THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

An Arab-Israeli Security Dialogue

Finally Ripe for Regional Advances?



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February 14, 2018

Currently, the Middle East does not have a framework for inclusive and comprehensive regional security dialogue, even though one is sorely needed. As one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world, the Middle East stands out for its lack of such a framework, which precludes discussion among the regional states—in a specifically regional setting—of the myriad issues and concerns that affect their security.

Two major constraints have plagued past efforts to initiate regional security dialogue, especially the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group set up as part of the Madrid peace process of the early 1990s. Both constraints relate specifically to Israel's inclusion in such dialogue. The first regards the centrality in regional security dialogue of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), which for years was a euphemism for Israel's assumed nuclear capability. The second is the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the resolution of which Arab states have set as a precondition for "normalization" of relations with Israel. However, the collective impact of the significant transformations that have taken place in the Middle East over the past decade, and that continue to reverberate in many Arab states, accentuates the need for a regional dialogue framework. In particular, these transformations include the ongoing bloody civil war in Syria, and the conflicts in Iraq and Yemen. Also significant are the threat posed by Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and continued nuclear aspirations, as well as the shifting role and commitment of key external players in the region. Moreover, new regional dynamics raise the prospect that the time may be ripe for creating a new framework for regional dialogue, one fueled by indications of a newly forged common interest and a parallel mitigation of past constraints.

This report reviews past official and unofficial efforts to advance regional security dialogue in the Middle East, along with the problems that these efforts faced. It assesses changed attitudes toward the constraints that have hindered earlier dialogues, and examines the new opportunities that have appeared in the past few years, in light

of indications that key state interests are being redefined in the rapidly changing Middle East geopolitical and security landscape.[1] New security concerns—most strikingly with regard to the threat that Iran poses to many regional states—have arisen, altering some of the thinking that had precluded dialogue with Israel over the past two decades. The analysis focuses on the possibility for regional players to move forward in efforts to establish a regional security dialogue framework at least at the Track Two level, if not at an open and official one. (Track Two diplomacy consists of unofficial, often informal discussions among academic and nongovernment experts to explore possible points of mutual agreement and understanding, without the formal involvement of policymakers.)

A regional security dialogue should not be regarded as a panacea. It will not resolve the raging conflicts in the Middle East. But the absence of such a framework means that Middle Eastern states are depriving themselves of a recognized, well-established regional tool for discussing and possibly advancing their collective ability to manage the conflicts in their midst. At the very least, it would provide an accepted framework within which they can raise their concerns, clarify threat perceptions and security interests, and perhaps forge new understandings regarding complex situations. It would provide an opportunity to assess what really matters to states, beyond rhetoric. Moreover, it would help establish a culture and a habit of regional dialogue and cooperation in the region. These are all important goals.

In the current regional reality, this report argues that the prospects for official dialogue among Arab states and Israel have improved, but that it will be almost impossible to include Iran in such a framework. One issue is the fact that Iran refuses to sit in a common framework with Israel—as happened in the context of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). But beyond that, Iran and the severe threat that it poses to the region are currently major drivers for initiating dialogue and cooperation among Arab states and Israel. Moreover, actors outside the region—first and foremost the United States—are currently dealing with the threats that Iran poses. This is especially the case in the nuclear realm, despite conclusion of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA).[2]

Arms Control and Regional Security Talks (1992–95)

There have long been regional frameworks for inter-Arab dialogue in the Middle East that draw on Arab states' common identity. These talks have included entities such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. But this report focuses on regional security dialogue in the Middle East that does not rest on Arab identity, and would include Israel as a participant. An official regionwide process that included Israel was attempted for the first time in the early 1990s, in the framework of the ACRS working group, one of the five working groups of the multilateral track launched by the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference.[3] For the first time, Israeli and Arab officials sat down together to discuss their vision for arms control and regional security, and engaged in serious discussions on four categories of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs): prenotification of military exercises and military exchanges, maritime agreements focusing on search and rescue and incidents at sea,[4] the development of a regional communications network, and the establishment of three Regional Security Centers.[5]

It is hard to overstate the path-breaking significance of ACRS. For one thing, it is remarkable that it was set up at all, in the regional atmosphere that existed at the time. Its concrete achievements in the realm of CSBMs, which underscored the fact that there was a place for unprecedented win-win regional thinking and action in an Arab-Israeli setting, even if the talks were put on hold before many ideas could cohere. ACRS brought home to regional states that when they sat down together, they gained a mutual understanding that could not be achieved any other way—certainly with regard to WMDs, but ultimately with regard to a broader range of security concerns, and even their very relationships. It is no accident that some of the language incorporated in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty was lifted directly from ACRS documents. As the only official regional security dialogue that has taken place in the Middle East to date,[6] ACRS is an extremely important case study to examine in the context of any effort to reconvene such a dialogue.

The conceptual logic of ACRS was determined by the states that took the lead—the "gavel holders," namely, the United States and Russia. They incorporated into the working group an arms control logic that took its cue from the superpower experience of the Cold War years. Broadly speaking, initial arms control agreements between the superpowers were aimed at reducing tensions, enhancing communication, and stabilizing relations, in order to minimize the danger of unintended escalation to nuclear warfare. The focus was more on the states and their relationship than on the weapons themselves, and this focus was reflected in CSBMs that the superpowers agreed upon, beginning with the post-Cuban Missile Crisis "hotline" established between Washington and Moscow. Similarly, when the United States and Russia initiated the process in the Middle East, then Secretary of State James Baker explained that stability and confidence-building were the first order of the day. Baker's explanation set in motion an understanding that the first step in conducting dialogue on arms control among adversaries in the Middle East must be to address the nature of interactions among the relevant states. Regional players must be encouraged to lay out their threat perceptions and security concerns, and efforts should focus on building mutual confidence in areas where they could more readily move forward, in order to reduce the overall level of tension and avoid unintended escalation to conflict. As Baker remarked in 1992:

In the first instance . . . [offer] the regional parties our thinking about potential approaches to arms control. . . . From this base, the group might move forward to considering a set of modest confidence-building or transparency measures covering notifications of selected military-related activities and crisis-prevention communications. The purpose would be to lessen the prospects for incidents and miscalculation that could lead to heightened competition or even conflict.[7]

In parallel to the official talks, the 1990s also saw concerted efforts to initiate dialogue at the unofficial level in multiple Track Two settings.[8] These discussions often took the ideas being discussed in official settings and created parallel unofficial frameworks where participants might feel an even greater degree of freedom (as compared to the official ACRS setting) to brainstorm in an "outside-the-box" manner. The informal nature of the meetings enabled participants to interact and exchange views in a pressure-free environment with plenty of time for conversing in smaller, more intimate groups. These discussions contributed to the overall goal of building confidence and working on relationships between states.

In these early years—the first half of the 1990s—many of the Track Two settings also included officials who would take part in what was called their "unofficial capacity." Many of these meetings were purposely set up to facilitate the official process, but other seminars and conferences were organized by think tanks or academic institutions to explore the same issues but not necessarily to help facilitate the official ACRS talks. Nevertheless, the latter also contributed to the growing Track Two atmosphere that developed in the 1990s. After the official ACRS talks were put on hold in December 1995, the unofficial gatherings were the only place where such dialogue was being pursued. But even these unofficial gatherings began to lose steam in the early years of the new millennium, mainly because of the impact of the Second Intifada.

When assessed against the backdrop of the level of animosity toward Israel before the Madrid peace process began in 1991, and the near-absolute rejection of any idea of sitting together in a common regional forum with Israeli officials, the ACRS talks—together with the four other multilateral working groups of the Madrid peace process—made impressive progress. In ACRS, the major progress was in the CSBM realm, and was achieved in a relatively short period of time. Many regional participants expressed satisfaction with the ACRS process, especially with the apparent new opportunities for cooperation. Jordan came to the talks with its own well-developed plan for creating a regional security structure for the Middle East modeled after the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which Jordan called a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East. Jordan also took a leading role in the group that discussed the Regional Security Centers—the main one was to be set up in Amman—and often mediated between Israel and Egypt when the nuclear issue was raised.

The regional framework granted a measure of legitimacy for discussing these issues with Israel. No one state had to stick out its neck and be castigated for taking an unpopular approach. Moreover, the regional format enabled different Arab states to forge conversations with Israel, outside the direct influence of Egypt, the traditional leader of the Arab world. It provided cover for Israel in this period to open trade and interest missions in Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia.

The constraints to progress, which ultimately led to the American decision to put the ACRS talks indefinitely on hold in December 1995, were related primarily to differences in approach to the centrality of WMDs in the arms control and regional security talks. Egypt came with an arms control agenda that focused directly on these weapons, and in particular on Israel's assumed nuclear capability, whereas the United States and Russia preferred the gradual step-by-step confidence-building approach that had been successful in their own Cold War relationship. Israel was also advocating the confidence-building approach, and stressed the need to advance the regional security side of ACRS. The ACRS talks suffered from the clash between Egypt and Israel over the nuclear issue. In 1995, the final year of the talks, Egypt refused any further cooperation on CSBMs until the idea of a WMD-free zone (WMDFZ) was placed squarely on the agenda. Israel would not accept this.

A deeper examination of the ACRS talks reveals that Egypt's growing dissatisfaction with the talks was also wrapped up in regional issues unconnected to WMDs and arms control, and that leadership concerns were the underlying factor driving its

increasingly negative approach. In 1992, Egypt was taking its first steps toward reintegration in the Arab world as its traditional leader, after having been ostracized for more than ten years following its 1978 peace agreement with Israel. Egypt's challenge was greatly complicated by its efforts to find a way to take the lead in the new regional dynamics being established in the Middle East in the early 1990s. It felt that the structure and evolving dynamics in ACRS—including the facts that Israel was at the table, Jordan was taking on a leading role, and Israeli-Arab discussions were conducted beyond Egypt's direct control—were jeopardizing its ability to reassume its traditional regional role.[9]

Regional Security Dialogue Efforts: 1995–2015

The twenty years from 1995 to 2015 can be roughly divided into four periods of efforts to restart regional security dialogues. The first five years (1995–2000) were characterized by efforts to reactivate the ACRS talks, primarily by trying to find a way to get Egypt and Israel to the point where they could resume cooperation. These efforts were unsuccessful. Most initiatives, which were at Track Two and Track 1.5 levels,[10] ground to a halt in 2000 due to the impact of the Second Intifada. The next five years (2000–2005) saw very little movement, but beginning around 2005 there was more apparent interest in restarting unofficial dialogue on regional security and arms control, including parallel efforts in the Euro-Mediterranean framework.[11] As such, the third period (approximately 2005–10) saw a new peak in Track Two initiatives. Conferences, seminars, and different types of meetings were convened, all in an effort to find innovative ways to restart regional dialogue, whether in regionwide or smaller regional settings.

The final five years of this twenty-year period (2010–15) took a sharp turn toward focused discussion of the idea of holding a conference on a WMDFZ for the Middle East. This was the result of a section included in the final document of the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (NPT RevCon), which focused on the Middle East. That section included a decision that mandated the designated conveners (the United States, Russia, Britain, and the UN secretary general) to work in consultation with the states in the region to hold a Middle East WMDFZ conference by the end of 2012. It also stated that this would be on the basis of arrangements "freely arrived at by the States of the region."[12]

This 2010 NPT decision was the fruit of an intense long-term Egyptian campaign to get the WMDFZ proposal onto the international agenda in a manner that would force Israel to comply, and begin nuclear dismantlement. Egypt began this diplomatic campaign back in the ACRS years, and first pushed it on the international agenda at the 1995 NPT RevCon. The practical effect of the 2010 decision to hold a conference by the end of 2012 was to revitalize the idea of creating a regional framework for discussing security issues in the Middle East, and it sparked new Track Two initiatives. Significantly, however, unlike ACRS—which had placed a premium on relations between states—Egypt had pressed for a WMDFZ in order to drive home the message that the spotlight would be squarely on Israel and its assumed nuclear capabilities.

It should be recalled that by the final year of the ACRS talks, the Egyptian agenda for focusing on Israel and the nuclear realm had placed it at odds with most of the other

participating states. Other Arab states were actually displaying a keen interest in exploring common threats and interests, and were very much engaged in the CSBM discussions and activities on the agenda, and considering new areas as well. A process of identifying common interests had begun. In this sense, the new WMDFZ emphasis of 2010 was a step backwards.[13] Egypt's focus on Israel's assumed nuclear capabilities put the WMDs-versus-regional-security dispute back at the forefront of all regional security discussions, precluding constructive dialogue rather than enabling it.

At the official level, the WMDFZ conference conveners ultimately failed to convene the conference by late 2012,[14] and the American statement to that effect was issued in late November. Efforts to convene a conference nevertheless continued up until the 2015 NPT RevCon, including attempts over the course of 2013–14 to gather regional participants together to agree on an agenda for the conference. But all efforts failed, and at the 2015 NPT RevCon, Egypt put forth a new proposal with somewhat dire implications for Israel. The terms of the Egyptian proposal were too extreme for the United States, Britain, or Canada to accept, and they withheld their support for the final document, blocking consensus. Thus, the WMDFZ conference proposal was effectively removed from the NPT agenda, at least until the next RevCon in 2020.[15]

Track Two initiatives throughout this five-year period all took their cue from the WMDFZ idea, but the constraints to progress went back to the basic dispute that characterized the ACRS talks: whether the emphasis should be on WMD disarmament in the first place, or on efforts to encourage regional dialogue and cooperation by addressing regional realities, threat perceptions, and security concerns. Without a clearly defined mutual interest in holding regional talks, efforts were doomed to failure.[16]

Since 2015, and following the NPT RevCon failure, WMDs have receded from the forefront of discussions about (re)convening regional security dialogue. After years in which security dynamics for the Arab states revolved around WMDs—especially from 2010 to 2015, when the WMDFZ idea overshadowed Track Two discussions—more people are choosing to reexamine the insights gleaned from ACRS: to reassess the concept of CSBMs, and to seriously consider regional security dialogue rather than focus solely on WMD disarmament.

How to Restart?

The above review of past efforts at convening regional security dialogue in the Middle East—from ACRS to the WMDFZ conference idea—illustrates that despite the pessimism and the nagging constraints, there also have been some successes, however limited. In the realm of soft security and CSBMs, and at the Track Two level in particular, enhanced forums for direct communication have led to better understanding of mutual concerns. Some insights and possible guidelines have emerged from these experiences that should be seriously considered in any future effort.

When looking toward the future, three key issues stand out: the role of external parties in getting the regional states to the table, the identity of states that might take part in a new regional security dialogue initiative (regionwide, subregional, or the like), and the topics that can garner their interest and active participation. The latter two

questions are strongly linked, because even though the many conflicts currently cutting across the Middle East necessitate security dialogue and cooperation, the actual subjects of contention are very broadly defined. Regional security dialogue needs to be broken down in a manner that sets forth a clear and pressing common interest or concern for the prospective participants.

WMDs, as defined in ACRS, did not to provide that common basis, especially not for Israel. However, these weapons failed to spark significant interest for the Arab states apart from Egypt, as indicated by the other states' willingness and even keen interest in pursuing CSBM discussions. In fact, it was Egypt alone that insisted on discussing WMDs to the detriment of ACRS in 1995, because Egypt's WMD agenda was closely linked to its leadership role. Indeed, whatever issue is defined by states as a mutual interest for initiating regional security dialogue and cooperation could very well leave at least one state in the position of being the odd man out. Thus, while in principle the guideline for convening a regional security dialogue framework should be all-encompassing and inclusive membership, in practice this goal might be difficult to achieve. During ACRS, Egypt had enough regional clout to end the talks when it alone was not satisfied. No one—and certainly not the United States—would have considered continuing the talks without Egypt, although the other participants had forged a common interest in CSBMs.

Currently, a major impetus for regional dialogue revolves around the perceived threat emanating from Iran. The common fears in this regard have in recent years brought pragmatic Sunni Arab states, especially in the Gulf, closer to Israel. But if the Iranian threat is the common interest bringing the parties together, it would leave Iran itself outside the frame, at least in the initial stage. In fact, for additional reasons—mainly that Iran refuses any contact with Israel at the official level—it will be nearly impossible for the two states to join in any official common dialogue framework.[17]

As discussed, in the early 1990s, when Iran and Iraq were not invited to participate in the ACRS talks, the overt problems between Israel and Egypt centered on their inability to define a common interest for cooperation. They held polar views as to the basic arms control logic to be applied in the talks—whether to focus primarily on the weapons or on the states and the region—and by implication, the topics that should feature on the agenda. But with the WMDFZ off the immediate agenda, space has opened to create a broad regional security agenda. It certainly may include the topic of WMDs, but no longer must exclusively focus on them. It should be noted that in recent years, Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation is at an all-time high, mainly because of terror threats in Sinai, and this existing cooperation might help engender a more positive atmosphere for any new initiative that was devised. However, this is not a given, especially as Egypt waged the campaign against Israel at the NPT RevCon in 2015 at the same time that bilateral security cooperation was getting stronger. At times, it appears to outside observers that the diplomatic campaign waged against Israel in the nuclear realm, which is spearheaded by Egyptian foreign affairs officials, is an autonomous process, oddly detached from policy toward Israel in other respects. However, such a campaign could also be a way of balancing perceptions of increasingly tight security relationships with Israel. Whatever the true explanation, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi chose not to halt the NPT campaign, and it is hard to assess where he stands on broader regional security dialogue with Israel. Moreover, it is not clear whether anything has changed as far as Egypt's Middle East leadership

agenda, which was the underlying factor driving its displeasure with ACRS. Yet beyond the question of the participating states—which as noted is closely linked to the question of which mutual interest has brought the parties together—there are some guidelines and questions to be considered in efforts to move forward.

The first point to consider is the role and importance of a strong and committed external power or powers. The United States played a crucial role in initiating ACRS, but looking to the future the questions to consider are about what to do if there is no strong state that wants to assume this role. Can the regional states create a dialogue framework on their own? What change, if any, has come with the administration of Donald Trump?

Israeli Police officers clear a Palestinian protest and rip up a President Trump banner outside the Damascus Gate of the Old City after Friday prayer on December 8, 2017 in Jerusalem, Israel. At least 50 Palestinians have been wounded in clashes between Palestinian protestors and Israeli security forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on Friday after thousands of protestors took to the streets in a second 'Day of Rage' following U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital on Wednesday. Source: Chris McGrath/Getty Image.

The second point is the fact that an essential precondition for regional talks is the existence of common/mutual interest(s) and goals to be addressed through such a dialogue. The best starting point is when states recognize not only that they have a clear common interest but also that their ability to advance that interest depends, to some degree, on their cooperation with the other regional players. Moreover, states must feel that these topics are important enough to overcome insistence on certain preconditions being met. Such preconditions can present self-defeating stumbling blocks that torpedo any hope for moving forward.

Finally, the dialogue framework should be set up with an emphasis on the cooperative process, and should not be strictly result-oriented, although anything tangible that can be agreed upon will help the process along. But the goal should be to create a dialogue framework and build up a culture and a habit of dialogue and cooperation, not necessarily a specific result—particularly not in the initial stage.

Iranian Threat Creates Common Interests

Some of the necessary terms for initiating regional dialogue seem to have coalesced in the past few years, and are specifically relevant for dialogue among Israel and the pragmatic Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and possibly Turkey as well. The threat that Iran poses in the Middle East is bringing Israel closer to its Arab neighbors, and could be a strong basis for bringing the parties together for regional dialogue, albeit without Iran.

The past five years have seen more and more bilateral meetings between high-profile Israelis and Saudis, and there is increased talk of stepped-up cooperation between other Gulf Arab states and Israel, with some of it occurring in the open.[18] In one significant development, in November 2015 it was announced that Israel would open a diplomatic mission in Abu Dhabi, in the framework of the United Nations International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).[19] Although the Emirates

emphasized that this was not an indication of a changed diplomatic stance toward Israel, there was no doubt that it signaled a more accommodating approach.

Moreover, these new signals have everything to do with the new threats that have cut across the region since the Arab uprisings of 2011; these have accelerated more recently in light of developments connected with Iran's attempts to expand its regional presence. These developments have engendered more intelligence sharing between Israel and Gulf Arab states, especially regarding Iran's arms shipments to its proxy militias fighting in Yemen (Houthi rebels) and in Syria.[20] Arab states in the Gulf perceive themselves to be directly threatened by Iran's ongoing regional aspirations and the negative implications of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The regional tension was accentuated during President Barack Obama's second term, when these states also felt abandoned by the U.S. administration in favor of its interest in improving relations with Iran,[21] and perhaps reorienting its entire Middle East policy toward the Islamic republic and away from its traditional Arab allies.[22] These trends—namely, a common threat perception regarding Iran, and the realization that regional ties were more important than ever following the Obama administration's pivot toward Iran—underscore common interests with Israel that may support a move toward greater cooperation.

A *Wall Street Journal* article from early May 2017 captured the significant change in attitudes toward Israel that is emerging in some parts of the Arab world, particularly among the Gulf states.[23] With Iran perceived as the major threat, Israel in turn has begun to be perceived as a de facto ally. The article notes that the willingness to be more open about possible partnerships with Israel "gathered steam" owing to the rise in Saudi Arabia of Mohammed bin Salman—since June 2017, the crown prince—and also to the election of Donald Trump. As the Saudi deputy intelligence chief put it, according to the Journal, Israel and Saudi Arabia have the same enemy, and both are close allies of the United States. The major Gulf media outlets are beginning to tone down anti-Israel rhetoric, directing their rage instead toward Iran. The Palestinian issue still holds sway in these states, and therefore open official-level gestures—such as the Israeli mission to IRENA—are still rare. The article ends by quoting a telling insight from Saudi businessman and analyst Ahmad al-Ibrahim that demonstrates how the shift toward Israel can be justified despite the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ibrahim noted Saudi Arabia's support for the Palestinians, but also cited growing frustration with the fact that, even though Saudi Arabia was negotiating on their behalf and was spending money freely the Palestinian leaders did not want to get along: "You cannot just say no to everything." This is definitely a new tone coming from the Gulf.

The Journal reported again in mid-May 2017 about indications of a more concrete offer on the table from the Gulf states to Israel—one that would step up the cooperation that gained momentum in 2011,[24] and bring it into the public domain, if Israel makes a goodwill gesture toward the Palestinians. "Arab officials said they understand that a formal peace agreement is unlikely to be reached between Israel and the Palestinians in the near future," the Journal reported. "But they stressed that Israel has to show good faith to get diplomatic benefits." This good faith, according to the Journal, could include stopping construction of settlements in certain areas of the West Bank and allowing freer trade into Gaza. In return, the Gulf states would be willing to offer steps in the direction of what Israel seems to desire most: more open

ties. These could include providing direct telecommunications links or overflight rights to Israeli aircraft, issuing visas to Israeli sports teams or other delegations, and integrating Israel into regional trade and business.[25]

The new trends from the Gulf offer a new opportunity with potentially positive implications also for restarting regional security dialogue.[26] It is noteworthy that the steps mentioned still pose a political challenge for Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his right-wing coalition government, yet are minimal compared to the Saudi peace initiative of 2002. Trump's May 2017 visits to Saudi Arabia and Israel seemed to emphasize the Trump administration's apparently strong support for these ideas as well. He talked about new opportunities, while placing Iran squarely in the crosshairs; he also emphasized that both Israelis and Palestinians must start making concessions to advance peace. All of these messages seemed tailored to the idea that new and significant regional cooperation may be possible. Moreover, the Trump administration might be willing to take an active role in helping to bring the parties together.

With the full array of issues that are creating new security challenges in the region, the original balance between "arms control" and "regional security," going back to ACRS, has moved much more toward regional security as the desired goal. Although the topic of WMDs still holds sway, states may not have the luxury of remaining stuck in old divisions that prevented forward movement when in other respects the region may be crashing down upon them. Regarding Iran specifically, regional states are feeling the immediate results of Iran's emboldened and aggressive policies across the Middle East, especially but not only in Syria—and, ironically, this aggression is a direct result of the nuclear deal itself. The deal elicited a common sigh of relief among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (the P5+1 states), who felt that after years of directing energy to this crisis they could now relax their efforts and enjoy the fruits of economic cooperation with Iran. This bargain, however, included turning a blind eye to Iran's provocative missile tests, its presence and atrocities committed in Syria, and its role in the fighting in Yemen. It also ignored Iran's continued support for Hezbollah, not least in the form of ongoing transfers of missiles and other military materiel in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

One could ask whether the common interest among Israel and Arab states with regard to Iran will not merely trade one axis of conflict for another, rather than open opportunities for positive regional security dialogue. The point to emphasize is that a firm mutual interest must exist in order to establish a framework for regional security dialogue. That common interest—the threat from Iran—may help bring the parties together. However, the perceived threat posed by Iran does not mean that the dialogue would focus exclusively on that threat. Rather, once convened, the new dialogue framework can and should serve as a platform for discussing a full range of security issues, from the very soft (confronting bird flu or water management), to the various conflicts and rivalries, and to hard security issues like WMDs.

Opportunity in the Palestinian Issue

Beyond the constraints to regional security dialogue that stem from the lack of a strong common interest, and the ongoing dispute over the centrality of WMDs to

regional security dialogue, the longstanding preconditions that Arab states have set for dialogue with Israel also have created difficulties. Chief among these considerations is the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict—and the accusing finger often directed at Israel as the sole responsible party—has been ever-present in the background of regional security dialogue efforts, presenting an ongoing constraint in the sense that regional dialogue was often framed as back-door "normalization" with Israel. Normalization was therefore considered a "prize" for Israel, one which the Arab states believe that it should not be allowed to enjoy until it ends its conflict with the Palestinians.

Yet advocates of this approach often miss the fact that Israel cannot end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on its own. Such an approach is also self-defeating: a refusal to normalize relations with Israel does not help resolve the conflict, and at the same time it blocks dialogue that could benefit all parties, not just Israel. Mistakenly viewing normalization as beneficial to Israel alone—and blocking it as a means of pressing Israel to do more to resolve its conflict with the Palestinians—was in effect the Arab states' cutting off their nose to spite their face, even though they were indeed also punishing Israel by depriving it of beneficial cooperation.

The new trends emerging among the Arab states of the Gulf have raised hopes for new opportunities for cooperation with Israel; skeptics have been quick to caution that nothing of consequence will happen until the Palestinian issue sees significant progress. This is the argument that former special assistant to President Obama (and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region) Philip Gordon has put forward in an article focused on the "illusions of normalization."[27] But if the Arab states are signaling that they are willing to begin a process with Israel in return for much less from Israel on the Palestinian front, this is good news. Indeed, these states indicate that they recognize the fact that it will likely take years to resolve this conflict, and it may implicitly recognize that the conflict is not something that Israel can fix with a wave of the proverbial magic wand. Resolving this conflict will require difficult concessions from both sides; Israel cannot deliver on its own, and past offers have been on the table—offers that Israel agreed to, but that were rejected by the Palestinians. The new offer from the Gulf Arab states should be welcomed and encouraged, not diminished by immediately jumping forward with all the reasons why it will not work. Why would people want to keep the bar restrictively high when Arab states are signaling at least an initial willingness to lower it for their own benefit as well as Israel's?

There is a kind of balancing act between the impact of the Iranian threat, as a factor bringing the parties closer, and the Palestinian issue, which can continue to constrain dialogue. This seesaw dynamic has been playing out in the Israel-Saudi Arabia arena. Although the many raging conflicts in the Middle East in recent years underscore the sense that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the core of tensions and open conflict in the Middle East, the Arab states still maintain that they want to see progress in this area. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the fact that the intractable nature of the conflict means that waiting for it to be resolved might rob the region of opportunities to work together to confront other severe conflicts and challenges.

Interestingly, over the course of 2016 there were indications of a renewed interest in a regional framework for discussing the Palestinian issue itself. This potential overture adds another dimension to the overall dynamic—the fact that the Palestinian conflict might be dealt with in a regional framework means not only that it is not necessarily a constraint to dialogue, but also that it may be conducive, in and of itself, to restarting regional dialogue. The idea came briefly onto the agenda at the end of the Obama administration,[28] and resurfaced at the start of the Trump administration.

Conclusion

Middle Eastern states have showed signs of a renewed interest in a regional security dialogue framework. There is a sense of ripeness for such dialogue, and in some respects even a sense of urgency that the situation will worsen if states in the region do not begin to address their concerns collectively. Many security-related issues affect numerous states and cross national borders, and it would be beneficial to raise them in a regional format. Regional security dialogue is not in itself a solution, but rather presents the opportunity to establish a forum for discussing the problems and possible solutions. A framework for regional security dialogue would open space for initiating a process that could lead in unanticipated, positive directions. External parties have a role to play in setting up such a framework, but the question remains whether or not their role is an essential one. Can regional states begin without their help and then ask them to join? Is that a realistic proposition? In ACRS, the external powers played a crucial role. In the Obama years, the sense was that the U.S. president was leaning toward exiting the region, which pushed Israeli-Saudi cooperation forward. External help is most likely still crucial to this effort, and much currently depends on the approach adopted by the Trump administration. Although there are initial positive indications that the new administration is interested in assuming a more significant role that could support a regional security dialogue initiative, it has yet to articulate a clear policy. In ACRS, the United States worked hard to bring the states of the region to the table; today, the work of the Trump administration—should it choose this path—could be considerably easier because of the new dynamics described here, and the mitigation of longstanding preconditions and constraints.

The efforts of external parties may best be focused initially on a core group of states—Israel, Egypt, the Emirates, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—as there is already a relationship among them. Egypt and Jordan are central to any regional security dialogue framework, but Egypt will need to be persuaded to acquiesce to regional security dialogue. As discussed, security cooperation between Israel and Egypt under Sisi has greatly improved, and today could be more significant than the hardline position that Egypt took at the NPT RevCon in 2015. Egypt could remain a spoiler, but the willingness of other states in the core group to pursue regional security dialogue could have a positive influence. The recent decision of a number of Arab states to isolate Qatar has created tension that could negatively affect these efforts, but Doha's often contradictory policies are at the heart of the long-term tensions, as it tends to punch above its weight. At the time of writing, the situation with Qatar does not look hopeful, but there is a fair chance that it will be resolved or at least toned down. Above all, these are the kinds of issues that could be discussed in a regional forum.

Finally, on the question of whether the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict will constrain normalization efforts, some analysts may forget that when they stress that Arab states will never agree to this or that without something else happening, ten years ago they likely would have explained how we would never get to where we are now, or that the current offer from the Gulf states to Israel could never happen. But things do change, and the commonly perceived Iranian threat has been a major factor in this regard. Moreover, a regional forum for dialogue could be an impetus for change for the better, even radical changes, such as began to happen in ACRS. Nevertheless, and despite the room for optimism, the Palestinian constraint may be entrenched to a degree that it precludes movement at official levels. If this proves to be the case, efforts should be directed to convening Track Two and Track 1.5 forums of dialogue to get more positive discussions going, at least at the unofficial level.

Indeed, the line from ACRS to a possible new framework for regional security dialogue stretches along the path of optimism, and a belief that processes matter. Through a process of dialogue and cooperation, there is a chance to further break loose from old constraints and encourage a new process that might help forge new relationships and understandings. One should not discount even the prospect that at some point in the future, Iran could join the forum. We can always choose to focus on the known constraints, tying our own hands, or we can choose to embrace and encourage dynamics that could break out of the old debilitating patterns and work together for a better future. Rather than batting down the idea of regional dialogue as unrealistic, it should be embraced and encouraged.

The author would like to thank Danel Lushi, intern in the Arms Control Program at INSS and working toward his M.A. in Diplomacy Studies at Tel Aviv University, for his research assistance.

Notes

1. Shlomo Brom, Emily B. Landau, and Shimon Stein, "It's Time for Israel and the Arab States to Talk Mutual Security," *National Interest*, December 2, 2015, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/its-time-israel-the-arab-states-talk-mutual-security-14482.
2. Emily B. Landau, "Obama's Legacy, A Nuclear Iran?," *Middle East Quarterly 24*, no. 2 (Spring 2017), http://www.meforum.org/6561/obama-legacy-a-nuclear-iran.
3. For an overview of the multilaterals, see Joel Peters, *Pathways to Peace: The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1996); and Peters, "Can the Multilateral Middle East Talks Be Revived?," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)* 3, no. 4 (December 1999): 90–99, http://www.rubincenter.org/meria/1999/12/peters.pdf. Specifically on the ACRS talks, see Emily B. Landau, "Egypt and Israel in ACRS: Bilateral Concerns in a Regional Arms Control Process," JCSS Memorandum no. 59, June 2001; Emily B. Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East: Cooperative Security Dialogue and Regional Constraints* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press and JCSS, 2006); and Emily B. Landau, "ACRS: What Worked, What

Didn't and What Could Be Relevant for the Region Today," *Disarmament Forum* 2 (2008): 13–20, http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/ACRS%20what%20worked,%20what%20didn't,%20and%20what%20could%20be%20relevant%20for%20the%20region%20today%20-%201.7.pdf. The regional ACRS participants were Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, and representatives of the Palestinians. Iran and Iraq were not invited to take part; Lebanon and Syria were invited but opted not to participate.

4. David Griffiths discusses this topic in depth in his report in this series, "Oceans of Opportunity: Maritime Dimensions of Security in the Arab World."
5. Emily B. Landau, "Egypt and Israel in ACRS"; Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East*; and Landau, "ACRS: What Worked."
6. Another major effort was the Barcelona Process, initiated in 1995. However, this process was fundamentally about creating a Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and the goals and objectives were European (to strengthen their relations with the Mediterranean states) rather than Middle Eastern. Moreover, it did not include the Gulf states.
7. Remarks by Secretary of State James A. Baker III before the Organizational Meeting for Multilateral Negotiations on the Middle East, House of Unions, January 28, 1992, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Assistant Secretary/Spokesman (Moscow, Russia).
8. For more on Track Two dialogue, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2007), 1–25; and Hussein Agha, Shai Feldman, Ahmad Khalidi, and Zeev Schiff, eds., *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 1–9; 115–33.
9. For a full explanation of this complex dynamic, see Landau, *Arms Control in the Middle East*.
10. Whereas Track Two dialogue refers to purely unofficial dialogue, Track 1.5 is a term used when more officials are around the table, perhaps a few in their official capacity, and when the goal is to have a more direct impact at the official level. The lines between the two are not clear cut, but the latter (Track 1.5) is used when the organizers want to signify a closer link to the official level—and also suggest the possible intent to transfer insights directly to officials.
11. Emily B. Landau and Fouad Ammor, "Regional Security Dialogue and Cooperation in the South," EuroMeSCo Paper 48, October 2006, http://www.euromesco.net/images/48eng.pdf. In this paper, a Moroccan colleague and I looked separately at opportunities for cooperative security dialogue in the Middle East and in the Maghreb (here meaning the North African countries of Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia). Regarding the Middle East, we note findings from interviews point to opportunities for cooperation in soft security areas such as firefighting and combating avian flu. At the time, two of the multilateral working groups established in the early 1990s were still operating.
12. Emily B. Landau, "Israel and the Proposed 2012 WMDFZ Conference: Framing a Regional Process," *INSS Insight* 221, November 3, 2010, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-and-the-proposed-2012-wmdfz-

conference-framing-a-regional-process/?offset=8&posts=9&outher=Emily%20B.%20Landau&free_text=wmdfz.
13. Emily B. Landau, "Egypt, Israel, and the WMDFZ Conference for the Middle East: Setting the Record Straight," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2013): 13–16.
14. Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "The Decision to Call off the 2012 WMDFZ Conference: An Outcome Destined from the Start?" *INSS Insight* 390, December 5, 2012, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-decision-to-call-off-the-2012-wmdfz-conference-an-outcome-destined-from-the-start/?offset=6&posts=9&outher=Emily%20B.%20Landau&free_text=WMDFZ.
15. Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "2015 NPT RevCon: WMDFZ Conference off the Table, for Now," *INSS Insight* 705, June 3, 2015, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/2015-npt-revcon-wmdfz-conference-off-the-table-for-now/?offset=1&posts=9&outher=Emily%20B.%20Landau&free_text=WMDFZ.
16. See, for example, Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "Where Do We Go from Here? A New Israeli Approach to Tension-Reduction in the Middle East," in *A WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East: Regional Perspectives*, eds. Paolo Foradori and Martin B. Malin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center, 2013), 23–26, http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/dp_2013-09.pdf.
17. In ACRS as well, many of the participating Arab states had no diplomatic ties or even prior official contact with Israel. However, none of the Gulf or Maghreb states had any pressing grievances or unresolved conflicts that rendered them absolutely unwilling to sit in a common framework with Israel.
18. For an early assessment, see Udi Dekel and Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and Saudi Arabia: Is the Enemy of My Enemy My Friend?," *INSS Insight* 500, December 22, 2013, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-and-saudi-arabia-is-the-enemy-of-my-enemy-my-friend/.
19. Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "What Does Israel Want with the UAE?," *National Interest*, January 5, 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/what-does-israel-want-the-uae-14802.
20. Jay Solomon and Gordon Lubold, "Gulf States Offer Better Relations If Israel Makes New Bid for Peace," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/gulf-states-offer-better-relations-if-israel-makes-new-bid-for-peace-1494893769.
21. Todd Rosenblum, "Improving Saudi-Israeli Relations Offers an Opportunity for the U.S.—and a Big Risk," *Politico*, May 18, 2016, http://www.politico.eu/article/middle-east-security-improving-saudi-israeli-relations-offers-an-opportunity-for-the-us-and-a-big-risk/.
22. In this regard, see Michael Doran, "Obama's Secret Iran Strategy," *Mosaic*, February 2, 2015, http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/02/obamas-secret-iran-strategy/.
23. Yaroslav Trofimov, "For Arab Monarchies, Israel Emerges as an Ally," *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-arab-gulf-states-israel-is-emerging-as-an-ally-1494004246.

24. For more details on economic and security cooperation between Israel and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council in recent years see Samuel Ramani, "Israel Is Strengthening Its Ties with the Gulf Monarchies," *Huffington Post*, September 12, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/samuel-ramani/why-israel-is-strengthening_b_11946660.html.
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27. Philip Gordon, "Israel, the Arab States, and the Illusions of Normalization," *INSS Special Publication*, July 3, 2017, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-arab-states-illusions-normalization/.
28. Barak Ravid, "Kerry Offered Netanyahu Regional Peace Plan in Secret 2016 Summit with al-Sissi, King Abdullah," *Haaretz*, February 19, 2017, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.772531.

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This report is part of "Order from Ashes: New Foundations for Security in the Middle East," a multiyear TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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