

Reviving Multilateral Security Dialogue in the MENA: Finding the Hard, but Possible, Compromise

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Summary

While possible, prospects for repairing existing fractures through multilateral dialogue and compromise have become elusive as crises in the region persist. There are quite a few unfavorable conditions hindering the emergence of some form of multilateral security process: areas of hot conflict have widened in recent years making violence almost endemic in the region, in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya; the Middle East peace process is in a stalemate and already thin trust between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships is all but gone as both have become more contested among respective constituencies and less respected abroad; in some countries, the social contract seems to be breaking after a failed Arab Spring, challenging government authority even in places like Tunisia where a fragile democratic transition audaciously continues despite growing socio-economic discontent and a deteriorating security situation; some other MENA states have become weaker as a result of chronic violence and dysfunctional governance; while non-Arab states, from Turkey to Iran, have seen an opportunity to expand their clout in a Middle East in flux, even if themselves under great pressure, extra-regional actors have never appeared more divided about the course to follow, or more distracted by other priorities.

1. A Challenging context

Russia's military intervention in Syria, a re-engagement in the region since 2015 partly made possible by the vacuum created during the Obama administration years by an increasingly hesitant and wary America, has perhaps impressed some acceleration to the resolution of the armed conflict. Yet, as most recently shown by the snap US military retaliation against yet another chemical attack killing Syrian civilians, Moscow faces pushbacks to its pro-Assad regime strategy. If anything, Russia's involvement in Middle East affairs has further complicated the Levant's already complex security equation as well as aggravated an already explosive humanitarian emergency. For its part, Europe has remained largely a bystander of regional conflicts even as spillovers of regional instability – from migration to terrorism – have impacted on its territory

and societies as probably never before in modern times, providing ammunition to resurgent nationalistic and xenophobic forces wanting not only to shield Europe from external influences but also undo the EU construction altogether. To be true, EU leaders have never lost faith in a concerted solution to the conflicts inflaming Europe's neighborhood. Yet, engulfed by its internal travails, from the trauma of Brexit to a never-ending Euro crisis, the EU seems to be currently absorbed by the hard task of saving its own multilateral experiment. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the new US administration seems to be leaning towards both nationalistic and neo-isolationist impulses, either premised on a more independent and unilateralist course. President Trump's declared aversion to "globalism" and international institutions, and the emphasis he has put on key bilateral relationships, starting with the "unbreakable bond" with Israel, does not seem to bode well

for America's active engagement, let alone leadership, in a new multilateral security dialogue for the MENA region. Among other challenges, the new administration's openly confrontational attitude towards Teheran, a return to the pre-Obama years, undermines any full rehabilitation of Iran as a regional actor, a development Europe and others had cautiously encouraged after the nuclear deal. The recent attack on Syrian government military facilities, an impressive change in US policy towards this conflict since 2011, undoubtedly accentuates differences between the US, Russian, and Iranian approaches to the Syrian question and risks leading Washington and Moscow on a dangerous collision course on regional strategy more broadly.

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In fact, the continuation of regional rivalry is at present one of the greatest impediments to the revival of multilateral security dialogue in whatever fashion. From Syria to Iraq, from Libya to Yemen, local crises in the MENA are compounded with, when they are not directly provoked by, proxy conflicts that have entangled regional, and sometimes also extra-regional, actors in a ruthless contest for influence premised on a zero-sum approach to security. In such a confrontational context, bringing to the table the same forces that have contributed in various ways to undermining the fragile Middle Eastern order in the first place may seem a plainly impossible feat. Yet, even against such an unpromising backdrop, it is notable that proposals for re-launching multilateral security dialogue in the region have been put forward from many corners in recent years and months, sometimes resurrecting ideas that have been cyclically floated in Mediterranean diplomatic and policy circles since at least the end of the bipolar era. One such idea is to explore the applicability, in a Mediterranean and/or MENA context, of a multilateral process similar to the one that inspired and continues to animate the CSCE/OSCE experience in Europe – what Italy's Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni has supportively referred to as the "Helsinki method".¹

1. See the intervention of Hon. Gentiloni at the Rome MED Dialogues organized by ISPI on 1-3 December 2016, which featured a number of high-level discussions around the same theme: <http://rome-med.org/speeches/>. At the October 2015 OSCE Mediterranean Conference, then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier had outlined a similar vision by arguing that the CSCE experience can "provide a range of principles and processes that can also offer countries a glimmer of hope for political settlement in the Middle East", <http://www.osce.org/secretariat/193371?download=true>

2. A lively policy debate

To be true, proposals advanced recently vary significantly. Most are to be found in more or less detailed think-tank reports aiming to spur a forward-looking policy discussion about the region.² The revival of regional security dialogue is seen as an important ingredient of a wider range of initiatives capable of reining in instability and conflict. Even in the case of the Italian proposal, no official diplomatic initiative has been apparently contemplated, the idea of a Helsinki-like multilateral conference being explored for now merely at the so-called Track II level. Revealingly, very few proposals have for now been put forward from the region itself.³ Most contributions are characteristically – and could therefore be easily dismissed as – "made in the West". The focus of existing proposals is also a matter of discussion. Some specifically focus on regional/multilateral solutions to the ongoing conflict in Syria.⁴ Others have tried to address the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran – a geopolitical/geoeconomic contest with sectarian overtones which, at least on some levels, is framing many of the ongoing crises.⁵ Others still, including the above-mentioned Italian idea of a Helsinki-like multilateral process, aspire to address Mediterranean affairs in the broadest sense, looking at the Levant, Mashreq/Maghreb and Europe as parts of an interconnected security space.

2. See, for instance, the Regional Cooperation Series of the Washington-based Middle East Institute, <http://www.mei.edu/regional-cooperation-series>; See also the Final Report of the Middle East Strategy Task Force issued by the Atlantic Council in December 2016 and endorsed by Co-Chairs Madeleine K. Albright and Stephen J. Hadley, http://mest.atlanticcouncil.org/final-report/?utm_content=buffer78e5f The report calls for a new Regional Framework for dialogue and cooperation which would "transcend the limited mandates and memberships of existing organizations such as the Arab League... [and] help tamp down conflicts, encourage cooperation, establish agreed standards of state behavior, and incentivize and support positive steps by states in the region... even become[ing] an engine for advancing the cause of Arab-Israeli peace".

3. Some retired Iranian officials have informally called for a conference on security and cooperation for the Middle East. The idea of a Conference on Security and Cooperation for the Mediterranean, "CSCM", was floated by Italy and Spain at the beginning of the 1990s. A reference to a similar forum was included in the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. Late Israeli President Shimon Peres referred to the Helsinki experience in several speeches. For a history of the idea in the 1990s, see Alberto Bin, "Mediterranean Diplomacy. Evolution and Prospects", Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, <http://aei.pitt.edu/386/1/jmwp05.htm>

4. For an early perspective, see, Varun Vira, A Regional Solution to the Syrian Uprisings, American Diplomacy, September 2011. For a more recent contribution, see Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "How to Fix the Syrian Mess", The National Interest, March 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-fix-the-syrian-mess-12469>

5. See, for instance, the proposal advanced by Christian-P. Hanelt and Christian Koch of the Bertelsmann Foundation of a "CSCE for the Gulf", July 2015, www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/spotlight_02_2015_ENG.pdf

Among factors and developments that are cited as justifying some cautious optimism about the revival of regional security dialogue are: the landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or “Iran nuclear deal”, reached in Vienna in July 2015 after successful multilateral talks between Iran, the P5+1 and the EU. According to some, this framework agreement could portend cooperative dynamics on a host of other files, from brokering a political solution to the Syrian conflict to issues such as energy cooperation. Other factors include: the UN-backed political process in Libya, which despite continuing meddling of external actors in the country’s unsettled political and security situations, led to the establishment of a Tripoli-based interim Government of National Accord in 2016 nominally supported by all major international players; attempts to stop or at least de-escalate the war in Syria through a series of internationally-brokered ceasefires in 2015-2016, including initiatives such as the Astana summit between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, while UN-led talks in Geneva seek to keep alive the prospect of a political resolution to the conflict. A compelling unifying factor, moreover, is said to be the common threat posed by terrorist entities, signally Daesh, that have imposed themselves on the exchequer of the Middle East in recent years as the regional order crumbled, and which aim to redraw the region’s political map while subjecting local populations to unprecedented violence. Furthermore, the simple counterfactual of not having any viable multilateral track in place is also offered as a powerful reason for giving a new dialogue initiative a chance.

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Indeed, weaving together otherwise different takes on the issue is a widely-held perception in Europe/the West – a view that is not necessarily shared by the Arab countries themselves – that because of its increasingly unbearable predicament of internal and external pressures the Middle Eastern order as we know it since 1945, or even 1916, may altogether implode if local and regional stakeholders do not finally come around to put an end to violence, tame centrifugal forces, and find manageable and peaceful ways to handle competition.⁶ Hence, the idea

6. Among a vast literature, see Waleed Hazbun, “(In)security in the Era of Turbulence: Mapping Post-Statist Geopolitics in the Middle East” in Lorenzo Kamel, ed. *The Frailty of Authority. Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums*

of establishing a multilateral forum of sorts ensuring that channels of communication are available at all times, even during crises, as well as the notion that basic principles similar to the ones enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act’s “Declaration on Principles” or “Decalogue” – from refraining from the threat or use of force to the respect for sovereignty and the inviolability of frontiers – can sustain a process of dialogue, or even rapprochement, premised on the “indivisibility of security”.

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However well-intended and certainly praiseworthy for their attempt to bring about a paradigm shift towards a positive-sum approach to security, pro-multilateral arguments need to come to terms not only with the region’s currently harsh realities but also with fundamental dilemmas and choices that can only be avoided at one’s own risk. What follows is a (non-exhaustive) list of specific issues to be carefully pondered as the debate continues. As the devil often lies in the details, even more so when ambitious visions are put forward, a lucid discussion of key points may help chart a realistic and credible course without completely removing that open-endedness, and even ambiguity, that are often needed when trying to accommodate divergent positions in a polarized context characterized by a high level of mistrust.

3. Restoring or reforming the old order?

The first point gets perhaps to the core of the ambiguity that in varying degrees seems to characterize most of the existing proposals: would the goal of a new multilateral process in the region be to restore the order that is said to be crumbling or, rather, reform it? Differently put, should the current configuration of states and borders continue to provide the basis of any future order or should stability be attained through innovative solutions? And if so, which would be the foundations and building bricks of a new possible regional order?

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The most problematic and weakest aspect of the current debate about reviving multilateralism in the MENA region is that existing states are seen as both the cause and the solution to the region's convulsions. The question is not only one of legitimacy of existing governments and ruling regimes. The issue is also, and perhaps more decisively, about the relationship between states and non-state, sub-state, and also wannabe-state actors. For instance, it is objectively hard to envisage a successful multilateral process in the region - one capable of reflecting developments on the ground - without taking into account, among others, the claims of a state-less people like the Kurds who in recent years have borne much of the brunt of the violence carried out in Syria and Iraq and that have, as a result of their military engagement, gained much power in vast areas of these two countries.

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The inclusion of the Kurds in whatever fashion in a new diplomatic initiative, however, seems to remain unacceptable to several of the neighboring stakeholders. To take a second obvious example, the Palestinian question remains all but sensitive. Far from having been "downsized" or "sidelined" by more recent conflicts, the unsettled Palestinian question continues to have deep political and symbolic significance, dividing the region and offering extreme and violent groups across the spectrum a cause to rally around. As past multilateral initiatives have found out, this issue has the potential to easily hijack any other discussion, effectively derailing efforts to address the region's problems through multilateral approaches. The crux of the matter is that there is still notably no agreement in policy and diplomatic circles about whether peace between Israelis and Palestinians – and the creation of a Palestinian state – should be one of the main outcomes of or, on the contrary, a necessary pre-condition for a multilateral regional dialogue to be launched.

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When it comes to sub-state and quasi-state actors, dilemmas are no trivial either. In the presence of embattled states ruled by riotous or not fully accountable elites, even the successful transitions have seen a significant role of sub-state actors. In Tunisia, unions, human rights associations, business associations, and other organized social interests were crucial in keeping the country together as the democratic process moved forward among formidable political and security challenges, earning the so-called 'National Dialogue Quartet' no less than the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. In light of their relevance and the popular support they enjoy, these 'civil society' actors would certainly provide a much needed connection between governments and societies as the former outline the contours of a new regional settlement. As Middle East instability and conflict have much to do with broken or unsatisfactory social contracts – not only with international rivalry – the quality of any future multilateral process could be measured in terms of sub-states actors being able to inform and shape discussions, acting as intermediate bodies connecting governments to societies. Beside persuading state elites to accept such a prominent role for 'civil society' in an international negotiation setting, the challenge of such approach would involve crafting a "hybrid" type of multilateralism whereby sovereignty would no longer be the litmus test for participation. Compromise solutions could certainly be found in providing observer or associate status to actors such as workers' unions, trade associations, educational and charitable institutions, etc. Yet, the dilemma in a MENA context would be how to ensure that these actors are not just accessory to the state-led process, being on the contrary an integral part to decision making. Especially if the envisaged multilateral process was intended to put the MENA region on stronger grounds as opposed to restoring the status quo, the involvement of sub-state actors could provide the dynamic element that is needed to, in a sense, "rescue the Arab state from itself".

As far as “quasi-state” entities are concerned, the question becomes possibly even more intricate. The Middle East is replete with organized groups that claim a type of allegiance and/or authority that in other contexts is the domain of sovereign entities. As some of these groups provide goods and services to their constituencies that are not adequately guaranteed by the state and its branches, these actors may be seen as both challenging and complementing state sovereignty. Indeed, the debate is open on whether quasi-state entities in the MENA are one of the most evident manifestations of the alleged disintegration of the Arab state system or, on the contrary, they are contributing to a process of state consolidation which remains unfinished.⁷ The heterogeneity of these groups, among which one could also include long-standing and highly controversial transnational movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, is such that any attempt to systematically engage them in a dialogue process would touch on a whole range of political sensitivities. The fact that in this category it is possible to include groups which are considered by some states as terrorist organizations – among other examples, Hezbollah in Lebanon – creates red lines that it is extremely hard to cross. Yet, without winning or coercing any of these groups to compromise through talks, prospects for genuine breakthroughs in solving the region’s various conflicts would be severely reduced.

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4. The fight against terrorism: the common glue?

This leads to considering a second important point which is too often misleadingly presented as uncontentious and almost self-evident: the allegedly unifying factor represented by the common threat posed by terrorism. At the declaratory policy level, there is probably no other subject that currently unites more governments from the MENA and neighboring regions. The scourge of terrorism provides a powerful case for even rival states to set other differences aside and focus on the shared goal of neutralizing terrorist groups that thrive on Middle

Eastern instability. The phenomenon of Daesh, a terrorist organization that has gained control over some Middle Eastern cities in Syria and Iraq and has carved out large swaths of territory from both, has forced MENA states to come to terms with the tangible risk of being supplanted by revisionist entities that question not only existing borders but also the region’s political order more fundamentally. In fact, the fight against Daesh has been waged, among other means, by forging powerful regional and international coalitions capable of mobilizing the combined military power of some of the most powerful armies in the world. The ongoing retrenchment of Daesh, which has led many to predict that the organization could be defeated in the course of 2017, testifies to the potential of international cooperation when effectively leveraged. This should not lead, however, to forget how laborious the process of coalition-building was at the outset, due to a number of discrepancies in the assessment and approach to this rising group, nor to underestimate the differences that still revealingly exist within the regional and international community about the fight against terrorism.

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Terrorism is a tactic or even a strategy for some ideologically-motivated groups to attain their goals in a situation of deep asymmetry of power and resources or in the context of an unconventional conflict such as an insurgency. Terrorism’ use of violence against civilians, the often total disrespect for international norms regulating warfare and, above all, the threat it poses to the targeted state, explain why such a phenomenon has been capable of unifying the international community in its condemnation. But can terrorism truly be the glue, or even the propelling factor, for a process of stabilization and peace-building in the MENA/Mediterranean region? The unpleasant reality is that to the degree that terrorism is a dimension of the confrontations that are at play in areas of the Middle East and North Africa, and to the extent that specific terrorist organizations are directly or indirectly supported by certain states as proxies in these confrontations, it is very hard to see how the fight against terrorism can act as a catalyst for genuine regional cooperation. As a matter of fact, different armed groups are listed in the terrorist lists of different states (it is worth noting that the international community is yet to coalesce around an agreed definition of terrorism), reflecting fundamentally

7. See, Florence Gaub, “State Vacuums and non-state Actors in the Middle East and North Africa”, in *The Frailty of Authority*, cit.

different assessments and alignments. Indeed, terrorism is both a cause of the region's convulsions as it is an effect of them. Terrorism seems to be currently living in a symbiosis with the region and its crises. A piece of advice for any future multilateral diplomatic initiative would be, therefore, to address this threat as a key priority, yet to avoid the illusion that it can be the area in which progress is most obviously at hand.

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5. Geography and scope matter

A third important point is about the scope, geographical but also political, of any future multilateral dialogue. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the entirety of the MENA/Mediterranean region suffers from many common underlying problems, from dysfunctional governance to widespread violence. But individual countries and realities differ significantly on key indicators of both socio-economic development and security. When it comes to security challenges, some of the most pressing ones such as violent radicalization clearly have a much wider reach, making the MENA at most the epicenter of a complex global phenomenon with many sub-chapters, from Central Asia to Europe, as the geographical distribution of so-called foreign terrorist fighters illustrates. Conversely, some of the ongoing conflicts, including Syria, do not affect all regional actors in the same way and do not necessarily require all of them to find a solution. The region also remains characteristically divided in sub-regions which have been defined by specific historical legacies and experiences and which present somewhat different outlooks. Although instability has become more widespread across the whole region, geopolitical stakes as well as security challenges remain disproportionately concentrated in the Levant, a corner of the world that has traditionally been the arena of large confrontations. North Africa is certainly not immune to instability, from the threat posed by Jihadism to the phenomenon of state fragility. If anything, Libya currently stands out as a glaring example of state failure right in the center of the Mediterranean region.

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This said, North Africa remains comparatively more stable than the Middle East and among North African states are countries like Morocco that have a long history of statehood and that have weathered more recent storms. Both Morocco and Algeria are currently focused on managing the challenge posed by instability originating from the rest of the African continent, from terrorism in the Sahel to large-scale migration. The connection between North African states and the solution to key Middle Eastern issues, starting with the peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians or the Syrian conflict, should not be underestimated, yet remains more tenuous than for some of their neighbors in the Levant. Once the pivotal state, Egypt itself is increasingly absorbed by domestic priorities, from managing social pressures to addressing security areas of the country which are increasingly hard to control, such as the Sinai. In both the Levant and North Africa, multilateralism seems to be enjoying scant support at present. In the African context, however, promising signs are not completely absent. While the Arab Maghreb Union remains hampered by disputes between the two main states, the African Union remains afloat despite its many challenges and was recently re-joined by Morocco. More interesting still, the sub-regional grouping of ECOWAS, covering the West African countries, is making strides in economic and security cooperation and includes states such as Mali and Niger from which North African security increasingly depends. Any future multilateral initiative, therefore, would need to take into account different realities and dynamics at play in sub-regions of the MENA/Mediterranean region, perhaps envisaging parallel dialogues with different tables, at least during the initial stages.

The scope of future multilateral initiatives encompasses also the role of extra regional actors. As was noted at the outset, an alignment of interests seems far from being in place at present. To be true, the new US administration has repeatedly signaled that it would strongly favor a new axis with Moscow to defeat Daesh in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Yet, in the Middle East as in other parts of the world, the US and Russia do not seem to see eye to eye on a number

of crucial issues. The White House's recent decision to authorize a limited missile strike against military facilities in Syria underscores the fact that there are other factors in America's Middle East agenda other than the defeat of ISIS.

Washington and Moscow continue to leverage different relationships in support to their regional interests, with attitudes towards Iran – according to the US Department of the Defense “the world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism” - being a major divisive factor. Competition between US and Russia, rather than convergence, seems to be the underlying dynamic. The already-cited Russia-sponsored Astana summit on military aspects of the Syrian conflict notably excluded all Western players, from the US to the EU. America's apparent disenchantment with “nation-building” and democratization may have removed some traditional causes of attrition with the Russian position in the region, but does not as such create the basis for a common approach, let alone a common diplomatic initiative.

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A larger question concerns the “viability” of having extra-regional actors involved in a new regional dialogue. On the one hand, it is hard to envisage a multilateral process excluding major external stakeholders like the US, the EU, and even Russia. These actors continue to exert in their respective ways an enormous influence in economic, political, or military terms. On the other, MENA states have grown increasingly disenchanted – sometimes outright unfavorable – to foreign interference, meddling in internal affairs being blamed for much of the current regional instability. This is a major difference, among many others, between Cold-War Europe and today's Middle East. When the so-called “Helsinki process” was started in the early 1970s, European countries, with the partial exception of France, generally saw in positive terms the involvement of the two superpowers, without the support of which no major international settlement could realistically have ever been attained. In today's MENA, international actors are hardly tolerated because the history of regional engagement has, on balance, not served the region well. Envisaging the involvement of actors that have traditionally been absent from the region's geopolitics, and whose international reputation is less tainted in a regional

context, may be too wishful. China is clearly rising as an economic partner in the MENA/Mediterranean space and economic ties will create political interests in due course. Yet, it is hard to see China abruptly changing its traditional policy of non-interference to join a process that would decide the region's internal order. Europe and America would in any case be reluctant to let China supplant them as an external balancer or power broker of sorts.

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Depending on how the region is defined, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies could be considered as “extra-regional”. As far as Turkey is concerned, its progressive “Middleeasternization” in recent years has made the country both more present in the region and more vulnerable to its dynamics, from terrorism to human displacement, not to speak of the risk for Turkish foreign policy to get trapped on one side of the Sunni-Shia divide. But the main challenge for Turkey in a multilateral context would in all likelihood remain the Kurdish issue – still ostensibly the security and political number one problem for Ankara. For their part, Gulf monarchies are for all intents and purposes regional players in the MENA, their projection having significantly strengthened in recent years due to the weakness of some of the local actors. Gulf monarchies are currently an important and fast-growing part of the region's economic and security equation, having partly supplanted Europe and others in the role of foreign investors and cozy partners of financially troubled regimes. In light of their weight and influence, their participation in a future multilateral process would be of the essence. Yet, it could easily mean lead to even more tensions erupting, as specific political agendas underpin their current regional engagement. While signs that a less confrontational modus vivendi between Saudi Arabia and Iran is possible are not completely lacking, it is far from clear that linking a most challenging bilateral relationship to a multilateral dialogue framework would add anything to this dynamic. What is certain is that even a most well-meaning “Sunni front” assembling the Gulf monarchs would not want a new regional dialogue process to meddle with intra-Gulf affairs.

For its part, incentives for Iran to accept participating in a new regional dialogue are mixed at best. On the one hand, some constituencies within the Iranian leadership certainly favor a new international course breaking the

isolation the country was forced to in recent years. On the other, signals coming from the US and other places may suggest great cautiousness, giving further leverage to hardliners who never fully supported the concessions made in the nuclear deal and who remain convinced that an assertive and uncompromising Iranian regional policy ultimately better advances Iranian national interests. Perhaps most decisive than domestic political balances is the economic situation, which is improving in Iran as a result of the lifting of sanctions and higher oil prices, all other things equal lessening the incentive for a more cooperative course.

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The role of existing regional and multilateral organizations could also be considered. One surprising aspect of the recent debate on multilateralism in the MENA region is how little existing international organizations are accounted for. The Union for the Mediterranean, established not even a decade ago, embodied a similar aspiration to the one that is animating the current discussion: bringing together all relevant players – forty three countries from Europe and around the Mediterranean basin – to ensure an inclusive process of regional cooperation. Before the UfM, the so-called 5+5 dialogue has been trying to accomplish just that in a Western Mediterranean context, North and South. In the south, the already cited Arab Maghreb Union and the same League of Arab States are examples of regional and sub-regional cooperation that should be factored in the attempt to overcome challenges that have so far prevented multilateralism from succeeding. At the very least, the track record of these organizations should be studied in search for lessons learnt and best practices. In all likelihood, the same organizations should be associated to the process together with the UN and other relevant international institutions.

When it comes to European organizations, the already cited OSCE should be carefully scrutinized. The OSCE arguably provides a useful term of reference. The MENA region would undoubtedly benefit from the adoption of confidence and security building measures, and the elaboration of common principles, such as those which the CSCE/OSCE process provided for Europe, thus contributing to the emergence over the years of a “European security architecture”. The OSCE “comprehensive approach” to security, seminally spanning from the start politico-

military, economic-environmental, and human rights aspects (the so-called “three dimensions”) would surely mean a paradigm shift for a region in which security has too often been defined in narrow terms as state security, or even as regime security. In light of the almost existential test the OSCE “method” is facing in Europe – with the Ukraine crisis, among other developments, undermining its founding principles, - the OSCE would better be looked at as an “experience” to learn from rather than a model to simply emulate, let alone transplant, into a profoundly different regional reality such as the MENA.

6. A Realistic Process

A final point is worth considering and may serve as a way of conclusion. Against such a daunting backdrop of challenges facing the region, only some of which were addressed in previous sections, the ground to cover in any new regional dialogue format could be too little and too much at the same time. Very difficult choices would have to be made at the outset, such as what place and priority giving to the Palestinian question. The mix between hard and soft security issues would also be one to be carefully worked out. One line of thinking would recommend to first exploring common ground on issues that are less politically divisive or that come with a lighter baggage. The list is rich, from environmental challenges posed by the increasingly tangible impact of climate change on the region to “economic security” in the broadest sense. A similar line of thinking would suggest engaging not only governmental representatives, but also other constituencies, such as the private sector. When it comes to more traditional – and sensitive – security issues, the involvement of youth representatives and women could be envisaged as a way to open the debate to segments of society that could be the forbearers of new, more cooperative approaches.

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Indeed, what seems needed is not so much a careful choice of files to be covered – certainly an unavoidable task as the talks would unfold. Rather, the crucial – and most delicate – task would be launching and preserving dialogue. Differently said, the process’ success would definitely depend on the ground covered, but equally

important would be the process itself. The search for common ground would be as difficult and challenging a goal as finding a common “code” or “dialogue method”, if only to be able to agree to disagree in a non-violent manner. The adoption of confidence-/security- and transparency-building measures, therefore, from notifications of military activities to exchanges of information, from comparing threats perceptions to setting in place mechanisms to prevent incidents and other inadvertent developments - could be the main goal of the initiative at the outset, providing the process’ very fuel at later stages. Instead of addressing in a frontal way the roots of conflict in the region, or formally settling from the very beginning the question of mutual recognition of participants in the dialogue, the process could start creating an acceptable place for all. It could also address some basic priorities, around which political perspectives could be brought to align over time. Among these would be the prevention of new conflicts – a minimalistic goal whose importance in the current scenario should not be underestimated. A second pressing priority would be the alleviation of human suffering in the region, in particular the plight connected to the refugee and migration emergency. Exchanging evidence and data, identifying mutually trusted operators for delivering aid in areas of conflict could be a first

step towards tackling conflict itself from a political, not only humanitarian, standpoint. Innovative confidence-building measures could actually be explored around the issue of large movements of people, both to ensure that violations of human rights are drastically reduced and that movements across borders are monitored and managed in a way to prevent the outbreak of tensions among affected states. Confidence-building measures could also extend to topics such as food security, creating common databases, and in the future maybe regional food banks, to leverage the regions’ resources and avoid the most disruptive effects of natural and man-made emergencies. This would help address some of the underlying factors of social tension in the region.

In sum, as the region struggles with fragmentation and fast-eroding trust, the minimum objective would be to re-open channels of communication as a way to forestall new instability and possibly creating the political, cultural, even ideational space to promote new initiatives aimed at addressing needs that are widely felt and shared. Preventing the current order from ruinously collapsing while planting the seeds for a better one is, perhaps, the most ambitious goal that a new inclusive dialogue can pursue in such trying times.

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