

Conference

Avoiding Multi-State Conflict in the Middle East: How the EU can Foster Regional Peace

11 December 16:30-18:30

European Parliament, Room P4B001

Arrays of intersecting conflicts in the Middle-East have drawn the region into a complex battlefield, with damaging effects on its social fabric. Even before the 2011 Arab uprisings, major conflicts in the region tended to intersect with local divergences, creating primary as well as secondary conflict clusters, poisoning relations between regional and international actors and complicating any attempts for sustainable solutions.

Latest developments in the region saw a volatile environment characterized by reckless attacks allegedly executed with Iranian support, new waves of interconnected protests and security vacuums, which threaten to trigger larger conflict clusters. With its economic integration stalled by US sanctions, and its standing on the global stage challenged, Iran elected to maintain its controversial proxy activities, which it has long used to project spheres of regional influence, especially in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. The June 13 attack on two tankers in the strait—an incident that Washington blamed on Iran and Tehran denied— follows a dangerous pattern of escalation and diffusion of tensions between Iran and its neighbors. This attack highlighted the vulnerability of the Strait of Hormuz, through which one fifth of the world's oil supply is transported, and was followed by a direct attack on Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil facilities.

Despite the tensions raised following these attacks, there are signs of opportunities for peace. The notable absence of a firm American response to the attacks raised concerns of further US withdrawal from traditional alliances, adding to growing perceptions of the US as an unreliable military partner. This shifting geopolitical stage opens more space for other partners, especially the EU, to launch a new appeal for peace and serve as a diplomatic force against a new cycle of regional crises.

In light of these risks and opportunities, this event seeks to facilitate a constructive debate between experts, academics and EU policy-makers on how to best mitigate the rising risk of conflict and de-escalate regional tensions in the Middle-East. Participants will discuss how the EU can better leverage its diplomatic influence to strategically de-escalate tensions, avoid the erosion and breakdown of state institutions and the eruption of violent conflict. Overall, this event will provide a forum to explore different pathways and political alternatives to preempt the possibility of conflict and to defuse direct confrontations that would negatively impact the wider region.

Tentative questions:

1. On 3 December, Iranian President announced that Tehran wouldn't be opposed to resuming ties with Saudi Arabia in a bid to maintain security and stability throughout the region. In recent weeks, we've seen Saudi Arabia take decisive steps towards eliminating divisions amongst allied Yemeni forces, and engage with the Houthis. How optimistic should we be about these positive trends, and what can the EU be doing to assist in fostering regional peace?
2. In recent months, the United States' commitment to regional de-escalation appears to be waning, despite the current administration's previous restraint in avoiding a full multi-state conflict, specifically following the summer attacks that it alleged were perpetrated by Iranian proxies. In light of these uncertain developments, and the somewhat unpredictable positions of the United States, should the EU be playing an increased role in working to mitigate the economic tensions currently causing domestic unrest throughout Iran?
3. The new European Commission has positioned itself as a 'geopolitical' Commission that will engage the world and demonstrating the power of EU leadership. To date, we've seen much of this 'geopolitical' aspect focus on Africa, but what will this concretely mean for the EU's relationships with the Middle East? If the EU wants to prove its leadership and serious engagement in the region, what should it prioritise accomplishing in its first 100 days?
4. Iranian Parliamentary elections are coming up in February- should we expect that domestic politics, and potentially more hardline candidates, will stifle international efforts for de-escalation?

Speakers

- **Ms. Paula Yacoubian**, Lebanese MP, Journalist and Recipient of the Officer of the Order of the Crown Award
- **Dr. Amelie Chelly**, Expert on Iran and Middle East, CADIS (EHESS-CNRS) Paris
- **Dr. Peter Krois**, Austrian Delegate for North Africa, the Middle East and the Gulf Region
- **Amb. Marc Otte**, BIC President and Belgium Special Envoy for Syria

Moderated by

Ms. Shada Islam, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.

Hosted by

MEP Mr. Lukas Mandl, EPP

Conference Format

The conference will have a lecture format, which will be moderated by Ms. Shada Islam. MEP Mr. Mandl will provide the opening remarks to the audience and speakers. The opening session shall serve to frame the discussion for the panel of experts and policy makers.

Speakers will be introduced individually by Ms. Islam, and each will give a short intervention explaining their perspective on the subject for about 8 minutes, which should provide extensive coverage of all relevant viewpoints.

Attendees will then have the opportunity to participate during the Q&A session, and contribute to comments and questions to the discussion. This will draw on the extensive expertise from high-level policy makers, Ambassadors and leading think-tanks in the room, and produce a dynamic, constructive debate.