom would not pay for its departure.¹⁴⁵ No major stakeholder can be excluded from the conflict resolution process if a peace settlement is to be sustainable.

C. *Policy Principles Guiding Conflict Management*

It is fanciful to believe that the U.S., the EU or its member states could decisively affect the spiralling conflicts in the MENA region, except to make things worse. Yet Western states cannot afford *not* to pay attention to a region where they have vital interests: the free flow of oil, the swell of migrants placing heavy pressures on societies and economies (even if cheap labour is desperately needed in most Western countries with their aging populations) and conflicts that inspire disaffected European youth to join a barely defined jihadist cause and wreak havoc in population centres. The challenge is to devise policies that address these concerns without making things worse – without magnifying threats that might be manageable unless mis-handled. Global powers can and should be part of the solution as long as they understand they have been, and continue to be, part of the problem.

Before treatment, diagnosis. To ensure that policy responses are tailored to the situation and have a positive impact, external actors need not only to be well-informed of rapidly evolving developments but also to have an accurate real-time analysis of key drivers and actors as they change. Step one should always be to determine the full range of variables at play, take these into account in policy planning and ensure that intervention does not make things worse by pursuing priorities that do not reflect local civilian needs but deepen political divides. A historically-based framework for understanding conflict lines is critical to such an approach: policymakers are liable to do further harm if they fail to understand the original drivers of today's conflicts.

Above we have dissected ongoing conflicts to provide policymakers with the analytical basis for fashioning appropriate and workable responses. That work should be ongoing and is not the purpose of this report; conflict-specific Crisis Group reports are far more helpful. But regardless of intersecting conflicts, there are certain principles that policymakers should observe in formulating policy responses to any actual or potential armed conflict. These are primarily focused on external actors in keeping with this report's concentric circles approach.

In the following, we will separate out hot conflicts from pre-conflict situations (the "states still standing") in proposing policy approaches and principles. These might be obvious, but they bear repeating, as they are often observed only in the breach.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group communication, former senior U.S. official, November 2017.

1. In active conflicts: do no harm

The key principles in addressing conflicts are:

- ❑ **Do no (further) harm.** Providing unquestioned, unconditional support to local allies who are pursuing their own agendas may worsen conflicts or create new ones down the line. Do not take sides, as this will deepen polarisation. An overly militarised response to a perceived threat could aggravate, not alleviate it. It could keep open existing wounds (for example, Sunni grievances about Western double standards in Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine and elsewhere) in the attempt to remove an irritant (jihadists), thereby fuelling further radicalisation. Arms transfers justified by counter-terrorism policies rather than by the recipient/buyer's legitimate self-defence often do more harm than good. They are a particularly insidious form of external intervention – by capitalising on the suffering of others – that is akin to shooting oneself in the foot, *if* the objective is to reduce the drivers of conflict and mitigate its broader impact. By sustaining conflict, they contribute to donor frustration over development aid's lack of impact.
- ❑ **Prevent things from getting worse.** Help actors find ways to halt and reverse escalatory cycles by focusing on a war's particularly inflammatory components. These may include officially sponsored sectarian rhetoric and campaigns of active disinformation, including via cyberwarfare.¹⁴⁶ Without efforts to remove the sectarian dimension from the Iranian-Saudi rivalry to expose the power competition that drives it, Sunnis and Shiites will undergo further radicalisation and polarisation, with adverse, possibly fatal, consequences for what remains of stability in MENA. In the absence of clear solutions, and with the prospect of armed conflict becoming endemic to the region, the focus should be on containment by preventing existing conflicts to further haemorrhage refugees, fuel jihadism and invite external military intervention.
- ❑ **Identify areas of common ground between global actors as a basis for cooperation.** This would help de-escalate global tensions, which in turn would allow regional actors to find ways to de-escalate as well. It could serve as a basis for “friends of” groups that could effectively coordinate common efforts to end a given conflict.
- ❑ **Explore the possibility of reaching a shared vision** with key MENA actors of what a tolerable, workable spheres-of-influence arrangement for the region could be. This would create space for states and people to find ways to end local conflicts.
- ❑ **Prioritise the establishment of de-confliction mechanisms** – both military and political – for fighting parties as war continues. One such mechanism could be a hotline allowing for urgent communication; another, ad hoc crisis cells composed of representatives of the principal actors to defuse tensions as they

¹⁴⁶ Kristina Kausch, “Cheap Havoc: How Cyber-Geopolitics Will destabilize the Middle East”, German Marshall Fund, November 2017.

escalate. The absence of such channels raises the risk of accidental clashes that could escalate into all-out confrontations.¹⁴⁷

- ❑ **Identify areas in which de-escalation can be accomplished.** These could serve as confidence-building steps toward a broader effort to achieve ceasefires and political talks. In the case of Iran's regional actions, such areas could be in Yemen, Bahrain, northern Iraq and northern Syria; for Saudi Arabia, it could be in Syria and Yemen; for Turkey, Egypt and the UAE in Libya. For Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it might mean addressing the damaging role of their respective media outlets; for the Muslim Brotherhood, toning down the incendiary rhetoric of some spokespeople.
- ❑ **Carefully design pledges of reconstruction aid.** Such pledges should encourage an end to armed conflict and pursuit of a managed and inclusive political transition.
- ❑ **Apply military pressure cautiously.** Its objective should be to enforce cease-fire compliance, bring parties to the table or put them on the defensive and marginalise them until they suffer major defections. Military pressure should only be applied as part of an overall political strategy that takes the full array of drivers and actors into account and understands how conflict clusters intersect and interact.
- ❑ **Stabilise the patient once a ceasefire is in place.** Stem the bleeding from an open wound left by conflict – for example, the cities of Mosul and Raqqa and their environs – by applying a tourniquet: a stabilisation force in which local security actors play a prominent policing role and external forces that participated in the area's retaking provide perimeter security. Significant risk exists that conflict cycles will continue if one external conqueror/liberator simply replaces another.
- ❑ **Provide humanitarian assistance that is politically (and in every other way) colour-blind.** Serve people, not parties. If access is limited by certain groups, try to strike a balance by also aiding damaged areas outside of those groups' control.
- ❑ **Enable inclusive political transitions.** In post-conflict areas that have achieved a measure of stability, efforts should be made to restart politics and governance. These should be coordinated with the UN, which in most cases should take the lead. Instead of staging early elections, which could empower the most radical elements and re-inflate a raw wound, help put in place an interim governing mechanism based on power-sharing between a broad cross-section of local political players who reflect the concerned community's diversity. Encourage Track-1.5 and Track-2 approaches to lay the foundations for effective mediation.
- ❑ **Create mechanisms to ensure transitional justice.** These are needed to lay the basis for political and intercommunal reconciliation. Do not repeat one of

¹⁴⁷ See Crisis Group, "The Iran-U.S. Trigger List", <https://www.crisisgroup.org/taxonomy/term/2141>.

the most egregious mistakes of post-2003 Iraq, where victor's justice helped set off a new cycle of retribution and conflict.¹⁴⁸

- ❑ **Enlist the technical assistance of experienced neutral actors**, such as the UN secretary-general's office, various UN agencies and the ICRC, according to their areas of expertise and mandate. Despite a record of foibles, the UN Department of Political Affairs is still the best placed to lead mediation efforts. Nongovernmental organisations specialised in conflict mediation can help lay important groundwork with "difficult" parties.
- ❑ **Allocate sufficient resources** to efforts for ending conflicts, post-conflict stabilisation, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction and post-conflict peacebuilding.

2. For states still standing: help renegotiate social contracts

To prevent the breakdown of fragile states – the "states still standing" – the principles are similar, though with some significant differences. The key objective should be to help states build new legitimacy through revamped social contracts. The dilemma is that while it is important to support these states, lest they collapse under the weight of growing illegitimacy, their repressive systems (police brutality, torture, summary justice) are themselves partly to blame for the rise of opposition, which can feed into jihadist groups. Entrenched regimes shun externally-proposed reform measures, which they say can open the way for radicalisation, when it is precisely the absence of reform that radicalises.

How to thread this needle? Here are the foundations of a policy approach:

- ❑ **Do no (further) harm** through overly securitised responses to threats. These may provide short-term solutions to eternal actors' problems but aggravate domestic challenges and may produce the opposite of the desired outcome. Aid for the security sector should be aimed primarily at reform and at broadening the concept of security to encompass human security.
- ❑ **Base "treatment" on accurate diagnosis.** If the principal driver of the Arab uprisings was a perceived and deeply felt sense of social injustice (Cluster V), then solutions must be tailored accordingly and not be based on technical fixes only, such as improving job creation. In providing technical assistance, it is imperative that policymakers understand the political context into which it is delivered, and ensure that aid is appropriate to it.
- ❑ **Be modest in expectations of what positive impact can be achieved.** Is the pre-2011 model of development assistance obsolete? Can it still be applied to states still standing today? Is this debate taking place?
- ❑ **Communicate intentions clearly.** A leitmotiv of perceptions in the region regarding Western relations with MENA is the nagging question of motive: what is the real reason behind such-and-such an approach proposed or undertaken by x Western actor? Political and economic relationships require the maximum

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, op. cit.

honesty and transparency possible to counteract – as far as possible – the generation of conspiracy theories.¹⁴⁹

- ❑ **Take the time to reach insight and understanding.** Recognise and acknowledge MENA interlocutors' assumptions. Many see the West, and Western aid, through the lens of neo-imperialist designs. It may be impossible to disabuse them of such notions, but accepting that they may have a different outlook and priorities will help in identifying common-ground interests.
- ❑ **Practice, don't preach.** No public-relations campaign can effectively conceal, much less improve, bad practices. The region has long seen through Western meddling and double standards. This means avoiding counterproductive terms ("changing mindset/mentality"), ideologically loaded terms ("democratisation", "secularism", "women's empowerment"), claims of equal "partnerships" when they are profoundly and undisguisedly unequal, and use of a selective lens ("Islam", "Arab world") to view a highly diverse region. Western priorities to enable the peaceful rotation of power and strengthen good governance, the rule of law, security sector reform and women's empowerment may be better carried out through carefully designed and targeted project funding rather than enunciated explicitly as policy objectives.
- ❑ **Help societies renegotiate their social contracts.** Press for popular participation and buy-in. Do not impose blueprints, however well they may have worked elsewhere. But do draw on lessons from other post-conflict societies and share these as learning tools through various mechanisms such as Track-2 exercises.
- ❑ **Devote sufficient resources to preventive diplomacy.** Engage in early-warning exercises and scenario-planning with the participation of representatives of potential conflict actors. In other words, these exercises themselves should be designed to promote conflict prevention.
- ❑ **Appreciate and accept the presence of mainstream Islamists in MENA societies.** Designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation would backfire. It would not necessarily impel Brotherhood leaders toward violence, but it would narrow the movement's options and play into jihadist narratives that peaceful resistance and accommodation with the West are futile.¹⁵⁰
- ❑ **Help tackle transnational/cross-regional issues:** Addressing the effects of climate change, pandemics, pollution and environmental degradation, water shortages, population movements, narcotics and people trafficking – to name the most urgent – can have a salutary confidence-building impact.

¹⁴⁹ In Iraq in April 2003, a popular theory was that looting in the U.S. invasion's immediate aftermath must have been intentional on Washington's part in order to keep Iraq weak and grab its oil. Interviews, Baghdad, April 2003. U.S. triumphalism and its tone-deaf handling of Iraqis' concerns hardly helped. Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Briefing N°6, *Baghdad: A Race Against the Clock*, 11 June 2003.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016; and Crisis Group Special Report N°3, *Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid*, 22 March 2017.

- **At home: Avoid siloed decision-making.** Uncoordinated and fragmented policy formulation by Western governments ensures that different parts work at cross-purposes. An integrated “whole-of-government” approach, with careful inter-agency coordination, is absolutely instrumental to deal consistently with a given conflict and prevent adverse secondary effects, including across conflict clusters. (This is, of course, just as true for the EU and its errant member states.)

D. *Regional Actors: Develop a New Modus Vivendi*

The intervention of regional states in civil wars in their neighbourhoods ensures that these conflicts cannot be solved without first creating an environment in which peace can be pursued. Feeling empowered by their sponsors, local players aim for victory rather than settlement. How to break this vicious cycle?

Regional actors allow themselves to be sucked into local conflicts because they fear their regional rivals will outcompete them. Step one therefore should be developing a vision of regional accommodation that preserves core interests and provides space for local actors to work out issues by themselves. They will need the assistance of global powers willing to develop their own common understanding and offer mediation in various formats, i.e., the type of process that led to the Helsinki Accords in Europe and the resulting regional security framework.

Defusing tensions should be the priority, both within the GCC and between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side and Iran on the other. This will require untangling Cluster III and Cluster IV antagonisms in a situation in which the Gulf states are fearful of a Cluster V challenge. Iran and Turkey will also need to find a new accommodation (based on the Cluster I order that allowed them to coexist peacefully for a century). And there is the perennial question of Israel and its failure to integrate into the region (Cluster II).

None of these regional tensions will be resolved easily, if at all. But ongoing mediation efforts can prevent them from getting worse. Even if these do not offer the immediate prospect of a settlement, they can still lay the foundations for a settlement down the line while improving mutual communication and, perhaps, understanding. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia was not built in a day; negotiations began almost as soon as the war first broke out thirty years earlier and many issues were addressed only after the peace was signed. Trust between the fighting parties, a supposed precondition for settling MENA conflicts, was not established until decades after the war ended.¹⁵¹

E. *Local Actors: End Conflict, Rebuild, Put One's House in Order*

Efforts to bring MENA conflicts to a negotiated end should not await a new regional, much less a new global, order: the wait could be long, the human cost of war is staggering and wars' centrifugal dynamics risk further regional and global destabilisation. As in the case of regional actors, active mediation between warring parties – in Syria, Yemen or Libya – can help prevent further escalation even if it cannot end these conflicts. This is often most effectively done by a neutral actor with the requisite expertise.

¹⁵¹ See Axworthy and Milton, “A Westphalian Peace”, op. cit.

The military defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria is important, but how the post-conflict situation is managed will determine whether, when and how this Cluster III/IV conflict will reignite. Questions of stabilisation, governance and reconstruction are critical to preventing a resurgence of jihadism in areas freed from it. Without a role by local actors in all components of peacebuilding, the effort will fail, and one repressive ruler simply replace another. The logic is clear but the challenge enormous, because the actors providing security in any given post-conflict area will be the ones who shape key decisions on governance and reconstruction.

If the wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya can be brought to a lower level of violence, an important default result will be decentralised governance. After a century of centralised rule that has failed, this would be a welcome change. Decentralised forms of governance are essential to building state legitimacy based on renegotiated social contracts between citizens and rulers, yet promoting decentralisation without some central oversight would be risky. Post-conflict decentralisation will therefore need to be carefully designed, not allowed to emerge spontaneously and independently.

Outside actors have a critical role to play in ensuring that negotiating processes are participatory, so that the results enjoy broad buy-in. They can also help rulers and citizens build institutions that respect the rule of law and allow for the execution of justice – major deficits of the pre-2011 order and of the states that survived the Arab uprisings but remain dangerously fragile (Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in particular). Other challenges remain: the need to diversify economies and loosen dependency ties. The last thing the region needs is a refashioning of the old order with a new face or name.

Last but not least, the region should seek a new identity, or series of identities, that embrace its rich diversity and are not expressed in ethnic or confessional terms. This obviously is a long-term regional rebuilding challenge.

V. Conclusion

With no grand bargains or even lasting local settlements in sight, the distressing prognosis is that the world may face prolonged instability in the MENA region, spread over multiple battlefields. The current set of intersecting conflicts worsened by external interventions bears some resemblance to the Thirty Years' War in Europe, which perhaps was the first "world war" or appeared that way to Europeans: it involved their entire interconnected universe.¹⁵²

This suggests that from an international policy perspective the primary objective should be, and realistically could only be, to prevent things from getting worse. This means containing and helping parties find ways to de-escalate while providing succour to the victims, lest the world be dragged into a broader conflagration, and developing a vision for a workable future regional order via broadly participatory exercises on the level of states and populations. In medical terms: isolating and stabilising the patient, providing pain killers and other palliatives, while making sure that any initial remedial steps do not undermine the patient's eventual recovery.¹⁵³ The conceptual model proposed here needs to be applied to each conflict and crisis that exists or erupts in the MENA region. It allows policymakers intent on stemming the bleeding to start treatment with a correct diagnosis and proceed according to the most basic principle: first do no harm.

Brussels, 22 December 2017

¹⁵² Ibid.; and Daudin, "The Thirty Years' War", op. cit.

¹⁵³ The notion of "protracted conflict" and its humanitarian consequences is particularly pertinent, as presented by Daudin, "The Thirty Years' War", op. cit.