تفهم

TAFAHUM

13 BRIEF

Tafahum

An Ideational Fundament on which to Build a Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula

by Christian Koch and Adnan Tabatabai

The region of West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (WAAP),[1] as a geo-strategic space, continues to feature prominently on the international security agenda, with various powers competing to maintain and/or improve their strategic position in this region. The intricate interplay between Middle Eastern and external states has led to delicate dynamics, further complicating the region's precarious stability. The resulting uncertainty regarding the actors' strategic ambitions is aggravated further by the absence of a functioning framework in which security issues can be addressed. Instead, a balance-of-power approach,

---

[1] In the Tafahum initiative, the region referred to as West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (WAAP) encapsulates the Gulf Cooperation Council member states Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, as well as Yemen, Iran and Iraq.

Executive Summary

In September 2018, the project "Tafahum – Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula" has been initiated by CARPO and the Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF). This project's goal is to collectively construct ideational pillars for a *tafahum*, or common understanding, of how to define a process towards regional integration and a shared security architecture for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (WAAP). This is an evolutionary process, which begins with the essential building blocks of overcoming the existing lack of trust and addressing not only the current political and ideological conflicts defining the region from different angles, but also the conceptual frameworks behind them. The Tafahum project provides such building blocks, including the pursuit of issue-oriented cooperation between regional actors on a variety of subjects, promoted through the support of external parties. Such an approach allows for the gradual establishment of conditions and mechanisms under which an operational regional security process can ultimately become reality. Tafahum is designed as a 3-years project and is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

largely based on a military paradigm defined by mutual antagonisms, deep mistrust and strategies of deterrence, remains prevalent. This maximizes the level of uncertainty and lack of stability in the WAAP and far beyond.

In order to overcome this perennial cycle of instability and antagonism, the project "Tafahum – Security Roadmap for West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula" has been initiated by CARPO – Center for Applied Research and Partnership with the Orient and the Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF). The project's goal is to collectively construct ideational pillars for a *tafahum*, or common understanding, of how to define a process towards regional integration and a shared security architecture for WAAP. This is an evolutionary process, which begins with the essential building blocks of overcoming the existing lack of trust and addressing not only the current political and ideological conflicts defining the region from different angles, but also the conceptual frameworks behind them. The Tafahum project provides such building blocks, including the pursuit of issue-oriented cooperation between regional actors on a variety of subjects, promoted through the support of external parties. Such an approach allows for the gradual establishment of conditions and mechanisms under which an operational regional security process can ultimately become reality.[2]

Towards a Shared Vision for a Shared Region

In light of ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen, the conflict-laden contexts of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the delicate state of affairs in Bahrain and Lebanon, the WAAP region is almost certain to face a wider disintegration: Thus, a systematic effort to counter the forces of instability is required. One potential approach is to re-visit the ideas put forward by regional experts and policymakers for a regional security process, in particular an emphasis on multilateral solutions and arrangements, that are premised on an overall regional agreement (*tafahum*) regarding the core security concerns and interests of regional stakeholders. To overcome shortcomings in past regional security proposals, it is necessary to first establish a shared idea on regional security before taking steps towards anything approaching a regional security "system".

A primary objective of the Tafahum project, from its onset, has been for stakeholders – primarily Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also the input of other regional and key external actors – to develop a consensus view of definitions, terms and goals, and thus form the basis for further security discussions in a second operational phase.

---

2 In this paper the term 'regional security' is understood as the absence of armed conflict, the freeze of mutual threats, and an end to economic blockades or any other forms of embargoes.

A key idea behind such an approach is not to wait until diplomatic relations improve to build consensus, but to clarify crucial concepts in advance in order to fully seize the opportunity once it becomes available. It can be argued that had this approach been taken before the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 was finalized,[3] the created momentum could have possibly been built on politically. Such opportunities cannot be missed again.

In this context, certain conceptual foundations must always be kept in mind. These include:

- Security is a collective good, based on interdependencies.
- Effective security is only accomplished by inclusion.
- Any process must be defined step-by-step, with sufficient flexibility to allow for changing dynamics and developments. The objective is to work towards commonalities that incrementally promote cooperation, trust and transparency, thus leading to a shared vision for the region.
- The process begins with an agreement on principles guiding the process, including the commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes. This is a vital first step in order to tackle the existing mistrust between all sides.
- Any process is based on a multi-track approach to actors and issues. At the actor level, three component parts must be included (ideally interconnected): government, track II, and people-to-people. On the thematic level, numerous 'hands-on' points of contact need to be identified, with an emphasis on functional and issue-oriented cooperation.

- Ultimately, regional security requires that the regional actors lead and own the process. The process can only succeed if it brings in regional representatives, engages them in wide-ranging discussions, and ultimately transfers to them final ownership.
- External actors also have a distinct interest in the WAAP region, and should be accorded a role. At the outset of deliberations, this includes the U.S., Russia and Europe.

The establishment of a regional security process in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula will ultimately function as a precursor to a wider Middle Eastern security arrangement. The current emphasis of the Tafahum project is to engage in sufficient preparatory work that allows for ideational exchange and understanding; to delineate between areas where further cooperation is necessary and/or possible and coordination is already sufficient; and to outline short-term requirements within the framework of a long-term vision. The bottom line is that as long as the establishment of a regional security system is not yet attainable, the focus must be on establishing a process on how to get there.

The Security Framework as a Point of Reference

While it is imperative within the context of regional security to "de-securitze" and "de-politicize" issues in order to allow for an environment of broader trust building, realpolitik must account for the existing regional and extra-regional security interests and priorities around which to frame current and

---

[3] The P5+1 group of states consist of the US, Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany.

future relations. Thus, while the overall aim is to build a foundation for multi-level and multi-functional discussions around a variety of issues, the overall context has to start with present geopolitical and geostrategic realities. In the WAAP region, this means taking stock of the security priorities held primarily by key regional and extraregional stakeholders, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Russia and Europe. Any future initiative between these actual/potential rivals – even in the most specific and technical area – will have to undergo a reality check with reference to hard security interests when assessing the feasibility of the respective initiative.

CARPO and GRCF brought together a small group of well-connected security experts from these countries in order to elaborate an overview of the geostrategic security priorities at hand. A brief overview of the essential security priorities of each actor follows:

Iran: The Islamic Republic's defense and security doctrine has been strongly shaped by the traumatic experience of the invasion of Iraq on Iran and the resulting eight-year war. Tehran is aware of its strategic isolation and military inferiority compared to its regional and global adversaries; therefore, its military posture relies on deterrence via its missile program, as well as support for state and non-state allies in the region, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Analysts expect this conduct, consistent throughout the four decades of the Islamic Republic's existence, to continue. Iran views the U.S. as its main threat, and thus a core security component of

Tehran is limiting the American presence and influence in the region. Following the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, Iran has further reinforced its deterrence capabilities, as well as pursued a less conciliatory regional and foreign policy approach. Given that Iran increasingly views Saudi Arabia as a security threat rather than just a regional rival, Tehran gives particular emphasis to safeguarding its so-called "axis of resistance"[4] as a deterring alliance. However, Iran also seeks to expand its economic relations with its neighbors, given its mounting economic and social challenges, and has put forward suggestions to its immediate neighbors for broader regional security arrangements, emphasizing a collective approach, defined by win-win calculations among regional powers, to achieve stability in the region.

Saudi Arabia: Riyadh views Iran as its key threat, and as such is very reluctant to engage in dialogue with Tehran. The main priorities from the Saudi perspective are to limit Iran's influence in the region; deepen and broaden relations with like-minded countries; and keep the alliance with the U.S., the kingdom's key security provider, intact. Even though the kingdom views the policies of the Trump administration positively, there also exists a high degree of skepticism in terms of how sustainable and effective the current American approach towards Iran actually is. Saudi Arabia understands that containing Iran will be difficult. Combined with a high degree of concern for the economic situation at home, a growing realization that interventions in Yemen cannot remain open-ended provides

---

4   The strategy under which the Islamic Republic has built an on the ground network of allied states, non-state and hybrid actors in its neighborhood.

an opening for engagement with functional communication channels. Thus, while dialogue or rapprochement with Iran is currently not in the cards, Riyadh is open to deliberations with other powers, ultimately even Iran, over issues such as reconstruction efforts in Syria and Iraq, the future political settlement in Yemen, or counter-terrorism strategies and approaches. The bottom line is that Saudi perceptions are not static. To balance out its lack of any foreseeable conflict resolution with Iran, the kingdom is open to work towards lessening other regional tensions.

The United States: Washington has been deeply involved in WAAP regional affairs for more than 50 years, during which it has pursued its core security interests: maintaining a favorable regional balance of power, i.e. seeking regional allies who support the U.S. posture over that of its adversaries and competitors such as Russia, China or Iran; degrading the threat posed by terrorism to U.S. interests; ensuring access to energy and freedom of navigation; and countering nuclear proliferation. Overall, the U.S. has been successful in dominating the region in its favor, and will continue to attempt to do so despite recent references to a possible strategic re-orientation away from the region. The U.S. does not view Iran as a regional power with which it could conclude tacit agreements: Washington does not view its interests as compatible with those of Tehran, and has no confidence that Iran would pursue objectives in agreement with U.S. terms of regional stability. That being said, as long as its core role in the region is not challenged, the U.S. will continue to focus on deconfliction with adversaries in order to avoid inadvertent escalation.

Russia: With its role in the WAAP region not as central as that of the United States, Moscow's main objective is to situate itself as a key player in the establishment of a regional order to counter U.S. dominance. Russia's engagement operates along the lines of the capitalization of successes and a minimization of risks. For the former, this means to seek new economic ties in order to counter current Western sanctions policy, especially in the fields of energy, agriculture and military equipment; to develop new allies on both the political and economic front; and to ensure hydrocarbon exports. In the latter domain, counter-terrorism strategies are a key component in terms of stopping the expansion of religious extremism into Russian territory. Similarly, Moscow does not want further destabilization of the wider Middle Eastern region, as this could escalate the number of threats over which Russia would only have limited control. As such, maintaining a solid level of statehood for WAAP countries is a predominant theme. Russia is thus open to processes and approaches that would allow for conflict resolution and political settlement in the region. This includes setting up multilateral groups to discuss commonalities and adopting measures to build trust, such as initiating multi-dimensional dialogues on the future of the region. In summary, the political stabilization of West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula serves the fundamental, long-term interests of Russia.

Europe: The WAAP region constitutes one of Europe's most important geopolitical tests, despite the fact that Europe is largely strategically absent from the region. In contrast to the United States or Russia, Europe

is pursuing normative goals in the region, such as defending international law and the authority of multilateral institutions. Its central focus is to safeguard the nuclear agreement with Iran, as the deal's collapse would further undermine the perception of the EU's role and its image as a normative power. However, Europe also has economic and security interests that are incompatible with Iran: the security of Israel, reconstruction in Syria, and economic ties to Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states. As a result, Europe struggles to balance its conflicting interests regarding Iran. A similar balancing occurs in dealing with the Arab Gulf states, as regards the issues of energy dependence, lucrative arms deals, and the protection of human rights. The EU has scaled back on its intention to seek a fundamental transformation of the region; instead, it has begun to pursue a more realist agenda of countering terrorism, controlling migration, preventing nuclear proliferation and strengthening the resilience of regional governments and societies. In seeking a comprehensive approach for stabilization, Europe is open to discussing political settlements in the region and contributing to reconstruction efforts in places such as Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

Taken together, the negotiable and non-negotiable security interests of the key actors, described above, show a number of contrasting approaches, but also some commonalities and overlap. A realization thus emerges that potential areas of cooperation can happen within the existing limits of the variety of security interests. Strengthening the overlaps and creating points of contact that could eventually also tackle the divergences is the key to moving towards some form of a regional security process.

The Way Forward: Operationalization

A comprehensive outline of regional security cooperation must combine the conceptual and operational baskets in a parallel process in order to build the necessary confidence for a way forward. This means, within the current context of existing animosities and asymmetries, establishing a series of regular channels of communication in which points of views can be explained and fleshed out. This should include widening the circle and expanding networks to include and engage emerging actors beyond the primary target group of 'usual suspects', i.e. advisors to top-level decision-makers or security officials. The idea is rather to take the conceptual framework – developed via the core security interests of key regional stakeholders – as a point around which to frame the future debate. With the inclusion of new voices and within a sufficiently realistic conceptual framework, compartmentalized forms of exchange, in which existing obstacles are broken down into manageable parts, becomes possible.

To this end, the Tafahum project has established five working groups, composed of regional experts, dedicated to: (1) trade relations and economic cooperation; (2) environmental challenges and climate change; (3) security sector reform and counter-terrorism; (4) media narratives and discursive integration; and (5) reconstruction efforts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. These working groups, convening throughout the first half of 2019, have provided dialogue platforms where issues could be de-politicized to some degree.

The relevance of this approach is that these working groups constitute less formal models

of exchange and provide a level of flexibility under which to evaluate potential cooperation. By integrating forward thinking, for example on the environment and the economy, and by focusing attention on a medium-term time horizon of five years, the deliberations serve as a deconfliction mechanism that places issues into their broader (time and regional) context, rather than being viewed from a reflexive posture and within existing parameters. As the security interests outlined above place an emphasis on both the domestic and regional concerns of involved actors, the working groups' focus on functional issues allow for sufficient overlay and create the space for interaction between the conceptual and operational part of the project.

This methodology enables the working groups to develop walkable paths that can contribute to a roadmap towards a regional security process in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Importantly, the emphasis is on the *process* rather than the overall objective of regional security. It is only after there is an understanding (*tafahum*) on which steps can be undertaken in which field that such a process towards regional integration and security can start in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations for Europe

Europe continues to struggle to define its precise role in the WAAP region, and is yet to develop a coherent strategy that both secures its core interests and promotes its normative approach. As they continue to work on such, European strategists and policymakers should consider four key recommendations:

1) Do not underestimate the importance of European 'soft-power', as it provides Europe with the credibility and mandate to promote regional integration. Europe has been referred to as an 'irrelevant actor' in the WAAP due to lack of a proper military presence. However, it is precisely *because* of this lack of military presence in the region that civil society actors, as well as significant parts of state elites, hold Europe, the European Union and individual European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Finland or the Netherlands, in high regard. This repute allows European state officials, civil society actors and organizations to play a prominent role in promoting regional integration. Initiatives related to people-to-people relations and cultural exchange, as well as via official channels, are effective conduits for such.

2) Focus on education and capacity building to enable regional actors to implement roadmaps to integration. The development of concepts and an overall understanding (*tafahum*), as regards how and through which sectors regional integration can best be processed, must also ensure that actors from diverse backgrounds are able to implement milestones of future cooperation agreements. A key task for European efforts can be the enabling of societal and state actors and institutions to be at the right place at the right time, and thus to seize the opportunity of meaningful cooperation.

3) Maintain a balanced approach, engaging all regional stakeholders in WAAP. There is no alternative to a comprehensive approach when dealing with the WAAP

region. Be it via shuttle diplomacy to multiple capitals of the region, statements of European governments, the EU's European External Action Service engaging all capitals, or the sheer presence of the diplomatic corps: Europe must carefully calibrate its outreach in all directions, in order to preserve impartiality and the credibility of a neutral mediator in pursuit of regional integration.

4) Emphasize geographic proximity and a sense of regional belonging. The key difference between Europe and the United States is the geographic proximity of Europe to the WAAP region. Developments throughout the entire Middle East immediately affect Europe; and European interlocutors need to stress towards their regional counterparts that challenges in WAAP are also challenges for Europe. This notion of connectivity and shared concern will help generate trust between the states of the region and their European neighbors, and willingness to seek joint solutions.

A multilevel and multilateral approach to regional security is the only way forward: to overcome existing trust deficits, to prevent a further downward spiral in regional relations, and to establish a basis on which a more stable regional order can emerge. Based on the approach outlined in this brief, the *Tafahum* project has taken initial steps in the right direction. Now is the time to build further.

About the Authors

Christian Koch is project leader for "Tafahum" at the Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF) in Geneva, Switzerland, and Senior Advisor at the Bussola Institute in Brussels. He previously served as Director of the GRCF and as Director of International Studies at the Gulf Research Center in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Dr. Koch also worked as head of strategic studies at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi from 1995 to 2004. His work combines the analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states on pertinent foreign and security issues, with a particular interest in GCC-EU relations. He is particularly interested in better understanding the dynamics driving regional security issues in the Gulf region and promoting aspects of cooperative security among regional and international actors. Dr. Koch is the editor of eight books; author of *Politische Entwicklung in einem arabischen Golfstaat: Die Rolle von Interessengruppen im Emirat Kuwait*, as well as numerous chapter contributions and journal articles; and coauthor of "Establishing a Regional Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Gulf Region." He received his Ph.D. from the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg.
Contact: ckoch@grc.net

Adnan Tabatabai is co-founder and CEO of the Germany based Middle East think tank CARPO. He holds an assigned lectureship at the Heinrich-Heine-University of Dusseldorf's Institute for Social Sciences. As an Iran expert, Mr. Tabatabai is consulted by European policymakers and businesses on Iran's domestic and external affairs. His analysis and commentary is regularly featured in international media. Through CARPO projects, Adnan Tabatabai is active in various bilateral and multilateral track 2 and civil society dialogue initiatives focusing on West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, Tabatabai has curated multiple publications and events on Iran. He is the author of the German book *Morgen in Iran – die Islamische Republik im Aufbruch* (2016, Edition Körber-Stiftung).
Contact: tabatabai@carpo-bonn.org

About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

About the Gulf Research Center Foundation

The Gulf Research Center Foundation (GRCF) was established in 2007 in Geneva, Switzerland, under the Swiss Civil Code relating to foundations. The GRCF aims to facilitate research on the Gulf, promote academic excellence both in and about the Gulf region, and ensure objective and comprehensive information and analysis about a vital part of the world. As an independent think tank, GRCF has been recognized as one of the leading institutions in the Middle East providing insights and perspectives from the Gulf region. It is part of the Think Tank Leader's Forum of the World Economic Forum. The GRCF acts to coordinate all Gulf Research Center research efforts and has successfully completed numerous projects work including with the European Commission on EU-GCC relations, with the UNDP and International Development Research Council, Canada. One of the key focus of the GRCF's work is the changing geopolitics of the Middle East with a particularly focus on the foreign and security policies of the GCC states, Gulf security issues, and efforts to establish a regional security system.