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SECURITY AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE GULF

Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. As the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing recession are transforming the global security landscape, the Gulf region finds itself in a particularly vulnerable situation. The region's volatile security environment was already of significant concern to the Allies and the international community for years before the pandemic. The relative decline of the strategic importance of Gulf energy resources heightened the sense of uncertainty and reinvigorated searches for new security schemes by regional actors. The process coincided with a period of upheavals and internal conflicts in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where several Gulf countries have considerable stakes, most notably in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

2. The Gulf region continues to be divided along several fault lines, the most prominent being the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, both vying for regional pre-eminence. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which unites the Arab Gulf countries except Iraq, remains severely incapacitated by the ongoing rift between Qatar and three other GCC members. The crumbling of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPoA) as well as the escalation of tensions between Iran and the United States added further complexity to the regional security situation. Furthermore, the recent signing of the UAE-Israel and Bahrain-Israel normalisation agreements were met with both hope and concern across the region. Finally, the devastating COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further upset the fragile balance of power in the region. That said, the pandemic might also offer opportunities to break existing stalemates and launch new diplomatic and cooperative initiatives.

3. The Euro-Atlantic community should play its role in helping to exploit these opportunities and mitigate the potential negative fallout. NATO's partnership with the Gulf countries dates back to the mid-1990s and was elevated to a new level in 2004 through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). This relationship again finds itself at a crossroads as NATO looks to new ways of engaging with the region, in response to the US administration's call for NATO to play a more active role there as well as to the abovementioned new geopolitical developments. Discussions on the revitalisation of this relationship should be an integral part of the *NATO 2030* reflection process.

II. COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON REGIONAL SECURITY

4. The Gulf region is characterised by its extraordinary heterogeneity and competition among various political and security agendas, often utterly incompatible.

5. **Iran** is an influential Shia majority actor in the Gulf and the MENA region. Iran's strategic ambition is twofold: 1) to put an end to the US military presence in the region, and 2) to expand its own influence by backing Shia organisations and militias operating in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Although Iran is often perceived as a highly sectarian actor, it does pursue pragmatic relationships with some of its Sunni-majority neighbours, including Turkey and Qatar. Tehran also has a history of supporting Hamas.¹

6. Iran is developing conventional and strategic military capabilities, including its ambitious missile programme², but its defence budget is significantly lower than the accumulated defence spending of its rivals. Therefore, Tehran extensively relies on asymmetrical assets – from its proxies across the region to the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an elite unit conducting clandestine foreign operations.

¹ Iran's relationship with Hamas was temporarily suspended in 2012 due to diverging views on the war in Syria.

² Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran has reportedly launched its first military satellite into orbit, using a three-stage rocket.

7. Iran's regional nemesis, the Kingdom of **Saudi Arabia**, is the most populous GCC country (though its population is about 2.5 times smaller than Iran's), by far the largest military spender in the region and the largest regional economy (18th in the world, according to the World Bank). The Kingdom's prestige in the Muslim world is underpinned by the fact that it hosts the two holiest mosques in Islam (in Mecca and Medina). However, the country's poor human rights record and its reported role in the murder of the Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi has damaged its reputation.

Defence expenditures in the Gulf

According to SIPRI, in 2019 Saudi Arabia spent USD 61.9 bn on defence, significantly more than Iran (USD 12.6 bn). Iran's defence budget decreased by 23% in 2018 and 15% in 2019, due to the country's economic woes. The Saudi Arabia's defence spending fluctuated over the years and decreased by 16% in 2019, but it overall increased by 14% between 2010-2019.

Two relatively small GCC nations, Kuwait and Oman, boast significant defence budgets – USD 7.7 bn and USD 6.7 bn respectively. Iraq's defence budget was USD 7.6 bn, while tiny Bahrain was spending about USD 1.4 bn on defence in 2017.

Credible up-to-date data on defence budgets of the UAE and Qatar is lacking. In 2014, these two countries were spending, respectively, USD 14.4bn and USD 5.1bn on defence (IISS estimates).

It is also worth noting that Israel's defence budget in 2019 was USD 20.5bn, Turkey's USD 20.4 bn, Egypt's USD 3.1bn and the United States' USD 732 bn (SIPRI estimates).

8. The main tenets of Saudi views on regional security are the following:

- a) Iran remains a revolutionary power dedicated to overthrowing the regional order and actively working to destabilise Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen either directly with its own forces or through proxies.
- b) The Kingdom is concerned that the US and Europeans are allegedly disengaging from the region as the power vacuum emboldens Iran.
- c) The Saudi ruling family, which adheres to Wahhabism, believes that Muslim Brotherhood-type movements pose a threat to the country's stability. This approach guides the Kingdom's relations with Egypt (strained under Mohamed Morsi and cordial under Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, whom the Kingdom backed in his assumption of power through a military coup) and was a major factor prompting Riyadh to lead the campaign against Qatar.

9. The **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) is the most cosmopolitan country in the Gulf and a major commercial partner for many Western governments.³ The UAE shares Saudi Arabia's fixation on Iran as a destabilising actor in the region, albeit the UAE's position is slightly more nuanced: being a federation, it has to take into account the links between Iran and the Emirate of Dubai. That said, the chances of genuine rapprochement between the UAE and Iran are slim, not least because of the territorial dispute over three islands in the Gulf. The country also considers Muslim Brotherhood-type organisations as a lethal threat to its own regime, which motivated the country to be among the

³ For example, in 2018, roughly 100,000 British citizens resided in the country and 6,000 British firms conducted business there. Germany is also deeply engaged in the commercial life of the country, for which it is a major trading partner. France has 30,000 citizens working in the UAE, and roughly 700 firms operating there. The UAE, in turn, has significant investments in all of these as well as many other NATO countries.

leaders of the blockade against Qatar. Furthermore, this is one consideration which leads the country to oppressive policies and human rights violations despite its endeavour to create a soft image for years. This approach of the country also determines its policies in the broader region. In Libya, accompanied by the Kingdom, the UAE backs the illegitimate warlord Haftar against the Government of National Accord which is recognised by the UN as the sole legitimate representative of Libya.

10. Although its interests broadly align with Riyadh's, there is also a hint of rivalry between the UAE and Saudi Arabia which manifested itself, inter alia, in the competition for spheres of influence in southern Yemen as well as in tactical differences vis-à-vis the Assad regime in Syria. The UAE also seeks to present itself as a more rational regional player in the context of Riyadh's somewhat erratic foreign and domestic policies under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

11. The main factor driving **Bahrain's** foreign policy is the ruling Sunni Arab elites' preoccupation with the preservation of internal stability, shaken by the uprising in 2011. The country's Shiites, reportedly the majority of the population, are not represented in the parliament and the government. Bahrain accuses Iran of continuing interference in its domestic affairs and supporting Shia organisations. The ruling Al Khalifa family counts on Riyadh's support to quell potential domestic unrest and firmly backs Saudi Arabia's hard-line stance on Iran and Qatar.

12. **Qatar** stands out among other GCC members due to its support for the so-called Arab Awakening and its willingness to maintain a relationship with Iran. That relationship is largely rooted in the practical matter of a massive, shared gas field that runs into the territorial waters of both countries. Qatar also opposed the Saudi/UAE intervention in Yemen. These profound differences with the two most powerful GCC members escalated into a major crisis in 2017, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE (later joined by Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and several other countries) cut ties with Qatar, imposed an embargo and made 13 demands on the country which taken together would totally undermine its sovereignty. International efforts to mediate this dispute have so far come to naught. The notion that Qatar has been a partisan supporter of Iran is an exaggeration: in Syria, for instance, Qatar has been a hard-line opponent of the Assad regime, which Iran supports.

13. Despite its small size, Qatar has a number of strengths that allow it to punch above its weight regionally and internationally. Qatar has the highest per capita GDP in the world (according to the IMF), the world's third largest natural gas reserves and is the third greatest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). The country exerts significant soft power over the region through the Al Jazeera network, funded by the Qatari government. The network is seen as extending the voice of the country to the rest of the world. Qatar also enjoys strategic partnership with its key ally – Turkey. Qatar hosts American and Turkish bases and it has signed military cooperation agreements with a number of Western countries. Doha also hosts Afghanistan and the Taliban's peace talk negotiators.

14. The remaining members of the GCC, **Kuwait** and **Oman**, are generally seen as the intermediaries between Qatar and its three GCC opponents. Both assumed a more conciliatory stance on Iran: being relatively small nations in a volatile security environment, Kuwait and Oman stand much to lose from a major escalation. Furthermore, Kuwait has to take into account that some 40% of its citizens are Shia Muslims, mostly of Persian origin. Oman also lacks ideological motivation to align itself firmly with the Saudi/UAE Sunni duo, given that the majority of Omanis adhere to the Ibadi brand of Islam – distinct from both Sunni and Shia. Of the two, Oman pursues a stricter form of neutrality – something that Kuwait finds difficult to afford due to its being sandwiched between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Active diplomacy and a search for partnerships is Kuwait's first line of defence.

15. **Iraq** continues to be consumed by internal political strife, economic woes, terrorism, and civil war. The country is too fixated on healing internal divisions to be playing any notable part in regional politics. Iraqi leadership's foreign policy ambitions are essentially reduced to attracting international assistance to fight Daesh and stabilise the economy, while limiting foreign interference in its internal affairs. The central government does not have a monopoly on violence within the country. Ethnic and sectarian divisions largely determine the country's geopolitical inclinations: while credible data

is lacking, the 2015 European Parliament report estimates that Iraq's four main ethnic groups are Shia Arabs (15 million), Sunni Arabs (9 million), Sunni Kurds (4 million) and Turks (both Shia and Sunni, 3 million). The dominance of Shia Arabs in the parliament led to Iraq's close association with Iran, particularly under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014). In January 2020, the Iraqi parliament adopted a non-binding resolution calling for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. The vote was boycotted by Sunni Arab and Kurdish lawmakers, and the government continues to value cooperation with NATO Allies. That said, the Iraqi government has been diversifying its foreign policy and is seeking to reduce dependence on Tehran. This diversification includes mending cooperation with Turkey, strained over the activities of the PKK terrorist organisation and its affiliates in northern Iraq. Mass protests that erupted in Iraq in 2019 also seem to transcend the sectarian lines which provides some hope for a more unified and coherent Iraqi society and politics.

16. When it comes to external powers, the **United States** is a major political and security actor in the Gulf, maintaining military bases in Iraq and all GCC nations except Saudi Arabia (withdrawn in the wake of the 9/11 attacks). The US also leads maritime operation *Sentinel*, involving Australia, Bahrain, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the UK, to ensure safe passage of ships throughout the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Under President Obama, the United States was seen by Saudi and Emirati leaders as disengaging from the region. This approach caused alarm particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Trump administration has reversed US Gulf policy and sought to reassure Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while applying the strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran and withdrawing from the JCPoA. Both the current and the previous US administrations refrained from taking sides in the Saudi/UAE-Qatari standoff and called for the reinstatement of GCC unity.

17. A united GCC is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Middle East Strategic Initiative (MESA), dubbed widely as the "Arab NATO" (albeit lacking NATO's Article 5-type clause). The MESA initiative was proposed by the Trump administration in May 2017, in an attempt to bring together US regional allies, including the GCC, Egypt, and Jordan, and to institutionalise their cooperation on economic, political, and security issues. However, ongoing feuds among regional actors undermine the feasibility of this project.

18. For the **European Union** (EU), the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal presented a test for its common foreign policy instrument. The former EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and her team played a key role in brokering the deal, and the EU does its utmost to preserve it, even after the withdrawal of the United States. The EU and the U.S. share the objective of ensuring that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons capabilities. Europeans are also weary of Iran's hostile activities abroad as witnessed, inter alia, by the EU's inclusion, in January 2019, of the Iranian security services on the EU Terrorist List, in response to foiled attacks on European soil. Back in 2011, the EU also imposed sanctions in response to serious human rights violations in Iran. Overall, however, the largest EU nations have taken a more neutral approach to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry than the United States. In June 2019, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom activated an EU-wide INSTEX, a payment mechanism designed to ensure trade between the EU and Iran in areas not subject to US sanctions. Europeans are also generally more critical of the Saudi Arabian regime due to its poor human rights record. France, Italy, and the UK have also deployed military personnel in the Gulf (again, except Saudi Arabia). Furthermore, France leads a joint operation of 8 EU members⁴ called European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH), headquartered at the French naval base in Abu Dhabi, UAE, aiming to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Overall, however, the largest European nations have yet to forge a coherent strategy towards the Gulf region.

19. **Russia's** energetic support for the Assad regime and the presence of Russian airpower and boots on the ground in Syria turned Russia into an active regional player. However, Moscow also lacks a clear vision for the Gulf. Russia is not directly militarily present in the Gulf, and its trade with

⁴ Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal

the region is insignificant. The convergence of interests in Syria bolstered the Russian-Iranian partnership: while for Tehran this partnership provides an additional pathway to mitigate the effects of US sanctions, for Moscow supporting Iran is part of its campaign to challenge the US global clout. That said, Iran is a highly independent actor and Russia's influence on Tehran can only be limited. The Iranian constitution prohibits foreign military presence on its territory, even during peacetime. Moscow, too, does not shy away from expanding ties with Iran's regional adversaries, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It is questionable if Moscow would supply strategic weapons to Iran that could seriously upset Russia's other regional partners, such as Israel. Russia and the UAE find themselves supporting the same side in the Libyan conflict. In sum, Russia's ambitions towards the Gulf appear to be pragmatic and flexible, prioritising the preservation of old regimes and the coordination of activities in the global oil market. Russian diplomats did suggest creating a regional security organisation akin to the OSCE, but the feasibility of this proposal is highly questionable.

20. The People's Republic of **China** largely keeps a low profile on regional issues in the Gulf. Beijing took part in the JCPoA negotiations and is supporting the reintegration of Iran in the global market. Iran is an important participant of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China signed a "comprehensive strategic partnership" agreement with Iran – but it also signed similar agreements with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states. China's main interest in the region has to do with its hydrocarbon resources. About a quarter of all crude oil that goes through the Strait of Hormuz is shipped to China. It covers about 40% of China's oil demand. However, China is also increasingly exploring ways to invest in other sectors of the Gulf economy. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted considerable humanitarian cooperation between the Gulf and China.

21. So far, China has refrained from deploying naval capabilities to protect shipping route through the Strait of Hormuz, albeit the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy base in Djibouti does provide certain power projection capabilities in the broader region. Beijing also somewhat stepped up its involvement in Gulf security by increasing arms sales, particularly drones, to the region and conducting joint naval drills with – separately – Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2019. Nevertheless, at least at this stage, China is familiarising itself with the Gulf and is reluctant to be fully dragged into regional politics.

22. It is also worth noting that **Japan** and **South Korea**, major importers of Gulf oil, are conducting independent naval missions to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

III. REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS: AN OVERVIEW

A. IRAN'S REGIONAL GAMBITS

23. Throughout 2019 and in the beginning of 2020, Iran's confrontation with its principal rivals the United States and Saudi Arabia **escalated** to a dangerous degree. In May and June 2019, six oil tankers – sailing under the flags of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Norway, and Germany – were damaged by explosions as they transited the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. A UAE-led inquiry blamed an unidentified state actor. The United States accused Iran of being responsible, but Tehran denied involvement. A week after the June attack, Iran's Revolutionary Guards claimed that they had shot down a US drone allegedly over Iranian airspace. In July 2019, the British Navy seized an Iranian tanker suspected of carrying oil to Syria. Two weeks later, Iran seized, off its coast, a British-flagged tanker in retaliation.

24. Subsequently, in September 2019, the Khurais oilfield and Abqaiq processing facility, both belonging to state-owned Saudi Aramco, were hit by drones, causing Saudi Arabia to temporarily shut down about half of its daily oil production, affecting about 5% of global output. The drone attacks, which were claimed by the Houthis in Yemen, but for which Iran was widely held responsible, caused the largest single-day production cut on record and sent oil prices soaring. The attacks also occurred at the time when Saudi authorities were preparing the initial public offering of Saudi Aramco shares.

25. The series of attacks had a direct impact on increased military activity and additional troop deployment plans in the region. In August 2019, the United States launched the abovementioned *Operation Sentinel*. However, international participation stayed below expectations, as many EU countries remained reluctant to join, not least due to fears that their involvement would undermine the prospects to salvage the JCPoA. Instead, 8 EU nations, led by France, launched operation EMASOH in January 2020. That said, both the U.S. and the EU nations agree on the need to ensure safe passage through the strait of Hormuz. US Gulf allies also had difficulty in turning their promises to join into deeds. The United States, in turn, made several announcements of additional troop deployments to the region.

26. A new wave of escalation took place between December 2019 and January 2020. Following the Iranian-backed Iraqi militias' attacks on US assets in Iraq, the United States responded by conducting a series of airstrikes on the militia. The US response culminated with a drone strike targeting an extremely influential Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, head of the IRGC Quds Force and de facto leader of Iranian military activities in Syria and Lebanon. The United States argued that Gen. Soleimani and his troops were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members as well as for plotting to attack American facilities, diplomats, and military personnel deployed in the region. The killing of Gen. Soleimani caused a public outcry in Iran. Tehran, in turn, retaliated by firing ballistic missiles at US bases in Iraq. Amidst the escalating situation, Iran admitted to having mistakenly downed a Ukrainian civilian airliner (with a missile of Russian production as reported by the US intelligence), on 11 January 2020. Fears of a major war in the Gulf surged across the international community. However, both the United States and Iran refrained from further retaliatory actions.

27. Following the US withdrawal from the **JCPoA** in May 2018, Iran announced that it would gradually reduce its commitments under the Plan. In the course of the next few months, Iran increased its enriched uranium stockpile to a level above 300 kilograms set by the JCPoA and began enriching uranium to purity rates above the JCPoA limit of 3.67%. In a third step, Tehran lifted all restrictions on nuclear research and development and announced it would use advanced centrifuges. Furthermore, the Iranian nuclear agency resumed uranium enrichment to 4.5% at the Fordow nuclear facility by injecting gas into advanced IR6 centrifuges. Finally, in October 2019, Iran announced it would limit access to its nuclear sites by international inspectors, raising further questions about its commitments outlined by the JCPoA. Iran's breaches of the limits set out in the JCPoA were also confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency. On 15 January 2020, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom triggered the agreement's dispute resolution mechanism. This could lead to the return of UN sanctions on Iran that existed prior to signing the JCPoA. The dispute settlement mechanism was extended indefinitely to avoid the matter reaching the UN Security Council, as required by the JCPoA, if the parties do not reach a settlement within a month. More recently, in August 2020, Iran agreed to allow the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect two previously restricted nuclear sites.

28. The US position is set out in 12 requirements as a condition to negotiate a new deal, designed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and to deter its regional brinkmanship. The United States also maintains that Tehran's ballistic missile programme violates UN restrictions on missile activities, in particular UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the JCPoA and set restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile and conventional arms activities. Even though European leaders share concerns about Iran's ballistic missile programme and its regional adventurism, they emphasise that these concerns should be dealt with separately from the JCPoA. At the same time, European countries express deep concern over Iran's announcements and actions, which are contradicting its commitments under the Plan and urge Iran to reverse all these activities and return to full implementation of its JCPoA commitments. As part of their efforts to salvage the deal, European leaders launched the abovementioned INSTEX mechanism to facilitate legitimate trade between Europe and Iran. The first shipment carrying medical equipment to Iran using the INSTEX framework was launched in March 2020, but so far these efforts could not produce results that would meet the expectations of Iran and encourage European companies to trade with this country. The

US administration is critical of the INSTEX payment mechanism as undermining its “maximum pressure” policy.

29. It must be noted, however, that waves of escalation in the Gulf tend to be mitigated by simultaneous efforts to diffuse tensions. Despite occasional inflammatory rhetoric, all regional actors stand much to lose from a full-fledged war in the region. For instance, in the wake of the Saudi Aramco attacks, in July 2019, the UAE dispatched a military delegation to Tehran to hold talks with the IRGC. The negotiations were followed by further meetings between Emirati and Iranian officials in October 2019. In September 2019, Iran’s President Rouhani unveiled a proposal for a regional cooperation and security framework dubbed the Hormuz Peace Endeavor, or HOPE. According to Iranian officials it would provide a forum for regional dialogue on issues ranging from energy security and freedom of navigation to arms control. Iran’s HOPE proposal implies the side-lining of non-regional powers, making it hardly acceptable to GCC members who value their security ties with the United States. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia launched an initiative to establish dialogue among various parties in Yemen. In January 2020, both Iran and the United States eventually demonstrated aversion to further escalation after Iranian strikes on the US bases in Iraq that reportedly did not result in fatal casualties. That said, the continuation of this trend in Gulf security dynamics should not be taken for granted.

B. THE QATAR CRISIS

30. Prompted by a fake news story, the so-called Arab Quartet, consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, severed its diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017 and imposed a blockade against this small Gulf nation, accusing it of allegedly supporting extremism, maintaining relations with Iran and sponsoring Al Jazeera. The crisis has by now evolved into a stalemate whereby neither side seems to be willing to renounce its position, making a face-saving solution difficult to achieve. Moreover, the fact that Qatar has survived the blockade and has been able to enhance its economic self-sufficiency in the face of these restrictions makes it extremely unlikely for Qatar to give in to the demands of the Arab Quartet in the future. There are concerns in the international community that the continued rift and the resulting erosion of mutual trust among the Arab Gulf countries may negatively affect the security and stability of the entire Gulf region.

31. Kuwait, which spearheaded diplomatic efforts to resolve a smaller-scale conflict between the Arab Quartet and Qatar in 2014, has made strenuous efforts in overcoming the current crisis. The United States, too, made an attempt to reconcile the Arab Gulf nations, as the unresolved crisis proved to be an obstacle for realising security-related initiatives in the region, such as MESA. The United States is currently focusing on convincing Saudi Arabia and the UAE to call off their ban on Qatari airlines to cross their airspace – not least because Qatar is forced to use the Iranian airspace, thus generating income in overflight fees for Iran. However, Saudi and Emirati leaders are reluctant to make this concession which would deprive them of an important leverage over Qatar. On the other hand, the dispute about the air blockade was brought before the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) by Qatar accusing its neighbours of violating the convention on the free passage of passenger planes. Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have instituted appeals to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the decisions rendered by the ICAO Council. The appeals against ICAO jurisdiction over the air blockade dispute were rejected by the ICJ, on 14 July 2020. According to the judgments of the ICJ, ICAO had jurisdiction and the case was admissible, thus the ICAO Council will now resume its proceedings.

32. At about the same time as the tensions between Iran and the United States gained momentum, signs of a potential thaw in relations between the Quartet and Qatar have emerged. Qatar’s Foreign Minister visited Riyadh in November 2019. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE decided to attend the Arabian Gulf Cup football tournament held in Qatar in November-December 2019. Additional signs of goodwill among the GCC members were seen at the GCC summit, held in Riyadh on 10 December 2019, which was attended by Qatar at the level of Prime Minister (not the Emir). Although an expected breakthrough did not materialise, Qatar nevertheless joined the final communiqué – a marked change of attitude from the previous summit. It seemed, however, that

these efforts were based solely on a recently reopened dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Qatar (the Aramco attacks convinced Riyadh to address the split within the GCC). The UAE was strikingly absent from this process. Lifting of the blockade is therefore unlikely in the short term.

C. THE ONGOING WAR IN YEMEN

33. The war in Yemen is in its sixth year with no end in immediate sight. The humanitarian and political crisis has left millions of Yemenis in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, where food insecurity and epidemic diseases constitute major challenges to the population as a whole. Yemen's humanitarian crisis is the worst in the world, according to UN figures. More than 100,000 people have been killed since 2015 and approximately 4 million have been displaced. It is estimated that up to 24 million people may be in need of some form of humanitarian assistance throughout the country.

34. The political process led by UNSG Yemen Special Envoy Martin Griffiths provides little ground for optimism. Although there have been ongoing efforts for reconciliation and direct talks between the legitimate government and the Houthis, divergence on the interests and priorities at various levels can be observed, including between Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

35. Terrorist organisations find safe havens across Yemen, exploiting the fragile security situation, the constant armed conflicts and the failure of state institutions to meet the basic needs of the people, together with the historical prejudices, resentment, and rivalries amongst Yemeni tribes. This, in turn, presents additional security challenges to the already multi-layered, multi-front war conditions with potential repercussions for the wider region.

36. Since the beginning of the conflict, the Houthis regularly fired cruise missiles and drones into Saudi territory, targeting the energy and water infrastructure and commercial airports. After the intensification of mutual cross-border assaults, the September attacks against Saudi Aramco oil facilities led Saudi Arabia to a re-evaluation of the conflict and created a sense of urgency in the face of the damage upon such critical infrastructure. Ahead of the initial public offering of Saudi Aramco, the risks stemming from being a constant target of drones emanating from Yemen were considered too high to be left unattended. Under these circumstances, the Houthis surprisingly announced a unilateral halt to strikes on Saudi Arabia, to which the Saudis responded positively and thus helped produce a more conducive environment for negotiations.

37. The UAE, on the other hand, is mainly interested in securing its commercial and trade interests by controlling various Yemeni port cities in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The UAE's control of Sokotra Island, Aden, and Mukalla is a case in point. From 2015 to 2019, the UAE controlled Aden mostly through the local militia group Al Hizam al Amni which is affiliated with the local Southern Transitional Council (STC) and was UAE-financed, equipped, and trained. The UAE also established ties with the fourth actor in the conflict – the National Resistance Forces of former president Tariq Saleh, which changed sides during the course of the conflict and is controlling a part of western Yemen. The UAE completely withdrew its forces from Yemen in February 2020, but its influence in the southwestern part of the country remains significant. To continue its influence, UAE relies also on foreign fighters. There are remarkable reports, accusing UAE of transporting hundreds of mercenaries especially from Sudan, Sahel countries, and Latin America to fight in Yemen. As regards allegations of committed war crimes in Yemen, using mercenaries will also definitely raise the problem of identifying the responsible actors and grant impunity for the actual perpetrators.

38. On 5 November 2019, the Riyadh Agreement was brokered by Saudi Arabia, between UAE-backed separatist STC and the internationally recognised legitimate government of Yemen led by President Abdi Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The agreement was designed to consolidate the alliance against the Houthis/Ansar Allah. However, the agreement de facto collapsed in April 2020, when the UAE-backed separatist STC announced itself an ultimate authority in Aden and other southern territories. In July 2020, Saudi Arabia managed to push through a new agreement between the official Yemeni government that it supports and the UAE-backed STC, thus providing some hope that anti-Houthi forces could enter negotiations with the Houthis as a united bloc. However, at the

time of writing, hostilities in Yemen have continued, despite UN Security Council Resolution 2532 (2020) demanding secession of hostilities during the pandemic.

39. Yemen has morphed into a chessboard for regional actors. While Saudi Arabia sees Yemen as a national security issue, Iran is attempting to exert its influence to counterweigh Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the UAE pursues its own ambitious agenda to locate itself strategically on the Gulf of Aden and Bab Al Mendeb, so as to project power on the east coast of Africa. The fragmentation and de facto collapse of the Saudi-Emirati led international coalition is likely to further entrench the positions of the Iranian-backed Houthis, UAE-backed separatist STC and National Resistance and the Saudi-backed Hadi government. The Houthi rebels did not reciprocate the ceasefire announced by Saudi Arabia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Diverging interests and the maximalist and confrontational approach of regional actors continue to dominate the war in Yemen. Consequently, a lasting political settlement will depend heavily upon the willingness of these regional actors to make concessions on their long-term strategic goals and to apply pressure on all the Yemeni parties for a negotiated settlement in good will.

D. THE WAR IN SYRIA: THE STAKES FOR THE GULF

40. Except for Kuwait and Oman, all other GCC countries have cut their diplomatic ties with the Assad regime after the conflict broke out in 2011. Conversely, Iran backed the regime with arms and militiamen.

41. The Russian intervention in Syria changed the course of the conflict in favour of Assad forces. Bashar al-Assad managed to capture large tracts of Syrian territory, which prompted certain Gulf states to revisit their support to the opposition. Some Gulf states began restoring ties with the Assad regime as the alternative option to limit the influence of Iran in Syria such as the UAE, which reopened its Embassy in Damascus in December 2018.

42. Given Moscow's influence in Syria, the Arab Gulf states are also exploring the possibility to improve ties with Russia as a channel to secure their interests in post-conflict Syria. The GCC countries also have a potential to increase their influence in Syria by participating in Syria's reconstruction, something that Iran and Russia might find difficult to do with their own resources given their economic shortcomings. However, the Arab Gulf countries' plans to participate in the reconstruction can be hampered by US disapproval of their rapprochement with Damascus: in December 2019, the United States adopted the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, under which a first batch of new sanctions on the Syrian regime and on those maintaining trade contacts with Damascus were announced in June 2020.

43. A comprehensive plan for the reconstruction of post-war Syria is yet to be devised. In 2017, the Syrian government allocated USD 2.5 billion for reconstruction purposes, but experts suggest that much more is needed. Indeed, the former UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that Syria will need at least USD 250 billion to repair damages caused by the war. Damascus also devised, in 2017, a 10-year forward looking National Development Program for post-war Syria, but this plan has yet to deliver tangible results. It seems highly unlikely the Assad regime will be able to live up to the needs of the Syrian people, 12 million of which are in need of humanitarian assistance and 5 million are refugees in other countries, without substantial international assistance, including at least some buy-in from Western countries, which is unrealistic unless the Assad regime agrees to major concessions. In fact, the reconstruction process in Syria should have a logical integrity and involve concrete steps based on ensuring an environment of trust, determining needs and priorities, carrying out emergency humanitarian activities, developing infrastructure and improving living conditions, deleting traces of conflict and making efforts for normalisation. In a nutshell, the reconstruction process is not only a matter of financial capability but more importantly requires providing security, the implementation of justice and a political transition environment in Syria. However, the Assad regime makes the prospects of Syria's effective reconstruction in the foreseeable future illusory.

E. THE NORMALISATION AGREEMENTS BETWEEN ISRAEL, THE UAE, AND BAHRAIN

44. GCC countries historically viewed Israel highly unfavourably and refused to accept its existence. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Saudi King Faisal played a central part in placing an oil embargo on all nations that supported Israel. Upon its foundation in 1971, the UAE's Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan stated that all Arab countries must "confront the Israeli enemy". Among the GCC countries, only Oman stood out in its position vis-à-vis Israel: when Egypt struck its historic peace deal with Israel in 1979, Oman publicly endorsed it.

45. The antagonism began to erode when a new generation of leaders took over in the Gulf countries. In the early 1990s, Israel discussed establishing improved trade ties with Qatar and Oman, and Saudi Arabia's Arab Peace Initiative, launched at the Arab League in the early 2000s, also sent a signal of potential normalisation of relations with Israel. However, the initiative fell through as tensions between the Israelis and the Palestinians flared up during the second Intifada.

46. In a new turn of events, Israel and the UAE formally signed a peace deal to normalise relations on 15 September 2020. The deal would not have been possible without diplomatic pressure from the Trump administration. As part of the agreement, Israel vowed to suspend its plan to annex the West Bank. While the UAE agreed to collaborate with Israel in pursuing full business relations, promoting tourism between the two countries, increasing scientific cooperation, and ultimately pursuing full diplomatic relations. The agreement builds on the previous attempts by the UAE and Israel to establish normal relations. In 2015, Israel opened a diplomatic office in Abu Dhabi to represent its interests at the International Renewable Energy Agency. This was the first time in over a decade that Israel held an official presence in the Gulf peninsula. The Emirates also invited Israel to participate in its Dubai Expo 2020 (now 2021).

47. The deal was met with both praise and scepticism by other countries in the broader region. NATO Ally **Turkey** denounced what it considers hypocritical behaviour by Abu Dhabi. Turkey considers that the unilateral attempts by the UAE and Bahrain to eliminate the Arab Peace Initiative, put forth by the Arab League under the leadership of Saudi Arabia and also supported by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in 2002, is extremely concerning. Turkey calls for a just and lasting settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict, which lies beneath the problems in the Middle East, through mutual negotiations on the basis of a vision of two states living side by side within secure and recognised borders, and in the framework of the relevant Resolutions of the UN Security Council (242, 338, 1397, 1515), the principle of Land for peace, the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative.

48. The **Iranian** leadership characterised the deal as a "stab in the back of the Palestinians", "historic idiocy" and a "betrayal". **Qatar** refrained from outright criticism of the deal, but its pro-government media widely condemned it. **Kuwait** also remains officially silent, while its media and a number of parliamentarians voiced their criticism of the deal.

49. At the other end of the spectrum, **Bahrain** not only welcomed the deal, but, on 15 September 2020, signed its own normalisation agreement with Israel, aiming to establish full diplomatic ties between the two countries. **Saudi Arabia** has not taken an official position and announced it would not follow suit and normalise ties with Israel, unless Israel affirms the existence of the Palestinian state. However, the fact that the Kingdom did not prevent Bahrain – given Bahrain's close association with Saudi Arabia – from signing the agreement, implies Riyadh's at least tacit acceptance of it. **Egypt** and **Oman** have made generally positive, albeit restrained, remarks about the deal, while reiterating their commitment to the Palestinian cause.

50. The UAE-Israel and Bahrain-Israel deals can significantly recast the regional security dynamics and further undermine Iran's position in the region. Experts are divided, however, on whether the deals will contribute or be counterproductive to stability in the broader region. Those who oppose the deal, including Turkey, fear that it will undermine the idea of Palestinian sovereignty. Those supporting the deal argue that cooperation between Arab countries and Israel is a necessary

step for the creation of a Palestinian state as it paves the way for a renewed negotiating framework between the two peoples. “Normalisation” deals might provide a chance for a historical rapprochement between Israel and some Arab states, but, if other Gulf Arab states refuse to follow suit, they can also create another fault line dividing the region.

IV. INTERNAL TRENDS IN THE GULF ECONOMIES AND THE EFFECT OF COVID-19

51. The Gulf region is undergoing a period of economic, societal, and even political transformation. Most visibly, the region is beginning to adapt to the era where the strategic relevance of its hydrocarbon resources is diminishing – both due to the rise of alternative oil and gas production and the drive to reduce the global carbon footprint, including the EU’s commitment to become climate-neutral by 2050. All Gulf countries declared commitment to **diversification** of their economies, and some already made tangible progress in this regard.

52. The UAE, for instance, has made major investments in solar power. It also hosts the secretariat of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and strongly supports its agenda of advancing renewable energy development. A large nuclear power station that is currently under construction will generate 25% of the country’s electricity needs. Saudi Arabia adopted the ambitious “Vision 2030”, a programme designed to reduce Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil revenues, bring government performance to a higher standard and promote wide-ranging economic and social change. In contrast to previous reforms which were announced when energy prices were low but only pursued half-heartedly, the Saudi leadership, particularly Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, now seems determined to see the reforms through. Regrettably, the positive reforms in Saudi Arabia, including on women’s rights, are accompanied with new waves of repressive measures against the regime’s opponents. In Qatar, the use of renewable energy receives substantial government support. Doha also provides incentives for foreign firms to operate in the country and is developing food processing, pharmaceutical, and chemical sectors in an effort to diversify economy. Kuwait, congruent with its aim to wean itself from a dependency on oil revenues, pursues the ambitious goal to establish itself as the regional financial and commercial hub and to develop the private sector, according to its 2035 Vision “New Kuwait”. Bahrain adopted an “Economic Vision 2030” designed to promote sustainability and competitiveness. Oman pursues similar aims in line with its “Vision 2040”. However, according to a recent report by the American Enterprise Institute, GCC economies remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon resources and diversification efforts often boil down to state investments in hydrocarbon energy projects. The report also notes that GCC governments continue to face enormous strains on public finances due to low oil prices, demographic pressures, and a lack of tangible economic diversification.⁵

53. Iran faces even more daunting problems domestically. Since August 2018, Iran’s economy has been under US sanctions of an increasing scope and intensity. Targeting nearly all sectors of Iran’s economy, the “maximum pressure” campaign exacerbated the already existing structural problems and domestic mismanagement. Failed economic policies and the negative effects of US sanctions led to an aggravation of social and economic tensions in the country and triggered mass demonstrations. In one example, following a sudden increase of gas prices in the country on 15 November 2019, widespread protests occurred in several cities, resulting in great loss of life and arrests. Security forces used excessive force against protestors, while the government applied comprehensive restrictions and blocked internet access.

54. Iraq faces the most uncertain future in the region. The socio-economic situation has deteriorated to the degree that resulted in mass protests in 2019-2020, leading to the resignation of the government. According to IACSS, the oldest public opinion research company in Iraq, by the

⁵ For more details on the recent economic and energy trends in the Gulf see the Assembly’s Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Economic Relations report “The Gulf Crisis and Global Energy Markets” (2020).

end of 2019, only 19% of Iraqis believed that their country was moving in the right direction, down from 62% in the period 2005-2006; a staggering 95% of Iraqis said that corruption was getting worse. Also, shockingly, according to the World Bank the literacy rate in Iraq has dropped from 74% in 2000 to 50% in 2018.

55. The **COVID-19** outbreak hit the Gulf region in mid-February 2020. Iran was particularly affected, and for weeks the country witnessed the world's third-highest number of confirmed cases and death toll after China and Italy. The infection spread into the ranks of the Iranian government: two vice-presidents, ministers and many parliamentarians contracted the virus. Iran's vulnerability to the virus was increased by the fact that, with Tehran under sanctions, the country could not afford to shut down commercial trade and travels to China in the initial stages of the outbreak. Iran's inadequate response also derived from the lack of coordination between the civilian administration and the armed forces that are under control of the Supreme Leader. The government's inadequate response further eroded public trust in the regime.

56. The GCC countries also witness the spread of the pandemic, with Saudi Arabia registering highest total and new cases analogous to Iran and have applied stringent measures to contain it. The most painful fallout of the outbreak is the sudden drop in oil prices, which will increase budget deficits considerably. Wealthier Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have significant financial cushions and the borrowing capacity to weather the storm in the short run, but the new sultan of Oman, who succeeded his cousin in January 2020, will have to tackle the daunting challenge of budgetary deficit. The low oil prices are particularly damaging to Iraq, where oil revenue represents 90% of the budget. Low oil prices are also likely to slow down economic diversification projects in the Gulf as they are largely funded from oil and gas revenues. As of September 2020, oil prices still remain largely below the breaking point at which Gulf countries meet their budgetary needs. Oil prices currently range at USD 40 per barrel. The IMF estimates that Saudi Arabia breaks even with prices at USD 76.10 per barrel, whereas the UAE breaks even at USD 69.10 per barrel.

57. That said, the COVID-19 crisis could open the door for the resumption of diplomatic talks between GCC countries and Iran. Several GCC countries expressed solidarity and support to Iran as the hardest-hit country in the region. Qatar sent medical supplies, the UAE provided airlift support to the World Health Organisation to deliver aid and Kuwait communicated it would donate USD 10 million to Iran's healthcare system. Both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, nonetheless, criticised Iran for its slow and inadequate reaction to the pandemic.

V. THE GULF AND NATO: OPTIONS FOR THE EURO-ATLANTIC COMMUNITY

58. NATO considers stability and security in the Gulf and broader Middle East to be fundamental to Euro-Atlantic security. The Alliance sees this partnership through the lens of common interests, shared security challenges and an opportunity to enhance regional security and to counter shared threats, such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, and cyber-attacks. NATO focuses on practical cooperation in areas where it can add value, notably in the security field. NATO-Gulf cooperation is mutually beneficial as Gulf partners have participated in operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan. Gulf countries are also members of the Global Coalition Against Daesh.

59. NATO has cooperated with partner states there for more than 25 years, and, since 2004, works with Gulf states through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). This initiative contributes to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. Four countries of the GCC joined the initiative: Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE. However, Saudi Arabia and Oman also expanded their bilateral links with NATO and occasionally attended ICI events. Through the ICI, NATO offers a broad range of education, training, and consultation opportunities.

60. More specifically, the ICI offers a “menu” of bilateral activities that countries can choose from, including areas such as advice on defence transformation and planning; interoperability through participation in selected NATO and PfP exercises and education activities; cooperation in the fight against terrorism, including through intelligence-sharing; cooperation regarding border security in connection with the fight against illegal trafficking; civil emergency planning, including participating in training courses and exercises on disaster assistance; and joint public diplomacy activities to promote understanding of NATO and the ICI. The ICI also has an important political dimension which includes meetings in the format of NAC+4 (North Atlantic Council plus ambassadors of the 4 ICI partners) as well as the exchange of high-level visits such as the visit of Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, to NATO Headquarters in March 2018 and the meeting between NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Prime Minister of Kuwait Sabah Al Khalid Al Sabahin in December 2019 in Kuwait City. In addition, NATO engages ICI countries on a '30+1' basis for the development of individual work plans. NATO headquarters also regularly hosts delegations of inter-ministerial officials and young diplomats from ICI countries.

61. An important milestone was the establishment of the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait in January 2017. The Centre’s objective is to improve common understanding of security challenges by creating a level of interoperability and standardisation that enables closer cooperation between NATO and its partners in the region. The Centre organises courses carried out by NATO experts for participants from ICI countries as well as Saudi Arabia and Oman in areas such as military-to-military cooperation, science for peace and security, civil emergency planning, and maritime security. On 16 December 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated the Alliance’s commitment to cooperation with the GCC countries during the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the ICI in Kuwait City.

62. NATO has been deeply involved in defence capacity building in Iraq since 2004. Between 2004 and 2011, NATO’s Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) trained 5,000 Iraqi military personnel and 10,000 police officers. The mission was later suspended as its mandate expired and agreement could not be reached on the legal status of NATO troops in the country. In the mid-2010s, NATO and Iraq continued to cooperate in the framework of the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme, providing a framework for political dialogue and tailored cooperation. The Alliance also continued to contribute to the country’s defence capacity building organising out-of-country “train-the-trainers” courses for 350 Iraqi officers. In 2018, NATO launched a new training and capacity-building mission – the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI). This non-combat mission operates based on the invitation of the Iraqi government, helping the country to train forces and prevent the return of Daesh. NMI focused on mentoring and advising Iraqi national defence structures and military education institutions. The 500-strong mission was temporarily suspended in the wake of the killing of Gen. Soleimani and the COVID-19 outbreak.

63. The current US administration called on the Alliance for more tangible involvement in the broader Middle East. The aim of the proposal is to increase NATO’s role in preventing conflict and preserving peace in the region. In February 2020, Allied defence ministers agreed in principle to enhancing NATO’s training mission in Iraq. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg signalled that the Alliance is examining the possibility to further upgrade its contribution to the stability in the Middle East, but the exact scope of NATO’s potentially expanded role in the region has yet to be agreed among the Allies.

64. Allied governments should also follow political and economic developments in Iraq thoroughly, which are fundamental to Euro-Atlantic security. Due to the pandemic and a sharp decrease in oil revenues, Iraq may be faced with a disaster both politically and economically. In addition, the cost of terrorism increases the burden on Iraqi society day by day. In this context, the presence of a strong government is extremely vital for the stability of the country. The last thing to be desired for the region is that Iraq is being rushed to a new conflictual, sectarian, and unstable structure. The emergence of new political instability in Iraq will not only affect the security of the whole region but it will possibly have a snowball effect on the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region.

65. NATO's involvement in the Gulf region must be carefully calibrated, given the regional sensitivities and divergencies. NATO should focus on what it does best when it comes to partnerships: share expertise, help build capacity, train and promote socialisation of defence and security officers. The latter in particular represents a tangible contribution to diffusing regional tensions and increasing mutual understanding. NATO should consider using the ICI framework more intensively for regular high-level political dialogue between the Euro-Atlantic community and the participating GCC members. NATO should also consider setting up platforms for regular exchanges with non-ICI GCC members Saudi Arabia and Oman. The *NATO 2030* reflection process presents an opportunity to consider potential new avenues for NATO's engagement in the region, particularly in the context of NATO's need to become more global, as set out in NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's speech launching the *NATO 2030* initiative.

66. The Euro-Atlantic Allies also need to recognise that China has increased its influence in the region by sending medical aid to the Gulf in the context of the pandemic and engaging in the so-called "mask diplomacy". China's economic leverage is also expected to grow, while the naval base in Djibouti provides a power projection potential. Given the pattern of China's conduct in other regions where its economic influence tends to subsequently translate into a political one, it is reasonable to anticipate an increasingly assertive China's posture in the Gulf as well. If the Allies fail to rejuvenate their economic, humanitarian, technological, and security ties with the Gulf, the GCC countries could increasingly turn to other global powers to ensure regional stability and prosperity, including China.

67. NATO as an organisation's contribution to the stability and security in the broader Middle East can be enhanced, but it will inevitably be limited, given the Alliance's need to focus on its core task of defending its members. Individual European Allies, whether acting unilaterally or as part of a coalition of the willing, can and should do more to respond to the US call for better burden-sharing in the region.

68. The long-term security and stability of the Gulf region lies not only in the oil wealth and stability of dynasties but also in the evolution of legitimate governance. Therefore, NATO and the allies should observe energy supply security on one hand and governance practices of the rulers on the other. In this context, especially the severe human rights violations, require stronger reactions by the allies, which was not the case for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Weak reactions by most of the allies to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was painful to the peoples of member countries and subject of worldwide criticism.

69. The COVID-19 pandemic puts regional confrontations in the context of broader, more fundamental challenges to mankind. Narrow national interest should be set aside at this stage, and a focused international effort is more than ever necessary to help the countries most affected by the virus, especially countries like Yemen, which is already suffering a humanitarian catastrophe. International efforts and external mediation are essential to reach a nationwide ceasefire to facilitate humanitarian aid. Humanitarian cooperation could become the basis for future broader regional reconciliation. This opportunity should not be wasted.

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