

# MANAGING CRISES, THE LEAST-BAD OPTION

*Conflict management in the MENA region has little chance of succeeding as conflicts increasingly intersect and tensions driven by larger, regional triggers become even more unpredictable*

*By Joost Hiltermann*

The year 2011 was a watershed in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as the popular uprisings that cascaded through the region precipitated the collapse of several regimes at astonishing speed. These developments in turn triggered civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen that converged in dangerous ways, raising the potential for a wider conflict between regional actors, directly or through proxies, including potent armed groups supported by powers external to the region.

Over ten years later, Yemen is going from bad to worse, but the big war in Syria is for now frozen. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a shadow of its former self, and the Libyan civil war isn't raging on as it used to. Some of the intersecting disputes have calmed down—at least for the moment—as states in the region direct greater energies toward diplomacy.

Yet, the situation remains fragile and could turn at the merest incident. This could be a rocket fired by Houthi rebels in Yemen landing in Abu Dhabi or Riyadh; a Hezbollah rocket striking a school in Israel; an Israeli raid on Iranian assets in Syria to which Iran retaliates by attacking the U.S. military base at Al-Tanf with drones; an accidental confrontation between the Iranian and U.S. navies in Persian Gulf waters; or any event of similar impact, including what may follow a possible Donald Trump return to the White House in 2025.

The complexity of the region's conflicts has created unprecedented challenges for conflict management and resolution. This is because wars may have more than one fundamental driver. Addressing one may aggravate another. Take Libya, for example: a deal to end the conflict by forming a unity government will likely come at the expense of improving governance and accountability, thus potentially giving rise to new popular protests. Or Iraq: when the United States and the Kurds fought ISIS together, Iraqi Kurdish leaders felt empowered to try for independence in 2017. But their bid escalated an old conflict over secession



with the central government in Baghdad and neighboring countries, triggering a fight in disputed territories.

△ Parts of a broken mannequin lie on the ground near a tower building hit by Israeli air strikes on Gaza, May 12, 2021. *Mohammed Salem/Reuters*

External intervention also tends to exacerbate conflicts more often than help resolve them. Such meddling draws in competing forces, directly or by proxy—for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen, or the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey in Libya. Another challenge is that armed non-state actors, presenting themselves as state-like entities but without the true trappings of states, are less accountable. Meanwhile, the region’s states themselves often start to crumble through their partial loss of territorial control, sovereignty, and authority. An additional complicating factor is that the “international community” as a whole is going through a period of severe turbulence, in which multilateral institutions are increasingly driven by internal zero-sum competition and are losing legitimacy and influence.

The continuation of conflicts in the MENA region without the prospect of a durable resolution—even if they are temporarily stalled—raises two critical dangers. One is that any conflict can metastasize at any point, covering even larger territories and involving a greater number of actors. The second is that external power interventions in places such as Syria where their interests collide can generate hair-trigger situations that could spiral rapidly out of control, possibly with global consequences. That is in addition to the constant presence of regional conflict drivers such as the struggle between Iran and the

Gulf monarchies or the continued Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories, which prevent conflicts from coming to a negotiated conclusion.

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Under these circumstances, there is no direct or optimal approach to tackling the region's conflicts. What we are left with is trying to find ways to manage and contain conflicts before they intensify. This will require diplomatic efforts and tactical deals, as well as the creation of channels of communication and dialogue

between adversaries that can help prevent unintended and uncontrollable escalations.

### **Regional Turning Points**

In the century since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the modern Middle East maintained a certain coherence: the initial post-Ottoman borders remained in place for the most part (despite some opposition to established boundaries), and the states survived (even as political systems changed), at least until 2011.

Yet, the region's history has been dotted with several turning points. The first of these upheavals was the region's birth from the remnants of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. The victorious great powers of Britain and France divided the spoils by appropriating territories through a series of accords, starting with the famed Sykes-Picot Agreement. They demarcated Arab lands and established within them direct or indirect administration or control, in many cases mirroring their own monarchical and republican systems, respectively. These countries have survived for a hundred years, and counting.

The next upheaval came in 1948 with the creation of the State of Israel following a gradual three-decade-long build-up culminating in a war with neighboring Arab states. Arab leaders saw Israel's ability to implant itself in Palestine as a Western attempt to divide and weaken an Arab World in which nationalism and decolonization had become the dominant ideologies following the Second World War. Ever since, Israel has remained a sharp Western-backed wedge stuck in the Arabs' backs. It is only recently that Israel started to partially overcome its isolation by establishing closer relations with a handful of Arab states, such as the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan (after earlier agreements with Egypt and Jordan delivered a cold peace in each case).

Arab nationalism had its major triumph in 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Free Officers Movement overthrew the British-backed monarchy in what became known as the July 26 Revolution. This ushered in dramatic change

throughout the Arab World, and placed Egypt and others on a non-aligned course in the worsening Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Domestically, the new secular republic outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, its main potential challenger.

Fifteen years later, the tide turned in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which Israel refers to as the “Six-Day War”. It spelled the end of Nasser’s standing as the most widely admired regional strongman, and ushered in the gradual end of Arab nationalism as the ideological glue unifying the region. Islamism started to slowly overtake Arab nationalism as the only ideological alternative that enjoyed widespread popular support. However, it would take decades of grassroots organizing and struggling against state repression before Islamist forces could turn their political ambitions into formal power; this materialized in Egypt in 2012, with the Muslim Brotherhood taking up the presidency.

The next upheaval came in 1979 in two pivotal events. The first was the Iranian revolution, which saw a popular uprising oust the Shah’s repressive secular monarchy, and supplant it with a Shiite theocratic republic, a system known as *vilayet-e fakih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), no less repressive than its predecessor. The second was the so-called siege of Mecca later that year. Here the near-success of Sunni radicals in overthrowing the House of Saud prompted Saudi Arabia to further empower its religious establishment and export its particularly intolerant brand of Islam, Wahhabism, by using its growing oil income to fund mosque building, literature distribution, and recruitment of preachers throughout the Muslim world. While there is no direct link between Saudi Arabia and the establishment of Al-Qaeda, the generation of Muslims steeped in Saudi-fed Wahhabist Salafism provided a fertile ground from which Al-Qaeda could recruit followers and fighters in several wars—first in Afghanistan, later in Iraq and Yemen, and then in Syria and Libya.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq unleashed another wave of jihadism (following jihadists’ successful effort to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan over a decade earlier; the return of volunteers from fighting against the Soviets to join insurrections elsewhere; and a series of Al-Qaeda attacks on Western interests that culminated in the September 11, 2001 attacks). It provided the space and motivation for Al-Qaeda, which had been scattered and on the run after losing its safe haven in Afghanistan and never had a presence in Iraq, to rebrand itself. Its newly established Iraq branch, under the leadership of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, increasingly confronted a perceived Iran-backed Shiite ascendancy and helped fuel sectarianism within the country. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was the basis for what would become the Islamic State a decade later.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and its mismanaged aftermath had other implications: it caused enormous harm to the U.S. standing in the world, and arguably marked

the beginning of the decline of its influence in the region. At the same time, the Bush administration's decision to move forward with the invasion against the strong advice of Arab leaders who feared Iran's rising power convinced them that they could no longer confidently count on Washington to protect them. Some, like the UAE, became even more convinced of the need to gain greater political and security autonomy from the United States. This disposition first began to emerge in the 1990s and increased especially after the 2011 popular uprisings.

These became the final transformative events of regional proportions. The home-grown revolts precipitated not only the ouster of a number of long-time autocrats but also the collapse of several Arab states. Capable regional actors such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar stepped into the security vacuum that opened up in a number of countries, most notably in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. In these wars, upstart non-state actors recognized opportunities to advance their respective causes, the jihadist groups most aggressively among them. Kurdish groups challenged the post-Ottoman Iraqi

and Syrian borders in pursuit of a state of their own while the Islamic State rejected the whole notion of the nation state, seeking to reinstate the long-lost Caliphate instead.

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In brief, the uprisings exposed the bankruptcy of the century-old order in the region. From the inchoate voices in the squares, a single message rang loud and clear: a rejection of the status quo and the forces upholding it.

But the protesters, who had no coherent vision for the future, nor leadership or organization, failed to present a workable alternative and were quickly outflanked by powerful military actors. These were driven by the need to fill a political and security vacuum, while pursuing objectives that reflected longstanding and deep regional fault lines.

### **Regional Conflict Drivers**

Triggered by these political earthquakes, four conflict drivers were propelling parts of the region into four separate but increasingly intersecting areas of conflict.

The first one concerns the borders and the nature of the state systems established a century ago, and how well they held up their end in the social contracts between states and their citizenry. These states may have survived, but not without challenges to their rule. Chronically incapable of reliably providing infrastructure, services, jobs, and sometimes even security, the legitimacy of these states in the eyes of their citizens is constantly tested and often found

wanting. Yet, their autocratic nature leads them to hold onto power instead of fostering a greater degree of political participation; they ultimately cannot sustain themselves, as the 2011 uprisings showed. In some ways, it is a miracle that the borders have endured when states themselves have faltered. Part of the reason may be that the elites in these countries have bought into the notion that the nation state is preferable to an overarching (yet unachievable) Arab nation or an all-encompassing Islamic caliphate.

The second fundamental conflict driver is the tension between Israel and its neighbors and Iran, and especially the way it projects itself as an outsider imposing itself militarily while professing an innate legitimacy through its origin narrative. In the adversarial dynamic between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel and Arab actors, and Israel and Iran, armed conflicts are endemic. The overall confrontation between Israel and these various actors has contaminated the region, putting states up against one another and people against their governments, while offering Arab leaders an excuse to indefinitely postpone long-overdue fundamental reforms.

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The third driver is the ongoing struggle between Iran and the Gulf monarchies—an outcome of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Islamic Republic continuously tries to replicate its ideological victory throughout the wider Shiite community and beyond, while Saudi Arabia attempts to counter that. Iran's attempt to export *vilayet-e fakih* has been met with only mixed success, but it has been very effective in projecting its power throughout the Middle East—first and foremost through Shiite communities—but also in Syria and with a group as closely aligned with the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood as Hamas. The Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s and the stand-off between Iran and Gulf Arab states today, with the UAE choosing to side with Israel as part of an anti-Iran front, attest to the potency of this particular conflict driver.

The fourth one concerns the unsettled debate in the Sunni world over the role of Islam in politics. (In the Shiite world, the Iranian revolution settled the matter for now.) It stems from the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt early last century in response to secular Arab nationalism—although it has far deeper roots—and has spread throughout the Muslim world. This debate fuelled the rise of jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that challenged the sitting secular regimes, as well as the Brotherhood itself. It also incited conflict that is evident in the relatively recent rivalry between the UAE and both Qatar and Turkey, playing out in battlefields such as Libya, Syria and Yemen; in the

2013 seizure of power from the government of President Mohamed Morsi that was elected following the 2011 uprising in Egypt; in the 2017 spat between Saudi Arabia and the UAE at one end, and Qatar at the other, which was only partly overcome early in 2021; and most recently in the Tunisian president's grab for greater power in the face of an Islamist-dominated and paralyzed parliament.

Outside interventions, especially of the military kind, dangerously interact with these four basic conflict drivers. External actors can play a constructive role as

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relatively non-partisan mediators, but more often than not, they side with one party to a conflict, deepening internal fault lines and elevating them to regional ones. Witness the separate Russian and U.S. interventions in Syria (one to protect the regime, the other mostly to fight jihadists in what at times became overlapping efforts), which raised the dangers of an inadvertent clash in the skies between their respective air forces.

In Syria, all these conflict drivers, compounded by external interventions, converged, and thereby rendered a peaceful solution more elusive. The war, which first erupted as a popular challenge against an unresponsive, unaccountable, and repressive regime, soon evolved into a civil war between the regime and an externally backed insurgency, and then, into a proxy war in which regional powers, and later Russia, the United States, and Western members of the anti-ISIS coalition, came face to face. These powers included Turkey, which pursued the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate, and Israel, which struck back at its Lebanese enemy Hezbollah, as well as Iran, which had used Syria as its main transit point for arms shipments to Hezbollah.

Syrians' popular insurgency ultimately failed, in part because the financial support that Gulf actors, who disagreed over the role of Islam in government, funnelled to different rebel factions sowed division among them. Russia's 2015 intervention then provided the final and fatal blow. Jihadists thrived in the chaos. The war became the mother of all perfect storms, one that is far from having spent its energies, even if it appears frozen for the moment.

### **Spreading Risks**

The ways in which such drivers of conflict intertwine have complicated efforts to bring these conflicts to an end through negotiations leading to ceasefires and transitional political arrangements. Diplomacy's traditional instruments have proved to be insufficient, especially if they are not backed up by the unified actions of the world's greater powers. The most a UN envoy can hope to achieve is to emerge from the assignment having avoided a sharp escalation, with his or her reputation intact.

Under these circumstances, the risks posed here are obvious. First off, it is unclear how these conflicts can be contained within certain territorial boundaries and without exerting a certain degree of lethality. The Syrian war, in particular, has highlighted how conflicts can suck in new actors, and spread to engulf wider areas. What began as a popular anti-regime protest in the provincial town of Daraa in March 2011 soon consumed the capital Damascus and the entire Sunni Arab heartland; it then prompted military interventions by Hezbollah and Iran on the regime side, and financial and material backing from Turkey and Gulf Arab actors on the other.

Global powers also entered the scene. Turkey, which has vital interests at stake as Syria's neighbor, remains lodged militarily in Idlib province; an incursion by the regime and its allies, which would prompt a new refugee flow into Turkey, has sparked repeated direct confrontations between Turkey and the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies. Moreover, Hezbollah extended its military power from Lebanon into Syria. The Islamic State then built on its territorial gains in northern Syria to invade (or return to) Iraq, erasing the official border between the two countries; the anti-ISIS coalition followed suit, chasing ISIS in both countries. Both sets of actors thus jointly infected an entire sub-region with armed conflict.

The Syrian war also saw the reintroduction of chemical weapons on the battlefield (by both sides, but most intensively and lethally by the regime), the first time since the Iran–Iraq war. The war's most defining feature may have been the regime's wholesale use of barrel bombs dropped over civilian areas in which rebels were active. That level of lethality prompted the United States to respond with missile strikes. If the stakes had been higher for the United States, perhaps it would have introduced even heavier weapons, as it did in Afghanistan in April 2017, when it dropped the most powerful conventional bomb in its arsenal on an Islamic State cave complex. As it was, Russia and Iran together appeared to have "escalation dominance" through their superior strategic interest in Syria and therefore comparatively greater willingness to counter U.S. military moves.

A second, and related, risk is that any proverbial flash in the pan could set off a wider conflagration. Several armed stand-offs in the region would need just a small trigger to push the conflict into a rapid and uncontrolled escalation, causing a chain reaction of destructive events. The following scenarios share the same premise: that none of the primary actors involved in them seeks a direct confrontation with the other for the time being.

In the first scenario, conflict would arise if any of the principal actors on either side of the Israeli/Lebanese or Israeli/Syrian border were to inadvertently cross the other's (often undeclared) red line. For example, a Hezbollah rocket barrage retaliating for Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah assets hits a school in northern



Israel, with casualties. It is inconceivable that Israel would not launch a major assault in response. Both Israel and Hezbollah have observed mutual deterrence across the Israel–Lebanon border since the 2006 war.

Transplant the scene to northern Syria. Confrontation between Turkey and Russia may arise, for example, should a Syrian regime rocket attack on a Turkish forward base in Idlib kill Turkish troops, and Turkey retaliates, accidentally hitting Russian military advisors deployed alongside Syrian troops. It is very difficult to imagine that Russia would not take significant retaliatory measures, even if it has avoided harming Turkish soldiers in Idlib so far. Retaliation could even take the form of a combined Syrian regime-Russian frontal assault on Idlib in an attempt to wrest the area from Tahrir Al-Sham and Turkey, and restore Damascus's authority.

Attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz or Gulf of Oman are nothing new. But a naval mishap between U.S. and Iranian vessels could lead to an undesired confrontation in the absence of instant communications in the form of a hotline or otherwise. In 2016, the United States could have met Iran's detention of U.S. sailors who had entered Iranian territorial waters, possibly because of navigational errors, with an attack on Iranian assets inside the country or on the high seas. Instead, Secretary of State John Kerry's calls to Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, almost instantaneously led to a quick de-escalation and the sailors' release after 15 hours. During the Trump administration, a similar incident might have had a different outcome, as the circumstances surrounding Iran's downing of a U.S. drone in June 2019 suggest; the United States reportedly was within minutes of carrying out a retaliatory military strike on Iran before Trump's aides persuaded him to undertake lesser drastic actions.

And a final example: after ISIS was defeated in Iraq, Iran and its allied paramilitary groups stepped up the pressure to drive U.S. troops away after their partial return to the country, mainly through rocket attacks on facilities in which U.S. and Iraqi soldiers were housed together. This tactic carries great risk, because the United States may retaliate—as it has in the past—and this could cause casualties. One such incident came in the wake of the U.S. killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in a drone strike at Baghdad airport in January 2020. Iran struck back by launching missiles at Iraqi bases that housed U.S. and other Western soldiers, injuring many. What reportedly prevented further escalation was an Iranian message to the Trump administration, transmitted through a Swiss diplomatic backchannel, that Iran did not intend to carry out further strikes; fortunately, Trump decided to leave it at that.

### **Managing Impossible Crises**

What, in this fragile state of affairs, could be done to prevent the region from sliding into greater chaos and the expansion of armed conflict to all-out war?

“Very little,” is the correct answer. If there is any change for the better, it appears to be mostly unrelated to diplomatic activity and more tied to a political or military event, such as, for example, the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House and the expectation in the region that the United States would return to the nuclear deal, reset relations with Iran, and start balancing the books diplomatically between Iran and U.S. Gulf allies. It is because of this latter perception that Saudi Arabia reached out to Iran in 2021 and, perhaps, also mended its ties with Qatar. This set off a chain reaction, allowing Turkey to start rebuilding diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. The overall result has been a lowering of the temperature, but the fundamental problems remain. Another major political or military event could easily reverse all these surface-gains. Available options to address the underlying tensions and grievances are limited but there are steps that could at least minimize risks of a wider escalation.

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The first relates to activating the UN’s special mechanisms, such as the Secretary-General’s envoys, which are meant to mediate between conflict parties and bring a conflict to an end through negotiations, a ceasefire, and a political transition. Although heroic, such efforts have a low rate of success in bringing individual conflicts to an end, or even preventing further escalations. Even in helping to contain these conflicts, the envoys should communicate more actively, not just with headquarters in New York, but also with one another in the region, as the various conflicts are interlinked through their historic drivers and through countries’ political leaderships who see these connections and use them to their advantage region-wide.

The second relates to those actors external to the region that have an interest in its stabilization. They should open their own channels to non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and encourage enemies to talk to one another at various levels. This could take the form of military hotlines, direct talks between political leaders or intelligence chiefs, multilateral security dialogues, or Track-2 discussion forums involving a broader spectrum of political and security elites. Such channels of communication are no panacea, but they can help prevent the worst in a situation where more ambitious progress remains improbable.

As long as the region’s principal actors seek no direct confrontation but think they must engage in brinkmanship in order to manage their disputes, accidental escalations based on miscommunications or a misreading of events are very likely to happen again and again. The best way to prevent them from turning into something bigger is to ensure that working channels of communication at the right level of leadership are open and available in moments of acute crisis. ®