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Europe and GCC must lead a Middle East reset

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The recent and ongoing Israeli attacks on Iran and Iranian counterattacks are bringing the Middle East once again to the brink of a wider war. While headlines rightly focus on the immediate fallout, including the damage, retaliation and fear of further escalation, including a nuclear dimension, there is a deeper and more urgent truth that policymakers must confront: the cycle of conflict in the Middle East will not end unless serious diplomatic leadership steps in.

The crisis, therefore, also offers an opportunity — one where Europe and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, in particular, must step into the current vacuum to take ownership with a new diplomatic initiative that addresses what the region's security environment will look like post-Israel-Iran crisis.

The attack by Israel on Iran and the subsequent regional shock waves mark a dangerous turning point in an already fragile region. Iran's long-standing involvement in proxy conflicts across the Arab world — from Lebanon to Syria, Iraq and Yemen — has made it a persistent source of tension with its neighbors. At the same time, the Netanyahu government's uncompromising stance on national security, often at the cost of diplomatic restraint, is feeding into a cycle of tit-for-tat violence. The result is a continuous downward spiral where everyone loses — civilians suffer, extremism festers and trust across borders erodes. That cycle must be broken.

Amid this chaos, the usual arbiters of peace — chiefly the US — are no longer seen as reliable brokers by many in the region. Washington's political polarization and its increasingly transactional approach to foreign policy have left question marks on its credibility. Russia, distracted and weakened by its war in Ukraine, is no longer a stabilizing counterbalance. China, for all its growing diplomatic ambitions, still lacks the deep historical ties and cultural literacy required for lasting influence in the Middle East. And both Russia and China lack the institutional depth to mediate in the Middle East effectively.

This vacuum presents a unique and urgent opportunity for Europe and the GCC. Together, they possess the diplomatic relationships, economic leverage and regional legitimacy to chart a new course. To seize this moment, the two sides should now jointly lay out a serious, coordinated plan for a postconflict Middle East — one grounded in realism, mutual respect and long-term strategic thinking.

Europe has both a moral obligation toward and a strategic interest in Middle East stability. Waves of migration triggered by Middle Eastern wars have had profound political consequences across the continent, fueling the rise of populist movements and undermining social cohesion. Terror attacks on European soil — many inspired by chaos sown in Syria, Iraq and beyond — have shown that Middle Eastern instability does not stay confined within its regional borders. A prolonged Israel-Iran war would ensure that such instability will not only continue but increase.

Europe still enjoys strong diplomatic relations with key players on both sides of the current divide. In the framework of a strategic partnership with the GCC states, an increased convergence of views



on the causes and paths forward on regional security is being formed. Europe has long maintained dialogue with Iran under the framework of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and European capitals continue to underline their unwavering support for Israel's security. It is also true that much of the Middle East leadership looks to Europe to play a diplomatic role that the US is either unable or unwilling to play, or one that regional players cannot fully claim.

Yet, Europe is almost completely absent when it comes to peacebuilding in the Middle East. European diplomacy is reactive, cautious and inconsistent. Europe's failure to hold the Netanyahu government to account for its violations of international law when it comes to the crisis in Gaza has seriously undermined European credibility. To be clear, Europe's inattentiveness in its direct neighborhood has contributed to the region's insecurity. Unless reversed, the direct consequences for European security will mount.

Meanwhile, the GCC has emerged as a diplomatic force in recent years. Saudi Arabia's outreach to Iran, the UAE's normalization with Israel via the Abraham Accords and Qatar's ability to mediate hostage negotiations in Gaza all illustrate a newfound maturity and pragmatism in Gulf diplomacy. This is coupled with a commitment to finding solutions to the region's perennial problem, exemplified in Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution and the GCC's push, through the Arab League, for the Gaza reconstruction plan.

The GCC also brings economic and soft power to the table. The bloc's financial clout will be essential to underwrite reconstruction efforts in conflict-ravaged areas. Its sovereign wealth funds will be critical for driving regional infrastructure projects that bind nations together through shared interests, while its religious and cultural influence will help foster narratives of coexistence rather than confrontation.

Moreover, the GCC has a vested interest in regional stability. The fallout from a full-scale Iran-Israel war would be catastrophic for Gulf economies, particularly given the vulnerability of maritime trade routes and oil infrastructure. Thus, preventing further escalation is not merely an act of altruism — it is an existential necessity.

Now is not the time for shoulder shrugging or continued complacency. Instead, it is time for leadership and foresight. Critics will argue that the region is too fractured, the enmities too entrenched. But history shows that the most fruitful diplomacy often arises from the moments of greatest danger. The EU itself was born out of the ashes of two world wars. The Helsinki Accords emerged during the Cold War's tensest period.

Furthermore, the current waves of attacks between Israel and Iran have shaken the status quo. They have reminded all regional actors of the fragility of peace and the urgency of restraint. In this equation, it must be underscored that military victories will be fleeting and only political solutions will endure.

Based on their shared vision for a better and more stable future, Europe and the GCC must now act together, not as distant benefactors or cautious observers, but as co-architects of a new Middle East, outlining a path for a regional system of cooperation and security. Both have ties across the



regional divide and can serve as stabilizing forces by offering a roadmap toward de-escalation and longer-term security arrangements.

Waiting for the perfect moment is futile, as the only current certainty is that inaction will result in more lives lost, more cities destroyed and more generations condemned to cynicism and despair. The window for diplomacy remains open, but that opportunity must be urgently seized, as the cost of failure will disperse far beyond the borders of the Middle East and be felt around the globe.

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