

Middle East Dialogue

Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative, Wilson Center

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(Aerial View Istanbul / Shutterstock)

Executive Summary

The Middle East Dialogue*, hosted by the Wilson Center’s [Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative](#), met in Istanbul, Turkey to explore regional political and security dynamics. This meeting brought together policymakers and senior experts from across the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) region, including the Gulf states, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.

This moderator’s report provides a series of briefs (region and country-specific) as a summary of the discussions and highlights issues discussed, as well as specific recommendations put forward by dialogue participants. Recommendations were provided during (not exclusively) the country and issue-specific discussions as relevant.

The Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative

The Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative builds on established track 1.5 and track 2.0 dialogues in the heart of the Middle East and North Africa, where conflict is impacting security, development, and governance. The initiative hosts a series of in-person and virtual dialogues held under Chatham House Rule, including the Middle East Dialogue, the Arab States Dialogue, the Israel-Arab Dialogue, and others between the United States, Russia, and Turkey. These dialogues convene policymakers, academics, and experts to engage in knowledge sharing and provide policy recommendations that build collaborative regional principles to reduce conflict, minimize global security threats, and empower the states and people of MENA.

The Middle East Program

The Wilson Center’s Middle East Program serves as a crucial resource for the policymaking community and beyond, providing analyses and research that help inform US foreign policymaking, stimulates public debate, and expands knowledge about issues in the wider Middle East and North Africa region.

* The Middle East Dialogue, an established track 1.5 and track 2.0 dialogue was recently relaunched as part of the [Middle East Track II Dialogues Initiative](#) under the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center.



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Syria

The fall of Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 has brought about a significant reorientation in the Middle East, including changes to the regional landscape and wider alliances. It also fundamentally changes the prospects for Syria as a country. Even so, after 14 years of a brutal civil and regional war, the country has enormous challenges. As per one Syrian expert who recently returned to Damascus: “we are sitting on huge levels of [physical] destruction. Fifty percent of Syrians are not at home and cannot go home. Ninety percent of Syrians are below the poverty line. Education levels are low. The health sector has collapsed.” In addition, the expert noted that there are social questions that need to be responded to under the new leadership of interim President Ahmed Al Sharaa: “[secular] versus Islamist is another big question or challenge. Will they have a new social contract with Islamic values but not an Islamist political agenda? The Arab versus Kurd [fault line] is not just [about] the Kurds and Damascus but also involves Turkey. The outcome needs to satisfy different sides in order to last.”

One Syrian UN official echoed the challenges, emphasizing the economic challenges including the burden of daily struggles and lack of access to public services, while noting positive trends since Assad’s fall, notably the recapture of public space and the level of freedom of expression, both long denied to generations of Syrians.

Meanwhile, a Turkish policy expert noted that “transitional justice must be done with international support...100,000 people disappeared...Reconciliation efforts must be done in Syrian civil society. Everyone wants to have a say in the future of Syria, rightfully. What can be the way that they will feel included but not lead to a messy form of transition where no decision can be made, or lead to different countries to destabilize Syria? This can turn into a geopolitical vortex and generate a new set of conflicts in the region.”

There was broad consensus that economic challenges need to be alleviated quickly—both in forms of immediate recovery and aid coupled with investment to support restructuring. This must come in the form of long-term sanctions waivers from the United States alongside the lifting of sanctions from European countries.

Despite the apprehension towards interim Syrian President Al Sharaa among regional countries, there was consensus among the dialogue participants that he has significant legitimacy and popularity with the Syrian people at this time. There was also acknowledgement that the Syrian public has little desire or energy to demand more political engagement through this turbulent transition or even a military response to Israel. Although, one Lebanese policy expert highlighted the dangers of continued Israeli territorial and military expansion as a watershed moment, which was echoed by Iranian and Turkish experts.

The Gulf states are concerned about counterterrorism, foreign fighters, and the perceived risk of an ISIS resurgence. One Emirati policy expert noted the need for Al Sharaa to deliver on power-sharing arrangements within Syria to placate concerns about his Jihadi past and his relationship with his former armed group, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS). As one Turkish expert noted: “Everyone is trying to create their own Atlantis in Syria. Countries without power sharing are asking it for power sharing. They [Syrians] should not be the victim of rising expectations.” Despite public perception, the expert was cautious about Turkey’s role, “Turkey has limited support in Idlib [HTS]. I’ve never seen Ankara this cautious.” Further risks of Turkey’s expanded involvement were targeted at the level of the HTS and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) negotiation in the northeast, while the risk from Israel is seen by Ankara as an overt conflict driver that they would not ignore.

From across the region, there is hesitancy regarding the new authority in Damascus and how it shapes the region and geopolitical alliances. For Iraq, there are various challenges and concerns, notably security, the established ethnic power balance between the Kurds and Arabs, counterterrorism, and threats from Israel. There is also the complicated historical legacy of the Ba’ath regime and Iraq’s relations with Syria. For Iran, it was noted that there is a significant difference between the fall of Assad and the weakening of Hezbollah, with the latter treated as a much bigger strategic defeat. Assad, conversely, became a burden on the state and cost the regime significant political capital, according to one Iranian expert. Iranian participants noted that now the major concerns for the Islamic Republic center on Israel and its wider territorial aggression.

One Syrian participant posed something of a reality check during the discussion, lamenting that “there is an expectation for Syria to be the poster child. The wish list is huge and unrealistic and is coming from many who don’t even practice half of what they are asking Syria to become. There is a lot of goodwill in advising Al Sharaa and Syria, and if Syria manages to implement half of which we are managing, then it will be a good path.”

Recommendations

Sanctions

- Need for goodwill and pathway from Washington to waive sanctions and from the EU to lift sanctions
- Offer sanctions relief as an incentive towards an inclusive political process and transitional justice roadmap

Stabilization

- Regional diplomatic efforts are needed to prevent Syria from once again becoming a regional battleground

Regional Security

- Rebuild an inclusive national military, including the disarmament of armed factions
- Regional and international training of the newly formed Syrian military can serve as an important incentive and support mechanism

Economic Recovery

- Prioritize support to the public sector, with a focus on education, health, and energy (both financial support and technical expertise)
- Encourage private sector engagement through the lifting and waiving of sanctions, which will provide confidence to the banking system to enable investment into Syria

Reconstruction

- Should be part of a regional/Levant “Marshall Plan” (including Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza)

Moderator's note

A group of dialogue participants met virtually on March 15, 2025, to discuss the implications of the insurgency led by remnants of the former Assad regime that took place on March 8, 2025, and the sectarian violence that followed it.

A Syrian expert noted these recent developments showed that the post-Assad era is still bloody, with communal divisions running deep—notably the longstanding Alawite/Sunni division. For some segments of Syrian society, the insurgency revealed the fragility and insecurity of the interim authorities in Damascus. For the Alawite community, their worst fears came true along with the realization that fellow Syrians will support their killing.

The agreement signed by interim Syrian President Al Sharaa and SDF leader Mazloum Abdi was surprising to Syrians. Both parties needed this agreement: Al Sharaa to regain some of his legitimacy domestically and internationally and Abdi to secure a ceasefire. US pressure on an upcoming withdrawal was key to bringing Abdi to the table. However, the agreement is more of a goodwill move, as it does not address most of the differences that divide Arabs and Kurds. The same has been said of the agreement reached with the Druze in Suwayda within the same time frame. The Syrian expert noted that “the national dialogue conference provided a space for a one-day honest discussion among Syrians. The issues that were raised during the discussions were not reflected in the final statement. The constitutional declaration provides a roadmap that gives Al Sharaa the powers he is seeking without solving any of the issues Syrians are focused on.”

Following the sectarian violence in Syria, pro-Iran groups started pressuring the Iraqi government to take a more hardline stance against the Syrian government. There are ongoing attempts by these groups to frame the violence targeting the Alawites as part of an overall narrative of Shia targeting and grievances, with the objective of mobilizing Iraqi Shia against the interim authorities in Syria. Given that this is an election year in Iraq, Iraqi officials are attuned to this heightening in the public narrative that is increasingly antagonistic toward the Syrian leadership.

An Iranian academic argued that while Iran still has capabilities to engage in internal Syrian matters, most Iranian officials do not intend to do so unless new regional dynamics require it (i.e., a joint US-Israeli attack against Iran). This will change both Tehran's cost-benefit calculus of action in Syria and its strategy of engaging against the US and Israel on Syrian territory. Part of that strategy is to maximize the conflict parameters in the region by linking its security to regional insecurity.



(Ali Chehade Farhat / Shutterstock)

Lebanon & Iraq

The developments in recent months in Lebanon have provoked significant shifts in the country’s internal dynamics. The collapse of Hezbollah’s military—notably the eradication of its senior military leaders, including the assassinations of Secretary-General Sayed Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy, Sayed Hashim Safieddine—has raised new questions about the national and regional positioning of the group. The election of Joseph Aoun (former head of the Lebanese Armed Forces) as president and Nawaf Salam as prime minister are seen as positive milestones towards rebuilding a fractured social, political, and economic national landscape.

Economic and financial restructuring are seen as the immediate priority for the country. The recent war with Israel, building on the disastrous 2019 economic collapse and the traumatic 2020 Beirut port explosion, has left the country in a dire situation. Sixty percent of the country is below the poverty line, little to no reforms have been made in recent years, and state expenditure plummeted as a result[†]. Furthermore, the war with Israel is estimated to have cost the state approximately 13-14 billion USD, with significant pressures on war-ravaged communities and challenges for returning displaced citizens^{††}. A Lebanese policy expert noted the hidden environmental and economic effects of the war with Israel: “over 60,000 olive trees were uprooted [in southern Lebanon], phosphorous was used damaging the fertility of soil [in agricultural areas], and in communities like Nabatiyeh the economic lifelines such as the souks were destroyed...meanwhile Israel remains occupying five outposts in [southern] Lebanon.”

[†] “Lebanon’s Economic Crisis Pushes 60 Percent of the Population Into Poverty,” Lebanese American University, January 3, 2025, <https://news.lau.edu.lb/2025/lebanons-economic-crisis-pushes-60-of-the-population-into-poverty.php#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20findings%20of,of%20the%20ongoing%20economic%20crisis.>

^{††} “Lebanon, Ravaged by War, Needs Changes to Unlock Aid. That Could Be a Tall Order.” New York Times, March 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/24/world/europe/lebanon-hezbollah-israel-government-economy.html>.

Both this year's municipal elections and next year's parliamentary elections are viewed as important milestones that will test this inflection point in Lebanon and provide significant answers in relation to Hezbollah's role domestically. Lebanese policy experts lamented the risks posed by not having, to date, any organized Shia voices to rally Shia constituents ravaged by the war and noted the ability for Hezbollah to use nativist rallying calls, including the specific targeting of Shia communities across the country by Israel, to enhance their supporter base and return disaffected Shia civilians to their cause. Nevertheless, there remains criticism within the Shia community of both Amal and Hezbollah, which is unable to command the same level of financial resources as they did in 2006 when they succeeded at presenting themselves as the leader and the financier of the reconstruction efforts post-Israel-Hezbollah War.

On the security side, longer-term questions about Hezbollah's ability to regroup are rife, including the question of whether this moment may force a longer-term disarmament of the group. A Lebanese expert noted the sheer level of decimation of the military wing: "The two top leadership tiers of Hezbollah's military infrastructure have been wiped out. They are bringing retirees back into the jihadi council because of command-and-control issues. We're talking about the third rank of fighters now—none of them have leadership potential. Expect infighting among the rank and file." On the question of whether there would be disarmament of the group, the expert noted that "there are different wings inside Hezbollah that are competing for setting the party agenda. It is very hard to get the full story of what is taking place inside the party. For example, there is talk of a pro-Iran, pro-regional resistance competing with a pro-Lebanon policy. One camp prioritizes Hezbollah as a political party, whereas another group is prioritizing the regional role and how to regain it...a lot of internal ideological cleavages are rising to the surface."

Fundamentally, however, experts agreed that Hezbollah leadership has not reflected on what went wrong and how much the recent war with Israel has damaged their military capabilities and affected the group's political role among Lebanese.

On the other side of the Lebanese political spectrum, non-Hezbollah political groups have not sent the wider Shia community an inclusive, reassuring message that could serve as a way to further delegitimize Hezbollah and force new forms of national political representation for Shia. It was argued further that the messages on what is needed to reintegrate the Shia community into a broader national state-building narrative need to come from within the community and not be heralded from outside it, with reference made to longstanding victimhood and "Shia grievances," a powerful social and political driving force within the community. Overall, it was concluded that it is far too early for any verdict about Hezbollah and its positioning inside Lebanon. Although, it was also concluded that Hezbollah's capabilities and legitimacy as a transnational military force are likely severely weakened, even as deeper questions related to Hezbollah's relationship with Iran still need to be addressed and acknowledged.

To that end, an Iranian official argued that the "relationship with Hezbollah was never vertical, only horizontal...Nasrallah was pure Lebanese." In defending Iran's wider relationship with

Hezbollah, they noted that “the 1982 invasion of Lebanon made Hezbollah. Iran supported Amal originally. Hezbollah imposed itself on Iran. Iran did not manufacture Hezbollah.” One Iranian expert argued that Tehran wants to strengthen Hezbollah’s capacities while acknowledging that this will take time. Meanwhile, an Iraqi expert noted that a similar leadership gap across the “axis of resistance” after the 2020 assassination of Qassem Suleimani and Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis did not trigger a similar crisis of legitimacy among the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Sha’bi), nor inside Iran’s funded resistance axis, despite the power vacuum that has prolonged since.

To that end, the same period in Iraq has seen the formation of the Shia Coordination Framework, which emerged from the political fallout from the 2019 Tishreen Uprising and the subsequent elections in 2021. An Iraqi policy expert noted that the power of the framework came from the fact it “brought all different [Shia] parties to sit and discuss different issues, leading to a strong level of rationality [and] providing strong support for the prime minister. The prime minister could do more and prevented uncontrolled behaviors from 65 armed groups in Iraq. Just two insisted on attacking [the US] while the others did not because of ideology. A decision was made inside the framework that it was not in the interest of the Iraqi framework to engage; Iraq can do a lot when it is out of the conflict.” The mechanism of the framework is judged to have provided a format and platform of containment and even reconciliation within the Shia political movement with its armed factions.

While Iraq continues to contend with a militarized political space across all factions and groups (Sunni, Shia, Kurd, etc.), it is deemed that the current successes on infrastructure development, economic reform, and regional alliances—notably the fresh engagement with the Gulf, Jordan, and Egypt—have proven the lucrative nature of peace rather than conflict. There is, therefore, renewed consensus that the country should remain stable and conflict-free even amid ongoing competition for power. To that end, an Iraqi expert highlighted certain steps that could support important balancing of domestic and bilateral relationships.

They highlighted the role the Autonomous Kurdish Region can play in shaping a balanced policy between Washington and Iraq. President Nechriwan Barzani was identified as a key facilitator between Erbil and Baghdad. In addition, Baghdad welcomes institutionalized channels of dialogue between Iraqi Shia elites and US policymakers to expand the scope of political and intellectual engagement, whereas Iran should recalibrate its approach toward Iraq by focusing on diplomatic, economic, and cultural instruments rather than an excessive reliance on security and military tools.



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Iran

Regional developments have shed a fresh spotlight on the growing power brokers. Emerging Gulf power, which is now seemingly determining the trajectory of the region through diplomacy rather than military or security power, not only competes with but in many spaces aligns with the non-Arab roles of Iran and Turkey. As such, participants highlighted a need to refocus efforts on the diplomatic and security ties between these middle powers.

While Iran is reeling from the recent events in the region, the strategic defeat of Hezbollah is proving a significant challenge for the regime in Tehran. One Iranian academic pointed to new trends emerging in the national security mindset of the regime, notably that “deterrence was for its own time...there are changes inside Iran, notably amongst youth and women, towards de-escalation. The time for dialogue and de-escalation is something that is evolving in the domestic political scene.”

While Syria evolved from a deterrence mechanism to a strategic partner, an Iranian official defended the policy to back Assad as existential during the time of the ISIS war. Although, he claimed that neither Syria nor Hezbollah are deemed existential issues for Iran that would prompt direct military engagement now. Rather, existential threats were described as “Iran’s immediate neighborhood, the border. Anyone playing with Iraq is playing with Iran’s national issues, as well as in the Persian Gulf and the Caucuses...[and] maybe the economic war that the Americans are trying to impose on Iran may soon also be existential.”

Moderator’s note

In the additional virtual meeting on March 15, 2025, an Iranian academic disagreed with this argument, noting that “no country is an existential threat for Iran. What is existential for Iran is the motherland—we are increasingly focused on protecting ourselves. The

government has lots of issues to deal with on multiple fronts. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is focused on strengthening deterrent power and strengthening defensive lines in our immediate neighborhood. Iran's main problem is Israel. Tehran does not want to put more burden on itself like alienating Iraq, Syria, Turkey governments [and] publics. Iran would not go in that direction unless it is cornered."

The Iranian view as presented, therefore, seeks to acknowledge the new realities in the region and work on diplomatic efforts to stabilize the region and primarily prevent an Israeli attack on Iran. Diplomacy with Saudi Arabia, in particular, was highlighted as a priority to securing those interests, with Iran working to diversify its regional relationships and rapprochement across the region. The official position remains that Iran seeks to see a successful transition in Syria, where the rights of minorities and "everyone who has a stake in the government needs to be integrated into regional interactions."

The position, however, was not welcomed by all. One Turkish expert was critical of the role Iran has played in the region and the messages it now seeks to send considering its failures: "[to] put it simply, Iran lost. If we want to move on, then Iran has to acknowledge its mistakes from the past and acknowledge how other regional countries have perceived Iran."

While a deeper introspective debate was held amongst participants regarding the role of Iran, its perception, and its own national security considerations, there was consensus from representatives across the region that no one seeks an Iran-Israel confrontation (see: Israel-Gaza report), and there remains considerable apprehension across Arab states not only of Iran's military behavior and plans but also that of Turkey following the fall of Assad in Syria.

Recommendations

- Favor inclusion of Saudi Arabia in nuclear talks as potential mediator and possibly additionally as monitoring party
- Enhance "corridor diplomacy" based on geographical determination and shared threats, connectivity, and economic integration
- Diversify relations with great powers (US, Russia, China, Europe) and establish non-aggression pacts
- Identify "zones of possible agreement" with regional actors and establish conflict resolution mechanisms on issues related to refugees, borders, and the environment
- Develop joint approaches to "stabilization" of post-conflict countries and shared efforts towards national unity governments and transitional roadmaps with neighboring and regional countries



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Turkey

For Turkey, recent developments in Syria have created the air of “victory” for Ankara, but experts stressed that was not the approach being taken by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Rather, Syria has become a “complicated” policy issue for Ankara, particularly the rising anti-refugee sentiment in recent years, the risk of the burden and cost paid by Iran and Russia for their continued backing of the Assad regime ‘transferring’ to Turkey as Syria remains fragile (albeit now under allied control), as well as the security threats posed both by Kurdish groups affiliated the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Israel’s advancing incursions into Syrian territory. There remains a strong constituency of Syrians in Turkey, of which the official number is 2.8 million, but sources believe the number to be closer to 3.2 million of which approximately 750,000 were born in the country, and Erdoğan has insisted there will be no forcible return.¹ “Turkey is waiting for reconstruction and the waiving of some sanctions for refugees to return. It may take years, and some will stay.” Elsewhere, a complicated economic relationship with Idlib, coupled with the breaking down of conflict lines and barriers that have divided major parts of the country for years, are causing tensions across the economy. Damascene and Aleppo merchants complain of the competition from Turkish goods, and Turkish businessmen complain of the rising export taxes that have been imposed by the interim Syrian authorities.

Security concerns remain a high priority for Turkey, notably regarding regional relations with the Kurds, primarily groups affiliated with the PKK. To counter ISIS threats, Ankara has sought to launch a quartet approach to counterterrorism and ISIS threats, including Iraq, Jordan,

1 “GEÇİCİ KORUMA,” Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, March 20, 2025, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>; Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Türkiye, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/kime-yardim-ediyoruz/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-tuerkiye>; and Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections,” Heinrich Böll Stiftung, August 17, 2022, <https://us.boell.org/en/2022/08/17/immigration-politics-refugees-turkey-and-2023-elections#22B>.

and Syria.² Turkey seeks to resolve this issue on a regional level in order to leverage the US relationship with the YPG/SDF to negotiate their dissolution and disarmament.

Regarding relations with the transitional leadership in Damascus, Turkey is said to be cautious but fully engaged, taking on the role of regional and global mediator and messenger. This relates to both advocacy on sanctions lifting and waiving for Syria and providing direct support, including to recently reopen airports in Damascus and Aleppo and reinstate direct flights into the country. One expert highlighted the importance of regional stability and Syria's successful transition to Ankara's own ambitions: "Turkey doesn't have oil or natural resources and is a trading state, so to survive they need regional economic integration and the flow of trade." Another expert echoed this sentiment, noting that "[Turkey's] new approach is more realistic, and [they] try to have a good relationship with the Arab world. The main thought is that Turkey is tired of conflicts and meddling, and they want to have stable relations and normalization with the Arab states and to preserve the connectivity that Turkey sees with the Arab world, which was cut due to the security situation there [in Syria]." They reinforced this in terms of the perception in Syria, stressing that "Turkey...doesn't want Syria to be perceived as a Turkish puppet. They are trying to explain to the Arab world to have a joint approach and are pushing for Syria to become the opening gate for Turkey and the Arab world."

However, understanding the fragility of the Syrian state at this moment in time, there is a need for Ankara to step in and shore up the leadership and security apparatus in the country. This is seen as an opportunity to recalibrate security partnerships and cooperation across the Arab region. Even so, warnings from Turkish experts note the domestic pressure that Erdoğan faces on this issue, primarily anti-Syrian/anti-Arab sentiment, must be balanced with regional priorities and a "common, joint approach with Arab countries on security in Syria that should not outwardly threaten anyone." While confirming there are no security guarantee arrangements with Syria for now, one Turkish expert noted the challenges still facing the leadership in Damascus, namely the lack of any control over Syrian airspace and effectively no functioning military hardware after Israel's attacks.

In all cases, a Turkish expert noted the sensitivity around Turkish involvement in the country, reflecting that "Turkey would be blamed for it, if it is involved too much." Even so, the wider regional landscape remains dominated by the Gaza War and the plight of the Palestinians. A policy expert highlighted that it is a sensitive, national issue that encompasses all parts of the Turkish political elite and social landscape of the country, and any change in the pro-Palestinian stance (i.e., amid questions of any warming of relations with Israel) cannot be risked by Erdoğan owing to domestic pressure.

2 There remain over 9,000 ISIS prisoners and over 40,000 ISIS families/civilians held in camps and prisons in northeast Syria in SDF territory. Iraq has proposed to absorb the burden, but under Iraqi jurisdiction for all prisoners, including remaining foreign fighters (numbered at least half), with support from the international community to fund security operations and logistics. Approximately 2,000 fighters and 14,000 family members are believed to be Iraqi. "Remarks to the IJ Meeting on ISIS Prosecutions," U.S. Department of State, July 23, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/remarks-to-the-ij-meeting-on-isis-prosecutions/>.

Recommendations

- Turkey's position is that Syria should not export any security threats to the region, and the new Syrian authorities should be encouraged to form an inclusive government
- Turkey's position is that nation-states in the region should be respected, and non-state armed groups should be sidelined
- Reconstruction in Syria, preserving its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, is a shared interest with Arab countries that requires Turkish-Arab collaboration
- Turkey and the Arab region should coordinate their strategies to prevent an escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria
- Turkey and the Arab region have converging interests in maintaining the ceasefire in Gaza and should find a joint strategy towards a two-state solution



(Kirill Skorobogatko / Shutterstock)

GCC-Iran Relations

As the wider threat perception from Israel grows, there is a renewed sense of “geographical alignment” emerging between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Even as significant differences remain, the point of departure for most discussions, at this point, is the immediate need to mitigate the threats from Israel and prevent an Israeli attack on Iran. It is becoming a clearer narrative from across the Gulf states that Iran’s national security is closely tied to, if not intrinsic to, Gulf national security. While there remain suspicions that prevent such a policy from becoming state public diplomacy, there is a general convergence on these priority security issues.

Nevertheless, the Gulf states argue it is necessary to empower their role—both diplomatically and as mediators—through important confidence-building measures to overcome strategic and ideological differences that may yet persist with Iran, even if they are embarking on a new era of Gulf-Iran relations. Various areas already identified can be used to promote dialogue between the states, create more concrete interdependency, and support dialogue as a de-escalatory mechanism.

Recommendations for confidence-building measures for Iran-GCC relations

- Economic and trade relations: Iran and GCC states share economic interdependencies, especially in trade, investment, and energy cooperation. Despite sanctions, countries like the UAE and Oman maintain robust trade ties with Iran. Iran and Qatar, for example, jointly develop the South Pars/North

Dome gas field, the world's largest natural gas reservoir, and many GCC countries rely on Iranian ports, such as Bandar Abbas, for regional trade and commerce.

- **Energy security and collaboration:** Both Iran and GCC states are major players in global energy markets, especially in oil and gas production. They share an interest in stable energy prices and cooperation within OPEC. They also face common challenges, such as transitioning towards sustainable energy and balancing production quotas to avoid market volatility.
- **Maritime security in the Persian Gulf:** Ensuring the security of vital shipping lanes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, is a shared interest. Since a significant portion of global oil trade passes through these waters, Iran and GCC states benefit from stability in the region. Both sides have engaged in occasional dialogues on maritime security to prevent disruptions caused by tensions, piracy, or external interventions.
- **Environmental and water cooperation:** The Gulf and surrounding ecosystems face environmental challenges such as rising sea levels, water scarcity, and pollution. GCC states and Iran have common interests in desalination technologies, conservation efforts, and managing climate change impacts.



(Anas-Mohammed / Shutterstock)

Gaza & Israel

This meeting provides regional perspectives, with no Israelis or Palestinians present. It was convened following the Arab leaders' meeting in Riyadh on February 20, 2025, and prior to the Arab Summit in Cairo on March 4, 2025. It came amid heightened tensions between Washington and Riyadh following Trump's social media posts on the "Trump Gaza" and "Gaza Riviera" plans. The "Gaza Reconstruction Plan" as presented by Egypt was not yet public, and the ceasefire was in a precarious state but still holding (now having collapsed as of March 17, 2025).

Amid a "bumpy, but successful" phase I of the ceasefire agreement, an Arab UN official noted disappointment in the announcements from Washington, suggesting a "Nakba 2.0" with US President Donald Trump's plans to displace the entirety of the population of Gaza.

The challenge of the last 16 months, since the war first began after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, remains that there is complete US cover, if not outright support for Israel's war in Gaza and settler expansion and violence in the West Bank, alongside weak European positions. The UN official went further in explaining the challenges on a political and diplomatic level: "When it comes to finding a political solution, the international relations parameters are still the same two-state solution, which seems to be an easy way out for all stakeholders. The US is not a stakeholder anymore. The framework is like what the international community has been saying minus the US, while the international community found refuge in the Saudi-led initiative because it is easier to stick to these parameters and to offer two states while the reality on the ground does not allow for two states to be realized territorially and administratively.

A Saudi official present at the meeting confirmed the contours of what has become the "Gaza Reconstruction Plan" as presented by the Egyptians at the Arab Summit on March 4, 2025. They also confirmed that the World Bank and the IMF are working on the recovery of the Levant in

collaboration with the Saudi government, which is envisaged as a wider reconstruction plan for Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria.

A Jordanian policy expert noted that Jordan's political and diplomatic position remains precarious following King Abdullah's meeting at the White House with President Trump. While defending the king's policy of a "step-by-step" approach with the Trump administration, the expert noted the problem lies within the framework itself and "the paradigm of Trump towards Gaza and the West Bank. There is no two-state solution on the table, Israel will never accept it." The expert defended Jordan's position against the transfer or forced displacement of the Palestinians but noted the domestic criticism against Foreign Minister Ayman al Safadi for his statements placing red lines against Israel and conduct that would be seen as a declaration of war by the Jordanians.

A Saudi official noted the importance of presenting a more powerful response to Israel's ongoing aggression: "there has been a major confrontation with the US and Israel in a global context where there are no other powers standing with us—this is really powerful. There are major differences between the Arab countries, but there are major agreements as well." Furthermore, the official lamented that Saudi Arabia, as leading the process, would bear the brunt of the responsibility for its success and the blame for its failure. While noting the different reconstruction plans that have been proposed, the Saudi official noted that reconstruction fundamentally was not the core issue and that there were spoilers within the Israeli and Palestinian body politics that could easily sabotage any attempts to get a wider deal with Trump on the future of the Palestinian state. "The only peace possible is an imposed peace, and the only leader possible to do so is Trump. What can we pose to Trump that will satisfy the basic principles of protecting Palestinians, realizing a viable Palestinian state, and offer integration in the region? That is our [Arabs'] job."

It remains that the greatest challenges for any plan for Gaza are administration and security. The Jordanian expert noted this remained a primary role for Palestinian leadership: "the Arabs will not push for disarmament in the presence of occupation and without security commitments or a state. It is the role of the Palestinian state to deal with the disarming of non-state actors, and we are trying to communicate this to the Americans." Bigger questions remain about the disarmament of Hamas, what incentives or drivers would support this move, and how relinquishing power could be presented to the group as something bigger than merely ceding to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Meanwhile, the Saudi official opined on the best way to engage the Trump administration on the issue of the Palestinians: "In Saudi Arabia, we don't think that you can bring Trump a peace process, [a proposal to] restart negotiations, or a plan that takes years. We think what needs to happen is a final settlement needs to be put on the table, and then you need to work backward."

One participant posed the question of what the region might look like in three or four years amid this seismic shift and war against the Palestinians, asking "what does a real second Nakba really mean for the region?" An Arab official noted that the worst-case scenario for the Arab States was actively being pushed by voices around Trump, who they view as expressing an

“Armageddon mentality.” They also noted that Israeli society is not a monolith, and it would be a mistake to look at Israel’s politics and its society only through the lens of the most radical elements, even if they are in the ascendency. They noted the example of an Arab country working with senior rabbis to convince the Israeli government to unlock PA funds that had been frozen following the outbreak of war. Even so, there was an acknowledgment of the difficulty of this moment: “we are so traumatized by what the Israelis have been doing for decades and the genocide—in the midst of a radical US president how far can this go. We have to use all the tools we can have. Let’s stop casting negative energy to people trying to think outside the box. We are in full agreement that we need to protect Palestinian rights. None of the resistance narrative and failed engagement was helpful in preventing the genocide from happening.”

Meanwhile, as the Palestinian issue continues to define the wider region’s relationship with Israel, a dialogue participant looked at the immediate term and posed the hypothesis that Israel’s main lesson from the Gaza War has been that “they are heavily influential in the US.” They pointed out that Netanyahu “has concluded that he can solve his problems militarily. He doesn’t need peace with Egypt and Jordan. One of the issues for Jordan is that the US cares about it only through the Israel lens, but now it’s all expendable. If you can settle the West Bank, Lebanon, Gaza, [and] Syria militarily then there is no need for talking. You don’t need to co-exist but dominate the region. Everyone recognizes Israel on Israel’s terms.” Thus, the region is faced with Israel believing it can remake a new Middle Eastern order in its own name. An Emirati policy expert noted that this mentality was being reinforced by messaging from the Trump administration with regard to the wider world: the US threats against Canada, Panama, and Greenland and tacit support for Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Participants noted that despite the military power of Israel and its continued aggression, it remains the case that there is a crisis inside the country: “they don’t have a national identity. They are moving up as a Jewish state more than an Israeli state. Israel must be put within the nation-state context.” Nevertheless, a debate on whether this moment was the most dangerous for the region in the last 75 years forced the discussion on what Israel may yet be able to do or achieve in the coming three to four years. There was consensus agreement that in the short-to medium-term Israel would continue to seek the eradication of Palestinian claim to their lands and to push forward on the agenda of displacement while tying their policy towards the Palestinians with a wider confrontation with Iran.

While Gulf officials confirmed that their foreign policy position remains steadfast against any threat to Iran’s national security, there remains a fundamental disagreement on the way to achieve this through arrangements and agreements between Iran and Arab countries. Beyond Israel, there are core disagreements over the view of existential threats and national security challenges in the region, with the role of armed non-state actors still a sensitive topic that remains unresolved. Even as Saudi Arabia and Iran step up their bilateral relations and remain committed to the terms of the Beijing Agreement, which has served them well in putting forward a joint position against Israel and could prove successful in developing joint

approaches for countries like Syria and even Lebanon, the question of Yemen's stability and the role of the Houthis is a clear sticking point between the two countries.

One Iranian official noted that the "continued threat perception from Iran is that our Arab neighbors have been maneuvering to weaken Iran." Meanwhile, a Saudi official argued the perception was dated and that there had been a reset with Beijing Agreement, which has sought to create a new narrative on Iran-Arab relations. A Turkish policy expert echoed this, noting that gaps remain where "we [the region] don't have a problem with how Iran talks, but this issue is with how [they] behave. If we see a change in behavior, then we are all open to it." To which an Iranian official reiterated their position that the region will win or lose together, including Iran.

In concluding a debate on the role of Iran and the threat perceptions as seen from all sides of the region, a Saudi official emphatically set the parameters for how the region can move forward in its relationship with Iran: "no forward defense. No proxies, no friends, [or] allies. We need to protect Lebanon, Syria, [and] Iraq. We will work together on the Palestinian issue. We are more than ready to work with all our influence and leverage and protecting Iran against any threats and resolving the Palestinian issue is core."

There is clear consensus and urgency around the need to protect the region from continued Israeli expansionism and aggression. This includes the risk of confrontation with Iran and Israel's growing messaging that it is prepared and readying itself to strike Iran. Even as there has been high-level dialogue between Iran and GCC states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia remains suspicious of Iran and has significant grievances, alongside other Gulf allies, towards Iran for its "forward defense" policy and arming of non-state actors in the Arab region.






The state of regional affairs was well-defined in conclusion by a Lebanese expert who said, "for the first time I see a convergence in the region around a shared existential threat, and if we start with this, then we can move into strategies, the toolbox, [and] what each can do and be part of a coordinated strategy of dealing with this shared existential threat. What are we going to do individually and collectively? But the timing is not [in our favor] so messaging and actions must change rapidly."

There is a clear need for deeper dialogue efforts at track 1.5 and track 1 between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and also Iran, the Arab States, and Turkey more widely. Confidence-building measures need to be strengthened, as there has been a clear move away from the language of normalization.




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