



Multilateralism

On the Search for Order in the Middle East and North Africa

Sub-Regional and Sectoral Multilateralism as an Opportunity

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To date, multilateralism has failed to establish itself as a model in the Middle East and North Africa, yet the major problems that beset the region cannot be solved by one country acting alone. Some forms of multilateral cooperation have emerged at the sub-regional level and in response to specific issues, such as security in the Persian Gulf, economic cooperation in the Maghreb, and natural gas production in the Eastern Mediterranean. Europe should support such initiatives as they have the potential to bridge the region's geopolitical divides.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the question of the future of the international order comes up against a region that has become particularly unstable in the last decade. Internally, many countries face pressure to reform due to their outdated governmental and economic models, and externally the whole regional order is in disarray. This is currently demonstrated by failing states, by frequently violent conflicts along identity lines, and by the geopolitical manoeuvring on the part of regional powers. Alliance-building, bilateralism, and the pursuit of hegemony dominate this geopolitical shake-up in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the political, social and economic crises faced by states in the region threaten their very existence, yet they cannot tackle them alone. The enduring conflicts in the region have not only consumed vital resources but, above all, allowed external actors to gain greater influence. Despite this, we should not expect to see the triumph of multilateralism. As a system of order based on principles and norms, multilateralism will not be attainable in the region as a whole in the short-to-medium term. History also teaches us that attempts to establish a comprehensive regional order have ultimately failed. However, the countries concerned could, in their own interest, establish or expand multilateral forms of cooperation in the coming years that focus on specific economic and security concerns and remain confined to smaller geographical areas (such as the Gulf, Maghreb, or Levant).

Attempts to Establish a Regional Order and Their Failure

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire a century ago, there have been attempts by external actors, states, and political movements in the region to impose their ideas of a new regional order and with it a particular form of multilateral cooperation.

As far back as World War I, France and Great Britain began this process with the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement, which carved up the Middle East into spheres of interest. After independence, attempts to integrate the region's states into the Western camp by co-opting and/or installing compliant rulers and through military alliances, such as the Baghdad Pact, ultimately failed due to the rise of Arab nationalism as a mass movement – a movement that also attracted plenty of supporters in the armies of Arab countries.

Arab nationalism was a unifying ideology that fuelled the independence movements. In the 1950s and 1960s, leaders, such as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, promoted it in the form of pan-Arabism with political ambitions that extended beyond the nation state. Nasser's pan-Arab project established anti-colonialism and rejected external alliances. It set opposition to Israel and support for the Palestinians as basic norms that most Arab regimes had to recognise along with paying at least lip service to the peaceful resolution of intra-Arab

conflicts under the auspices of the Arab League, which was founded in 1945.¹ However, as an ideology, pan-Arabism proved too weak to realise Nasser's desire for a regional order and to fulfil his political and socioeconomic promises. Saudi Arabia in particular rejected secular, republican, and socialist-inspired ideologies and positioned itself as the leader of the Arab monarchies and a counterweight to Egypt. Even the leaders of states that were ideologically closer to Nasser feared that pan-Arabism was merely a smoke-screen for the ultimate legitimisation of Egyptian hegemony, to which they would also have to submit. Pan-Arab experiments such as the unification of Egypt and Syria (1958 to 1961) came to nothing. Instead of pan-Arab integration, a multipolar state system was consolidated from the 1970s onwards. This was given a basic institutional framework, for instance within the setting of regular Arab League summits and was managed with varying degrees of success.²

Since the 1970s, political Islam has been gradually strengthened by groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and state actors, such as Saudi Arabia, and has been directed against secular systems of rule.³ The return of religion has led to further destabilisation at both national and regional levels. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, this was further exacerbated by the sectarian conflict between Shiites and Sunnis.⁴

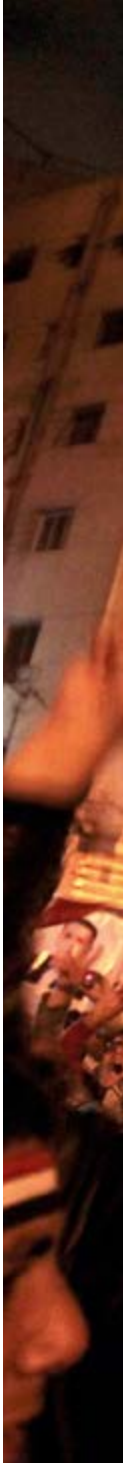
In the 1990s, the European Union initiated the Barcelona Process, an external attempt to create multilateral forms of cooperation in the Mediterranean region. The aim of the initiative was to establish an area of peace, stability, and shared prosperity through political, economic, and civil society partnerships in the Mediterranean region. However, this initiative also fell short of expectations because the Arab rulers refused to accept democratic changes, and economic reforms were only partially implemented or led to social problems. Stalemates and setbacks in the bilateral Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine also caused the stagnation of the multilateral Barcelona Process and its successor project, the Union for the Mediterranean, which was founded in 2008.⁵

America's ideas for establishing a democratic political order in the region also proved unviable. After the 9/11 attacks, the US policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran was replaced by a strategy of democratisation through externally imposed regime change. This approach was used in Iraq in 2003 and failed dramatically. The Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown by a US-led invasion, but the country was not stabilised and remains beset by regional power struggles and jihadist militias.

Any hope that democracy would sweep through the region was brought to an abrupt halt by the civil wars in Syria and Libya.

In 2011, the mass demonstrations that became known as the Arab Spring and the calls for political and socio-economic reform that were common to many of the protests briefly gave the impression that the Middle East and North Africa were on the verge of a democratic revolution. But any hope that democracy would sweep through the region was brought to an abrupt halt by the civil wars in Syria and Libya. Instead of a new democratic order for the region, a counter-movement developed, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which came to the aid of authoritarian rulers through regional organisations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and bilateral and multilateral initiatives. This allowed them to restore the status quo ante and to develop into authoritarian centres of gravity⁶. However, this did not result in regional stability either.

Whereas grand designs (based on ideology or *realpolitik*) for regional order were not sustainably implemented during the last decades, some "elements of order" persisted and can still play a role in the current and future search for models of cooperation. This includes the effort to push back against external influence (as during the





Full of hope: In 2011, the mass demonstrations that became known as the Arab Spring briefly gave the impression that the Middle East and North Africa were on the verge of a democratic revolution. [Source: © Dylan Martinez, Reuters.](#)

panarabist independence movements) or putting the legitimisation of political power into question (as during the Arab Spring). In the following, we argue that, against the backdrop of the current

upheaval in the region, multilateral cooperation is most promising – and feasible – if geographically constraint, with a limited number of actors involved, and focussing on a specific policy field.

From Anti-Iranian Alliance to a Regional Security Dialogue in the Gulf?

It was concerns about a common enemy that led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. It was a way for the six Arab Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE – to arm themselves against the Iranian regime and its commitment to exporting revolution. In 1984, they set up the 10,000-strong Peninsula Shield Force, but otherwise efforts to coordinate policy in the GCC have been limited, apart from a few economic agreements. Agreement is also rarely seen on

foreign policy issues. And any joint action on the part of the GCC was paralysed in 2017 when Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed a blockade on Qatar, which is still in place today.

Instead, the GCC states have always relied on an external power to hold Iran in check: the United States. Building on the security partnership with Riyadh that has existed since the end of World War II, Washington has continuously ramped up its military presence in the region since the late 1980s and, above all, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. This is how Washington and the Gulf monarchies pursued their mutual



Side by side: It was concerns about Iran that led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981.

Source: © Bandar Algaloud, Reuters.

interest in containing the two regional powers, Iraq and Iran, and in securing the maritime trading routes that are vital for oil exports. However, it did not lead to a cooperative regional security system. Instead of creating multilateral cooperation, it strengthened bilateral relations between the US and the Arab Gulf States, which bought arms from the US and provided bases for American troops. The views of Washington and its Gulf partners still diverged on key regional issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the 2003 Iraq war, and this rift widened under the Obama administration. Washington's calculations changed when the US began fracking for oil and shifted its strategic orientation to Asia. For their part, the Gulf monarchies regarded Obama's endorsement of the Arab Spring democracy movements in 2011 as an affront and feared that Iran would be strengthened by the nuclear deal agreed in 2015 JCPOA). European hopes that the internationally negotiate JCPOA would gradually develop into a comprehensive, regional security architecture came to nothing.

Countries on both sides of the Persian Gulf are increasing their efforts to scale back tensions and prevent a war.

With his unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and his “maximum pressure” campaign, President Donald Trump fundamentally changed US policy on Iran and sought to close ranks with the GCC states. But the US responded with remarkable caution when Iran (and its allied militias) gave a dramatic demonstration of the threat it poses to the Gulf States by attacking tankers and a Saudi oil plant in 2019, leading to Saudi oil production being temporarily halved. The region barely escaped a conflagration at the turn of 2019/20, when the conflict between the US and Iran in Iraq escalated with an attack on the US embassy by Iranian-backed militias and the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by the US.

Against this backdrop, countries on both sides of the Persian Gulf are increasing their efforts to scale back tensions and prevent a war that nobody wants – neither Iran, which has been ravaged by US economic sanctions, nor the Gulf monarchies, which are preoccupied with their own economic transformation. And, by tying up resources, the coronavirus pandemic could also encourage everyone involved to decide de-escalation is in their best interests. The UAE in particular has made positive noises in this respect and sent medical supplies to Iran to help deal with the pandemic. Even permanent crises that have mutated into proxy wars, such as in Yemen, could ultimately prove too costly for the regional powers. Last year, Abu Dhabi announced that it was withdrawing its troops, and, in April 2020, Riyadh declared a unilateral ceasefire in Yemen due to COVID-19. In the second half of 2019, the UAE and Iran had held several clandestine diplomatic meetings. Saudi Arabia has also put out feelers to Tehran via Pakistani and Iraqi mediators.⁷

In a speech to the United Nations in September 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rohani, for his part, proposed a regional dialogue initiative called the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE). With the involvement of the United Nations, this requires the Persian Gulf states to agree on common principles, such as respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to develop mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Supported by China, in 2019 Russia also unveiled a proposal for a “Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf”, in which it called for the removal of extra-regional foreign troops from the Gulf – by which it meant the US, which still has 30,000 soldiers stationed in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar alone. Despite their dwindling confidence in US security guarantees, the Arab Gulf states are not prepared to accept such a demand.

It is conceivable, however, that a dialogue between the GCC and Iran could emerge through a range of potentially overlapping regional discussion formats – with international participation. Maritime security is important to

all the countries that border the Gulf in view of oil and gas exports from the Middle East and North Africa (90 per cent of which now go to Asia) and international trading routes. Such a flexible “multilateralisation” involving several global powers as guarantors could reduce the mistrust that exists between Saudi Arabia and Iran and between Washington and Tehran.⁸ In addition to the US-led Operation Sentinel (IMSC) launched in November 2019 with the participation of the UK, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, a number of EU states have come together under French leadership to create their own mission, EMASOH, with the political support of Germany. In early 2020, Japan and South Korea sent their own naval forces to the region to protect their merchant fleets. The improved – and possibly institutionalised – coordination of such missions would be a step towards multilateral cooperation in maritime security with maximum inclusivity and could thus serve as a starting point for a regional security dialogue.

The Untapped Potential of Economic Cooperation in the Maghreb

There have long been complaints that the Maghreb, as a geographical and cultural sub-region, is failing to exploit its potential for integration and cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere. Only three to five per cent of the trade of the five Maghreb states (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) is conducted with one another. And less than one per cent of foreign direct investment in the region is inter-Maghreb. The resulting loss of prosperity for each country is estimated at between one and five per cent of annual growth.⁹

In the 1950s and early 1960s, after their independence from France (or, in the case of Libya, from Italy) these countries developed in very different ways, and early attempts at unification quickly came to nothing. However, economic difficulties in the Maghreb states as a result of falling oil prices and the accession of Spain and Italy to the European single market led to the foundation of the Arab Maghreb Union

(AMU) in 1989.¹⁰ Its charter sets the objective of pursuing a “common policy” in the area of foreign affairs, defence, economy, and culture and “working gradually” towards achieving free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital.¹¹ However, the initial euphoria was soon shattered by the nation-state orientation of the authoritarian regimes and particularly by political disputes between Algeria and Morocco, whose land border has been closed since 1994. Since then, there have been no summit meetings at the head-of-state level.

Major steps are unlikely to be taken towards integration without rapprochement between Algeria and Morocco.

Major steps are unlikely to be taken towards integration without rapprochement between Algeria and Morocco and the necessary resolution of the Western Sahara conflict. However, initiatives for multilateral cooperation in areas such as finance and infrastructure have regained at least a degree of momentum over recent years. On the basis of an official AMU resolution in 1991, the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Foreign Trade (BMICE) opened in Tunis in 2017. With an initial capital of 500 million US dollars, its aim is to promote intra-Maghreb trade and invest in regional projects. The AMU secretariat has also recently commissioned a feasibility study for the trans-Maghreb railway line, which has been in the pipeline for many years and is now looking to attract investors.

Growing economic pressure could increase the political will to push forward with such initiatives. Over the last five years, the economic growth of the Maghreb states has averaged less than 2.5 per cent, while youth unemployment stands at 25 per cent.¹² The drop in oil and natural gas prices means that Libya – currently plagued by civil war – and Algeria are facing unforeseen economic difficulties. Economic pressure on the Maghreb states is being intensified still further by the global crisis

triggered by COVID-19. Morocco and Tunisia are being hit particularly hard by the recession in the EU, their largest export market (Morocco exports 60 per cent of its goods to the EU, Tunisia 80 per cent). In addition, hundreds of thousands of people work in the tourism industry, which has been decimated by the pandemic (in both these countries, tourism accounts for around seven per cent of GDP). The COVID-19 pandemic also underlines the importance of regional value chains; these are less vulnerable to global crises and could be created by increasing intra-Maghreb economic cooperation.

The Arab Spring of 2011 and the “Hirak protests” in Morocco (2016 to 2017) and Algeria (2019 to 2020) have clearly shown the countries’ rulers that young societies with poor economic prospects can lead to political instability. Moreover, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who became Algeria’s president in December 2019, is a leader who could lift old foreign policy blockades and who faces an urgent need to present his people with successful economic initiatives.

Gas Fields in the Eastern Mediterranean: Regional Cooperation Rather than Geopolitical Confrontation?

Significant natural gas reserves have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean over recent years. Huge natural gas fields have been found in the Israeli and Egyptian economic zones and off Cyprus. Smaller natural gas fields have also been discovered off the coast of the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, and it is thought that more deposits exist throughout the region. All the riparian states are hoping to boost their prosperity by securing their own energy supply and exporting natural gas. The deposits also constitute a political opportunity for the region. It is necessary to set up a technical infrastructure for exploiting the fields and exporting the natural gas. It is cheaper and more efficient to build and maintain this infrastructure if all the countries of the region work together. An approach to collaboration based on functional and economic issues could, therefore, also make a positive political contribution to regional relations. In this respect, a number of bilateral and multilateral approaches can be observed.

In geographical terms, Israel’s nearest natural gas customers are Jordan and Egypt. Jordan is dependent on energy imports and receives some of its supplies from Israel via two pipelines. Egypt used to be dependent on gas imports but can now cover its growing domestic consumption thanks to the discovery of deposits off its coast. In recent years, however, the country has built up considerable capacities for liquefying natural gas. It has more capacity than it needs, so it is interested in establishing itself as a regional export hub – including for Israeli gas.¹³ Egypt and Jordan are two Arab states to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, albeit a “cold” peace. The situation between Israel and Lebanon is more difficult. The two countries have agreed a ceasefire but do not maintain diplomatic relations. Yet, the natural gas reserves could also stimulate relations between them as both countries still have to define their sea border, but talks on this issue are at early stages.¹⁴

By establishing the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy have also created a multilateral forum to strengthen regional energy cooperation and develop a regional natural gas market and related infrastructure.¹⁵ The objectives of the EMGF transcend coordination and technical issues and include approaches to collaboration that go beyond the conflict lines of the Middle East. By creating economic interdependences, this could also create common interests. There is no shortage of proposals for increasing cooperation, such as the establishment of a virtual energy hub.¹⁶

However, there are also initiatives that seem to stand in the way of moves towards more cooperation in the Middle East. The EastMed Pipeline is attracting particular attention in this respect. The planned pipeline will export Israeli natural gas to the EU via Cyprus and Greece. It will give Israel direct access to the European market, thus ensuring that the difficult relations with its regional neighbours do not pose problems for its energy exports. However, this would weaken efforts to create a regional natural gas market and reduce the need for energy cooperation

between Israel and Egypt. A further challenge for the growth of regional energy cooperation is the exclusion of Turkey from the EMGF and the associated cooperation initiatives in the energy sector. The fact that the EMGF incorporates security issues has fuelled Turkish perceptions that it is an anti-Turkey initiative. There is, thus, a risk that it could simply exacerbate the region's geopolitical lines of conflict.

This system of shifting alliances has been unable to lay the foundations for a substantial multilateral order.

By sending in naval vessels and drilling off the coast of Cyprus, Turkey is trying to assert its claim to a share of the natural gas reserves. The EU rejects Turkey's demands and has responded by imposing sanctions. France – whose energy company Total is involved in the gas exploration operations – has increased its military presence in the region.¹⁷ If the natural gas deposits are to provide the hoped-for benefits in terms of prosperity and regional cooperation, it is essential to prevent a looming military escalation. On the one hand, Ankara has to stop taking unilateral actions to gain access to natural gas fields in a manner questionable under international law. On the other hand, the question of how Turkey, as an important riparian state and key stakeholder, can be involved must be addressed. There is also particular potential for cooperation with Turkey with regard to creating a regional gas market under the EMGF.¹⁸

**Conclusion:
Solving Problems through Multilateralism**

There is no doubt that approaches to multilateralism are present in the Middle East and North Africa – albeit rather in the sense of ad hoc alliances based on a geopolitical calculation that may be fuelled by a specific threat perception or



Poor prospects: The drop in oil and natural gas prices means that Libya – currently plagued by civil war – is facing unforeseen economic difficulties.
Source: © Esam Omran Al-Fetori, Reuters.

hegemonic ambition.¹⁹ In view of the region's identity conflicts, power struggles, and heterogeneous political systems, this system of shifting alliances has, to date, been unable to lay the foundations for a substantial multilateral order involving agreement on common principles and the confidence that they will be respected. In parallel, the mutually reinforcing political and

socio-economic crises in this region are threatening the very existence of many states and their regimes. Dramatic examples over the last decade include: the transfer of power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan; the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; and, most recently, the 2019 protests in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Algeria. It is, therefore, in the interests of regional actors



to work together to increase their security and prosperity. Quite simply, the Middle East and North Africa can no longer afford to reject multilateral action in terms of building permanent platforms for cooperation.

The most realistic chance of success for such an undertaking is to focus on specific issues. This kind of multilateralism will be problem-oriented and thus sectoral and sub-regional. Could the functional spillover effects gradually lead to the development of a regional order – similar to the European Coal and Steel Community in post-war Europe? In light of the different political situations in each country, this seems like a distant dream. Yet, going beyond the specific benefits of cooperation, bridges are already being built to span the geopolitical conflict lines that have shaken the region for years and hampered the domestic development of many countries.

There remains a lack of trust, which makes it essential to embed international actors in (ideally overlapping) circles of multilateral cooperation. This could be a great opportunity for the EU. However, Brussels needs the will to boldly implement the commitments that are made and refuse to be drawn into the game of shifting alliances or even end up encouraging it. For there is always a danger that multilateral initiatives will be agreed against certain actors and have a destabilising effect. Moreover, Europe should not revert to a blinkered, regime-centred view of this region. Rather, it should work to ensure that, wherever possible, multilateral initiatives that go beyond state cooperation also promote dialogue between societies.

–translated from German–

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