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Trends-Atlantic Council

TRENDS 1st Annual Conference: Middle East Security in a Changing World:
Building a Sustainable Regional Security System

Tuesday & Wednesday – November 2-3, 2021, in Washington, D.C.

10:00 AM-3:15 PM, United States, ET

Overview

TRENDS Research and Advisory and the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative hosted a two-day conference on **“Middle East Security in a Changing World: Building a Sustainable Regional Security System.”**

This event took place from **Tuesday, November 2** through **Wednesday, November 3, 2021, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. ET**, both in person at the Atlantic Council Headquarters and online.

The Middle East is witnessing rapid changes with major repercussions for regional security and stability. Some of these changes originate from within the region, while others are related to broader shifts across the world, such as the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging technologies. In recent years, the region has seen relative improvements in its security and development environment. The decline of civil conflicts after the Arab Spring era, the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the signing of the Abrahamic Peace Agreement have brought new opportunities for regional peace and stability. However, there remain several challenges to achieving sustainable regional security. Fast-paced technological transformations, obstacles to development, and the different approaches of regional and international powers will have considerable impact on the future of security in the Middle East.

Within this context, the conference addressed six topics over two days. The first topic, **“Redefining Middle East Security in an Era of Transition: A 20-Year Vision,”** addressed the main threats likely to affect the region over the next two decades. It covered the links between prospects for collective security governance, state failure, extremist ideologies, regional economic cooperation, energy, and climate change.

The second topic, **“Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Middle East and Beyond,”** dealt with the persistent threat posed by sub-state groups and



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transnational ideologies that seek to undermine the current regional and state system. It also discussed efforts to fight terrorism and extremism in the Middle East, key governance challenges confronting the region, the future of Afghanistan under the Taliban, and existing and potential inter-state cooperation on the issue of combating violent extremism.

The third topic, “**The Future of Middle East Security: International Priorities,**” discussed shifting global politics and its impact on regional security dynamics, focusing on US, Chinese, Russian, and European responses.

The fourth, “**The GCC Perspective on Building a Sustainable Regional Security Order,**” discussed shifting global politics and its impact on regional security dynamics, focusing on regional and local responses.

The fifth topic, “**New Diplomatic Initiatives in the Region: The Quest for Stable Alliances,**” focused on recent regional diplomatic initiatives, including taking stock of the Abraham Accords one year since their signing, as well as the trajectories for peace and security in the ever-evolving geopolitical context of the region.

The sixth topic, “**Beyond regional Security: New Perspectives and Future Visions for Human Security,**” examined some emerging themes and trends that may shape future regional security. The intent was to discuss new and original perspectives to further inform policy recommendations for policymakers in the United States and the Gulf states.

Executive Summary

Tom Warrick

Director, Future of DHS Project and Non-resident Senior Fellow, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and Middle East Programs Atlantic Council

He opened the conference by welcoming participants and speakers. He explained that over the next 2 days the conference hopes to conduct a broad and thorough review of the big foreign policy choices and challenges ahead for the next U.S. administration and what the GCC’s expectations are toward questions on Iran, Russia, and the rise of India and China. To achieve such ambitious review, Atlantic Council and Trends have assembled top analysts from centres in Washington D.C., Moscow, Beirut and Beijing together with leading commentators from the GCC.



He concluded that this conference illustrates Atlantic Council and Trends' effort to bring the different perspectives - in fact the 'other' perspectives - to the debate on U.S. foreign policy.

(HRH) Prince Turki Al Faisal

King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

Turki Al Faisal began his address by emphasizing that the Middle East's security has always been tied to great powers throughout its history.

He sees the current alteration of the Middle East's political reality as the outcome of the US and its allies' **strategic confusion**. The main source of this consternation, according to al Faisal, is the unfolding drama in Afghanistan, which "marks the end of an era of foreign military intervention in the region and the formation of regimes according to foreign design, while also marking the beginning of a new phase in world politics.

“According to the speaker, the failure of US and its allies in Afghanistan and the semi failure in Iraq will have great consequences on the region and the world which if not challenged would lead to more uncertainty, polarization, vacuum in power politics and balance of power.

As a result of this confusion, the region's states will look for a future away from the great power. He drew a link between the Soviet Union's collapse in Afghanistan in 1989, which he described as a "watershed moment," and the likely repercussions of the US and NATO departure from Afghanistan. He takes strategic confusion to mean: Mistrust, sharp polarization, multiplicity of issues of conflict, and multiplicity of competing actors dealing with situation on an ad hoc basis. This situation is responsible for unleashing all kind of forces, social, economic, religious, sectarian, terrorist forces in the region.

He contends that the US is abandoning its regional friends and allies, which is not a good recipe for regional security and prosperity. He believes that the Middle East's strategic importance to the US remains, and thus he hopes that the US can assist in establishing a stable regional order based on a principled security rules framework encircling the region's states, free of foreign interference, within this forum interstates conflict.

The speaker suggests a regional security framework based on the Helsinki Process, which helped to cement European peace by establishing ten principles: non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs, respect for sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Despite the Madrid conference, which was designed to resolve the Arab-Israeli



dispute, he sees the failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a barrier to establishing such a mechanism.

The US-GCC links, which he sees as historical and strategic, were stable and well kept, but Turki has reservations about the strength of these ties, and he has urged the current government to maintain rather than disrupt them.

Joey Hood

US Department of State

“Speaking about the main security challenges in the region terrorism, the Islamic state, religious extremism continuing threats caused by Iran by its destabilizing activities, the conflict in Syria and Yemen. These are significant challenges and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future.

To tackle these issues, president Biden has articulated a clear strategic vision committing the USA to a more sustainable set of rules and long-term relationships with the US partners in the MINA. These relationships must feature an affirmative agenda that focuses on solving shared problems and building a future of prosperity.

Biden admiration placed human rights at the forefront of US foreign policy. And the states that will be most equipped to meet the security challenges of the changing world will be those with a resilient inclusive government that treats civil society as a partner rather than an enemy and recognize the fundamental rights of its people including freedom from oppression, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. This is why the US is pressing the government to increase transparency and accountability.

The peoples of the Middle East and North Africa have found their voice, as across the region we continue to see people demonstrate against corruption and government failure to deliver on promises and stagnation whether it is in Iraq, Algeria, Tunisia or Lebanon. The people are expressing their will; however, their political elite ignores these warnings signs.”

In this line of ideas, Hood referred to the PRC as often given false hopes of stability with High-Tech surveillance tools but instead operates to enact strict measures of social control. The PRC sell these tools of surveillance as a response to all world governments ills. But the reality is that these are a reflection of a short-sighted vision regardless of the short-term benefits that the government may see, such oppressive measures will backfire.

Promoting inclusive, effective governance and resilience state are a worthy goal and these qualities will be vital for tackling both the security problems and the ones that lay



ahead. Put simply countries cannot fight COVID-19 or the Islamic State if there are too weak, unstable and inward-looking due to the failure of their institutions' not capable of delivering the good and effective governance that people demand nor will they be able to tackle the real or imminent challenges posed by climate changes including counties in Africa and the Gulf.

These changes are significant but not insurmountable and the USA will be there to support its partners in MENA which is in our best interests and the Abraham Accords are a good example.

Session 1

Tom Warrick

Atlantic Council

The speaker summarized his presentation in five points:

- 1- He stated that while security is the primary and most important goal of government, it is not the only one, as peace and prosperity are.
- 2- The speaker's second point addressed terrorism, namely the lessons acquired over the previous 20 years in combating terrorism since 9/11, namely that no safe places should be provided for terrorists to establish themselves and therefore fund recruit and attack innocent people and governments. Terrorists should not be allowed to seize territory from which to launch lethal assaults, according to policymakers.
- 3- The need to comprehend the danger posed by Iran's security model, which is predicated on the dominant security role of the Militias, which operate outside of complete government authority and are an anomaly in the contemporary state's monopoly of military power. The risk is that this model may become appealing in nations where the state is weak, such as Iraq and Yemen, as well as Libya. The speaker sees it as a major security concern for the region's leaders to confront.
- 4- The importance of multilateralism collaboration; past experiences have shown that efforts are more effective when carried out with friends in Europe and abroad (China, for example). and with united nation, when possible, in order to tackle various challenges, such as security, climate change
- 5- The significance of non-military cooperation in security areas such as aviation, marine, and border security...



Dr Omar Al-Ubaydli

DIRASAT

“As the material influence of the European powers and their successor, the US, wanes in the Middle East, there remains an opportunity for their intellectual influence to play a pivotal role in the region’s peace. Two-hundred and fifty years ago, during the peak of the Enlightenment, some of the greatest minds in Western philosophy, including Montesquieu, Thomas Paine, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith laid the foundations of the classical liberal school of thought in international relations, with its emphasis on trade and economic cooperation as the drivers toward peace. While this paradigm has had its ups and downs during the two plus centuries that have passed since the Enlightenment, it contains to play an important role in most efforts at securing long term peace. One of the biggest success stories consistent with the classical liberal school is the European Union, both in its drawing together of perennially warring countries such as France, Germany, and the UK; and in its successful integration of Eastern Europe following the collapse of the USSR.

Today, the Middle East region has an opportunity to be the newest case study for the classical liberal theory of international relations featured in undergraduate textbooks. We have already seen glimpses of success, with Saudi Arabia’s potential energy exports to Iraq and international counterpiracy efforts in the Indian Ocean, but the road ahead remains long and arduous. Nevertheless, the failure of most alternatives leaves the region’s key players with little choice but to experiment with trade and commerce as conduits to peace and stability. Fortunately, there are many opportunities for mutually beneficial exchange, and they can be the starting point for a lasting solution to the region’s security challenges.”

Dr Aysha Al Sarihi

King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center

Dr al-Sarihi started her presentation by pointing at the fact that climate change is real and a serious cause for concerns among many countries in the Middle East. Indeed, the region has recently witnessed both the highest recorded temperature, by reaching 50° Celsius in Iraq, and tremendous extreme weather events, such as the cyclone Shaheen which hit the northern coast of Oman last October 2021. Therefore, for an environment that is significantly burdened by a fragile desertic climatic condition, climate change represents a multi-dimensional threat that is bound to exacerbate the challenges that are already negatively impacting the water-food-energy security nexus.

Dr al-Sarihi emphasized that climate change produces trans-national threats and, therefore, it needs trans-national answers. This proves to be especially true for the Middle



East, a region where 66 per cent of freshwater resources are shared among a plurality of countries. Undoubtedly, this interdependent calls for attention as it might cause conflicts and mass migrations, but it also offers windows for positive cooperation.

Dr al-Sarihi stressed that climate mitigation measures represent a double-hedge sword for countries that are highly dependent on hydrocarbon export. Indeed, if it is true that they can mitigate climate change impacts through cooling systems and desalination plants powered by hydrocarbon resources, climate change will add further pressure on an already increasing domestic demand for energy. A dangerous mix that is bound to exacerbate even more the structural problems afflicting the region.

Dr al-Sarihi carefully pointed out that the Middle East region is not only a space plagued by climate-based structural problems and rising challenges but that it also represents an arena that has welcomed a high number of initiatives aiming at tackling climate change, both at national and regional levels. A series of projects will allow the region to be better equipped to face climate change adverse impacts and strengthen the countries' resilience.

Dr al-Sarihi emphasized that the Middle Eastern countries' commitment manifested both at the intergovernmental and national levels. On the one hand, building on the 2015 Paris Agreement, which has been widely recognized as a common basic framework to engage in positive climate action, the Middle East countries have translated this commitment to the regional level through the Middle East Green Initiative. By building on common research programs, the latter represents an attempt to foster regional cooperation and governance on climate-related issues. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain declared their commitment to achieving net-zero-emission targets by mid-century.

In her concluding remarks, Dr al-Sarihi stressed the importance of political commitment and local agency when pursuing climate change mitigation programs in the Middle East. Indeed, Dr al-Sarihi emphasized that the region is well-equipped with dedicated institutional structures to implement strategies, but what is missing is the willingness to ensure their smooth functioning. Besides, empowering and including the local youth in research and innovation projects is the key to reducing dependency on imported technologies and enhancing a deeper acknowledgement of climate change threats to the region.



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Dr Hesham Al Ghannam Gulf Research Center

According to Hesham Al Ghannam, even though there are other issues that the MENA region is facing, placing these within a security perspective would logically mean that without stability in the region there would be no economy, no trade, no megaprojects, no sports events, etc...

Al Ghannam added that the region suffers from a critical security issue that needs immediate attention from all concerned parties. And despite the chaotic security landscape of the region filled with uncertainties, the region's powerful countries can still manage the region's security issues reasonably and constructively.

Also, in Al Ghannam's point of view, the US disengagement from the region is a pivotal factor that led many countries in the region – including the GCC – to adopt a more pragmatic approach, and pushed them to take their fate into their own hands, and adopt a moderate rhetoric driven by shared interests and fears. This is, of course, not enough to establish a security framework but it is a must-have prerequisite to build an all-inclusive region's strong security framework.

According to Al Ghannam, economic competition is a pressing factor that could exacerbate security-related matters between the region's countries. To avoid such issues, the GCC countries need to reach a certain kind of equilibrium through:

- Strategic and political alignment between the GCC countries
- A Gulf united front (Kordahi being an example that shows the importance of unified front in Action => Abu Dhabi supporting KSA)

One of the security challenges that Al Ghannam mentioned as posing a threat for the GCC is the Iran regime that seeks to reorder and change the status quo in the region supported by the Americans and Europeans.

Al Ghannam highlighted that the GCC operates in an intricate security environment. The issue is that when a country is willing to compromise to reach an agreement, this willingness gets picked up as a sign of weakness by the other party/s.

To create a regional security framework:



KSA:

- Signs that KSA is eager to engage in a serious discussion about the region security with friends and enemies. This is a qualitative/positive approach compared with KSA not so old tactic. This approach will establish Riyadh as a constructive regional player.

Iran:

- Reaching any deal with Iran, the GCC/KSA needs must be neutral. Having the US out of the region cannot be achieved without addressing the regional security concerns.
- Not reaching a fair and balanced agreement on the security concerns of the GCC/KSA will make security issues more persistent.
- A key issue/part of the solution is Yemen
- Yemen could be a good starting point for de-escalation and establishing an all-inclusive security framework that benefits the region.

Session 2

Dr Anne Speckhard

International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism

She presented her research on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with a focus on the latter's propaganda, as well as techniques for countering the ISS narrative. She has concentrated her attention on the cyberspace initiatives of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

She began by presenting the ISS's online activities, which no longer encourage its supporters to travel to Syria to fight, but rather to do so at home, where they belong. Since its territorial Khalifate was destroyed, the ISS uses the hashtag BAQIYA, which means "we are still here". In their propaganda ISS uses the plight of the detainees in the Syrian democratic forces to gain support, raise money. They also carry out attacks on these forces help their prisoners to escape.

ISS has shifted its attention from Iraq and Syria to other regions: Afghanistan, Africa, Indonesia, Maldives.

ISS is attempting to rebuild the Caliphate from the prison, as by some of their websites, eg the Al-Hol directed to imprisoned women in the camps in Syria.



The second part of the talk was dedicated by the lecturer to the ways to fight back ISS nefarious activities online. The objective of center is to break the ISS brand counter narrative

To this objective they interviewed 271 ISIS defectors, returnees, and imprisoned cadres, they videoed them, cut them in short narratives and posted them on Facebook, you tube and RealJihad.org

The counter narrative explained the speaker is based on short account by an ex-ISIS member stating that he was an adherent to the groups' ideology and he shares the same predicaments like them, but once in the group he discovered that ISIS was un-Islamic, and from there goes not to advice others not to join.

In her last part of the lecture, she demonstrated the impacts of these counter extremism narrative are having on likely target, she did this by monitoring how many people follow these programs and how they interact with them.

Dr Patrice Brodeur
Universite of Montreal

UNESCO preamble: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed".

1) We have learned a lot from CVE and PVE, including also from resistances to such approaches, such as the preference for more proactive, and less reactive, approaches around the promotion of social cohesion and common citizenship (KAICIID approach to IRD and Peacebuilding, Arab Platform and beyond)

a. Prof. Abu-Nimer: Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding (Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13 & book chapter: A Way Forward in Transforming Violent Extremism, De-Islamisation, De-Securitisation and De-Religionisation, in a book on: Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism 2018 by the Berghof Foundation in Berlin)

2) Increased call for capacity-building in dialogical skills has become a common call, and not only from traditional religious leadership in M-E and beyond, but also from youth sector in particular (i.e.: research Adyan: report by Prof. Driessen: Interreligious Dialogue Mapping of the Middle East Report 2021)

a. Seven lessons:



Lesson 1: Interreligious dialogue in the Middle East is a relatively young field and its growth is directly connected to the major political and social dynamics shaping the region, including the growth of religiously expressed violence.

Lesson 2: The political context of each country affects the development of interreligious dialogue in powerful ways. Most interreligious dialogue organizations perceived local and national political challenges as the most difficult dilemmas they faced in their work.

Lesson 3: Much of the interreligious dialogue activity in the region remains local in scope, at the initiative of faith-based organizations, and oriented to serving basic community needs.

Lesson 4: There is great sensitivity from multiple types of organizations to the foreign interests and influences that may be tied to interreligious dialogue activities.

Lesson 5: There is growing support for interreligious dialogue activities which strengthen citizenship values, even as the exact meaning of those values may change across national contexts.

Lesson 6: There is room for more substantive participation and dialogue outreach to youth, women, conservative religious communities and religious groups that are considered to hold extremist beliefs.

Lesson 7: Strategies of education were recognized as an essential strategy of action which might effectively build dialogue organizations' capacity to participate in the reform of religious education or education on diversity in the region.

3) Increasing dialogue skills is an investment in what I will coin as: 'epistemological security'.

a. There is a need, first, to expand the notion of what security means today, or to use the words of Mr. Hood earlier today open up to "expansive views of what security includes" in order, second, to move in the direction of what Prince Faysal al-Turki mentioned in his closing comment at the end of our first panel this morning, "the need for more joint activities between GCC and Iran, and eventually also Turkey", adapting the Helsinki process to regional Middle East needs and processes.

b. For this regionalization of the Helsinki process to happen, to take this one potentially very viable idea, we must find ways to integrate better into existing political and intergovernmental activities, the leadership of traditional religious leadership as well as more recent social media influencers through more inclusive dialogical processes that address the problems already raised this morning. It is taking serious the call, earlier today by Mr. Hood, to take seriously civil society in general, and what I might add its religious components in particular in societies where religion still plays an important role.



- c. This includes not only practicing parallel and complementary forms of intra-religious, bilateral as well as multilateral interreligious dialogue (both Abrahamic and beyond);
- d. It also includes the integration of those practices and results thereof (DECLARATIONS, etc.) into the various formal and non-formal educational systems in existence throughout the Middle East and beyond.
- e. The good practice of dialogue leads to trust building, which is vital to regional cooperation and promoting multilateralism, whatever the focus of attention is, from climate change to violent extremism, from economic cooperation to political balancing of regional dynamics in order to avoid being prey to external influences.
- 4) Epistemological security is also necessary to understand better the changing dimensions of Islamism today, both in the Middle East and beyond, beyond particular religious or ideological subjectivities. This means using a dialogical approach to seek a better understanding of the various epistemologies underlying the current state of scholarship on violent extremism, as well as CVE, PVE, and other alternative approaches. With my colleague Dr. Wael Saleh, we have developed the concepts of neo- and retro-Islamism, sometimes leading to necro-Islamism. But these developments need further studies to understand better what fuels further developments in Islamist ideology leading to violent extremism, and what, on the contrary, attenuates both discourses and behaviors on the ground, leading to what might eventually be appropriately called 'post-Islamism'. (Olivier Roy, from 2012 onwards, coined the expression 'post-islamisme': Asef Bayat in 2013: The Changing faces of political Islam).

Increasing investment in education that promotes national citizenship values, combined with increasing ways to integrate religious leadership as well as young people into meaningful dialogical experiences with practical transformative actions in their local contexts in particular, will help stem in a proactive way the political and social critique that fuel much of the radicalization process.

H.E. Ahmed Al Qasemi

Hedayah

No person is born a terrorist. And those who eventually turn to terrorism undergo different stages in the process. In counter-terrorism, defeating ideology is a challenge even when military means are employed. Extremism is the main problem and political ideology with religious connotations is used as a vehicle.

Hedayah aims to address the root causes of terrorism, and it has developed a national action plan to deal with this. Countries need multi-dimensional strategies, and not merely reactive responses. There are gaps between countries in terms of their



responses. Many have no national action plans and others have those that are unrealistic to implement, which leads to failure. The capacity on the ground should meet the caliber of the document.

Terrorism or extremism is not a constant, one type of threat. And the approach towards it should not be constant either. An effective national action plan could, therefore, be a “living” document to be built and molded in stages. As a pre-requisite, measures to counter violent extremism should be defined in national terms. Definitions and terminology, as well as an understanding of countering violent extremism, need to be accentuated before proceeding further. The link between terrorism and extremism also needs to be understood and comprehended properly.

Both the local and international push and pull factors are important to understand as well, as a national action plan has to address their respective threats. Communication strategy should be paid attention to, as in some countries the governments may not necessarily be trusted by the public. It must also be kept in mind that civil society organizations do not always see eye-to-eye with government officials, and this requires addressing.

Hedayah has defined how people turn to radicalization, and it has published a public document explaining this phenomenon. The process of radicalization should be clearly understood because it does not happen out of the blue. The offline and online nexus needs examining, too, as people are sometimes encouraged to join online without their physical presence. This has been promoted by ISIS.

Some national action plans are vague in their intervention approach towards radicalized persons. Both time and manner in which the intervention approach is implemented are crucial.

Dr Louis Audet Gosselin
CPRLV

Radicalization research has shown that a sentiment of marginalization and injustice is central to the involvement of individuals in violent extremism. Consequently, the most efficient prevention programs have focused on helping reconnecting these individuals with pro-social activism and develop a sense of belonging to the wider society. However, it appears difficult to implement such programs in areas where the state authority has all but collapsed. In such settings, like is seen in several regions in Mali and Burkina Faso in recent years, P/CVE has mainly resorted to armed repression, the empowering of local community militias, as well as longer-term rebranding of development initiatives and the strengthening of so-called religious “moderate voices”. While sometimes well-intentioned



or necessary, many of these responses are in the long-term counterproductive and strengthen extremism. Non-state militias have committed large-scale humanitarian abuse and tend to fuel inter-community conflicts while most often not achieving significant results against well-trained armed rebellions. In the meantime, some of the most important factors remain unaddressed, such as the absence of a fair justice system or the marginalization of whole communities, such as Tuaregs and Fulanis in the Sahel. Finally, ideological responses based of strengthening “moderate” Islam have led to the stigmatization of young Sunni Muslims with the assumption that extremism doesn’t exist in other communities. While there is no simple solution in such a context, general objectives of prevention of radicalization must remain focused on avoiding stigmatization, strengthening dialogue between communities, developing a sense of belonging to the wider society and offering individual support to extremists, including in prison, in order to offer them an alternative way to contribute to society.

Session 3

Dr Anthony Cordesman
CSIS

There is no change in the US perceptions of priorities for the Middle East. There are force reductions, such as those in Afghanistan. But almost all the forces and bases that were in the region before the focus on terrorism have been expanded and improved. There is, however, a dramatic set of changes in the US military forces with new concepts of power projection emerging, which will inevitably force the US to work with its strategic partners in the region.

The nuclear arms race is back on while cyberspace is changing radically. What might be termed as “white area conflict,” which is designed to use economics and civil structures to achieve military goals, may become increasingly prevalent.

The central focus is on China and Russia, which is not a new development. In fact, President Obama raised the issue by highlighting the need to rebalance Asia. National defense strategies adopted subsequently were developed by General Mattis. The Biden administration has in most ways carried on with the same approach, but it is still unclear how much it will change US forces both globally and in the MENA region. This unknown will remain for at least next two fiscal years. And when it comes to the analysis business, policy and words take a back seat to money.



There will be changes to the forces the US has and will project in the Gulf. In some regional threats, uncertainties are exceptionally high, especially when it comes to how the US might approach Iran, but also Yemen and Libya.

With relatively poor and often corrupt governments mixed with authoritarianism, the MENA region is plagued with major population problems and lacks effective economic competition. There are exceptions and some progress is occurring in the Gulf and elsewhere, but not regionally. In fact, the US does not refer to the MENA as a region, but rather in terms of countries and sub-regions because that is where it has to make practical decisions. The Palestinian-Israeli issue will continue to be stagnant. Turkey is a wild card.

The US has shifted its strategic energy dependence on Middle East crude to China and Asia, and substituted it with trade in manufactured goods and services with Asian states. Therefore, it has not achieved energy independence, and energy dependence has shifted from US imports to Asian imports, which serve Asian exports.

The increase in Chinese military spending drives the US perceptions in its approach and response to China. Russia remains a major global power in terms of missiles and nuclear weapons. Although Russia failed in economic development except for its petroleum exports, it still remains a serious military threat. It is not the focus of future US military competition.

The GCC is a divided organization due to its members' inability to cooperate, modernize, and integrate. It is in need of reform and change. In an era of artificial intelligence, it cannot go on pretending that buying of modern aircraft allows it to compete with an Iran that focusses on asymmetric warfare in the Gulf and precision-guided missiles. This is a major challenge that requires a forward-looking re-thinking in the region that steers away from the past.

Dr Anna Borshchevskaya

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The speaker commenced by stating that Russia has always been interested in the Middle east since the 16th century. The constant driver of Russia toward to the Middle east was geography and namely the access to port.

During the Soviet Union era, were present in the Middle east in competition with western power western, this presence was driven by ideology and the cold war tensions.



The modern Russia increase interest in the Middle east happened since their intervention in Syria.

The Putin policy is conceived within the Primakov vision of a multi-polar world. Where the US are not the sole superpower.

She describes Putin's approach in the middle east as flexible and pragmatic and less ideological, he maintains relations with all political actors in the region and within the states in the region. Moreover, his strategy in the region is different from the previous regime (communist regime) it consists in investing less resources for more output in addition to ideological neutral stand.

Putin intervention in Syria in 2015, is a gamechanger, it has captured all the interests from the domestic and other international issues (Ukraine).

The Russian military presence in Syria gave it a strategic asset as it allows Russia to project power to other places in the middle east and Africa and to Africa

The intervention of Russia in Syria bestowed with some prestige as it proves that it is faithful to its allies in contrast to the US attitudes.

Russia extending influence with limited means, like cyber, private armies, arm sells, building nuclear plants.

She concluded by saying that Russia extends against perceived US retreat and ambiguity.

Dr Weng Wang

Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies

Dr Wang began his presentation by recalling the Middle East (ME)'s crucial role in the global history of human civilizations and past empires. In this regard, even though the origin of the ME-China relation can be traced back to 2000 years ago, Dr Wang emphasized that historically, these two regions of the world have never been in conflict. Consequently, it is on this long-lasting peaceful experience that China wants to build a renewed genuine engagement with the Middle East. The core of Dr Wang presentation is focused on deconstructing two myths on Chinese interests in the Middle East that, according to him, are based on false premises. The two myths are "China wants to dominate the ME process in future" and "the Middle East will become a new battlefield for China-US competition".



As far as the first myth is concerned, Dr Wang presented the current outlook of ME-China economic relations and what emerges is that China's economic projection towards the region is recording an overall decrease. Between 2010 and 2020, the rate of ME-China foreign trade decreased from 6,6% to 5,9%, crude oil imports diminished from 54% to 49%, and, finally, Chinese FDI headed to the Middle East plunged from 6,8% to 2,4%. On this last point, of the total FDI headed to the Middle East in 2019, estimated to total \$US61.6 billion, China accounted only for \$US 2.41 billion (2.7%). Last but not least, the Chinese exports of arms to the Middle East has also declined during the 2010s, by falling from 2,8% (2011-2015) to 2,0% (2015-2019).

Nevertheless, the Middle East oil remains of critical importance for Asia, which accounted for 83.9% of ME crude oil export in 2020. Consequently, Dr Wang recalled the primary role that the Middle East has for the Chinese economy by providing the latter with 1/3 of its crude oil domestic demand and 1/5 of its petrochemical products.

When it comes to the second myth, Dr Wang stressed that a US-China competition in the ME is quite unlikely since the two countries have no competing goals there, but only common interests, such as solving the Iranian nuclear file and ensuring peace to the region. For these reasons, in order to reap the inherent benefits of the region, Dr Wang pointed at the fact that US and China have not to see each other through the lens of great power competition, but through those of cooperation. This is the only way to unleash the mutual gains of the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI).

Since China is projected to become the most essential player in the global economy, the BRI, according to Dr Wang, is the most suitable tool to spread peace, cooperation, investments, openness, and connectivity without political coercion and to involve as many countries as possible. Therefore, the BRI is not a political choice between ideologically opposed camps but a mutually beneficial and win-win developmental initiative in which 19 countries have decided to participate until now.

Dr Wang pointed out that ME-China relation became even stronger during the covid-19 pandemic, especially because of the cooperation on the vaccine and the important role of the UAE in being the 1st country in the world to approve Sinopharm vaccine. Therefore, ensuring effective vaccine distribution and preventing a future pandemic is a shared goal between the two parties. Dr Wang concluded by affirming that the Chinese foreign policy of the future will be informed by both the 5-points initiative of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and by Beijing desire to promote a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Middle East, free from conflicts and wars.



November 3, 2021

Day 2

Welcoming Remarks

Dr Mohammed Abdullah Al-Ali

The Middle East security has almost always been fraught with tensions and conflicts that have not only upset its own security and stability, but have also had direct and indirect impact on international security.

The *TRENDS Annual Conference on the Middle East Security*, in this respect, aims to explore how to **achieve sustainable security** in the region, and bring peace and prosperity to its countries and the world at large. The Abraham Accords, in this regard, have opened the way for new opportunities for regional peace between Israel and Arab countries.

Signed between Israel, UAE and then Sudan and Morocco, the Abraham Accords, have been one of the most important developments in the Middle East in decades. These accords are already proving that the benefits of peace are much preferable to continuing age-old and endless conflicts.

How sustainable regional peace and security in the Middle East can be achieved:

1. Countering all armed organizations, seeking to weaken and disintegrate the states and turn them into failed ones.
2. Strengthening international and regional cooperation in confronting extremist organizations.
3. Sustainable development can contribute to enhancing security and stability in the region.
4. Working together to consolidate the foundations of peace in the region and build on the Abraham Accords.



Session 4

Abdullah Bin Khaled Al Saud

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia

Mr bin Khaled Al Saud started his speech by recognizing the multi-dimensional challenges hampering the Middle East region from unlocking its inherent potential. However, a future plagued by armed conflicts, terrorism, and sectarian rifts is not the inevitable destiny of the region, affirmed Mr bin Khaled Al Saud, by pointing at the potential positive outcomes of the paradigm shift currently embroiling the GCC region. According to Mr bin Khaled al Saud, the path leading to long-lasting peace, stability, and security at the regional level can only be successful if a three-pillar approach comes to inform the relations among the Gulf countries. First, state sovereignty and territorial integrity have to be recognized as the cornerstones of this process. Second, any form of malign activity or foreign interference in domestic affairs has to be stopped. Finally, countries are called to invest time and resources in nurturing a respectful mutual coexistence.

Achieving a durable security architecture in the Gulf will benefit not only the region's country but also the entire world, continued Mr bin Khaled al Saud. The centrality of the Gulf is proved by the main proposals coming from all around the globe that, through confidence-building measures and dialogue, are eager to achieve this goal.

According to Mr bin Khaled al Saud, this goal is not out of reach for two main reasons. First, the GCC countries are well aware of their shared destiny and that the only way to successfully navigate through the challenges of the future is by resorting to coordinated actions capable of delivering lasting political solutions to ongoing conflicts. Second, in the current days, also thanks to the exploratory talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there is enough momentum to let hope be more than wishful thinking and allow it to achieve tangible results.

The zero-sum mentality, that for too long has informed the relations between the Gulf countries, has been discarded in favour of a cooperative approach based on mutual benefits and which aims at tackling the root causes of the regional instability, affirmed Mr bin Khaled al Saud.

To allow this process to unleash its inherent potential, continued Mr bin Khaled al Saud, Saudi Arabia is determined to use core values of Vision 2030 as the blueprint of its foreign policy in order to foster the conditions enabling peace, stability, and prosperity to emerge in the region.



By building on mutual interests, cooperative partnerships, and enhanced confidence, the Gulf countries are bound to achieve a more holistic view of the Middle East security, affirmed Mr bin Khaled al Saud. A vision that will allow them to achieve a more economic prosper and sustainable future. In this regard, Saudi Arabia – thanks to the Saudi Green Initiative and the net-zero-emissions goal by 2060 – is willing to behave as an active and responsible leader in coordinating all the region’s countries to find creative ways to tackle climate change.

Mr bin Khaled al Saud concluded by affirming that as long as all actors are equally committed to mutual respect and trust, a region free from tensions and instabilities is within reach.

Dr Muhammed Al Sulami

Rasanah

The conference is organized at a very important time and the agenda shows how important it is.

The 2015 nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA is dying its slow death while Iran is advancing its nuclear capabilities and its highly enriched uranium reserves are mounting at a fast pace, thanks to advanced centrifuges. All the while, Tehran has continued its cooperation with the IAEA albeit marginally. The break-out time for Iran to develop a nuclear bomb has been significantly reduced while a variety of tried and tested sophisticated delivery systems – cruise and ballistic missiles – stand ready in a few underground cities. The fear of Iran’s still-secret enrichment and nuclear bomb fabrication facilities is a credible one.

The relationship between Iran and the Gulf states witnessed ups and downs, and there were many challenges here because the ideology of exporting the revolution and the use of non-state actors to destabilize. Nevertheless, the wise response from the Gulf was to solve all the problems, especially during Khatami’s era, but they became complicated during Ahmadinejad’s era.

The international community tried to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Three related thorny files:

1. Nuclear Program
2. Ballistic Missile Program
3. Destabilization

We should not separate these files because this will be a waste of effort and time.



There is no problem with the peaceful nuclear program, but Iran will not be satisfied with that.

Iran is still repelling the revolution and trying to export its ideology to its neighbors. Despite the sanctions, Iran continues its nuclear activities.

Iran's nuclearization, if realized, can trigger Turkey, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to kick start a nuclear weapons program, like China's nuclear weapons led to India's which in turn led to Pakistan developing its nuclear arsenal. If Iranian statements can be of any guide, they have often justified Tehran's quest for nuclear deterrence by referring to the Pakistani bomb or the Sunni bomb as a security threat. Nuclear deterrence brings along with it strategic superiority or strategic parity, but it also adds prestige to the country equipped with it.

If the Middle East and Turkey are to be kept out of the nuclear race, the West, China, and Russia must wholeheartedly curb Iran's nuclear activities first. Rewarding Tehran's rogue behavior and apathy towards its JCPOA nuclear obligations and IAEA safeguards is equivalent to discouraging the Gulf states, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and others from complying with the crumbling NPT.

Two opposing visions in the region:

Using the region's wealth for development (the Gulf vision) and using it for nuclear activities (the Iranian vision).

Iran's possession of nuclear weapons means its proxies' possession of nuclear weapons.

The threat is global, not just Gulf. Therefore, we must work together to force Iran to be a normal country that has good relations with the world .

There is no international definition of terrorism. No terrorist group should be tolerated.

Vice Admiral (Retired) Fozzie Miller
CEO The Fozzie Miller Group

According to Fozzie Miller, since at least the onset of the rift, the GCC, as an organization has been incoherent. He started off his remarks by defining the notion of a "Sustainable Regional Security"



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It is important to have a common understanding of what a stable and secure region looks like – especially in the air and maritime domains. His main pointers were:

Having a common understanding of threats to the security in the region

Free, unfettered use of the air and maritime commons

The free flow of commerce into and out of the region

Requirements for building sustainable regional security.

Some of the hurdles and challenges he foresaw regarding this issue for the GCC is:

Interoperable command, control, and communications systems

A common operating picture

The ability and willingness to share information

The willingness to participate in a hierarchal structure

Shared and well understood Rules of Engagement

These issues are, as far as he was concerned, current impediments to building sustainable regional security

He believed there is a shared view by GCC countries as to the largest threat to stability – Iran – especially malign IRGC behavior (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen....)

However, there is likely not a shared view of each nation's number two threat (this impedes building the trust relationship necessary to share and act on information

He then posed the question: What can be done in the current environment?

He went on to claim that improved relations between Israel and many GCC nations (not just Abraham Accord signees) opens a window to improve the air domain awareness and integrated air and missile defense because of Israel's expertise in this area and desire to grow partnerships – this could be accomplished tri-laterally first (US/ISR/Gulfies) and eventually become multi-lateral and mutually supportive

There are already existing structures that support common maritime security operations (CTF-152, CTF-81, CTF-150). Israel and the US recently completed the Noble Waters exercise in the Red Sea and the US has been exercising for years in the Red Sea, GOA, NAS, AG.... These maritime ties can easily be expanded with little to no public footprint



He concluded his remarks by stating that these are challenging times with many opportunities and that starting small and building confidence in each other is imperative.

Dr Fahed Al Shelaimi

Gulf Forum for Peace and Security

Dr Al Sheilaimi started his presentation by recalling the central role that the Middle East region has historically played in the rise and fall of empires, from the Macedon empire of Alexander the Great to Ottoman colonialism. The reason for the Middle East's pivotal position in the contemporary, according to Dr Al Shehabi, has to be found in its natural resources and its geographical position. Indeed, the Middle East is home to more than 60% of the world oil reserves, and it is encircled by three of the most critical chokepoints in the world: the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz. However, the very centrality of the Middle East has exposed it a series of threats originating outside and within the region.

Among the external challenges, the destabilizing Iranian role in the region, due to its narrative of exporting the revolution, is by far the most dangerous and the one causing the highest level of instability. Following suit, there are, on the one hand, Turkish regional ambition and its alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood and, on the other hand, the latent and unsolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, Dr Al Shelaimi continued by recognizing that threats may be found simultaneously in the abundance and the scarcity of natural resources. In this regard, the high dependence of the GCC's state budgets on oil revenues and the dramatic water scarcity affecting the region represent significant threats to the stability and livelihood of the GCC area.

As far as the domestic challenges are concerned, Dr Al Shelaimi recognized that, despite sharing common traits, the GCC monarchies hold consistently different political cultures, which ultimately represent the most significant limit to the definition of a unified political doctrine and agenda in the GCC. Therefore, achieving a more harmonized posture, also based on a stronger involvement of the Gulf public, is a fundamental step, according to Dr Al Shehabi, to improve the regional security, especially against those threats that are not violent, such as the demographic imbalance, or invisible, such as cyber-crime and terrorism.

Dr Al Shehabi continued by affirming that a long-lasting collective regional security should hold on two pillars: enhancing public political participation, potentially through a GCC national assembly, and the unification of some governmental sectors, such as a common military command a common central bank. As a result, more clarity on the GCC



geopolitical position vis-à-vis its neighbours and a more efficient decision-making process among the GCC members will inevitably have a positive impact in defining successful policies to achieve a higher the life-quality for the GCC generations of the future.

In his conclusion, aside from reaffirming the relevance of fostering mutual trust between GCC and Iran, Dr Shelaimi reaffirmed that the GCC future is in its own hands and pointed at the importance of three policies that might help in stabilizing the regional security order. First, to refuse from engaging with Tehran directly and limit GCC's action to minimize Iranian outreach in the theatres of conflict. Second, to pave the way for an enlargement of the GCC to those countries sharing similar challenges and common interests, such as Morocco and Jordan. Finally, to rehabilitate Iraq to its historical role of active player and balancing power in the Gulf region. The way to go remains still long, but significant steps forward have been achieved during the last decade.

Session 5

H.E. Yousef Al-Otaiba

“The UAE is getting enough support, respect, credit, and appreciation for the Abraham Accords. The US, the UAE, Israel, and India have met together recently. We are snowballing into various bilateral and multi-lateral forums to cooperate together. We already have working groups on two issues, namely water and climate. We also work together under the principle of tolerance, inclusion, and co-existence, which have been the building pillars of the UAE. There is a lot more we can do together.

We are in a different world today. The region is tired of conflict. People are tired of ideology because it hasn't delivered, and they have different priorities today. Young people want a better quality of life, opportunities, jobs, and future. The Abraham Accords are a mechanism for creating opportunities.

If we have enough cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally within the scope and provisions of the Abraham Accords, there will be a spillover effect for everyone. We should look at issues more broadly and less politically.

We are trying to break new ground with different approaches. We should keep expanding the range of issues on which we cooperate and create more working groups for addressing them. This could potentially benefit the entire region. There's much more potential to accomplish greater things for the region if we work together.

Everyone looks at the Abraham Accords through a different lens, which highlights their priorities. From the UAE perspective, the main priorities have always been peace,



economy, and people-to-people understanding. The Abraham Accords are not meant to target any specific country. They are meant to be a stabilizing factor and were driven by our intention to prevent annexation. We said that we would normalize ties in exchange for suspension of annexation – that was the deal which, in fact, salvages the two-state solution. The two-state solution is alive, in theory, because of the Abraham Accords. Had the Abraham Accords not come through, there would have been annexation, and we would have been talking today about a one-state solution. Diplomacy, stability, and prosperity were the focus of the Abraham Accords.”

Ambassador (Retired) Marc Sievers

American Jewish Committee in the Gulf

Marc J. Sievers congratulated Ambassador Al Otaiba for being the best representative of the United Arab Emirates in Washington. He pointed out the important role of Ambassador Al-Otaiba in the Abrahamic Agreements. He was noted for being one of the 100 most powerful people in the world.

Marc J. Sievers asked many of the questioners Ambassador Al Otaiba, including: Does the UAE enjoy support from the United States after the Abrahamic agreements? The UAE stock gave American support?

Marc J. Sievers emphasized that the important role of the Arab Emirates in extending the Abrahamic agreements to other countries. And there are developments in the region, including that there is a desire for peaceful coexistence, and there is more promotion of the philosophical foundations of this coexistence, and there is a desire to establish peace and approaches to work together to confront problems such as climate change and artificial intelligence. To include none other such as Egypt.

Session 6

Professor Uzi Rabi

Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University

“Following Israel’s signing of the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, there has been much speculation regarding their impact on the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, and the possibility they might follow suit. This paper analyzes the import of the wave of normalization of relations with Israel for Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar.



The Sultanate of Oman has frequently been mentioned as one of the prime candidates to soon follow the UAE and Bahrain in formalizing full-fledged ties with Israel. Muscat's positive reaction to the Abraham Accords was consonant with its longstanding position on normalization. An Omani government statement a month after the signing typified Oman's careful approach: "...this new strategic path taken by some Arab countries will contribute to bringing about a peace based on an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and on establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as capital."

Since 1970, when Sultan Qabus came to power and inaugurated the Omani nahda (renaissance), the Sultanate has emerged as a moderate Arab state, where tolerance is firmly embedded into the national ethos, based largely on the prevalent Ibadhi sect of Islam. Oman was one of only three Arab League members that refused to take diplomatic action against Egypt following the Camp David peace treaty in 1979. Oman has for many years had low-profile, productive relations with Israel, which were illuminated publicly by visits of then Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzchak Rabin in 1994 and Shimon Peres in 1996, and most recently, by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2018.

Yet, at least thus far, Muscat has refused to join the UAE, Bahrain (and Sudan and Morocco) in further normalizing relations with Israel. Prizing its position as a reliable diplomatic interlocutor (the hallmark of its foreign policy and a key component of its political culture), Oman has carefully balanced itself geopolitically between Tehran and Riyadh. For many years, Omani-Iranian ties have been based on mutual respect and trust. These close relations with Tehran began with the aid that the late Shah gave to Sultan Qabus to quell the Dhofar insurgency in the early 1970s. The cordial relations between Muscat and Tehran continued following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and it was in Oman that the initial negotiations between the American and Iranians took place, which lead to the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. As a result, formalization of relations with Israel — even if desirable from the standpoints of trade, tourism, and investment — would be premature from an Omani perspective, as it would deeply alienate Iran.

The timing of the UAE and Bahrain's normalization of relations with Jerusalem was likely connected to the U.S. presidential election and American domestic political considerations. Oman, which has been very sensitive about foreign countries interfering in its internal affairs, was keen to avoid taking any side in U.S. domestic politics. It also had its own domestic political considerations to consider. The death in January 2020 of Sultan Qabus and the ascent to power of the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq, has led to substantial changes in the government bureaucracy, as he consolidates his rule and builds his own base of support. By holding off on formalizing diplomatic relations with Israel, Sultan Haitham has allowed himself to concentrate on important domestic



concerns while, at the same time, maintaining Oman's careful balancing act between fellow GCC states and the Iranians.

In the near term, Muscat would rather "wait and see" what the policy of the incoming Biden Administration will be, and how the Abraham Accords and the subsequent Sudan-Israel and Morocco-Israel deals will pan out. However, it might change its outlook, as it is facing a double crisis – public health and economic – with a considerable drop in oil prices brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. Out of the three Gulf states under review, Oman seems to be the most likely to normalize relations with Israel.

Unlike its GCC partners, the Emirate of Kuwait has remained firmly wedded to its traditional position, rejecting normalization with Israel. The Palestinian question has been a key issue in the Emirate ever since Yasser Arafat founded Fatah there in 1959. A Palestinian community estimated at 450,000 – only slightly smaller than the local Kuwaiti population – resided there until the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This community paid a heavy price for Arafat's choice not to condemn this invasion, being forced into exile without hope of return, but Kuwait's ruling family, National Assembly (Parliament), and civil society have not since wavered in their support for the Palestinian cause.

Forty-one civil society groups and organizations, such as the Bar Association, the Teachers' Association, and the Kuwaiti Economic Association, were vocal in criticizing the Abraham Accords and called upon the National Assembly "to quickly pass a law criminalizing normalization with the Zionist enemy." The ruling Al-Sabah family, which has always been careful not to alienate its own population – historically the most politicized in the GCC states – judges that vocal opposition to the Abraham Accords would appease dominant political currents, both Islamists and nationalists. Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, who ascended to power on September 30, 2020, is unlikely to change his half-brother Sheikh Sabah's policy of support for the Palestinians.

Under these circumstances, Kuwait does not seem ripe for decision on the highly sensitive issue of normalization, as it would probably put the Emirate under tremendous internal pressure, especially from Islamists with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, who are aligned with Turkey's position. Kuwait seems in this to benefit from the position of its larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia, which has so far linked normalization with Israel to progress in the peace process in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative that Riyadh proposed in 2002, and that was approved as an Arab framework for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The battle for normalization in Kuwait is far from over, even if it is the Gulf state least expected to normalize relations with Israel.

The small, wealthy Emirate wedged between Iran and Saudi Arabia has always sought to have an independent foreign policy, outside Riyadh's orbit, which would allow it greater



diplomatic flexibility and influence. Keeping all channels of communication open has dictated a careful nurturing of links with Turkey and Iran, while at the same time maintaining its special ties with the U.S.: Qatar hosts the largest U.S. base in the Middle East. From the Turkish perspective, Qatari support and financial largesse provide them with a base from which to expand outreach in the Arab world, and the Gulf in particular; for Qatar's part, Turkey affords it the protection of a significant regional power. Qatar's ties with Iran are practical as well as geopolitical, as Doha shares with Tehran ownership of the South Pars/North Dome Gas Field, which is the largest gas field in the world.

This geopolitical orientation, as well as its active support of the Muslim Brotherhood, makes it an outlier among the Gulf States. This led to strong tensions between it and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi since 2011, culminating in June 2017 in a state of open – though not violent – conflict, with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt breaking off diplomatic relations, and organizing an air, land, and sea embargo of Qatar. In January 2021, however – contemporaneously with the change of administrations in the United States and with the normalization process (and apparently affected by both these processes) – the embargo was lifted and bilateral relations renewed. Many underlying issues and tensions between the sides persist, however; significantly, Qatar does not seem to have dramatically changed its positions regarding Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Iran. The potential for another severe flare-up between Qatar and its GCC partners, therefore, still exists.

The Qatari balancing act is also evident in the relations with Israel. Qatar was the first Gulf state (together with Oman) to establish direct trade relations with Israel by establishing trade offices in their capitals in 1996. The second Intifada in 2000 brought these diplomatic relations to a halt, but behind the scenes, Qatar has continued to play a useful role for Israel. Doha has used its support for Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and for the Palestinian issue in general, as an important item in its diplomatic toolbox. Qatar's support for Hamas has also brought it into close cooperation with Israeli interlocutors, who frequently use Doha as an intermediary to reach understandings with the Hamas leadership in Gaza, and who rely on Qatari financial assistance to shore up the governmental apparatus in Gaza and stave off humanitarian crises.

Qatar, despite its ties with Turkey and Iran, and its non-conformist stance on many regional issues, is nevertheless often mentioned as a target for Israel's efforts to normalize with the Arab world. Israel has a significant interest in proactive engagement with Qatar, beyond the Palestinian sphere. While Doha has always assiduously guarded its freedom to maneuver and would probably balk at being brought into formal, wider geopolitical alignment that would see them closely tied to Riyadh, the restored relations with the conservative Arab axis could eventually lead to the attenuation of the Ankara-



Doha partnership. If Israel could capitalize on a prospective weakening of the Qatar and Turkey relationship through greater diplomatic engagement with Qatar, this would be a sound policy for Israel that could lead to normalization and friendlier bilateral ties. It is important to note, however, that in any case the potential for normalization will continue to be bounded by Qatar's cordial and necessary relations with Iran, to which any change could have severe potential economic repercussions for the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas.

Qatar has refrained from official criticism of the normalization process, while declaring that it would not normalize relations with Israel until there is a comprehensive settlement with the Palestinians, in line with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. While Qatar might be open to re-normalization with Israel, especially in the context of the intra-Gulf reconciliation, its willingness to do so will be to a large extent a function of its need to balance future developments in its relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Hamas.”

Ahdeya Ahmed

Bahrain Journalist Association

The speaker began by stressing the importance of the middle east the world map due to its strategic political and economic status. She then declared that the region has witnessed many changes and faced many challenges in the past four decades and has also been a target for many militias, entities and nations that harbor terrorist and extremist ideologies.

After this introduction the speaker attempted to lay the ground for the Abraham Accords, and hence the normalization with Israel, which according to here lay in the rise of the extremist's ideology and militias and non-state actors that necessitated the formation of new alliances that can, through diplomatic efforts, and jointly laid strategies combat terrorism and build a stronger and more politically stable region.

She then proceeded to enumerate the of the normalization after one year of implementation which besides economic and commercial and technological paybacks, they helped in cornering of radicals who have no place to call home and the empowerment of less developed countries to attain economic success. The normalization of relations between Morocco and Sudan and Israel is just another example of how a fresh diplomatic approach and strategy can provide the greatest outcomes for all parties concerned.

Peace deals between Israel and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates are watershed moments in modern history. If other nations follow suit, the new Middle East will become



a stronger, more stable region. Normalization would also encourage ideologies that think that countries flourish with long-term plans.

She concluded by stating that normalization will also allow us to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia, which have resulted in religious discrimination, which is another challenge that Middle Easterners have faced. Nations will make significant progress politically, culturally, socially, and economically through cooperative diplomatic efforts with more countries adopting the peace measures that began with the Abraham Accords.

Dr Shira Efron INSS

Trade in both goods and services between the UAE and Israel is estimated to grow by as much as US\$ 6.5 billion within a decade. Investments could grow to US\$ 10 billion within a decade.

RAND recently produced an analysis which suggests that benefits could be larger if more countries join. Looking at the bilateral benefits, which could potentially be significant, regional cooperation among the current signatories, namely the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, could lead to US\$ 150 billion in new economic activity and 180,000 new jobs. If the normalization expands to additional countries, and the region enters a free trade agreement, the benefits could be much larger. Under such a scenario, 4 million new jobs and more than US\$ 1 trillion in new economic activity could potentially be created over a decade. If this were also complimented by policy measures and a new “Marshall Plan” for the region, we could also ensure that these benefits are equitable and expandable for populations across the region. A new chapter in the region’s development and security could perhaps be opened.

If the cooperation remains limited and exclusive to bilateral interactions between the UAE and Israel, the benefits will not trickle down to the rest of the region. We need a vision and plan of action, as well as a US that is supportive and is taking this as a priority. This also calls for new thinking on how expanded cooperation can be leveraged to create economic opportunities throughout the Middle East. The enduring challenges of this region have undermined previous efforts at regional economic integration. As we all know, previous peace agreements with Israel have not benefited the population at large in economic terms. A vision on the part of the US is needed to facilitate regional and economic integration. This would benefit us all.



Mohammed Baharoon

Dubai Public Policy Research

The presentation covered the regional dimension of the Abrahamic Accord and the potential to become a platform for regional security cooperation.

The Abrahamic Accords (AA) as an agreement had multilateralism at its core. The name refers to a broader umbrella than geography as the signing of 4 states, and the joining of other states later was indicative that it is not a bilateral agreement. The US playing host to the signing ceremony and signing as a witness has also given the AA an international packing.

In essence, the Abrahamic Accords is a **Deconfliction** and **Economic connectivity** Agreement. Therefore, it operates on two main dimensions: De-conflicting Identity Conflicts in the region and establishing a new connectivity agenda driven by economic integration.

The identity struggle in the region started with the Palestinian Israel conflict, then expanded to become an Arab Zionist conflict and is now and Jew-Muslim conflict that has given rise to radical ideological groups on all sides and given states outside the region geography a pretext to interfere.

Deconflicting Identity struggles in the region require bringing back the Palestinian Israeli conflict to its political arena and disentangling it from the religious polarity of Islam vis Judaism. The Abrahamic Accords have provided a functioning prototype for just doing that, and now it needs to be mass-produced.

The **Connectivity Agenda** of the Abrahamic Accords looks at economic integration as THE tool for addressing trade, energy, water, food, human security (including health and education) as well as the digital economy. Such connectivity – People to People Connectivity – is required to reduce conflicts and sustain cooperation in the region.

As of now, the AA has seven states cooperating on developing common security and economic ties in the region. The US support for the AA will provide a viable, expandable, and a platform for regional cooperation.

However, achieving sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine will be the most critical threshold to cross to make the Abrahamic Accord become a mechanism for cooperation that can involve countries beyond the Arab States including: Turkey, Iran, and the countries of the Horn of Africa.



Session 7

Dr David A Bray

Atlantic Council

The presentation revolves around the penitential for the Middle East to take a leadership position. In a highly interconnected world, humanity has experienced global pandemics such as SARS, Anthrax, and COVID-19... and more are coming in the future.

In the future, it will be a must to think about bio-defense and be capable of developing cures for natural pandemics as well as for human-caused events. This is where the Middle east can lead the way in coming up with a sensor network to monitor world health and at the same time maintain the privacy of individuals and their freedoms.

Bray compared this idea to smoke detectors that help pinpoint exactly the floor where the fire started but not the person who started it, alongside with a myriad of other details that help, eventually, the firefighter extinguishes the fire. Today we need something similar to the fire detectors, but that is developed to detect the start of a pandemic.

We need such a system for biological purposes because we are, and will be living in a world that is more and more interconnected and where people can use synthetic biology for less and less noble purposes that would impact us all in a way or another. Within this perspective the Middle East can play a pivotal role and lead the way in terms of monitoring wastewater as it is one of the mediums via which COVID-19 was spread as well as other pathogens, monitoring the air and also looking for non-obvious signs.

To sum up, Mr Bray stressed the urgency of having such biohazard early detector systems that will help detect not only natural pathogens but also human-caused ones. And thus, be able to sequence these pathogens quickly and support the research work and efforts to develop possible cures/vaccines.

This is an area where the Middle East can lead the way and move forward with science and scientific research.

Evanna Hu

Atlantic Council

When analyzing technological advancements artificial intelligence, the biggest takeaway from the conversation is to think about the intent of the technology. At the end of the day, it's always about the intent, as technology itself cannot change it.



A thinking about development of technology that will help us advance our objectives is required. Tech diplomacy is a way to collaborate and normalize ties moving into the 21st century. There are certain actors in the MENA region that can take lead in this endeavor.

Technology does not exist in a vacuum. It has to be adopted and trusted not only by the end users but also governments and international organizations. It has the potential to change the way we think about the future, including climate change, for example. If we can create technology to reduce or mitigate the risks of climate change, that could potentially help with the refugee crisis. Many conflicts in the Middle East in recent decades have been caused by the water issue. If there are climate refugees, then we must also think about the matter of their resettlement. The consequence of not having a refugee and/or resettlement policy is evident in the current state of Afghan refugees around the world.

Dr Abla Abdel-Latif

Egyptian Center for Economic Studies

“I will talk about human security from an economic perspective.

I am from the largest country in the region, through which I give examples of the most important elements of human security, which should not only focus on problems but also on avoiding risks.

Human security leads us to talk about health, social, political, and cultural security and all of these types of security are interrelated in nature.

I want to focus on the most prominent concepts related to human security.

First, **water security**: means the ability to survive.

In Egypt, we have the problem of material poverty and water scarcity, and we have to secure water.

The second concept is **overpopulation**. We have to manage that increase. We must do what is necessary to provide for the needs of the population.

Education: It should be at the center of attention in ensuring human security.



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Women's rights: In Egypt we have a large number of women, but there is no good representation for them, and we have to create the appropriate conditions to raise their representation in the government and in important jobs in the state.

Cooperation between states: states must cooperate. Cooperation will solve many problems.

Justice: The Corona pandemic has shown the unfairness of vaccination. The epidemic will continue and mutate as long as there is no justice.

The government, society, businessmen and civil society must cooperate transparently to achieve human security

Finally, it should be noted that all of these elements are interrelated in nature and have importance in achieving human security.”

Dr Jennifer Counter
Atlantic Council

Dr Counter started her presentation by highlighting the revolutionary impact that innovations in the communication sector have brought about in contemporary societies. If it is true that communication remains primarily based on the four components of the sender, message, channel, and receiver, what has changed the most is the incredibly quick pace in which communication nowadays takes place and the almost unlimited outreach that digital communication has. In this regard, the covid-19 pandemic proved that traditional borders mean less and less not only in the health dimension but also in the communication one.

Dr Counter continued her speech by exploring the security dimension of communication, especially regarding what strategies and policies governments can implement to protect their citizens better. Indeed, new media and a constantly expanding digital space represent a double-hedge sword for people's safety as many actors, primarily terrorist groups, are willing and capable of reshaping them to pursue their own agenda. Unfortunately, extremist groups have benefitted the most from the digital space as it allowed them to extend their fundraising and recruiting efforts and network beyond the traditional physical constraints, as proved by the massive mediatic impact of ISIS.

In this regard, Dr Counter emphasized that territorially dispersed terrorist groups with a very strict structural internal hierarchy are more prone to innovate and make the most out



of the use of new cutting-edge technologies to recruit and fundraise and sponsor their activities.

Despite the increasing threat inherent to the digital world, Dr Counter emphasized that not all extremist groups are interested in reaping the benefits of digitalization and prefer instead to resort only to traditional patterns of communication primarily. As more multimedia contents are posted online, the risk of leaving digital footprints that might lead to the identification of the group's members increases as well. Therefore, one-to-one in-person communication is far from disappearing as a method in the terrorist galaxy.

Apart from violence-oriented groups, Dr Counter was careful in pointing at the fact that communication is not a danger or a threat per se, and it also has inherent emancipatory power. Indeed, it may be a powerful tool to give a channel to historically underrepresented categories to have a voice and convey the international community's eyes to their cause.

As digital communication is projected to become a dominant feature of the daily life of the future, Dr Counter ended her speech by recalling the importance of establishing widely recognized technology regulation standards and defining more robust data privacy mechanisms. To pursue this goal, Dr Counter emphasized that it is of fundamental importance to proceed through a truly representative process capable of including as many people as possible and creating a constructive environment where creative solutions and improvement could occur.