

CSIS Middle East Program Vision Plan: The Middle East Emerging Order Initiatives

Strategic Framing. The Middle East is at a “hinge moment,” a period of transformative change where the old order is disappearing, and a new, region-driven multipolar order is emerging. The Middle East’s changing order heralds a time of greater dynamism and unpredictability. While this transformative moment brings new opportunities for peace and prosperity, it also holds the potential for deepening conflict. For the United States, understanding the dynamics at play in the Middle East, the motivations of the region’s key stakeholders, and the inherent risks and opportunities for the United States will be critical to ensuring U.S. interests and promoting American prosperity.

In the emerging Middle East order, regional actors hold far greater agency to shape the region’s contours. For the Gulf—the Middle East’s new “center of gravity”—the vision focuses on de-escalating and containing/managing regional conflicts; stabilizing countries emerging from conflict such as Syria; transforming their economies to create jobs, develop vibrant private sectors, and capture advances toward non-carbon energy transition and creating building blocks for a regional security architecture. If successful, these efforts could create a far more stable and prosperous Middle East, with strengthened intra-regional connections and the region’s fuller integration into the global economy.

For Israel, the region’s dominant military power, concerns center around preventing another October 7 style attack. Military interventions in Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere seek to preempt threats before materializing in attacks on Israel. While appreciative of the shifting power dynamics emanating from Israel’s use of force (e.g., the decimation of Hezbollah, the decisive weakening of Iran, and the derivative fall of the Assad regime in Syria), the region’s other key stakeholders remain wary of an overly militarized approach. They fear a “new normal” marked by an absence of “rules of the game,” guardrails, or clearly defined and respected “red lines,” essentially deepening regional disorder and chaos.

Indeed, persistent conflict stands as a critical impediment to regional transformation and a reminder that the region is in profound flux, with different actors competing to define its trajectory. Spoilers—both state and non-state—seek to derail efforts to build peace and stability, upending established rules of engagement and modes of deterrence. Assumptions undergirding the behavior and risk calculus of both state and nonstate actors in the region are increasingly obsolete. Taken together, these dynamics have wrought complex conflict dynamics, with the region at times careening toward all-out conflagration.

Thus, the region’s “hinge moment” is also a significant crossroads: one path leads toward peace and prosperity, while the other toward deepening conflict and instability. Significant volatility and change

mark this juncture. In this volatile mix, spoilers one day can become champions for peace the next—and vice versa.

The Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) will look to unpack the complex dynamics of the region’s emerging order through the “Middle East Emerging Order Initiatives” founded on four strategic pillars focused on key diplomatic, economic, security, and stabilization trends in the region. These initiatives will bridge regional actors with U.S. public and private sector stakeholders through meetings in Washington and regional capitals, deepening U.S. understanding of the region’s momentous changes, while also lifting up creative, actionable ideas to help ensure that the region’s emerging order heralds a peaceful and prosperous Middle East. As part of this bridging effort, the Middle East Program will develop partnerships with regional think-tanks, universities and diplomatic academies.

The Middle East Program will also leverage the extensive expertise across CSIS, seeking collaborations with programs as varied as AI, nuclear proliferation, critical minerals and global development and deploying CSIS capabilities with data visualization, imagery analysis and state of the art video and podcast production.

The Middle East Program will harness all these capabilities—objective analysis, extensive regional networks, exceptional convening power, and CSIS’s deep expertise—to publish incisive research products and develop actionable, creative approaches to meeting this this historic moment in the Middle East. The Program will share its work across a broad network of regional and U.S. stakeholders, focused on a shared interest of building peace and prosperity across the Middle East.

Pillar I: Middle East Mediators Initiative. This initiative will highlight mediation efforts undertaken by Middle East mediators: Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Turkey. It will enhance understanding of the complexities underlying mediation efforts—both regional and global—by these “middle powers., including the complex “risk/benefit” calculus underlying these efforts. The initiative will also deepen our understanding of the stakes for the United States and impact on U.S. national security interests. It will seek to map and compare the success of regional and global mediation efforts to understand “lessons learned” from previous mediations. The initiative will also explore the future direction of Middle East mediation efforts, tracking the evolution of Middle East mediation strategies and tools.

Pillar II: Levant Stabilization Initiative. The Middle East Program will serve as the pre-eminent convening space for all key stakeholders engaged in post-conflict stabilization and economic development, with a particular focus on Syria and Lebanon, and potentially Gaza. The forum will focus on activities designed to engage key stakeholders involved in stabilization efforts as well as to inform U.S. policy. It will convene key Gulf stakeholders funding stabilization efforts (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE), US and international community interlocutors (e.g., USG, World Bank, United Nations), and INGOs, as well as Syrian and Lebanese stakeholders. Specifically, the initiative will look to connect the “missing link” of technical expertise and deep experience embodied by former USAID, multilaterals, INGOs and other implementers to Gulf funders and stabilizing countries. This initiative will also develop insights and knowledge on the emerging assistance landscape, a new

“ecosystem” that includes new funders, broadened stakeholders, and new approaches and tools, including the innovative use of AI. It will work closely with members of the Lebanese and Syrian diasporas, tapping their expertise and passion for peace and prosperity in their respective countries.

Pillar III: Middle East Economic and Energy Transformation Initiative. This initiative will focus on the region’s economic and energy transformations. It will specifically explore efforts to develop vibrant private sectors, create jobs, expand economic activity to new sectors and develop new energy alternatives. The initiative will focus on artificial intelligence and potential opportunities, challenges, and implications of its growing importance in the region and globally. It will unpack the potential for economic integration or corridors both within the region and between the Middle East and other regions. It will focus on the new opportunities inherent in stabilizing Lebanon and Syria, bridging the Gulf to the Mediterranean, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative will also deepen understanding of the region’s geoeconomics and address challenges to economic growth and security.

Pillar IV: Building a Regional Security Architecture Initiative. A foundational pillar, this initiative will explore approaches to building a regional security architecture for the Middle East, the most conflict-prone region in the world and yet the only region lacking an inclusive, multilateral forum for dialogue and cooperation on security issues. While a comprehensive regional security architecture ultimately will be essential to sustain diplomatic, development, and economic progress, the initiative initially will examine ways to strengthen/expand existing structures. It will assess the heightened risks of conflict among regional powers as some seek to shape the contours of the emerging order militarily.

Specifically, this initiative will take stock of existing agreements such as the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) in Bahrain and “mini-lateral” groupings such as GCC+ formats, the Baghdad conference format and the Red Sea Council as potential models. It will also explore the GCC’s “New Vision” for regional security cooperation as well as other regional security architecture models such as ASEAN. The Middle East Program will address “seam” issues including Gulf power projection and competition in the Red Sea/Horn of Africa.