

## THE HELSINKI PROCESS AND ITS APPLICABILITY

TOWARDS REGIONAL SECURITY-BUILDING IN THE PERSIAN GULF

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- The idea of a 'Middle East Helsinki Process' has been raised as a potential collective security mechanism to help avoid major political regressions and violent spirals.
- The Helsinki Process, known for reducing tensions between the Soviet Union and the West in the 1970s, can provide some useful lessons, but the region will have to develop its own model by drawing on past experiences and the region-specific threat perceptions and political needs.
- Non-interference, sovereignty and the protection of religious rights could serve as useful starting principles for regional security-building in the Middle East.
- Drawing on the lessons learnt from the Helsinki Process, specific recommendations for a possible Middle East Process would be as follows: i) establish a regional initiative for building a security architecture in the Persian Gulf inspired by the Helsinki Process and its institutionalization; ii) establish a channel for Track 1, state-to-state-level consultations; iii) focus on the basic security guarantees that are common to the Persian Gulf states; and iv) maximize regional ownership, but with external facilitation.



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### INTRODUCTION

The situation in the Persian Gulf is tense, with a diverse set of interlocking conflicts having become more acute. Lacking a formal de-escalation framework, all major regional actors find themselves entrapped in a ‘security dilemma’, fuelling an arms race that creates the illusion of increased deterrence capabilities. This dangerous situation entails the risk of rapid escalation to the point of a major confrontation, potentially involving not only regional actors, but also extra-regional powers and stakeholders, such as the United States, Russia and European states. The Covid-19 pandemic has only added to the fragility in the region.

Given this precarious context, there is an urgent need to establish meaningful regional security cooperation, which has been meagre thus far. Most Arab states of the Peninsula established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 (excluding Yemen, at the time still divided), but it remains relatively dysfunctional. Policy differences regarding external actors such as Iran, and now also in relation to the blockade against Qatar, perpetuate internal divisions. Most recently in August, the decision by the United Arab Emirates to establish diplomatic ties with Israel is also fuelling mutual suspicions as well as further tensions with Iran. At the same time, over the longer term, the commitment of the United States as a security guarantor, particularly to Saudi Arabia, the GCC’s central member, is in doubt.

The Gulf states have sought to hedge a possible US withdrawal from the region by seeking closer support from actors such as China and Russia, and thus by diversifying their alliances. GCC action in Libya, Syria and Yemen has also actively sought to change the regional status quo and undermine Iranian influence. For its part, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to expand its political-military presence throughout the region, leveraging a mix of confessional affiliations and established alliances in order to create a regional external buffer zone. Deep-seated tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and now also heightened tensions between Iran and the United States due to the Trump administration’s unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal)

and its policy of ‘maximum pressure’, have helped strengthen antagonistic positions.

The prospect of the situation entering a dangerous spiral has alerted major stakeholders to the need to create a holistic mechanism of collective security in the region. Herein, the idea of a ‘Helsinki Process for the Middle East’ has been floated.<sup>1</sup> More broadly, the 45th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act has catalyzed questions concerning its continued relevance – is it a singular relic of the past or does it remain a viable reference point or even a model? The idea is not new – seeking to apply practices from the process that led to the Helsinki Accords in 1975, and eventually to the establishment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has been suggested on various occasions, including recently in the form of Russian and Iranian proposals.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be recognized that the US administration’s current policy of maximum pressure on Iran may work at cross-purposes with efforts to establish an inclusive regional security dialogue, as it gives the GCC less incentive to give any ground to Iran. As long as maximum pressure is exerted, Iran is expected to weaken, and hence engaging in a regional security dialogue will not make immediate strategic sense for the GCC. Although there would be willingness to decrease tensions, the limits on where the GCC wants to go are complicated and sensitive to changing circumstances, such as those created by the uneven burden of Covid-19, with Iran being particularly affected. So while the Covid-19 crisis has opened up some diplomatic channels, for example through the provision of humanitarian assistance, it has not facilitated any confidence-building measures. In fact, the US and its regional allies have ramped up their pressure on Iran.

This Briefing Paper reviews the idea of using the Helsinki Process as a model for Middle East regional security-building. It argues that the Helsinki Process can offer useful ideas, although overblown references to it

1 International Crisis Group, ‘The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown’, Middle East Report No. 212, 27 April 2020.

2 Vali Nasr, A New Nuclear Deal Won’t Secure the Middle East: But Regional Cooperation Could, and Washington Should Support It’, *Foreign Affairs*, February 7 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-07/new-nuclear-deal-wont-secure-middle-east>.

should be avoided. Eventually, the region will have to develop its own model, drawing on past experiences, but placing them in the regional context with its particular threat perceptions and political needs.

In short, the recommendations of this Briefing Paper, further elaborated below, are as follows:

- *Establish a regional initiative for building a security architecture in the Persian Gulf, inspired by the Helsinki Process and its institutionalization.*
- *Establish a channel for Track 1 consultations.*
- *Focus on the basic security guarantees that are common to the Persian Gulf states.*
- *Maximize regional ownership, but with external facilitation.*

## LESSONS FROM HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF REGIONAL SECURITY-BUILDING

From the Treaty of Westphalia to the Helsinki Accords and beyond, regional security-building has often been driven by rulers' fear of losing internal control. Indeed, regional security-building is often started by regimes fearing for their internal position, and the way it is being undermined by external actors.

The *Treaty of Westphalia* that marked the end of the Thirty Years' War was not only catalyzed by exhaustion after decades of warfare, but also rulers' fear of internal deconsolidation because of continuous religious strife and interference in each other's internal affairs. Herein, incumbent rulers had a mutual interest in security cooperation. By establishing sovereignty, non-interference and religious freedom as basic principles of statehood and of regional affairs, the rulers were able to consolidate their legitimacy and control, not only externally but also internally.

The *Helsinki Process* was driven not only by the overt threat of a major international confrontation, but also by the mutual fear of internal upheaval and the challenge to domestic legitimacy posed by the other system.<sup>3</sup> It was launched in the late 1960s at a time of major turbulence on both sides of the Iron Curtain. 'Active measures' – what we today call hybrid interference<sup>4</sup> – aimed at destabilization and subversion,

were a constant worry in East-West relations. Subversive means were used by both sides to nurture front organizations and drive wedges, in order to internally weaken the other side. For the Soviet Union, the Prague Spring (1969), and the way it could be nurtured by front organizations such as Radio Free Europe, was a wake-up call to the threat of internal upheaval. Recognition of the principle of sovereign borders was a major motivation for the Soviet Union to engage in the Helsinki Process. In Western capitals, student revolts, the anti-nuclear movement and terrorist groups such as the Red Army Faction also fuelled worries about Soviet infiltration. Indeed, Soviet-linked organizations had successfully infiltrated a number of leftist political parties and peace organizations. Most importantly, the prospect of an accelerating nuclear arms race catalyzed a sense of urgency around the issue of arms control and here the parallel Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) talks helped prepare the ground for the eventual Helsinki Accords in 1975.

The Helsinki Process duly built on a commonality of interest between leaders on both sides of the intra-European divide to stabilize the situation and to establish dialogue and non-interference as means of regional security-building. As a matter of fact, the Soviet side had a strategic interest in gaining recognition for its hold on Eastern Europe, whereas the Western side had an interest in establishing the protection of human rights as a norm by ensuring Russian non-interference. These were tradable principles that could be included in the process with reciprocity.<sup>5</sup>

According to diplomats involved, the Helsinki Process succeeded in large part because its agenda was deemed broad enough to include issues seen as important for all of its participants. Security-building was understood in a comprehensive way, including military, economic and humanitarian aspects. It was set up as a piecemeal process with prior consultations and with very few commitments in the initial stages, in order to lower the threshold for participation. It was structured as an open-ended process with no firm end-point, but a continuous dialogue over the terms of cooperation and monitoring of the process.

3 For a recent account of the Helsinki Process, see Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

4 On hybrid interference, see Mikael Wigell, 'Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy', *International Affairs* 95: 2 (2019), pp. 255–275.

5 In preparing this Briefing Paper, interviews were conducted with Finnish diplomats involved with the Helsinki Process.

## FINDING BASIC NORMS OF CONDUCT IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The present situation in the Persian Gulf partially resembles these earlier settings. It has ‘pre-Westphalian’ components with religious strife, interference and proxy warfare. It also resembles the ‘pre-Helsinki’ situation in largely being a grey-zone conflict situation in which two opposing major players vie for regional hegemony. Both major actors nurture proxies, front organizations and other subversive means, allowing them to interfere in each other’s internal affairs as well as in conflict theatres where their antagonism overlaps (mostly Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen). With memories of the Arab Spring or the ‘Green revolution’ (Iran 2009) still fresh, regimes also fear internal upheaval and the way it can be used by external powers for deconsolidation and subversion.

This mutual fear of spiralling conflict and internal deconsolidation is precisely what any current effort for regional security-building in the Persian Gulf should be based upon. Herein, drawing inspiration from past experiences, such as the Westphalian peace and Helsinki Accords, three key principles could serve as generic reference points for regional security-building: non-interference, sovereignty and the protection of religious rights. All Gulf states have an interest in seeing these principles strengthened, and most external powers, such as the United States, Russia and the European Union, can be envisaged to welcome them as well under the right circumstances.

*Non-interference.* The principle of non-interference is particularly geared towards addressing the problem of ‘hybrid interference’ on all sides. It has been suggested by the emir of Kuwait, amongst others, as a basic principle for regional security-building. All state parties have an interest in non-interference in order to help stabilize and consolidate internal legitimacy and control. At present, external interference threatens regime stability across the region. By committing to non-interference, the state actors will be able to focus on shoring up their internal cohesiveness.

*Sovereignty.* The principle of sovereignty can help provide assurance as to the recognition of statehood and the sort of full privileges bequeathed by the international legal order to sovereign states. All state parties have a mutual interest in strengthening state sovereignty, both external and internal, so as to entrench state control across their entire territory and in international forums.

*Protection of religious rights.* The principle of full protection of religious rights is intended to address the nature of the conflict as a religious-political dispute across Sunni-Shia lines in particular. Given the largely theocratic nature of many of the state actors involved, most state parties can be envisaged to have a mutual interest in religious safeguards.

These three principles would establish the basic norms of conduct between regional states in terms of how they deal with each other and the standards that they need to adhere to in their mutual relations. With an understanding of such shared norms of conduct guiding relations between them, the region’s governments could then engage in a process of laying out more precise means of strengthening collective security. In that sense, the Helsinki Process may serve as an example.

Yet it should also be noted how the Helsinki Process carries some problematic connotations for such a Gulf process. In some circles, it is perceived as a US/Euro-pean-driven agenda of Western human rights standards, aimed at advancing Western strategic interests. The fact that the Helsinki Process is often viewed as having played a role in the fall of the Soviet Union is bound to strengthen those suspicions. This is only a very partial reading of the breadth of the Helsinki Process, of course, but should in any case temper extensive references to it when planning any Gulf process of regional security-building.

## THE HELSINKI PROCESS

The key to the potential applicability of the Helsinki Process to other regional theatres is understanding the process, as well as the involved players’ interests. The Helsinki Process had at least the following unique and innovative features:

*Small state facilitation.* A small state (Finland) offered to facilitate the process. It seems to have been important that the facilitator was appreciated as neutral by all parties. At the same time, this neutral facilitator had close relations to all major external powers with interests in the region. Providing ‘good offices’ was internalized – for both political and identity reasons – by this neutral facilitator. Its own stake in regional security afforded it a never-give-up mentality. Geographically, it was well placed to serve as the hub for coordination.

*Sequencing.* Low-level contacts evolving into bilateral consultations followed by multilateral preparations. Bilateral consultations involved ambassadors accredited to Helsinki. The purpose was to draft the general framework for the official multilateral meeting. Importantly, no commitments were made at this stage, in order to lower the threshold for participation.

*Inclusiveness.* All governments with a stake in regional security were included in the process (including Europe's transatlantic allies Canada and the United States). A consultation and negotiation process for mapping out the views of bigger and smaller states was undertaken on an equal and uncommitted basis.

*Consensual decision-making.* A decision was considered approved if no participant actively opposed it.

*Topics.* The focal points were divided into 'baskets', based on the topics identified in the bilateral consultations. As such, the process helped identify the general focal points and strengthen ownership.

*Follow-up.* A process of follow-up meetings was set up, including monitoring mechanisms based on strictly voluntary commitments. No legally binding mechanism or authority was ever established.

A lesson drawn from the Helsinki Process is that it began very slowly and modestly, but evolved over time. It began by offering a channel of communication in East-West relations, progressed towards developing basic norms of conduct for their relations, and eventually evolved into a long-term programme of cooperation. The Helsinki Final Act, signed after years of consultations, then became instrumental in defusing East-West tensions by acknowledging the inviolability of territorial sovereignty as well as the inviolability of human rights, with the latter pushed by European and American diplomats in exchange for their acquiescing to the former. As such, it provided a security framework for confidence-building and, eventually, a multilateral forum for regional security issues. Interestingly, the functioning of the framework was ensured by self-binding adherence to the arrangement, without a legally binding mechanism in the case of non-compliance.

## **TOWARDS A GULF PROCESS OF REGIONAL SECURITY-BUILDING**

It should be remembered that the idea of a Helsinki Process for the Middle East is not entirely new. Even the 1975 Helsinki Final Act included a Mediterranean

Chapter and Mediterranean Partners, a theme continued by the OSCE up to this day. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference involved a process of multilateral meetings drawing inspiration from the Helsinki Process. The 1990s also saw both Jordan and Turkey promoting a Helsinki-like process in the Middle East. The United States has also, on various occasions, encouraged a similar process and congressional members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe have supported applying the Helsinki Process to the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Why have these earlier efforts not borne fruit and, in light of such efforts, does it still make sense to try to draw inspiration from the Helsinki Process?

First, there is the question of ownership, the idea that any initiative has to come from the region itself. Some of these earlier attempts have clearly been rejected simply because they have been driven from outside the region, and have therefore not been trusted or properly owned. At the same time, without external facilitation, any initiative will face difficulties because many of the region's governments do not recognize, let alone trust, each other.

Secondly, these earlier initiatives have all been region-wide initiatives, and in that sense duly modelled on the Helsinki Process. Yet it may be the case that a pan-regional initiative is simply too broad to work for the Middle East. Treating the region as a common entity contravenes the current reality of divisiveness and lack of integration, be it economic, political or social. Taking a sub-regional approach may help make the problems more manageable.

Finally, it has become fashionable to propose initiating talks on a semi-official Track 1.5 level or even a non-official Track 2 level. Some of the earlier efforts to apply the Helsinki Process to the Middle East did just that. Yet with their generally centralized decision-making models, talks on Tracks 1.5 and 2 may not gain much traction in the Middle East. Importantly, if hopes of any process rely on the governments' shared concern for internal deconsolidation, Track 1 would be the most suitable level for the process. By establishing secret Track 1 consultations, governments could engage in talks on the basis of this commonality of interest.

6 The US Helsinki Commission, 'The Middle East: Would the Helsinki Process Apply?', Hearing before the Commission on Cooperation and Security in Europe, June 15 2004, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/Official%20Transcript%20-%20The%20Middle%20East%20Would%20the%20Helsinki%20Process%20Apply.pdf>.



The Helsinki Accords were signed on 1 August 1975.

Source: Pressfoton Etyk 1975 –team via Museoviraston Kuvakokoelma/Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

## CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Starting a Helsinki-like process in the Persian Gulf will not be easy. As said, putting ‘maximum pressure’ on Iran will probably make it more difficult to start such a process, as it lessens the urgency felt by the GCC to engage in a dialogue with Iran. The starting points for any effective ‘triangulation’ of a path or process forwards are hindered, for example, by the fact that with the exception of Syria, Iran’s formal/informal foreign policy is very much interlinked with proxy actors (Hezbollah in Lebanon, Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen), while the Saudis have more elaborate state-based alliances.

Yet the current precarious situation warrants any effort that stands even the faintest chance of creating more regular interaction between the countries in the region. Hence, this Briefing Paper proposes the following recommendations:

1) *Establish a sub-regional initiative in the Persian Gulf.* Taking a pan-regional approach has often

led to the hijacking of the political agenda by the Israeli/Palestinian question and the stalling of the process. Entertaining the idea of a sub-regional process limited to the Persian Gulf region may stand a better chance of making progress with the cooperative interactions being based in a more specific security zone.

2) *Establish a channel for Track 1 consultations.* While Track 1.5 and Track 2 talks can often help initiate broader negotiations, they may also sometimes hinder the emergence of Track 1 consultations. When the governmental security concerns involve internal dynamics and fragmentation, Track 1.5 and Track 2 processes may act as a hindrance to Track 1 confidence-building measures. A Gulf process of regional security-building should focus on establishing a channel for Track 1 consultations with a view to a commonality of interest.

3) *Focus on the basic security guarantees that are common to the Persian Gulf states.* The three key principles of non-interference, sovereignty and protection of religious rights are broad enough to reflect a commonality of interest, while also being tailored to the

specific circumstances in the region. They can serve as basic norms of conduct while seeking greater interaction and cooperation.

4) *Maximize regional ownership, but with external facilitation.* For the process to stand a chance of success, the regional governments must take ownership of it, but with outside facilitation as required. When the process is perceived as driven by the region

itself, suspicions over any underlying, malevolent motives can be defused. Herein, it may be helpful to tone down references to a ‘Middle Eastern Helsinki Process’. It will also enable the regional parties to shape the agenda with a view to their own security concerns. Yet, as a result of the deep-seated lack of trust between some of the regional parties, external impetus and facilitation will also be needed. /