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# The Minilateral Moment in the Middle East: An Opportunity for US Regional Policy?

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three years, the Middle East has experienced major intra-regional changes. After a decade of fierce competition between two blocs—one led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the other by Qatar and Turkey—both parties now seem willing to cooperate.

This new era of de-escalation among regional powers has been felt across the Gulf and the Levant. Relations between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors were restored in January 2021 at the end of a three-year blockade of Doha while Turkey and Saudi Arabia also mended ties. The end of the blockade enabled an unprecedented wave of normalization agreements between Israel and Arab states—namely the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. It also led Gulf states to engage with Iran to restore diplomatic ties and prevent clashes, in particular in war-torn Yemen. This culminated last March with the China-facilitated Saudi-Iran deal, another sign that regional powers in the Middle East are reconsidering their foreign policy arrangements.

One of the key features of this new regional environment has been the growth of so-called minilateral initiatives that regroup several countries on an ad-hoc basis. These partnerships, like the Israel-Greece-Cyprus partnership, predated the current trend, but most of them grew in earnest over the past few years. Examples include the launching of the I2U2 group, composed of India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE in July 2022; the Negev Forum initiated by Israel with the contribution of the four Arab states and the United States; and the France-UAE-India dialogue that emerged in the fall of 2022.

Powers outside the region also embarked on a similar path of building relationships with countries in the Middle East. Russia's recent attempt to build a similar framework with Turkey and Iran provides evidence of how minilateralism is increasingly considered an effective instrument of regional diplomacy.<sup>1</sup>

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1. France 24, "Putin, Erdogan and Iran's Raisi pledge cooperation against 'terrorists' in Syria", 19 July 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220719-putin-to-meet-turkey-s-erdogan-and-iranian-president-raisi-in-tehran>

Noticeably, this “minilateral moment” comes at a time of increased speculation, in Washington and the region, of US disengagement from the Middle East. All these new local initiatives demonstrate the desire of Israel and Arab states to invest more in governance and to take ownership of this emerging regional security architecture. In that context, it could constitute a major opportunity for the United States. As the war in Ukraine and the US-China rivalry in East Asia are likely to remain the priorities of the US government for the near future, Middle East initiatives such as the minilaterals could help ease the burden on US resources, especially at military level.

Against that backdrop, this issue brief investigates the minilateral moment in the Middle East and discusses its implications for US Middle East policy. To do so, the analysis relies on a series of interviews conducted during the winter of 2022-2023 with dozens of policymakers and analysts from the main countries involved in these new initiatives (Israel, India, the UAE, the United States, and France).

The paper first unpacks the logic of minilateralism as an instrument of foreign policy meant to provide flexibility and support the establishment of a regional security architecture. Then, the following sections offer an assessment of four selected minilaterals: the East-Mediterranean triangle (Israel, Cyprus, Greece); I2U2 (India, Israel, US, UAE); the French-India-UAE dialogue; and the Negev Forum. To assess those initiatives, the paper looks at two key indicators: the degree of strategic proximity between the countries, and the level of institutionalization in the selected initiatives.

Then, the final section presents the key findings behind the new minilateral phenomenon. Given the limitations behind these initiatives, the United States should support them, though with realistic expectations. In the end, Washington could transform the minilaterals into a new foreign policy for the Middle East that uses them as a “lattice work”—to use an expression from the 2022 *National Security Strategy*—to defend US regional interests while supporting the objectives of local partners toward greater autonomy.<sup>2</sup>

## WHY MINILATERALS EMERGE

Interest in the minilateral phenomenon has grown in recent years, but the format is nothing new. In 2009, Moisés Naím called minilateralism a “smarter, more targeted approach” to achieve what multilateralism seemed unable to do.<sup>3</sup> European diplomatic history before 1945 presents a long history of minilateral arrangements that repeatedly failed to deliver their promise of regional stability. Arguably, the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century was a competition between several minilateral groups such as the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente.

The uncertain origin of minilateralism also relates to the absence of a common definition. Scholars and policymakers agree on a few characteristics such as its small size. Some analysts suggest a range of participants between three and five countries, while others go up to nine.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, minilaterals focus on functional and pragmatic cooperation rather than on lofty, hence unfeasible, objectives that are too often at the center of international organizations.

In the same vein, minilaterals do not rely on a permanent structure and favor a light institutional footprint to avoid the pitfalls of a bureaucracy. In other words, minilateral arrangements may be seen as the halfway solution between a unilateral foreign policy imposed on partners and a multilateral approach that dilutes national interests into vague global principles.

Noticeably, the contemporary growth of minilateralism originated in Asia and has been driven by two facts: the rise of China and the lack of a robust security architecture on the continent. It has taken different forms such as the trilateral mechanisms between the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea; the Australia-Japan-US Trilateral Strategic Dialogue since 2002; and most recently, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States alliance named AUKUS since 2021. It also informs the logic behind regional groupings like the Quad (including Australia, Japan, India, and the United States) initially launched in 2007, or other lesser-known formats like the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Tajikistan counterterrorism mechanism.<sup>5</sup>

2. White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12 October 2022, p.12. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administration-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

3. Moisés Naím, “Minilateralism”, *Foreign Policy*, July-August 2009, p.136.

4. See Bhuhindar Singh, Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2020.

5. Joel Wuthnow, “US Minilateralism in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 28, no. 115, pp.133-150.

A notable exception is Southeast Asia, where most countries (such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia) have yet shown little interest in minilateralism. Given their geographical proximity to China, this is likely caused by the desire of Southeast Asian countries to stay away from arrangements that they believe could antagonize Beijing.<sup>6</sup> This also relates to their commitment to preserving the so-called “centrality of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations)” — a principle to ensure the Southeast Asian organization remains the focal point for regional diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

Like in Asia, countries in the Middle East have now embraced the minilateral momentum for similar reasons, such as the absence of a security architecture and the chronic weakness of regional bodies such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

However, minilateralism in the Middle East is not a new phenomenon either. The format was a major feature of Israel’s foreign policy in its early years. Back in the 1950s, Israel tried to turn its bilateral cooperation with both Turkey and Iran under the Shah into a so-called “alliance of the periphery” to counter the threat from Arab countries.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the so-called “Arab cold war” — a rivalry that transformed the 1960s socialist-leaning regimes to conservative monarchies — took the form of ad-hoc coalitions respectively led by Egypt under its former president Gamal Abdel Nasser and Saudi Arabia, similar to today’s minilateralism.<sup>9</sup>

The logic of the current minilaterals is different though. First, many of Israel’s new partnerships are public, and not shrouded in secrecy as they were in the past. Second, the new minilaterals are not shaped by a clear US-Soviet competition but by a more ambiguous environment where Washington and Beijing do not openly divide the region into spheres of influence.

Consequently, to better grasp today’s minilateral moment in the Middle East, the next section considers four initiatives: the East Mediterranean triangle (Israel, Greece, and Cyprus) which emerged in the mid-2010s as the result of common tensions between those three countries and Turkey; the Negev Forum launched by Israel’s government in 2022 and involving four Arab states as well as the United States; I2U2

(India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE) established in October 2021; and the French-UAE-India dialogue launched in September 2022.

## MEASURING THE STRATEGIC PROXIMITY AMONG MINILATERAL PARTNERS

A first indicator of the viability of minilateral arrangements is the degree to which the strategic priorities of its members align. The closer those priorities are, the stronger the resolve of the countries will be to cooperate on security matters. Conversely, if countries differ on the threats and challenges they face, they may consider the minilateral setting as a diplomatic activity without much consequence apart from promoting trade and tourism.

This does not mean that countries should dismiss initiatives with a limited scope. Platforms encouraging stronger business ties play an important role in the development of regional stability, but with a caveat. Such partnerships are not designed to build the regional security architecture that the Middle East needs.

Against that backdrop, the initiatives mentioned above fall under three categories: limited proximity, strong proximity, and growing proximity.

### *Limited Proximity: I2U2 and the French-UAE-India Trilateral*

Both I2U2 and the French-UAE-India trilateral represent cases of limited proximity at a strategic level. The initial media reports coined the I2U2 arrangement the “Middle East Quad,” but this quickly turned out to be a misnomer.<sup>10</sup> The grouping was established in October 2021 when foreign ministers of the four countries met (albeit virtually at the time).

Following the announcement of AUKUS a few weeks earlier, I2U2 found itself caught in the narrative of US-China competition. Journalists and pundits assumed it represented another security arrangement intended to contain the rise of Beijing, this time in the Middle East. This was also due to the involvement of India and the sense that the rising profile of Delhi in the Middle East was a response to Beijing’s inroads in the region.<sup>11</sup>

6. Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2020.

7. Aaron Connelly, “The often-overlooked meaning of ‘ASEAN centrality’”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 9 June 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/06/the-often-overlooked-meaning-of-asean-centrality>

8. Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel’s Search for Middle East Allies*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015; Jean-Loup Samaan, *Israel’s Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery*, London, Routledge, 2017.

9. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed., London, Oxford University, 1971.

10. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “A Quad for the Middle East?”, *The Diplomat*, 22 October 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/a-quad-for-the-middle-east/>

11. Raja Mohan, “India and the new ‘Quad’ in West Asia”, *Indian Express*, 20 October 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-and-the-new-quad-in-west-asia-7578842/>

However, this narrative omitted the fact that the security agendas of the I2U2 members widely diverge. Officials in Washington and Delhi were pleased with the “Middle East Quad” analogy as it served their objective of countering Chinese expansion. However, the UAE and Israel had different views on and interests in China. Both the Israelis and Emiratis have embraced Chinese investments in infrastructure and digital connectivity. While China’s presence in the Israeli economy has slightly slowed since 2018, in Abu Dhabi, the rapprochement continues unabated and UAE cooperation with Beijing now takes a security dimension, involving arms sales such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and light fighter jets.<sup>12</sup>

The launching of the initiative paralleled the growing tensions between the United States and the UAE over Chinese presence in the Gulf state, caused by Huawei’s involvement in developing the Emirati 5G network and the alleged construction of a Chinese military facility in an Abu Dhabi port.<sup>13</sup> From the outset, the Emiratis were wary of any announcement on I2U2 that could be read by Beijing as a measure of defiance. As a result, Abu Dhabi reportedly expressed unease over the “Middle East Quad” narrative, and the initial speculations on the security dimensions of I2U2 have been toned down.

Additionally, I2U2 countries continue to view Iran with unease. Israel and the UAE share common security concerns over the regional policies of the Islamic regime and its ballistic and nuclear programs. However, where Iran constitutes an existential threat to the government in Jerusalem, Emiratis have lately adopted a more conciliatory approach towards Tehran through high-level visits made on both sides. Likewise, India maintains significant diplomatic and economic relations with Iran as it considers Tehran a valuable partner on several files such as Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>

The divergences between the political agendas of the I2U2 members were also on full display after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While the United States rushed to provide military supplies to Ukrainian forces fighting on the frontline, Israel, the UAE, and India took a more neutral stance and refrained from imposing sanctions on Moscow.

Because of the conflicted priorities among its members, I2U2 is unlikely to expand like the Quad in Asia. It may also follow the path of the first era of the Quad in 2007-2008, when the grouping dissolved itself after Australia’s government at the time felt uncomfortable with its anti-China undertone. Given the expressed desire of the UAE not to get pulled into the US-China rivalry, this might be the same trajectory awaiting I2U2.

The French-India-UAE dialogue is another case of limited strategic proximity. The three countries see eye to eye on several fronts, but diverge on certain matters. For example, each considers its partnership with the US a pillar of its foreign policy. The three countries also share common security interests, whether the fight against Islamist terrorism or the governance of the Indian Ocean. However, they each have ambitions for their strategic autonomy. The French traditional motto “allied but not aligned” could in some ways apply to the Emirati and Indian positions.

Beyond statements of principles, the purpose of the French-India-UAE dialogue is unclear. In interviews, representatives of the three countries were clear on what they did not want the dialogue to be, but less clear on what it should be. They all expressed a desire not to make China a driver of the trilateral consultations. Apart from that, national views differed. France promotes a foreign policy branding itself as an alternative, a so-called “third way,” to the great power competition. In April 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron made this stance clear during an interview on his way back from Beijing, as he called on Europe not to become “America’s followers.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, as with I2U2, the UAE is reluctant to engage in an initiative that would openly target Beijing. Finally, Indian motives are pragmatic. Delhi seems to consider that its dialogue with France and the UAE should not focus on containing China because the minilateral format does not have the credible strategic weight to do so compared to others such as the Quad or trilaterals with Japan and Australia.<sup>16</sup>

French officials indicated a desire to discuss numerous topics such as trade, tourism, renewable energy, education cooper-

12. Agnes Helou, “UAE to buy a dozen Chinese L-15 trainer aircraft”, *Defense News*, 26 February 2022. <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2022/02/25/uae-to-buy-a-dozen-chinese-l-15-trainer-aircraft/>

13. Gordon Lubold, Warren Strobel, “Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With U.A.E.”, *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 2021.

14. Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, “The Challenges and Limitations in India-Iran Relations”, *The Diplomat*, 27 October 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-challenges-and-limitations-in-india-iran-relations/>

15. Jamil Anderlini, Clea Caulcutt, “Europe must resist pressure to become ‘America’s followers’ says Macron”, *Politico*, 9 April 2023.

16. Author’s interview, 13 January 2023.

ation, and defense policy. There are also talks of potential military-industrial cooperation, given that Dassault Aviation, a French company, supplies Rafale fighter jets to both the UAE and India. Emiratis and Indians seem more circumspect. One Indian security analyst interviewed for this paper expressed skepticism of the French-India-UAE initiative and portrayed the dialogue as “mostly about business and arms trade.”

### ***Strong proximity: The East Mediterranean Triangle***

Before the hype surrounding I2U2, another minilateral emerged, known as the East Mediterranean Triangle between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. In the first half of the 2010s, the three states embarked on a rapprochement based on common interests with regard to gas exploration in the East Mediterranean Sea.

The trilateral dialogue between Nicosia, Athens, and Jerusalem was also driven by security concerns over Turkey. Although Greek and Cypriot relations with Ankara have been contentious for several decades, Israel-Turkey ties were undermined by the crisis of the Mavi Marmara Flotilla in 2010 and more broadly Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s ambition to revise the country’s foreign policy and strengthen relations with Israel’s enemies like Iran or Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

This initial alignment between the three countries has slightly decreased over the years. At first, mutual concerns over Turkey provided a strong incentive for the countries to work together, but it also meant that the fate of the trilateral dialogue depended on the evolution of bilateral relations for each of these countries with Ankara. As a result, by the end of the 2010s, especially after Israel and Turkey started restoring their relations, the security component of the trilateral was slowly de-emphasized. Still, the East Mediterranean triangle endures and the proximity of views between its members has not been challenged since its introduction a decade ago. It even found a way to expand through the formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum detailed below.

### ***Growing Proximity: The Negev Forum***

Convened for the first time in Israel on March 27-28, 2022, the Negev Forum could be seen as a by-product of the Abraham Accords. In 2020, the Accords created an entirely new dynamic that enabled minilateral arrangements between Israel and Gulf states. The agreements dismissed the tradition-

al approach of the Arab League regarding the establishment of relations with Israel countries like the UAE and Bahrain had carefully followed until then. Until then, it was assumed that recognition of Israel would be the result of a collective effort supervised by the Arab League and conditioned by evidence of progress on the Palestinian issue.

The Abraham Accords challenged both aspects. Furthermore, though the agreements were bilateral treaties between Israel and each of the two Gulf states, the underlying logic aimed to bring about a trilateral momentum. This was evident from the beginning when leaders of Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain gathered in the Rose Garden of the White House to sign the accords.

That trilateral momentum was meant as a stepping stone for regional expansion. It is under that same Abraham framework that Morocco and Sudan later signed joint declarations to open (or reopen in the case of Morocco) diplomatic relations with Israel. Proponents of the Abraham Accords also envision the agreement as a conveyor belt for Israel’s engagement with and beyond the Arab world.<sup>17</sup> Hence the Negev Forum, a conference designed to “build a new regional network” to exchange and cooperate on issues such as counterterrorism and regional stability. In addition to the United States, four Arab states joined the initiative: the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco. The Kingdom of Jordan officially declined the invitation to participate, demanding that Palestinians be represented (though the Palestinian Authority refused such engagement from the outset).<sup>18</sup>

The Palestinian issue may complicate the development of the forum, but it does not stop it. The framework approved by its members does mention the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the need for “a negotiated resolution,” though it carefully refrains from providing any detail. Despite Jordanian reservations, participants have thus far displayed strong commitment to the forum. In January 2023, amid the formation of a controversial government in Israel including far-right politicians, the steering committee of the forum met in Abu Dhabi, demonstrating the intent of its Arab members to put domestic politics aside.<sup>19</sup>

The alignment between the strategic priorities of the participants to the Negev Forum may be strong enough to bypass the hurdles of Israel’s politics or the stalemate on the Pales-

17. Gedaliah Afterman, Narayanappa Janardhan, “The Abraham Accords Bring the Middle East and Asia Closer”, Abba Eban Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, Reichman University, 14 September 2022. <https://www.eng.arenajournal.org.il/single-post/issue12-afterman-janardhan-middle-east-asia-eng>

18. “US official comments on Jordan’s absence from Negev Forum”, Jordan News, 9 January 2023.

19. Rina Bassist, “Negev Forum convenes in UAE with Jordan absent from Arab-Israeli meeting”, Al Monitor, 9 January 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/>



tinian issue. However, the forum should now turn this proximity into an enduring minilateral by going further with its institutionalization. Here, informality can also become a liability for the forum and Israel. It may allow some Arab partners to remain hesitant on their public participation in such gatherings, especially if they perceive the regional context unfavorable.

## THE DEGREE OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MINILATERAL INITIATIVES

Over time, the strategic priorities of countries participating in minilaterals may change. Therefore, the best way to guarantee the longevity of these partnerships is to ensure a certain degree of institutionalization. Minilaterals are not designed the same as international organizations with permanent bodies, and this cannot be the end state. However, the proximity between governments must translate into concrete working-level cooperation. High-level meetings between heads of state or foreign ministers help to build momentum for minilaterals, but foreign policy needs to translate at the bureaucratic level, either by strategic dialogues, military exercises, or technical and industrial cooperation.

When applying this criterion to the four initiatives studied in the Middle East, the results are similar to what was observed concerning the issue of strategic proximity.

### *Limited institutionalization: I2U2 and the French-Indian-Emirati Dialogue*

Despite the influence of I2U2, its institutionalization has been limited. The first meeting, in October 2021, was conducted virtually by the foreign ministers of participating countries. It then took ten more months before the leaders of the four countries finally met for a summit in Jerusalem. This first “physical” meeting was followed by a joint statement that refrained from discussing processes and mechanisms of consultation. Instead, the document mentioned a list of projects in domains such as food security and clean energy.<sup>20</sup>

The joint statement demonstrates the disconnect between the talks of a “Middle East quad” and the business-oriented agenda of the partnership. Proponents of I2U2 may assert that this emphasis on economy rather than security actually makes the initiative more viable, but it also means that the initiative cannot strengthen the regional security architecture.

The French-Indian-Emirati dialogue faces similar shortcomings as its institutional design remains uncertain. The first

official meeting gathered the foreign ministers of the three countries on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2022. Since then, only a few meetings involving the three sides have taken place, and the agenda of the partnership remains somewhat vague. There are also speculations on the enlargement of the format to other like-minded partners, in particular Indonesia, which has deepened its relations with the three countries in recent years, yet its motivations for doing so remains unclear.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, the trilateral involving Paris, Abu Dhabi, and Delhi could deliver on specific, though modest, projects that include naval cooperation as well as academic and business partnerships. However, it is unlikely to reshape either the foreign policies of its members or the regional environment in which they operate.

### *Growing Institutionalization: The Negev Forum*

Comparatively, the Negev Forum nurtures greater ambitions. As mentioned above, it started as a two-day summit, first convened by Israel in March 2022, and attended by the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, the UAE, and the United States. From the outset, Israel’s government introduced the forum as a new regional event to occur on an annual basis. Although declarations at the forum focused on expanding economic cooperation, the organizers also expressed ambitions in terms of regional security.

Several other meetings followed. A steering committee was later formed and released a “regional cooperation framework” in November 2022 that codified the activities of the forum. Conceived as a platform, the Negev Forum is now built around one annual ministerial. The second ministerial was initially expected to occur in the spring of 2023 in Morocco, though the date has reportedly been postponed due to Rabat’s concerns on the latest tensions in Palestinian territories. These political events have not affected the working level of the minilateral. As mentioned earlier, its steering committee met in Abu Dhabi in January. Moreover, six working groups were also established on themes such as food security, clean energy, tourism, healthcare, education, and regional security.<sup>22</sup>

### *Strong Institutionalization: The East Mediterranean Triangle*

Since 2014, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus have convened an annual trilateral summit attended by their heads of government. After 2016, it was complemented by a ministerial coined “3+1” involving the US Secretary of State and which has received

[originals/2023/01/negev-forum-convenes-uae-jordan-absent-arab-israeli-meeting](#)

20. White House, “Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States (I2U2)”, 14 July 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>

21. Author’s interview with French Diplomat 2, 21 December 2022.

22. US Department of State, “The Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework Adopted by the Steering Committee on November 10th, 2022”, <https://www.state.gov/the-negev-forum-working-groups-and-regional-cooperation-framework/>

support from the administrations of both former US President Donald J. Trump and US President Joseph R. Biden.<sup>23</sup> Military cooperation followed suit via the launching of trilateral naval exercises such as Noble Dina after 2011.

Officials still meet for the trilateral summit and the 3+1 talks, though the succinct content of the joint statements reflects the now-limited ambitions.<sup>24</sup> There were, however, significant achievements in the field of energy diplomacy. The formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2020 was a direct consequence of that rapprochement. It initially included Egypt along with Cyprus, Israel, and Greece. In following years, other littoral states of the Mediterranean joined: France, Italy, and Jordan. The forum now provides an effective instrument for gas cooperation between countries that may not see eye to eye on other foreign policy issues. After the 2022 maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon, the latter might consider joining the forum. Consequently, despite the decrease of its initial security motivations, the East Mediterranean minilateral has succeeded in institutionalizing energy cooperation.

## MINILATERALISM AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

The investigation of Middle East minilaterals provides evidence of disparities between all initiatives and calls for a sobering assessment of the phenomenon. The minilateral phenomenon should not be dismissed but it should not be the object of inflated enthusiasm either.

The minilateral projects discussed in this paper share several shortcomings. The first limitation relates to the resources regional partners can reasonably and reliably allocate to these initiatives. At the beginning, minilaterals may need a push from the top leaders in each country to gain political momentum, but they cannot deliver without the involvement of administrations to organize the practical details of technical cooperation. Multilateralism is a demanding activity for state administrations: the more integrated a regional organization is, the more it consumes the time of diplomats and soldiers. In the transatlantic area, the myriad of NATO ministerials, working groups, and task forces demonstrates this bureaucratic trend.

The problem remains that countries like the UAE, Israel, and India rely on small foreign ministries with limited capacities that do not match the greater ambitions of their leaders. Western officials acknowledge this reality as a clear obstacle to the expansion of these initiatives. Eventually, due to limited human resources, the foreign ministries of countries like the UAE, Israel, or India inexorably prioritize bilateral cooperation over new and uncertain initiatives like minilateral groupings.

Secondly, the objectives pursued by partners through these minilaterals are not entirely clear, typically on purpose. In that perspective, India undoubtedly raised its profile in the Middle East through I2U2 or the trilateral talks with France and the UAE. The groupings complement the vibrant bilateral relations cultivated by Delhi with Israel and the UAE.

However, India's strategic vision for the Middle East remains unknown. So far, the country seems more interested in engaging with everyone, rather than taking a stand on Middle Eastern issues. As explained by one Delhi-based Indian analyst, "India pushes for multilateralism but there is no clarity on the content, it is an idea that eventually sounds similar to non-alignment and the way India implements its view will define minilateralism".<sup>25</sup>

In the Gulf, the UAE seems inclined to adopt India's loose understanding of minilateralism as a tool of non-alignment. In fact, one reason behind the appeal of France's minilateral approach for the UAE is Paris' clear desire not to put China on the agenda.<sup>26</sup> It echoes Abu Dhabi's reluctance in choosing a side between the United States and China and reflects the belief, common in many small states, that the frenzy of minilaterals creates a "multinetworked" environment that could put great power competition at bay.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, this undeclared goal of non-alignment could prevent initiatives like I2U2 or the French-India-UAE dialogue from taking a proper strategic contour. The desire of the parties involved not to antagonize China means that beyond economic projects and occasional joint military activities, there is not much more that can be achieved.

23. Alan Makosky, "Opportunities and Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean: Examining U.S. Interests and Regional Cooperation", Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 31 March 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-examining-u-s-interests-and-regional-cooperation/>

24. US Department of State, "Joint Statement on the 3+1 (Republic of Cyprus, Greece, Israel + United States) Foreign Ministerial", 9 May 2022. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-31-republic-of-cyprus-greece-israel-united-states-foreign-ministerial/>

25. Author's interview, 2 January 2023.

26. Author's interview with French Diplomat 1, 15 December 2022.

27. Husain Haqqani, Narayanappa Janardhan, "The Minilateral Era", *Foreign Policy*, 10 January 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/10/minilateral-diplomacy-middle-power-india-israel-uae/>

In the Middle East, minilaterals look like ad-hoc solutions better suited to address a volatile security environment than permanent regional organizations, but their effectiveness in other regions remains uncertain. Given the flurry of such initiatives in past years, one might wonder how countries can best capitalize on them. India is now involved in a myriad of initiatives from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. This includes the original Quad, I2U2, as well as various trilateral dialogues involving France and the UAE, France and Japan, or France and Australia (that last one was suspended for one year after the diplomatic crisis between Paris and Canberra over AUKUS). Likewise, the UAE is involved in I2U2, the Negev Forum, and the France-India dialogue, as well as a series of informal trilateral consultations with Israel and Asian countries like South Korea and Japan.

The sheer number of these dialogues illustrates the growing ambitions of involved countries in regional diplomacy, but it is hard to measure the concrete value those minilaterals bring to their foreign policies. Based on interviews conducted for this paper, diplomats and politicians seem to adopt a general wait-and-see approach toward minilaterals. Contrary to the upbeat coverage in think tank literature, governments have moved more cautiously. For instance, when asked about the future of France's minilateral engagements, one diplomatic adviser to the French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna carefully replied "events and needs will define the future of these arrangements."<sup>28</sup> Another French diplomat talks of minilaterals as "a web that we spin and that helps creating ties without committing too much."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, an Indian ambassador insisted that "the minilateral format is customized for our national needs."<sup>30</sup> This sounds as if minilaterals are a low-risk investment, and possibly offer only low returns.

The third major issue with minilateral arrangements is that they could be an alternative to a deficient multilateral system, but they do not systematically provide greater regional stability. Because minilateralism is often driven by mutual threats rather than mutual interests, it can exacerbate competition. In most recent years, the self-declared "anti-terrorism quartet" composed of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain reflected the ambivalent effects of minilateralism. This quartet emerged after its members jointly imposed a blockade against Qatar in June 2017 as a retaliation for Doha's alleged involvement in supporting terrorist organizations. Between 2017 and the lifting of the blockade in early 2021, members of the Saudi-led quartet met regularly with each other as well as with foreign partners like the United States.

In this case, the minilateral format was the result of the local balance of power and it deepened the pre-existing weakness of regional bodies such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), undermined its ability to solve the dispute with Qatar, and eventually exacerbated the intra-Gulf rivalries. Therefore, despite the undeniable value to the minilateral format, it also has a potential destabilizing effect. In the end, the three-year crisis between Qatar and its neighbors was settled at multilateral level—not at minilateral level—through a GCC summit convened by Saudi Arabia in January 2021.

### CONCLUSION: US POLICY TOWARD THE MINILATERAL MOMENT

At the heart of Middle East minilateralism lies a paradox: local commentators portray these initiatives as a result of US decline and the growing ambitions of partners such as Israel and Gulf states to shape the regional politics on their own terms.

For sure, Middle East countries are eager to diversify their foreign policies, especially as they take stock of their lesser importance in Washington's strategic debate. At the same time, Washington is involved in most of those minilaterals, from the East Mediterranean Triangle to I2U2 and the Negev Forum. In fact, the United States may be the most active country in promoting them.

Maintaining the current level of US involvement in those minilateral formats serves US national interests. At worst, it will consume a modest amount of energy from the US Department of State. At best, it could pave the way for a better division of labor between Washington and its Middle East partners that allows for an easier burden on US military presence.<sup>31</sup>

However, could this minilateral moment go the wrong way and end up forming a Middle East network working against US regional interests? None of the parties involved aims to do so, but other countries like Iran or Russia would be pleased to see minilaterals that way. The Astana Talks initiated by Moscow and Ankara in 2016 to the trilateral meeting in 2022 involving Russia, Iran, and Turkey demonstrate initiatives designed to challenge US leadership in the Middle East. The recent China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal also suggests that new diplomatic arrangements might sideline the United States. However, those Russian and Chinese enterprises have yet to produce concrete results. In both cases, they indicate a clear desire from Moscow and Beijing to challenge US primacy in the Middle East, but until now they did not prove their ability to deliver on these initiatives.

28. Author's interview with French Diplomat 1, 15 December 2022.

29. Author's interview with French Diplomat 2, 21 December 2022.

30. Author's interview, 13 January 2023.

31. Becca Wasser, Elisa Ewers, "Rightsizing in the Middle East: The U.S. Military Should Pull Back but Not Pull Out", *Foreign Affairs*, 16 December 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-12-16/rightsizing-middle-east>



In that context, the biggest challenge for US Middle East policy does not come from its local partners, or Russia's and China's agenda, but from the need to clarify Washington's ambitions in the new Middle East. Put differently, the challenge is finding the balance between preserving US interests with smaller resources while embracing the push for local initiatives. It is a fact of life that Washington cannot decrease its presence in the Middle East or leave more leeway for regional initiatives without reducing its own ability to shape those trends. Defining to what degree the United States is willing to give away that ability is the prerequisite to any future response.

Eluding this question is already affecting US relations with its Middle East partners. In Abu Dhabi, Emirati commentators are railing Washington for its contradicting message "asking us to do more while systematically complaining when we do so."<sup>32</sup> This is where the minilaterals could be the best response.

At the level of public diplomacy, US support to local initiatives such as the Negev Forum would help build a positive narrative on US Middle East policy that is less about military disengagement or containment of China, and more about a new way to cooperate with regional partners. It would enable Middle Eastern states to grow more confident in their own autonomy and help them to shape a regional security architecture according to their own needs and desires.<sup>33</sup> As a result, they would be less tempted to align themselves on the agenda of a new external power, be it China or Russia.

While embracing the minilateral momentum, the United States needs to articulate a clear acceptance threshold, the minimal conditions required to preserve US interests in the Middle East and under which local partners can launch their own initiatives. Certain components of that threshold are obvious and unlikely to be contested by local partners, such as the fight against terrorist organizations.

One issue that may become contentious is the prevention of nuclear proliferation. This is a key US national interest that should be forcefully reasserted, especially as the negotiations with Iran over the resumption of the 2015 nuclear deal are on the brink of collapse. The Saudi-Iran deal of March 2023 did not address this issue and it might give the impression that Riyadh—and possibly other Gulf states—are now willing to tolerate Tehran's violations of its international commitments. The US administration should make it clear that, although the

current Gulf-Iran engagement can lower regional tensions, it cannot imply a tacit acceptance of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Washington should also make sure that the minilateral momentum does not come at the expense of multilateralism. To do so, the United States should keep engaging with the existing regional entities such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It should also be made clear that minilaterals are complements, not substitutes to the regional bodies. Similarly, the United States could promote the idea of using the Negev Forum as a mechanism fostering the settlement of the Israel-Arab conflict, and in particular the Israel-Palestine track. This could lead Jordan and other Arab countries to join the partnership.

Finally, the most contentious issue will certainly be the US acceptance threshold on Middle East-China relations and how this affects minilateral initiatives. Whereas Israel has made clear in recent years that it had no desire to antagonize the United States regarding its relations with Beijing, the topic is much more contentious in the Gulf, especially in the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Gulf states are increasingly tied to China through energy supplies, infrastructure management, and digital connectivity. As a result, they are extremely reluctant to adopt the US view of a great power competition.

In the current environment, the narrative of US-China rivalry in the Middle East is counterproductive. It inflates the reality of Beijing's influence in the region, dismisses the agency of US partners, and largely ignores the local issues that need to be addressed. Instead of using Cold War rhetoric, US Middle East policy should be articulated around the idea that the new era of regional cooperation, of which minilaterals are the latest illustration, calls for a more balanced partnership between Washington and its allies, one that builds on new initiatives to shape the security architecture the region has long needed.<sup>34</sup>

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32. Author's interview, 24 September 2022.

33. Jean-Loup Samaan, "The New Middle East is dismissing great power competition - for now", Atlantic Council, 18 October 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-new-middle-east-is-dismissing-great-power-competition-for-now/>

34. Jonathan Fulton, Jonathan Panikoff, "A New Strategy to Counter China in the Middle East", *The National Interest*, 6 February 2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/new-strategy-counter-china-middle-east-206167>



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