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Iran Saudi tensions: A new 'zero hegemony' approach is desperately needed

Seyed Hossein Mousavian (/users/seyed-hossein-mousavian)

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US intervention and a regional arms race have seen the Middle East embroiled in endless crises. This approach needs to end



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (AFP)

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Chaos and insecurity continue to ravage the Middle East region. Saudi Arabia launched strikes against the Yemeni capital Sanaa this weekend as missiles and drones fired by Yemen's Houthi forces (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemens-houthis-target-saudi-oil-facilities-new-escalation>) targeted the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil industry on Sunday. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-27/multiple-blast-sounds-heard-in-saudi-capital-cause-unknown>) Last month an explosion (<https://www.npr.org/2021/02/26/971854484/explosion-damages-israeli-owned-ship-in-gulf-of-oman>) hit an Israeli-owned ship in the Gulf of Oman.

US President Joe Biden ordered air strikes against facilities in Syria allegedly used by Iranian-backed militia forces (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/27/biden-tells-congress-syria-strikes-are-consistent-with-us-right-to-self-defense.html>), claiming retaliation (https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/political_commentary/commentary_by_pat_buchanan/is_biden_reenlisting_in_the_forever_wars) for a missile attack on a US base in Iraq's Erbil, which killed a contractor and wounded a soldier.

Suffice to say, Biden's election to the White House hasn't alleviated the perilous situation in the Middle East.

The dominant paradigm for ensuring security in the region has long been based on US intervention. In the post-World War II era, Gulf states have heavily relied on alliances with the US as an economic and military superpower (<https://www.vox.com/2016/1/6/10719728/us-saudi-arabia-allies>). During the Cold War, the shah of Iran, perceived as a regional policing (<https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/beyond-sectarian-politics-saudi-iranian-relations-in-prospect>) figure, sought security through a strong alliance with the US.

Expanded military presence

Soon after the 1979 revolution and the fall of the shah, the US expanded its military presence in the Gulf. Arab Gulf states assumed that by heavily purchasing US arms and bringing their troops to the region, their own security would be ensured. And in part because Iran-US relations have remained hostile, other US allies in the Middle East - such as Saudi Arabia - have been unable to reconcile with Iran.

Fostering dialogue and cooperation among Gulf states is necessary for any potential rapprochement

Observing the ruinous turmoil in the Middle East region today - from the destructive US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, to the rise of terrorism, to the medieval sectarian violence of the Islamic State (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/topics/islamic-state>) - the assumption that security can be purchased has been severely challenged.

But what are the alternative scenarios for regional security, insofar as the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia are concerned? Four possible scenarios can be envisioned.

Firstly, there is the traditional, hegemonic approach by the US, where it continues to have a military presence in the Middle East, and Gulf states rely on American troops for security. This approach has been applied in one way or another for seven decades, and as a result, the Middle East is engulfed in myriad crises.

The second scenario entails the US strategy of "pivoting to the East (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>)". This suggests that the US should focus more on the real threats posed by China and Russia. In the event that the US abandons the Middle East region, a vacuum of power would likely be filled by other powers, including Russia and China.

Laying a new foundation

Under the third scenario, an Israeli-led agenda for a so-called "Arab NATO (<https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/334922-an-arab-nato-including-israel-can-exist-if-it-stays-quiet>)" would replace the US military presence in the region. Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz recently said (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/BtBg6pofO>) that Israel intends to develop a "special security arrangement" with Arab allies in the Gulf who share common concerns over Iran. But this scenario, promoted by the Trump administration (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-idUSKBN1KH21K>), would most certainly perpetuate tensions - not reduce them.

The fourth scenario, and in my opinion the most conducive to ensuring sustainable peace and security, is a model of collective regional security and cooperation based on 12 principles (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/31/iran-saudi-arabia-joe-biden-cooperation>) introduced by Gulf Research Center chair Abdulaziz Sager and myself in a joint article published by The Guardian.

Among others, the principles include mutual respect, preserving national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs of states, and rejecting sectarianism and the arming of illegal militias in regional states.

These principles would minimise the risk of further conflicts in the region; lay the foundations for sustainable peace, cooperation and friendly relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and pave the way for a new security paradigm towards collective regional cooperation.

'Zero hegemony'

While Riyadh and Tehran focus on each other, smaller Gulf countries have cause for concern about the potentially hegemonic

(<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>) tendencies of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. As such, a regional security system should be based on the “zero hegemony” concept. Fostering dialogue and cooperation among Gulf states is necessary for any potential rapprochement.



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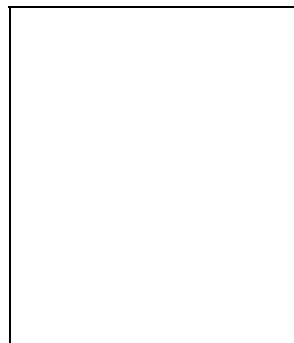
At the same time, one of the biggest challenges to regional peace and security stems from Israel’s longstanding violations of Palestinian rights. One cannot perceive sustainable peace in the Middle East without a fair and just solution to this tragic conflict

(<https://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/10/magazine/the-one-state-solution.html>).

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Eye.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy Specialist at Princeton University, and a former Chief of Iran’s National Security Foreign Relations Committee. His books: “Iran and the United States: An Insider’s view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace” was released in May 2014 by Bloomsbury, “A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction”, published in May 2020 by Routledge. His latest book: “A New Structure for Security, Peace, and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf” published in December 2020 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.



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