

# Opinion: A Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East

With the region engulfed by turmoil, torn by crises of varying natures and magnitudes, and undergoing an important process of transformation, the time has come to consider the necessity of establishing a conference on security and cooperation in the Middle East. Such a conference would bring together Arab states, Iran and Turkey. Indeed, the latter two states have normal diplomatic relations, but they have been witnessing increasingly recurrent tensions and crises.

The aim of such a conference would not be to create another institutional framework to replace or compete with existing regional organizations. The identity, nature and goals of these organizations are entirely different from the conference proposed. That conference would not pretend to have the ability to address or resolve all problems. Instead, it would provide the appropriate forum for addressing such matters, among other things.

The aim would be to bring the Arab states, Iran and Turkey together into a forum for consultation, dialogue, exchange of ideas and coordination. It would be a forum based on the philosophy of engagement, rather than confrontation, and grounded in the belief that seeking solutions to problems is preferably to rooting around for further confrontation.

Once established, the conference would convene at the ministerial level at regular intervals; it could convene any other time at a lower level as well. It could also entrust small committees of experts and officials with exploring solutions to certain crises or ways to contain issues, or with developing confidence-building measures for such purpose. Such committees could, perhaps, report to the general conference with policy suggestions.

The conference would be based on the assumption that no party would have the power to exclude other parties from the discussion of issues and areas of common interest, no matter how sharp the difference between them and regardless of the existing balance of power. The logic of exclusion is dangerous; it leads to confrontation and increases existing confrontation, whether direct or indirect.

Equally destructive is adopting a “wait-and-see” attitude, hoping differences will be settled by outside powers or that they will resolve themselves.

The four major regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Turkey—can and should take the initiative to launch such a process. This quartet, along with other countries in the region, have too many overlapping, intersecting and interdependent issues and areas of mutual interest. Such concerns can be better addressed within the framework of a conference such as we are proposing, which would give the opportunity to avoid new crises, contain existing ones, develop better understandings, and work out common approaches to problems.

Indeed, there are crises in this region that could escalate into war—and this is a region witnessing a proliferation of crises. Most of them are complex in nature, bringing together internal and external factors in a highly volatile Middle East. Even more, all sorts of links exist between these various crises.

The Middle East is witnessing too many challenges: a return of a regional cold war, the increasing role and weight of non-state actors, the threat of failed or failing states, the reemergence of strong transnationalism through the rise of Islamism and sectarianism, the rise and consolidation of jihadist terrorism on the shores of the Mediterranean, and the revival of sub-national identities fearful of the present or of the future. All of this threatens the fabric of existing states, providing an attractive space for interference, intervention, and confrontation by proxy.

The people of the Arab world, Iran and Turkey are forever condemned to live together in this region. They need to talk to, rather than about, each other. They are facing common threats, and they each have huge potential and influence in the region and beyond. Restoring peace and stability in the Middle East will not be possible so long as individual preferences and influences are not channeled into a coordinated approach to securing the common

interest.

The conference we are proposing would not pretend to replace the existing bilateral relations, dialogue, cooperation or alliances that might exist among members. Neither would it try to change the ideological or political priorities and preferences of any member country. The main goal would be to preempt and contain crises, to prevent any potentially costly spillovers of these crises, to develop a framework approach to dealing with crisis scenarios, to defuse tensions, and to contribute towards dialogue. Dialogue in particular would be a means of exploring possible ways to resolve crises, rather than waiting for actors outside the region to step in, and it is a context in which the fears of the other could be addressed. Confidence-building measures could underpin this process and create an environment suitable for dialogue between adversaries who find it otherwise difficult to talk directly. It would be key that such a conference not be organized as an exclusive or closed club. It could invite non-members to participate in its activities whenever it sees fit, to help achieve the goals of the conference.

The question that remains now is whether these four main powers will rise to this challenge and take the initiative to develop a comprehensive vision of the role of such a forum. Will they join forces with others to turn this idea into a working reality, or will they remain entangled in an increasingly fragmented Middle East?



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