



A WIN-WIN FOR IRAN AND THE REGION

*Iran's role in the "end-state diplomatic model" of conflict resolution
and crisis management in the Middle East*

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian

There is copious academic research on why the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is mired in ethnic and sectarian violence. However, the specific question of what workable models can be presented that would not only be effective in ending conflicts but also bring sustainable peace to the region has not been tackled as of yet. What is needed in this discussion on peace and stability is a look back at historic examples of conflict resolution in the region, and an application today of what worked before. Asking which models can be presented to resolve conflicts in the MENA region naturally presupposes having some ideas as to what roles the more powerful regional actors such as Iran can play to assist in resolving the crises.

Of course, there are other powerful actors in the Middle East besides Iran, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, which are actively involved in many crises and conflicts. However, a detailed discussion of Iran's role is crucial because some Arab neighbors and Western powers have accused Iran of intervening in conflicts where the end result is negative for locals on the ground. In order to dispel myths about Iranian foreign policies and look for an effective way in which Iran can participate in peacebuilding projects, I will draw upon historical incidents of state-led violence and subsequent military invasions by the United States and coalition forces, and examine what lessons can be learned from those older experiences. Finally, I will apply a test model—which I call an “end-state” solution model that is structured around being a win-win path forward for all parties involved in negotiations—of how Iran can contribute to conflict resolution in the MENA region.

Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa take different forms and dimensions. From the longstanding Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, Saddam Hussein's invasions of Iran and Kuwait, and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to the emergence of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front,

◀ Presidents Hassan Rouhani of Iran, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, and Vladimir Putin of Russia pose before their meeting in Ankara, April 4, 2018. *Tolga Bozoglu/Pool via Reuters*

and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the MENA region has been home to prolonged conflicts for much of the past seventy years. The current political climate in the region, which is animated by a culture of violence, behooves us as analysts and researchers to think about viable models of conflict resolution.

Let this be clear right at the outset that so far, the multi-state organizations in the region such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), once seen as appropriate instruments to resolve conflicts, have utterly failed to address those problems, including and most important of all: the rise and spread

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of terrorist organizations. Terrorism is a menace in the Middle East so great that without collective efforts by all—and I stress—all state actors, it cannot be eradicated. The barrel of the gun is not the only means by which one can hope to eliminate terrorism; full-fledged cooperation by regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Iraq is needed to combat the threat. If a regional power like Saudi Arabia funds and arms such groups—as unfortunately has been the case—while other regional powers like

Iran and Iraq combat the most dangerous terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, the Middle East will never achieve peace and stability. Every country then, particularly the more influential ones, must participate in resolving conflicts in the Middle East. What is needed is a historical presentation of the dynamics of the region with a view toward how regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia can foster peace.

Iran's Post-1979 Role and Interventions in the Middle East

Following 1979, Iran asserted its independence, projecting its power regardless of what the then-Cold War superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) wanted. Iran's history with the United States in particular created a new climate of contestation with America and U.S.-backed states across the region. The reasons for Iran's diplomatic rise post-1979 are numerous, but some of the most important are connected to the collective memory of Islamic Republic leaders about U.S. actions in Iran. These actions were the Central Intelligence Agency's ousting of the democratically elected government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and the undermining of Iran's sovereignty during the Shah's reign. Leadership in Tehran had more proof of American antipathy following 1979, when the United States supported Saddam Hussein's Iraqi invasion of Iran and use of weapons of mass destruction against Iranians from 1980 to 1988, and held a forty-year-long, ill-advised policy of regime change in Iran.

These factors heavily influenced decision-making processes in Iran's foreign policy in the post-1979 revolution era. For Iranians, it is not easy to forget the magnitude of death and destruction inflicted on Iran during Saddam's invasion. During the Iran–Iraq War, Iraq enjoyed support from both Cold War blocks: the USSR-led communist nations and the U.S.-led capitalist countries. As a consequence of Saddam Hussein's war of aggression, Iran suffered from massive destruction of physical capital (bridges, roads, schools, hospitals, etc.) as well as human capital of about a million deaths and casualties.

Iran was the first country to condemn Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and stood by Kuwait even though, along with other GCC members, Kuwait assisted Saddam Hussein with billions of dollars during Iraq's war with Iran.

On that note, in my capacity as Iran's ambassador to Germany (1990–1997), I was appointed by the late President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as his special envoy to meet then-Crown Prince Abdullah Al-Saud to build cooperative relations between the two states. Al-Saud and I had multiple rounds of private meetings along with President Rafsanjani's son, Mehdi Hashemi-Rafsanjani, in Casablanca and Jeddah. The strategy of Iranian–Saudi friendship worked well, and shortly thereafter the relationship improved drastically. In effect, by dispatching me as his special envoy to meet with the Crown Prince Abdullah, President Rafsanjani conveyed the message to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf that Iran was willing to forgive—but not forget—the harm that they caused to Iran by their blind support of the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein. The zenith of the détente was when Iran signed a security agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1999—a rapid leap toward improving bilateral relationships that did not even occur during the Shah's regime.

Due to American opposition to Iran's efforts to develop peaceful nuclear technology, the nuclear talks between Iran and the EU3 (Germany, France, and the UK) failed in 2005. This failure precipitated the rise of conservative Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who won the presidential election in 2005. After a period of détente during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), Ahmadinejad's new antagonistic rhetoric escalated tensions between Iran and the West and Western allies including Saudi Arabia.

By 2013, when the moderate President Hassan Rouhani came to power in Tehran, the first thing to which he committed himself was a platform of constructive dialogue with the outside world. He demonstrated his commitment to opening Iran by forging a nuclear deal with world powers, improving relations with the West, and calling upon the Arab neighbors—including Saudi Arabia—to heal past wounds. Indeed, once President Rouhani entered office, in one of his earliest press conferences he called Saudi Arabia “a friend and a brother.” Yet, despite the change in Iran's formerly bellicose foreign policy, tensions between

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We see that over the course of the past thirty years, Iran has attempted numerous times to resolve issues of concern to both the United States and the influential countries in the region, namely Saudi Arabia, through dialogue and collaboration. Many of those attempts have been either scuttled by the United States or left without a proper response. In what follows, I will examine the numerous gestures of goodwill that Iran demonstrated which, had they been embraced by the United States and U.S. allies, could have determined a different trajectory for the region, one in which collaboration would have prevailed.

Iran's Gestures of Goodwill

Historically, despite the fact that the United States and other international and regional powers supported Saddam's war on Iran, Tehran made four important gestures of goodwill toward the United States.

First, in the course of the Lebanon hostage crisis (1982–1989), in which American and Western nationals were kept as hostages at different times, Iran played a significant role in their release. President Rafsanjani's personal archives and documents that are now publicly available have revealed some important dimensions to the efforts that Iran made to release the hostages based on humanitarian grounds.

President Rafsanjani delegated three individuals to coordinate these efforts. Mahmoud Vaezi (who currently serves as the chief of staff for President Rouhani) and myself in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were delegated the responsibility of facilitating and coordinating the efforts that would lead to the hostages' release and safe arrival in their home countries. The current Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who at that time was Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations, was delegated the responsibility of coordinating the efforts of their release. Yet despite our best efforts, Tehran never got a positive response from Washington for this help. In a private meeting in mid-1989, Rafsanjani told me that a favorable U.S. response to our gestures could have resulted in possibilities for rapprochement.

Second, the enormous logistical support that Iran extended to the United States to dismantle and topple the Taliban in Afghanistan was ignored or even met with

the appellation of Iran being part of President George W. Bush's "axis of evil." Iran's foreign policy entered a new phase with the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. For the first time in two decades of hostilities, Iran's interests in the region seemed to converge with those of the United States, as both countries found defeating the Taliban to be a common goal that would serve their joint interests. In 1998, the Taliban forces in Afghanistan seized the Iranian consulate in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif and killed at least eight diplomats. Hence, shortly following the September 11 terrorist attacks, despite the fact that Iran was against

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the U.S. war on Afghanistan, the ground for cooperation between Iran and the United States on various security matters could have been fecund indeed. As Ryan C. Crocker, former American ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq, describes in his meeting with an Iranian official in an article he wrote for the *New York Times*, "Immediately after 9/11, while serving in the State Department, I sat down with Iranian diplomats to discuss the next steps in Afghanistan. Back then, we had a common enemy, the Taliban and its Al-Qaeda associates, and both governments thought it was worth exploring whether we could cooperate. The Iranians were constructive, pragmatic and focused, at one point they even produced an extremely valuable map showing the Taliban's order of battle just before American military action began."

After one of the Supreme National Security meetings in late September 2011, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Army, told me, "I suspected that the U.S. request for our help might have been a tactical move and not intended to lead to long-term cooperation. However, I also viewed Iran's assistance as a no-lose proposition. If the United States were sincere we would help them topple our archenemy and Al-Qaeda, an extremist terrorist group that threatened our security, the region, and the international community. Then broader cooperation would be possible."

The third example of American leadership ignoring gestures on Iran's part was in 2003, when the George W. Bush administration decided to attack Iraq. As the former secretary of Iran's National Security Council, I was aware of a case in which Iran sent a message through a mediator to the White House warning that a military invasion of Iraq would be a mistake and that Bush should not commit his administration to pursuing such a course of action. Also, then-President Khatami said in an interview on an official presidential trip to India, "While we recommend Iraq to abide by all UN resolutions, at the same time, we would condemn any military action and war against it (Iraq). We hope that the crisis would be solved peacefully."

Iran offered cooperation with the United States to help resolve the Iraq issue peacefully, yet we opposed a full-fledged American invasion of Iraqi territory despite the fact that a removal of Saddam's regime would have been a boon to Tehran. Right after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, major Iraqi resistance groups that had fought alongside the Iranian army during the eight-year war of aggression (1980-1988), such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Badr Brigades, and the Daawa party, left Iran to cooperate with the United States to build new political, military, and security structures for Iraq after Saddam. Indeed, the United States could not manage post-Saddam developments without the support and cooperation of these groups. However, after the new constitution and the presidential and parliamentary elections, Washington decided to isolate Iran's role in Iraq, which turned the climate of cooperation into an unhealthy rivalry between the United States and Iran.

Fourth, regarding Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, which was one of the world's most successful diplomatic efforts to resolve a potential confrontation, the United States again reneged on its promises. In other writings, I have emphasized that after years of intensive and technical negotiations, Iran and leading powers forged the most comprehensive nuclear deal that the nonproliferation world had ever seen. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a deal based not on trust, but on rigorous regimes of inspections and verifications.

The 2015 deal addressed the main concern of the international community: that Iran's nuclear program would always remain exclusively peaceful. The UN Security Council ratified the nuclear deal on July 20, 2015 with Resolution 2231. Over the past four years, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly reported that Iran continues to remain in full compliance with the nuclear deal. When the Donald Trump administration came into power in 2017, it was initially frustrated that it could not easily get rid of the nuclear deal with Iran. Finally in May 2018, President Trump and his advisors decided to violate the resolution endorsed by the UN Security Council, dismissing the UN body as the world's supreme rule-enforcing and adjudicating entity.

The Trump administration's violation of the JCPOA was a slap in the face to any attempts to reduce tensions between Iran and the United States and to resolve global security issues through diplomatic means. In this vein, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated in April 2015, "Now, this [nuclear negotiations] is a new experience. If the other side [the United States] sets aside its bad behavior, this will become a new experience for us, one that will tell us that, well, we can also negotiate with them about other issues. But, if they repeat the same behavior and take the wrong path, it [the negotiations] will only reinforce our past experience."

Hence, the failure of the Trump administration to implement the JCPOA

reinforced the longstanding pessimism that existed among Iranians regarding the trustworthiness of the United States as a negotiating partner. Had the American leadership succeeded in upholding its side of the bargain indicated in the JCPOA, there could have been grounds for a better diplomatic trajectory between the two nations, not just in bilateral relations, but in collective efforts to resolve other important issues in the region (terrorism and conflict resolution in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, to name a few). This consistent failure of the United States to abide by what it has committed itself to has convinced Iran that agreements with the Americans are essentially precarious, and that the lifespan of a deal is likely no longer than the term of the U.S. president making the deal. After the end of the Barack Obama administration, the incoming Trump administration has clearly not been bound to any agreement made by its predecessor.

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Roots of the Saudi–Iran Division

Ever since the negotiations for a comprehensive nuclear deal started in 2013, Saudi Arabia joined Israel as a voice of opposition to an agreement between Iran and the West. Saudi Arabia, as the most influential member of the GCC, viewed the nuclear deal as a permit for Iran to wreak havoc in the region. Signs of Saudi frustration were evident. From uniting diplomatically with Israel against a nuclear deal to oversupplying oil to the world market to keep prices low, almost all Saudi actions in recent years are connected to the kingdom's fears of losing its regional stature in proportion to Iran's growing regional influence.

Analysts and political observers both from the region and abroad view this growing Saudi–Iranian conflict through various lenses. They often argue that the Saudis are pushed to contend with Iran because of economic and demographic disparities Riyadh feels it has with regards to Iran. For example, pundits point to the fact that Iran has a young and highly educated population of 80 million people, while Saudi Arabia has a population of over 30 million people with almost 9 million foreigners (mostly South Asian workers who occupy various sectors in the economy such as services, energy, and construction). Analysts also discuss the economic gap between the two neighbors as a reason for their geopolitical tension. While Iran and Saudi Arabia are both oil producers, the former has enormous industrial sectors in textiles, garments, chemicals, petrochemicals, steel, auto, high-tech, and electronics which the latter, with the exception of but one or two of these fields, lacks. Many theorized that once the nuclear deal was sealed and the international sanctions removed, more resources would be made available to Iran to continue projecting its power in the region.

Rather than engage with Tehran in regional cooperation, Riyadh has continuously tried to undermine the role of Iran in the region, but the kingdom's attempts to do so have failed. The Saudis backed the anti-Syrian March 14th Alliance in Lebanon only to see Iran's ally Hezbollah remain a powerful force in Lebanese politics. The Saudis were also hapless to contain Iran's role in Iraq. These failures, however, provide further incentive for the Saudis to be obsessed with Iran as a competitor.

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notably by Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), who was appointed as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017, the kingdom is at risk of becoming a pariah state. This young generation of state managers seems interested in perpetuating tensions and promoting an aggressive foreign policy toward Iran—largely to divert domestic and international attention from the real threats, namely Saudi-backed extremism. However, some mistakes by MBS such as the Yemen war, taking

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri hostage, and the Khashoggi affair are homemade and not related to Iran.

All told, the Saudis have failed to realize that the fear of losing regional standing cannot be mitigated by provoking sectarian confrontation. Now with the increasing number of conflicts in the region, particularly the Syrian civil war, more regional actors have acquired visibility such as Russia, Turkey, and Egypt. This multiplicity of involvements by state actors further invites a new model of conflict resolution in the region, in which Iran can play a part.

The “End-State” Model for Conflict Resolution

Presenting a general model of conflict resolution in the region is crucial, because the Middle East has seen a meteoric rise in the number of violent conflicts over the past twenty years. The enormity and urgency of such conflicts behooves us to think about viable models of conflict resolution that could bring sustainable peace to the region.

It must be emphasized that parties involved in negotiating a broad Middle East peace must know the “end-state” of a final deal. They should steer away from having competing political objectives. In this vein, the success of the Iran nuclear deal sheds enormous light on the conditional background needed for negotiations to resolve the Yemeni, Gazan, Syrian, and Libyan crises. Were it not for the negotiating parties involved in the JCPOA first agreeing on the “end-state of the process,” achieving a deal would not have been possible. In

the context of the Iran nuclear deal, the bottom-line for Iran was the respect for a peaceful nuclear program including uranium enrichment. The bottom-line for the Western powers was no nuclear bomb in Iran. The Iran deal's success depended on both sides being clear, transparent, and compatible.

Moving forward, regional and world powers should suspend competing objectives during the process of negotiations. All parties involved in a Middle East regional conflict must achieve a baseline agreement prior to the implementation process. One of the main reasons that the Syrian peace talks in Geneva failed is that the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian government, and the armed rebels had competing objectives, even after preliminary agreements were reached on the principles of a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Therefore, the end-state of the negotiation process with respect to the conflicts in the region must be clearly and transparently identified. Once the partners involved in negotiations have identified each party's end-state objectives, the negotiation process can start in good faith. As demonstrated in this model, the negotiation process overlaps with certain political steps, each of them equally important to facilitate conflict resolution. Respect for the territorial integrity of the country troubled by conflict and collective violence reduction are crucial.

Surprisingly enough, there are political analysts that see partition as the main solution to conflict in the region. For instance, in an article published by the *Yale Global*, analysts suggest that partition of Syria along racial, ethnic, and religious lines is the only way to gain a resolution to the conflict. However, this is a faulty premise. Partition on those grounds in Syria and other flash-points in the Middle East will only give rise to more conflict and political opportunism for separationist groups whose interests do not necessarily align with those of the people.

Part of the reason why conflicts break out is because minority rights are not handled properly. A crucial factor in the process of negotiation is that parties involved should not dictate the nature of the negotiations according to their preferences. Other important political steps are free and fair elections and the drafting of new constitutions, which result in executive and legislative branches based on democratic principles and rights for minorities.

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After agreeing on the principles of the "end state," parties need a plan of action. The first stepping-stone would be a ceasefire. Once the ceasefire is in place,

then a national dialogue must start to formulate the principles needed to reach a long-term peace. Humanitarian assistance is of course essential, since ordinary people become the most vulnerable in a conflict.

As alluded to earlier, a group of world and regional powers can play a role in bringing about peace in the region, yet cannot themselves alone be the final deciders. This is because countries often have conflicting and overlapping interests that may induce them to put the sustainability of region-wide peace at risk. As such, ultimately the UN Security Council must step in and be the final arbiter for the coordination and supervision of peace. Once a functioning and inclusive transitional bureaucracy is set in place through a free and fair election supervised by the UN, foreign aid should be made available as “investment funds” to reconstruct the areas of wartime destruction. This rebuilding process is familiar to the United States and the UN, as both gave huge post-war funds during the long history of aid-giving after World War II.

A final element crucial to facilitating the success of the negotiation process would be a shift away from pernicious zero-sum calculations. This idea that winning must necessitate a loss by the other side kills the chance for a mutual victory and the establishment of a lasting peace. The Yemeni conflict in this case is the most telling. While analysts believe that bringing the Houthis to the negotiation table may increase in the likelihood of a political settlement, the Trump administration has backed the Saudis’ zero-sum approach. This approach assumes that a Saudi-led military victory in Yemen will mark a defeat for Iran, while a political solution or settlement with the Houthis will constitute a triumph for Tehran. Yet, were the United States and Saudi Arabia open to a win-win scenario in Yemen in which the Houthis, Saudis, and Iranians all gained their objectives, a long-term peace in the country would be a real possibility.

Win-Win Models and Lose-Lose Models

Negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program failed from 2003 to 2013. After ten years of negotiations, Iran and the regional world powers had a breakthrough when they agreed on an end-state which would be workable for both sides. They signed the Joint Plan of Action on Iran’s nuclear program on November 24, 2013. This document was short—only four pages—but it showed the shape of an end-state resolution, and was a roadmap that led to the world powers and Iran agreeing on the final 159-page JCPOA agreement.

The international community used the same approach with Afghanistan. In the Bonn conference in 2001, regional and international powers agreed on the following principles for a future Afghanistan: national reconciliation; independence; national sovereignty; territorial integrity; free elections; national unity; broad representation in an interim arrangement of all segments; and broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative governance

prior to the establishment of permanent institutions in the country. Yet the reasons for the failure of the 2001 Afghanistan roadmap were threefold. First, the United States undermined the principle of power-sharing with its emphasis on eliminating the Taliban at all costs. Clearly, we in Tehran wanted to remove the Taliban from power as well, but we would have been open to a negotiated settlement in which the Taliban leadership joined the new power-sharing governing system in Kabul in a non-leading role. With the support of regional powers, mainly Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Taliban had been a major player in Afghanistan after the end of the USSR's occupation in 1989, a fact that the United States did not respect in 2001. Second, there was a lack of cooperation among Bonn conference attendee nations in collectively fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. Third, the American strategy of exclusive dominance in Afghanistan undermined the interests of other regional and international powers such as Russia and Iran. Therefore, the Bush administration did away with an indispensable part of crisis management in preserving the integrity and unity of the country, and the United States missed a chance to collectively cooperate with Russia and Iran to combat and eradicate Al-Qaeda terrorism in Afghanistan.

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In looking at peace process failures in post-Saddam Iraq, it is instructive to see how power sharing, free elections, and the rights of minorities were not successfully integrated by the United States and the newly formed Iraqi government. The United States disregarded the importance of sharing the process with major regional and international powers, once again trying to go it alone. With U.S. support, the Nouri Al-Maliki government undermined the rights of the Sunni minority, while major regional and international powers did not contend with terrorism across Iraq. Finally, while the United States dismantled the military and security apparatus that would have led to increased security in the country, Israel and Saudi Arabia covertly supported the establishment of a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north.

End-State Model as the Way Forward

The outlined “end-state” solution model would be a more effective path toward larger efforts in bringing about sustainable peace in the region. Regional multi-state organizations such as the Arab League and the GCC have consistently failed to promote peace in the region. Their lack of success suggests that a solution must be found elsewhere. Ultimately, inclusive regional security and cooperation among regional powers, regional organizations, and actors on the ground, with the support of world powers through the Security Council, is

imperative for the creation and maintenance of sustainable peace and security in the Middle East.

Fundamentally, all parties involved must first identify an end-state of the negotiation process. Next, all the parties need to reach a consensus on the compatibility of their various political objectives. Finally, everyone with a seat at the table must not reduce the talks to a zero-sum political game in which a winner-takes-all mentality settles in over the participants. These three factors are extremely important to facilitate the desired outcome: putting an end to the civil wars and conflicts.

This model is useful in almost every conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, because it encompasses concrete steps toward addressing the demands of all social and political forces involved. In such endeavors, no organization in the world enjoys such high levels of authority and respect as the UN Security Council. Iran has played a constructive role in two cases of UN-led crisis management: the 2001 Bonn conference and the Iranian nuclear program negotiations. Iran now seems ready to be a positive actor in the region. Yet, this willingness to initiate and participate in collective efforts on the part of Iranian leadership still depends on the actions of other influential regional (Saudi Arabia and Turkey) and international (the United States and the European Union) powers.

There is no way out of crises without the political will to cooperate in good faith based on rational choices. No single regional or international power can manage such a complex diplomatic and international quagmire. We need a workable model to realize win-win, face-saving solutions. A realistic and non-discriminatory model, coupled with multilateralism and collective cooperation by regional and world powers, is imperative for crisis management in the Middle East. ©



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