

Towards a Regional Security Mechanism in the Gulf Region

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Given the continued volatility in the strategic Gulf region, the initiation and ultimately implementation of a regional security mechanism that engages all regional as well as relevant external actors is certainly something that demands closer attention. At this point, such a mechanism does not exist. Institutions such as the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are venues where exchanges and discussions can take place but their membership is restricted and as such they do not offer a platform where all regional actors can engage and interact with one another. The Organization for Islamic Cooperation headquartered in the Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, would on the other hand be too broad in order to focus on the core security elements at play in the Gulf. Proposals such as the recent Middle East Strategic Alliance or “Arab NATO” also fall short given their exclusion and actual targeting of Iran.¹

Given the centrality of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to much of the tensions in the broader Middle East, it would therefore make sense to explore alternative and new security mechanisms beginning in the Gulf region.² It would further be more viable at the outset to begin this process from a sub-regional approach rather than focusing on the entire Middle East as a whole. The Gulf region has its own unique set of security challenges and a clear geographic focus. Expanding considerations to bring in all of the Middle Eastern states (and necessarily Turkey as well) would likely go beyond the scope on what would be feasible at this stage.³

To be sure, there have been many official and non-official proposals put forward in the past decades to initiate a process towards a regional security mechanism in the Gulf region.⁴ Most prominently, UN Security Council Resolution 598 that ended the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 called on the UN Secretary-General “to examine, in consultation with Iran and Iraq and with other States of the region, measures to enhance the security and stability of the region.”⁵ In his speech to the inaugural Manama Dialogue in 2004, the then foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud al-Faisal, proposed a framework of “a unified GCC, a prosperous Yemen, a stable Iraq, and a friendly Iran as the “best guarantee for peace and stability in the Gulf” although he acknowledged that international guarantees provided by a unanimous declaration of the UN Security Council would be needed to ultimately see such a framework implemented.⁶ His initiative was followed in 2007 by a ten-point proposal by Hassan Rouhani, then Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, announced at the World Economic Forum calling specifically for the establishment of a Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organization.⁷

¹ Yasmine Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance has a long way to go,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/08/middle-east-strategic-alliance-has-long-way-to-go-pub-78317>.

² See Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry that Unraveled the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020).

³ For the most prominent proposal on a wider Middle East security approach see Peter Jones, “Towards a Regional Security Regime for the Middle East: Issues and Options,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Report of the SIPRI Middle East Experts Group, October 2011, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/SIPRI2011Jones.pdf>.

⁴ For relevant academic proposals, see Bjørn Møller, ed., *Oil and Water: Cooperative Security in the Persian Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001); Andrew Rathmell, Theodore Karasik and David Gompert, “A New Persian Gulf Security System,” (Rand Cooperation Issue Paper: 2003), https://www.rand.org/pubs/issue_papers/IP248.html. More recent proposals include Christian Koch und Christian-Peter Hanelt, “A Gulf Conference for Security and Cooperation could Bring Peace and Security to the Middle East,” Bertelsmann Foundation, Spotlight Europe #2015/2, July 2015, <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/spotlight-europe-022015-a-gulf-csc-could-bring-peace-and-greater-security-to-the-middle-east/>, and International Crisis Group, “The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown,” Middle East Report No. 212, April 27, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/212-middle-east-between-collective-security-and-collective-breakdown>.

⁵ Text of UN Security Council Resolution 598 can be found under <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/598>.

⁶ “Towards a New Framework for Regional Security,” Statement by HRH Prince Saud Al Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia, The Gulf Dialogue, December 5, 2004.

⁷ Hassan Rouhani, “10-Point Plan to Promote ‘Cooperation, Security, and Development’ in Persian Gulf” (World Economic Forum, Doha, Qatar, April 2007, <http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtid=00&depid=106&semid=193>).

More recently, Hassan Rouhani, now President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, has re-issued his earlier idea in the form of the HOPE Peace Endeavor which he presented to the UN General Assembly in September 2019 in order to “strengthen consolidation among all the nations with common interests in the Persian Gulf and the Hormuz region.”⁸ In addition, Russia put forward its security concept for the Gulf region with the long-term objective to create a security and cooperation organization in the Persian Gulf (PGSCO).⁹

Despite their multitude, none of the above ideas and proposals has gotten passed the drawing board with little concerted effort at seeking any form of implementation. The lack of inclusivity, the fact that existing initiatives are largely ad-hoc and non-committal, and the absence of any institutional backing means that at this stage there simply exists no common understanding among regional as well as external actors as to what a process for the Gulf could or should look like.¹⁰

The consequences of such a missing element to regional interaction, however, is only too clear to see. With the attacks on Saudi oil installations in Khurais and Abiqaiq attributed to Iran in September 2019, the seizures and attacks on tankers in the spring and summer 2019 in the Strait of Hormuz, and the assassination of Iranian General Qassim Soleimani by the United States in Iraq in January 2020, the region came precipitously close to being dragged into a regional war that would have brought with it devastating consequences. It is thus imperative that such a situation should be avoided in the near future.

Among the rising tensions, there have also been some more positive statements and actions forthcoming that a proposal for broader regional security could build on. The severity of the trajectory of developments in 2019 and at the beginning of 2020 has led to increased call for de-escalation, for example. The Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates Anwar Gargash came out in May 2020 to state that it is “essential that the region pulls back from the current and troubling tensions” and that “de-escalation is both wise and necessary.”¹¹ In addition and in connection with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian assistance was provided by Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE to Iran signaling their willingness to prioritize those immediate requirements over existing political tensions.¹² Finally, the election of Joseph Biden as the new President of the United States might provide an additional opportunity based on his administration’s stated attempt to possibly return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

What these above steps underline is the growing realization among both regional and external actors that a continued march down the path of increased escalation is ultimately detrimental and damaging to all sides and that therefore cooler heads must prevail. A new attempt at promoting a regional security mechanism should therefore be viewed as a suitable complement to recent de-escalatory steps and calls.

What is important if such a path is indeed pursued is that any regional security mechanism must come from within the region in a step-by-step process. The key emphasis at the outset must be on the process itself rather than some form of pre-defined system or institutional architecture. While the Helsinki process is here often cited as an approach to follow, it is simply not possible to transfer such a mechanism to the Gulf region. Instead, the establishment of forms of regional dialogue based on a multi-track approach with regard to actors and issues should be considered as a first set of steps to take. This involves the inclusion of officials at the track 1 level, specialists and advisors representing the track 2 approach,

⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>.

⁹ The full text of Russia’s Collective Security Concept is available under https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&_101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB.

¹⁰ Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai, “The Quest to Launch Regional Security Processes in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula,” Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), IAI Papers 20-31, November 2020, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2031.pdf>.

¹¹ See <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/01/08/De-escalation-in-the-region-is-wise-and-necessary-UAE-s-Gargash->.

¹² “Coronavirus spurs regional humanitarian outreach to Iran,” Al-Monitor, March 18, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/coronavirus-spur-humanitarian-outreach-iran.html>. See also, Adnan Tabatabai, “A Health Crisis as an Incentive to foster Regional Cooperation in the Persian Gulf?,” May 12, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/health-crisis-incentive-foster-regional-cooperation-persian-gulf-26083>.

and people-to-people relations in the form of track 3 exchanges. Moreover, a regional security process should be based on a comprehensive view of security that is not restricted to military affairs alone but rather one that allows for functional and issue-oriented emphasis to promote confidence-building. The ultimate objective here is to work “towards commonalities that incrementally promote cooperation, trust and transparency leading to a shared vision for the region.”¹³

Moreover, the Gulf region cannot, at least at the outset, do this on its own. External forces, such as the United States, Russia, Europe and most recently China play an inevitable part given both the integral role they have played in regional matters in the past and present and because external guidance and encouragement will be instrumental in starting a process to overcome the fundamental lack of trust that currently exists between the two sides of the Gulf waters. It will be further important to find a role for external actors so as to prevent them from playing a potential spoiler role.

Europe’s role might be the most important of all the external players given the various elements it can bring to the negotiating table. For one, Europe has a broad toolbox both in terms of the institutional formats it can put forward (a multilateral approach in the form of the EU, bilateral engagement through EU member states, or variants such as the E3 or E4 that have been used when it comes to the Iranian nuclear negotiations or Yemen respectively) and the issue-oriented focus through which it can promote cooperation (maritime security, trade, economic integration, climate change and capacity-building programs just to name a few examples). Second, Europe presents a viable alternative to the *realpolitik*, power approach often practiced and put forward by the U.S., Russia and China. As the US-China competition intensifies and as the U.S. reorientation away from the Middle East and the Gulf proceeds, Gulf actors will continue seek out European assistance and advice when it comes to all aspects of regional affairs. In both of these contexts, Europe should not underestimate the influence it can bring to the table and instead use its power to support various initiatives and foster the much-needed dialogue process in the Gulf region.

Despite the current climate of tensions and entrenched positions that exists among the Gulf states, ideas and initiatives for a new regional security mechanism in the Gulf must be considered and further developed. Only through such an approach can a path be developed that moves the region away from its perennial cycle of violence and instability. The current time is as good as any to begin such an effort in earnest.

¹³ Koch and Tabatabai, *op.cit.* The concept as outlined here is currently being developed within the Tafahum project of the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and the Gulf Research Center. More information on the Tafahum project can be found under <https://carpo-bonn.org/en/tafahum/>.

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