

# Early Warning, Early Action

An assessment of conflict potential  
in the Middle East in relation to  
Dutch national interests

Jos Meester  
Erwin van Veen  
Moneera Yassien

CRU Report



**Clingendael**

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**Disclaimer:** The report's contents do not necessarily reflect the position of the Dutch government, and naturally remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

# Executive summary

This report presents the results of Clingendael's Early Warning, Early Action (EWEA) Delphi sessions on the Middle East, assessing conflict risks over a five-year period.<sup>1</sup> Yet, for a number of countries the analysis presented here may be closer attuned to the present as a result of the intensity and speed of events in the Middle East at the moment, particularly in and around Gaza, and the difficulty of assessing how these events might develop and be viewed in the longer term. The substantive results of these Delphi sessions have been contextualised and enriched by the authors where necessary in order to develop a more comprehensive overview of conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> They have also been complemented by the authors with an assessment of the possible impact of such conflicts on the Netherlands.

A key observation from the discussions is that current political violence and vulnerability to future political violence appear to correlate heavily across the Middle East, suggesting that conflict vulnerability is already translating into the current significant political violence. Another key observation from the Delphi sessions is that the relative stability of the Arab states on the Persian Gulf was considered as a more superficial condition underneath which significant conflict vulnerabilities lurk.

The combined scores of the conflict vulnerability assessment and the impact assessment suggest the prioritisation list as captured in Table 1 below. Key risks to the Netherlands are:

- The enduring Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories stands out as a growing risk, particularly because the Dutch position after 7 October exposed a hitherto dualistic Dutch foreign policy as untenable. On the one hand, Dutch policy recognises the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and encourages a two-state solution. On the other hand, it has undertaken little effective action against decades of occupation and large-scale Israeli violations of international (humanitarian) law and human

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1 The analysis engages with developments up to 31 October 2023, when the research period ended.

2 For more details regarding the methodology see the Appendix.

rights. Unconditional<sup>3</sup> Dutch support for the Israeli military campaign in Gaza after 7 October has shown where the emphasis in this policy lies, which is undermining the international reputation and influence of the Netherlands in the Middle East, as well as the international legal order.

- Syria holds a myriad of vulnerabilities that might yet lead to escalation. This might affect the Netherlands through a range of transmission mechanisms, notably the return of individuals with ties to extremist violent groups, the expansion of drug exports to Dutch ports, and negative implications for the international legal order as large-scale human rights violations in Syria continue with impunity despite international condemnation.<sup>4</sup>
- Iran's geopolitical role presents some indirect risks to the Netherlands through Iranian intelligence operations. Such operations include the assassination of dissidents abroad and the kidnapping of foreign citizens in Iran to increase Iranian leverage on various issues. While such practices pose no specific threat to Dutch nationals, neither are they explicitly excluded from it.
- The vulnerability of nearly all Gulf states to rising political violence is a potential risk. While most Gulf states have recognised these problems and defined strategies to tackle them, the ability of a number of Gulf states to deliver on these strategies is questionable. While significant from humanitarian, local and regional perspectives, rising vulnerability in many Gulf states is unlikely to affect the Netherlands directly. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represent a potential exception, however. These countries, for example, hold significant stakes in strategic Dutch companies through their sovereign wealth funds, which could be leveraged at a later stage in pursuit of political purposes. Given opaque data on Gulf investments, it is unclear at present to what extent this risk is real or hypothetical. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also pose a range of risks towards the international legal order. The normalisation of ties with Israel ignoring the resolution of the Palestinian issue on the basis of existing parameters of international law, as well as existing soft law in the form of the Arab Peace

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3 A condition is a requirement that another party must agree to on pain of facing a negative consequence in case of non-compliance, which brings the required action or behaviour about. Demands or requests can have conditions attached to them, but do not have to.

4 The international legal order is noted as an impact for the Netherlands given its relevance as a public good with particularly attractive benefits for smaller countries, but also because the Netherlands has a role in upholding a legal order in line with the Article 90 of its own constitution.

Initiative, effectively removes an incentive to resolve the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Finally, the UAE's role facilitating the evasion of sanctions on Russia presents a threat to effectiveness of Western foreign policy and international norms.

- The Yemeni conflict is currently in a state of flux. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE likely to downscale their support for specific Yemeni partners, power is likely to shift towards the Houthi in the near future. This power shift is further augmented by the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, and poses a considerable threat to Dutch economic security specifically due to Houthi attempts to harass maritime traffic in the Red Sea.

### Suggested country prioritization:

Country		Vulnerability	Impact	Combined score
Syria	Conflict Resolution	0,90	0,50	0,450
Palestine	Conflict Resolution	1,00	0,40	0,400
Israel – Gulf	Conflict Resolution	0,80	0,30	0,240
Iran	Conflict Prevention	0,67	0,30	0,201
Israel – Levant	Conflict Prevention	0,65	0,30	0,195
KSA	Conflict Prevention	0,48	0,25	0,120
Yemen	Conflict Resolution	0,80	0,15	0,120
Turkey	Conflict Prevention	0,60	0,20	0,120
UAE	Conflict Prevention	0,43	0,20	0,085
Iraq	Conflict Prevention	0,75	0,10	0,075
Egypt	Conflict Prevention	0,35	0,20	0,070
Lebanon	Conflict Prevention	0,65	0,10	0,065
Bahrain	Conflict Prevention	0,55	0,10	0,055
Qatar	Conflict Prevention	0,40	0,10	0,040
Jordan	Conflict Prevention	0,50	0,00	0,000
Oman	Conflict Prevention	0,45	0,00	0,000
Kuwait	Conflict Prevention	0,35	0,00	0,000

Countries are ranked according to their combined vulnerability to political violence over the coming five years, and the impact of conflict in these countries on the Netherlands (scores normalised from a minimum vulnerability/impact of 0 to a maximum of 1). The impact on the Netherlands is a combined score incorporating the impact on the territorial security, physical security, economic security, and socio-political security of the Netherlands and key allies, as well as on the international legal order. Vulnerability scores are derived from two Delphi sessions with country experts; the impact scores are derived from the authors' previous work on Dutch foreign policy in the Middle East. Note that Israel is reflected twice in this figure due to the importance of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza to geopolitics across all countries in the region. The first placement ('Israel – Levant') reflects the consideration of the Delphi session focused on the Levant, while the second placement ('Israel – Gulf') reflects the placement determined by the Delphi session focused on the Gulf.

# Abbreviations

<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EWEA</b>	Early Warning, Early Action
<b>FATF</b>	Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign direct investment
<b>ICJ</b>	International Court of Justice
<b>INSTEX</b>	Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>KSA</b>	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers' Party
<b>PREVIEW</b>	Protection Visualization Early Warning
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>YPG</b>	Peoples' Defense Unit

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# 1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, interest in understanding, predicting and preventing violent conflict across different fragile and conflict-affected situations has soared. The focus on conflict prevention recognises not only the imperative of preventing the steep human costs associated with violent conflict and donor interests in stability in key regions across the world, but also rests on the idea that conflict prevention is cost-effective. Such insights were recognised in the framing remarks of the World Bank's seminal *Pathways for Peace* report, stating that '*over the medium to long term, donors would save between US\$2 and US\$7 for each US\$1 invested in prevention-related activities*'.<sup>5</sup> Hence, several European donors have recognised conflict prevention as a key goal in their foreign policies.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the government of the Netherlands prioritised conflict prevention as the first goal of its *Integrated International Security Strategy* (2018 – 2022) and subsequently upheld it in *The Security Strategy for the Kingdom of the Netherlands* (2023 – 2029).

Although the importance of conflict prevention is thus solidly entrenched in the international debate, its execution is not a straightforward matter. Conflict prevention requires an understanding of conflict dynamics, detection of early warning signals and trends, and the ability to initiate preventive action early across a variety of domains. In theory, well-funded and sufficiently flexible diplomatic, aid and defence systems should be able to address emerging challenges in a timely fashion, foregoing the need for any forward-looking tools and methods. In practice, deployment and budgeting procedures work in (multi-)annual cycles, coordination and multilateral advocacy take time, and the bureaucratic logic of ongoing programmes may resist the swift reaction required by a changing conflict context. As such, the evaluating and selection of early warning signals to be further explored through a strategic foresight process may be significant steps to more rapid and substantial policy responses should conflict emerge.

To overcome these constraints a variety of actors have developed Early Warning systems to bolster their ability to look ahead. Examples include the EU (EEAS's Conflict Early Warning System), Germany (PREVIEW Crisis Early Warning), and a

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5 United Nations and World Bank, 2018. *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, Washington DC: World Bank, p. 2.

6 Olsen, R. 2009. The EU and Military Conflict Management in Africa: For the Good of Africa or Europe?, *International Peacekeeping*, 16(2), p. 2.

range of academics and non-governmental organisations. In the Netherlands, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence have made significant investments in enhancing their ability to provide early warning signals in order to identify potential early actions (EWEA). Through the PROGRESS research programme these ministries have commissioned the Clingendael Institute to support their activities, in order to assess the risk of violent conflict and instability across a range of states. This report presents the results of Clingendael’s Delphi workshops designed to detect emerging conflict risks in the Middle East over a five-year period, which refines the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ own quantitative early warning approach.<sup>7</sup> Yet, for a number of countries the analysis presented here may be closer attuned to the present as a result of the intensity and speed of current events in the Middle East, particularly in and around Gaza, and the difficulty of assessing how these events might develop and be viewed in the longer term. The countries within the scope of this project are indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Countries within scope of the EWEA Middle East analysis highlighted in blue



7 For more details on the methodology, see the Appendix.

## 1.1 From theory to practice

The value of early warning signals and early action to prevent conflict is well entrenched, yet conflict can prove hard to detect. Although the past decades have seen vast improvements in quantitative analytical techniques, computing technology and data availability, the ability to accurately forecast conflict has remained noticeably limited.<sup>8</sup> While predictions regarding the continuation of conflict have somewhat improved, no accurate quantitative forecasting models predicting the onset of conflict are currently available.<sup>9</sup> This reflects the fact that conflict can take a wide range of forms, and can be sparked through myriad casual pathways. Moreover, conflict patterns and dynamics are contextual, and likely to change over time, even within a single context.<sup>10</sup> As for instance in the case of Sudan, virtually all indicators were signalling potential conflict decades before the recent protests and transition. ‘Even close members of Bashir’s entourage are puzzled as to how he managed to stay in power so long.’<sup>11</sup> It is therefore nigh impossible to generate an accurate prediction of the onset of conflict, and potentially costly when one considers the consequence of acting on misleading or incorrect forecasts. Interpreting early warning signals is thus not simply a matter of ‘better’ or ‘more’ data, but of understanding the potential drivers, impact and policy implications of the signals detected.

Over the past few years, Clingendael has produced several methodological papers aiming to overcome the limitations to forecasting by leveraging different early warning techniques which provide frameworks to analyse both countries’ vulnerability to conflict and the impact such conflict would have on the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> In order to overcome the weak predictive capacity of current methods and data systems, the approach taken here moves away from attempting to estimate the likelihood of conflict and instead assesses a county’s vulnerability to conflict. Vulnerability encapsulates the presence of factors

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8 Chadeaux, T. 2017. Conflict Forecasting and its Limits. *Data Science*, 1(1-2), p. 7.

9 Cederman, L.E. and Weidmann, N.B. (2017). *Predicting Armed Conflict*. *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)*, 355:6324, p. 474.

10 Chadeaux, T. 2017. Conflict Forecasting and its Limits. *Data Science*, 1(1-2), p. 7.

11 Waal, de A., 2015. *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*, London: Polity Press.

12 Deen, B., et al., 2021. *From Indices to Insight: A proposal to enhance the risk assessment of the Dutch Early Warning/Early Action process*, The Hague: Clingendael; Bruijine, de K. 2021. *Costing Conflict: An Early Warning Method to Assess the Impact of Political Violence on Vital Security Interests*, The Hague: Clingendael.

associated with a range of casual pathways that may lead to conflict, drawn from a range of conflict theories. An original estimate of a country's vulnerability to conflict is estimated quantitatively through a data analytical method developed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Datalab, and subsequently refined and contextualised through a Delphi process in collaboration with a range of country experts with first-hand experience of the context under discussion.<sup>13</sup> This assessment thus seeks to identify and explicate factors that create a vulnerability to political violence that exist within a country, rather than trying to forecast the likelihood of conflict.

In order to prioritise countries for early action, it is important to consider the potential cost of conflict to the Netherlands as well as its vulnerability to conflict. Assessments of the impact of conflict on the user is generally an underdeveloped aspect of early warning approaches, however. The assessment presented in this report overcomes this deficiency through an impact assessment method building on the Dutch categorisation of key interests abroad, as recognised in the framework of the *Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid* (Analyst Network on National Security), centring around five vital interests<sup>14</sup> to the Netherlands and its main allies – the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), France and Germany. Impact thus relates to various transmission belts that translate the consequence of conflict in a country into negative changes affecting Dutch interests.

The approach guiding this report thus departs from the quantitative analysis of conflict vulnerability conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and aims to provide a contextualised insight of the vulnerabilities of each country included in its research. It validates and enriches the quantitatively derived vulnerability assessments through additional qualitative insights from in-country experts through a Delphi method, and further contextualises these results through the authors' assessment of the impact on the Netherlands of conflict in these countries. While this analysis attempts to combine both analytical depth, grounded knowledge and a wide scope of analysis, it should be noted that

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13 For more details regarding the second part of the methodology, the Delphi-based expert validation, see the Appendix.

14 The original framework as developed by the *Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid* contained six vital interests. However, considering that the impact of conflict in a country on Dutch interests in 'ecological security' could not be adequately defined nor operationalised, this vital interest has been omitted from this analysis.

the analysis was conducted mere weeks after 7 October 2023 and the onset of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza.<sup>15</sup> Although the implications of this event were kept in sharp focus during the analysis, the limited research resources available and short amount of time that passed between these events and this research make it unlikely that the analysis fully captures the implications and consequences of these events for the Middle Eastern conflict landscape as a whole. As such, it may be worthwhile to periodically repeat (partial) EWEA analyses, in order to monitor the evolving threat landscape.

## 1.2 Outline

This report first presents the results of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' quantitative EWEA scan of the Middle East and the qualitative input from the country experts in the Delphi workshops (Chapter 2). It then discusses, refines and contextualises various countries' vulnerability to conflict, categorising countries into conflict resolution cases, conflict prevention cases and low conflict vulnerability cases. Chapter 2 explores the key factors driving countries' vulnerability to conflict in sub-chapters 2.1 and 2.2. Subsequently, Chapter 3 assesses the impact of conflict in these countries on the Netherlands. The analysis concludes with Chapter 4, where a prioritisation of countries for preventive action is established and discussed, and lessons from this assessment are summarised.

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15 The analysis engages with developments up to 31 October 2023, when the research period ended.

## 2 Vulnerability to conflict

This chapter discusses the intensity of current political violence as well as the vulnerability to political violence of various Middle Eastern countries over the next five years. This is combined with an assessment of the impact of conflict in these countries on the Netherlands in Chapter 3, in order to form a fully fledged risk assessment. The vulnerability assessment shown in Figure 2 (both variables) draws on both the quantitative analysis conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (on 11 November 2023) as well as qualitative insight derived from the analysis of 21 country experts through two Delphi workshops (conducted on 31 November and 9 November 2023).<sup>16</sup> Note that these analyses were conducted only several weeks after the Hamas attack of 7 October and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza. While this analysis was informative in exploring the immediate implications of the conflict, it does not necessarily provide an accurate estimate of the longer-term consequences of the conflict due to limited research resources and the many variables in play. Consider, for instance, the risk of region-wide conflict given changes in deterrence patterns and security perceptions across the Middle East.

The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses are shown as separate data series in Figure 2.<sup>17</sup> The analysis presented throughout this paper derived fully from the qualitative expert assessment.<sup>18</sup>

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16 For more details about the workshops, see the Appendix.

17 The operationalisation of the measures in the quantitative analysis by the MFA Datalab was conducted as such: *'This plot shows two indices: the Fragile States Index on the x-axis and the ACLED Severity Index on the y-axis. Both of these indices have been scaled, ranging from 0 to 1, ensuring that the data is presented in a standardized and easily interpretable format. By scaling the values, this plot preserves the proportional differences between countries, allowing comparison between the levels of fragility and severity across different nations accurately. In practical terms, when examining this plot, one can pinpoint countries that fall at the extremes of the scales (the red and green boxes). Those closer to 1 on the Fragile States Index may require more focused attention and targeted interventions to prevent or address conflict, while countries with higher values on the Severity Index signal the presence of severe conflict situations. The countries have been scaled to world minima and maxima. Important to note is how the indices are computed. In the ACLED severity index there are 4 indicators: Deadliness, Danger, Diffusion, and Fragmentation. This means that a country with more fatalities may not necessarily have a higher severity score, as the other 3 indicators also weigh in. The fatalities may for example be concentrated in one specific area, not involve many civilians, or have many different groups involved. The Fragile States Index contains Cohesion, Economic, Political, and Social indicators.'* This analysis was finalised on 11 October. The operationalisation of the qualitative analysis can be found in the Appendix.

18 The analysis engages with developments up to 31 October 2023, when the research period ended.



1) a red field that includes conflict resolution cases; 2) an orange field including conflict prevention cases; and 3) a green field including low vulnerability cases. Countries in field one and two are discussed below. Note that field 3 is omitted, as no countries were allocated to this category by the country experts. In this figure, Israel is reflected twice, given the central importance of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza to geopolitics across all countries in the region.<sup>19</sup> The first placement ('Israel – Levant') reflects the consideration of the first Delphi session focused on and around the Levant, while the second placement ('Israel – Gulf') reflects the placement determined by the second Delphi session focused on the Gulf.

Surveying the overall distribution, the countries' expert scores show significantly higher levels of current political violence than the quantitative analysis shows. In part, this likely reflects the covert nature of repression in many of the states under investigation and the construction of the political violence measure in the quantitative analysis (see note 12 for the quantitative methodology). While casualties due to ongoing conflict may be relatively easy and less controversial to register, the covert operations leading to the disappearance or torture of politically active individuals in other countries not dependent on Official Development Assistance are likely to frequently escape formal measurement but did feature prominently in expert evaluations.

Besides current levels of political violence, the expert survey also notes significantly higher vulnerability levels for virtually all Gulf states (the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), while the vulnerability levels of non-Gulf states are quite similar between both analyses. This may be due to the fact that many Gulf states rely on the proceeds of hydro-carbon sales to maintain domestic buy-in to the political system. With discussion regarding the energy transition starting to gain traction, oil prices declining, and the Covid-19 pandemic having severely hit the fiscal buffers of most Gulf states, such a model is increasingly unreliable. As such, the expert scores factor in the prospects of instability that may result from Gulf states' efforts to diversify their economies while maintaining their social and political models, rather than assuming continuity of historical performance.

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 4.2 for further considerations.

In addition to higher overall scores, it should also be noted that the expert scores appear to present a relatively linear pattern. This suggests that in the countries under examination, the vulnerability to political violence is not merely a vulnerability but is already translating into significant current political violence (be that state repression or inter-group violence). This suggests that many of potential vulnerabilities are already being mobilised by political actors or are actively counteracted by political actors.

Finally, the expert survey shows a major discrepancy with the quantitative analysis on both axes regarding the placement of Israel. The expert survey assigns especially high scores on both axes, which reflects extensive settler violence in the West Bank, high levels of violence in Gaza, the shifting of the Israeli political and popular discourse to legitimate such violence and the increasingly exclusionary nature of the Israeli state. This makes the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict less likely, raises the vulnerability to future violence, and increases the occurrence of domestic violence against minority groups.

## 2.1 Country descriptions – conflict resolution

The analysis below focuses on countries in the Middle East with high levels of vulnerability and high levels of current conflict intensity. They suffer significant internal violence, which interact with geopolitical dynamics affecting the wider region. Most of these countries would not benefit (any more) from conflict prevention efforts, although minor exceptions may exist in which violence might yet be prevented from escalating in selected areas within the country (e.g. Syria), or small windows may exist to prevent a fragile mediation process limiting violence from breaking down (e.g. Yemen).

The **Israeli state** has embarked on a military campaign that seeks to eliminate the militant capabilities of Hamas. According to the experts participating in the Delphi sessions, Israel's campaign should be viewed in the context of the broader pattern of the structural violence that it applies as a neo-colonial state to annex the Palestinian Territories and displace their inhabitants. The method Israel has selected for its current campaign is the destruction of at least the northern part of the Gaza strip and an acceptance of large numbers of Palestinian civilian deaths as collateral. The extremist elements of the Israeli government push for an unlimited campaign of unrestricted duration while also encouraging and enabling West Bank settlers to grab Palestinian land, assets and force civilians to flee in

larger numbers than before. Expropriation and intimidation in East Jerusalem have similarly increased. As international sympathy for Israeli's plight in the direct wake of the Hamas attack of 7 October has given way to international indignation about Israel's methods, the country now faces a genocide charge at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), brought by South Africa. All this takes place in a context of enduring occupation (56 years) of which major elements were declared illegal under international law decades ago, such as the separation wall (ICJ, 2004), the blockade of Gaza and Israel's illegal settlements. The Israeli government has so far given no indication whatsoever of wanting to undo occupation and numerous indications of wishing to continue its Gaza offensive. Experts in both Delphi sessions saw similar vulnerabilities in Israel's position, domestically, vis-à-vis Hamas and regionally. Yet experts in the second session considered the risk of escalation between Israel and its neighbours as substantially higher, and paid more attention to Israeli settler violence outside of the immediate vicinity of Gaza. This led to a higher score on both axes in the second session. In general, the Palestinian issue can be viewed as an internationalised intrastate conflict.

The **Palestinian proto-state** remains deeply divided between a dysfunctional and unrepresentative Palestinian Authority that runs the West Bank, Hamas that is vilified and glorified in turn but no longer runs Gaza, and the unrepresented Palestinian community in East Jerusalem. In parallel, the conditions and plight of different groups of Palestinians continues to steadily worsen as a result of enduring occupation, structural Israeli violence, poor Palestinian governance and the Israeli military campaign in Gaza – albeit in different ways. Palestinians in the West Bank face growing settler extremism who act with violence and with impunity under cover of the IDF. Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation has more or less held up so far, but this cannot be expected to continue forever. Palestinians in East Jerusalem face higher levels of expropriation, threats and intimidation by the same settler extremist groups that enjoy direct and indirect Israeli state support as those operating in the West Bank. The inhabitants of Gaza face unrestrained Israeli strikes and bombardment and extensive ground operations that show little to no regard for civilians while epidemics and famine are making their way around the corner. Violence by Hamas and Israel will remain a feature of the near future, augmented by violent responses from Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that will inevitably grow.

**Syria** features extremely weak state institutions unable to contain or resolve tensions, as well as a poorly governed war economy. Militias across the state run

various areas like local fiefdoms, with the central Assad regime only maintaining a low degree of control as arbiter of the last resort on issues crucial to regime survival. Although military rule and severe repression methods are exercised to maintain stability in regime-held areas, the situation remains fragile. Many fault lines exist throughout the country, especially between regime and non-regime held areas, and may lead to a resumption of violence. Unresolved conflict in the North East persists, as well as in Idlib. US-backed, Iran-linked and Turkey-supported groups co-exist uneasily next to regular US, Turkish and Russian military forces and extremist militants. As international tensions between external sponsors rise, tensions between their affiliates in Syria may do the same. The Israeli military campaign in Gaza that followed the Hamas attack of 7 October is a case in point of a spillover risk that has already triggered tensions between US and Iranian-backed groups in Syria, and which could lead to Iran indirectly opening a second front towards Israel from Syria. Syria appears to be increasingly used by external actors to signal their willingness to use forces across theatres. In addition to geo-politically motivated violence, regional tensions are further increased due to Syria's growing role as a hub of drug production and export to the Gulf (especially the drug Captagon). In general, the Syrian civil war can be viewed as an internationalised intrastate conflict with transnational elements – for example Hezbollah, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

**Yemen** is considered by country experts to be in a state of flux. Most factions have currently limited hostilities in Yemen to enable the mediation process to continue. With Saudi Arabia likely to significantly downscale its support to the official Yemeni government forces and the UAE likely to reduce involvement as well, power between the various factions in Yemen is likely to shift significantly in favour of the Houthi, after which conflict is likely to resume and intensify. This power shift is also accelerated by the situation in Gaza, as it has allowed the Houthi to significantly bolster their popular legitimacy by publicly supporting the Palestinian cause in general and Hamas in particular via missile, drone and naval attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. This facilitates Houthi recruitment, for example. Also, there are several different local militias which are poorly or not controlled by any of the major actors in the conflict. A reduction in geopolitical interest (and funding) is likely to further weaken whatever control exists at present, and further fragment the conflict in Yemen. As the civil war intensifies and resumes, government institutions will remain dysfunctional and controlled by whomever controls the territory. The humanitarian situation is likely to worsen further, as funding cuts for humanitarian aid start to bite, food prices

remain volatile and Red Sea shipping volumes diminish (including to Yemen). Although the Yemeni private sector has in the past managed to maintain a degree of access to essential goods, rising poverty throughout the country will create growing needs among its population. In general, the Yemeni civil war can be viewed as an internationalised intrastate conflict.

## 2.2 Country descriptions – conflict prevention

The early warning category consists of countries whose levels of vulnerability and conflict intensity rank between low and high. All countries in this category seem to follow a diagonal line, indicating a high degree of correlation between current levels of political violence and the vulnerability to further future political violence. Within this group, two groups can be distinguished: a group of Gulf states featuring relative stability that is challenged by a weakened fiscal position due to low oil prices,<sup>20</sup> combined with predominantly state-sponsored repression of its population, as well as a group of non-Gulf Middle Eastern states featuring a wider variety of state, semi-state and societal groups engaging in political violence.

Within the Gulf grouping, **Iran** faces a significant degree of ongoing political violence as well as conflict vulnerability. Iran features a deep yet stable divide between the state and large segments of its society in which the latter is held in check by strong state control over the exercise of violence, heavy domestic repression as well as state-sponsored social engineering. Regionally, it maintains a potent network of armed groups and political parties with ties to Tehran (the ‘axis of resistance’) that largely serves as an asymmetric defence mechanism against Israel and the US that creates strategic depth, redundancy and deterrence. This network is viewed as a major threat by other states in the region due to its relative opaqueness and the plausible deniability element it introduces, together with Iran’s missile programme and its potential nuclear capabilities. Although Iran is already heavily sanctioned due to the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and its assertive regional security profile, sanctions can hardly be increased further. Tehran’s sanction evasion techniques have become more

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20 Oil prices dropped dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the need for additional expenditures rose in many Gulf states, leading to depleted financial reserves. Looking forward, global CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction goals are expected to reduce demand for oil, hence reducing the expected income from proven and unproven reserves.

effective with time, which has enabled a modest degree of economic growth in the country. Overall, the Iranian state appears to be focusing on a conservative strategy that avoids direct military engagement in the region while maintaining its regional assets as it eyes a leadership transition and ensures domestic political stability. The country's deterrence strategy against its geopolitical adversaries appears viable and effective for now, facing only limited push-back in the form of grey-zone operations from the US and Israel, as well as direct strikes by these countries against some of Iran's partners like Hezbollah and the Houthi.<sup>21</sup> The fallout of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza after 7 October has not yet had a major impact on Iran. This stands in contrast to regional competitors, such as the Emiratis and Saudis who normalised, or were seeking to normalise, relations with Israel. On balance, Gaza has so far strengthened Iran's regional position.

The position of the royal family in **Saudi Arabia** is nearly as contentious as that of Iran's regime. Although Saudi Arabia may be a regional power, it has been facing a slowdown of economic growth, rising consumer prices and mounting urgency of the need to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbons with large ramifications for its rentier state character. Its attempts to focus solely on national development were set back significantly by the fallout of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza as it halted efforts to normalise relations with Israel and re-empowered the Houthi, with whom Riyadh was close to striking a peace deal in Yemen that might have enabled a somewhat dignified exit from its quagmire in Yemen. Moreover, as the country attempts to diversify its economy and modernise its society, it is faced with domestic Islamist and tribal resistance that makes a range of reforms more difficult. With a very limited civil space and very high levels of domestic repression, the ability to manage social change is constrained, potentially opening fractures within the ruling family, between the family and Wahhabi clerics, and between influential tribal families. Such divisions may ultimately lead to local protests or even revolts, and represent potential domestic sources of violence. Regionally, Saudi Arabia faces increasing tensions with the UAE over foreign policy and regarding economic competition.

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21 Grey-zone operations can be defined as 'a set of activities that occur between peace (or cooperation) and war (or armed conflict). A multitude of activities fall into this murky in-between—from nefarious economic activities, influence operations, and cyberattacks to mercenary operations, assassinations, and disinformation campaigns.' Atlantic Council, 2022. 'Today's wars are fought in the 'gray zone: Here's everything you need to know about it,' Atlantic Council, 23 February, [Today's wars are fought in the 'gray zone: Here's everything you need to know about it.](#) - Atlantic Council, (accessed 8 January 2024).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has numerous outstanding border disputes with other Gulf states that lie dormant or are reactivated depending on bilateral relations.

Similar to Saudi Arabia, the **United Arab Emirates** deploys significant domestic surveillance and repression to effectively limit popular political involvement and any kind of opposition to government policy. The ruling family nevertheless appears to maintain quite a high degree of popular legitimacy. The country maintains a stable economy and a sound fiscal situation, although the need to diversify its economy in the near future is clear in the UAE as well. Key domestic challenges for the UAE arise out of the misalignment of interests between the ruling families of the different emirates (predominantly trade-orientated Dubai versus gas-export reliant Abu Dhabi). While such tensions are generally resolved without too much consternation, they make it difficult for the UAE to enact a coherent foreign policy. Internationally, a rift has arisen between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which is reflected in Saudi attempts to block trade from the UAE (even though the countries are in a customs union). It has also led to a lower level of alignment on various foreign and security issues, especially in Yemen and Sudan. In the past, substantial troop losses have proved to be a threat to the legitimacy of the Emirati regime, but the drawdown of UAE troops from most foreign theatres has reduced this risk. While Houthi legitimacy has been boosted due to their professed support for the Palestinians in Gaza, the UAE's normalisation agreement with Israel (Abraham Accords) now looks problematic. Moreover, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are posing a serious threat to the UAE's maritime economy. In the longer term, the UAE's support for Russian sanction evasion may create additional financial risks to Dubai's status as an international financial hub; it is already grey listed by the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF), although no Western country appears to view this as overly problematic yet.

Like many other Gulf states, **Qatar** has been facing a declining GDP growth rate, rising consumer prices and a need to diversify its economy away from reliance on hydrocarbons. Nevertheless, popular buy-in to the current political system appears to remain high. Internationally, Qatar has nevertheless made major reputational and practical gains over the past years. With the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rift papered over, Qatar has developed a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, and with the acceptance of a Turkish military base it has further shored up its network of security partners. To further reinforce its web of international partners, Qatar has signed a 30-year LNG (liquid natural gas) deal with China, making it likely that China will become more involved in the region

in the coming years. Although tensions between Qatar and the UAE remain, the diplomatic position of Qatar appears to be strong. This is further bolstered by Qatar's role as a mediator between Hamas and Israel (and providing a haven for the political leadership of Hamas), which also prevents popular grievances over the Palestinian issue from acquiring political salience, as it might in other Gulf states.

In **Bahrain** the economic situation is worse, compared to Gulf states like the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Many Bahraini citizens face daily economic hardships as the country's economy is heavily reliant on Saudi investment and oil supplies. In an attempt to reduce this reliance, Bahrain has been developing its own fracking industry, but has so far not been able to arrest the decline of the livelihoods of its citizens. While the regime has been stepping up domestic surveillance and repression methods, popular grievances are maintained and expressed by the exiled Bahraini opposition party that operates out of Lebanon, where the regime has little influence. As a result, the state is left vulnerable to external shocks (e.g. a global economic downturn or reduced support from Saudi Arabia) and internal dissent should domestic surveillance/repression fail. Domestic tensions may escalate into conflict over the coming years, especially in the wake of an external shock to the system.

**Oman's** economy has suffered over the last few years due to declining oil prices. In contrast to other Gulf states, however, it has rather limited fiscal buffers to absorb the fiscal effects of this development, or to finance the diversification of its economy (some Gulf states have well stocked Sovereign Wealth Funds, but not Oman). Muscat also remains reliant on hydro-carbon exports and on China, which buys over half its exports. As economic pressures on its citizens mount, together with popular concerns regarding the succession of power within the royal family after the death of Sultan Qabos in early 2020, some degree of domestic tension has arisen. However, concerns over the country's heavy reliance on its relationship with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are key to Oman's vulnerability. It has seen a strong influx of investment from the UAE, for example, which most likely is a bid to tie Oman into the UAE emerging maritime network of power and influence.

In somewhat similar vein, **Kuwait** also suffers from a weakening economy due to declining oil prices. Although such risks used to be covered by additional expenditures in the past, the Covid-19 pandemic has left Kuwait's financial buffers largely depleted, which generates further challenges to attempts to

diversify the country's economy. Kuwait does feature significant space for civil society, is the closest thing to a semi-democracy that the Gulf has available, and has the ability to discuss how socio-economic challenges should be addressed. Yet, the ongoing infighting between the country's executive and legislative branches has prevented a productive socio-political process from emerging. The country's vulnerability to political violence remains low, however.

Moving from the Persian Gulf to the Levant, **Iraq** stands out for both its high vulnerability score as well as its elevated levels of current political violence. Iraq faces severe social and institutional weaknesses. As violence among the political class keeps recurring and power remains dangerously divided among ethno-sectarian and consociational lines, with all meaningful political players in command of substantial coercive capabilities, Iraqi institutions remain unable to resolve any of the underlying socio-political tensions nor manage the escalation of crisis. These are resolved instead by a kind of shuttle diplomacy between the political classes. As a result, national development is on hold, popular grievances mount and intra-elite political tensions remain rife. Violence across the country could also escalate relatively easily due to external presences and pressures, that is, Turkish military bases on Iraqi soil, a US military contingent, and Iraqi armed groups combined with political parties with ties to Iran. In such an event, the Iraqi government and its formal security forces would have limited capacity and be highly proscribed in effectively managing any security crisis. The risk of Iraq becoming a playground for externally induced violence has risen in the wake of the 7 October Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza. The vulnerability of Iraqi governance is further heightened by volatile oil prices, as they can cause sudden increases and decreases in public finance with swift ramifications for the country's ability to pay the public payroll, let alone improve social services or ensure the required level of public investment.

Similarly to Iraq, **Lebanon** stands out as a country with a very high vulnerability to political violence, as well as high levels of current political violence. The country has been facing a dire economic crisis since 2019, which is aggravated by the absence of effective governance institutions (it was rather the dysfunctional state of some of these institutions that helped create the economic crisis). Government institutions are largely paralysed as sectarian interests block necessary reforms. This paralysis is likely to continue in the near future, despite the reappointment of the serving Chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces (one of the government institutions perceived to be relatively impartial). The Lebanese population continues to face extensive hardship, including meagre livelihoods, a

lack of basic services (e.g. water, electricity, roads, healthcare, trash collection), and large-scale corruption. While popular tensions have translated into large-scale protests in the past, at present there is little domestic pressure on Lebanon's sectarian political leaders to reform. Instead, sectarian 'bubbles' are increasingly acting as proto-states, effectively keeping the country in a volatile state of temporary stability. In particular, the role of Hezbollah is significant in this regard, which is so strong that no other domestic sectarian grouping is willing or able to challenge its predominance. Instead, Syrian refugees are blamed for many of the country's hardships, leading to substantial violence against them. All this said, however, it should be noted that the main reason for high levels of current violence and vulnerability to future violence arises from the conflict between Hezbollah and the Israeli state. While focused on the southern border area for now in the form of ongoing exchanges of hostilities, the Hamas attack on Israel of 7 October has heightened awareness of the actual threat that Hezbollah poses to the Israeli political elite.

In contrast to Lebanon, **Turkey** is relatively isolated from any risks related to the Israeli military campaign in Gaza. Its strong support for the Palestinian cause has limited domestic discontent, in contrast to the situation faced by Arab regimes that either have a peace treaty with Israel (Egypt, Jordan) or that normalised their relations (UAE, Bahrain). Domestically, the Turkish government also appears relatively secure despite the ongoing PKK insurgency in response to Ankara's repression of the desire of its 20% Kurdish Turkish minority for greater socio-cultural and political rights. Although state institutions have been weakened through the transition towards the presidential system and decades of de facto one-party rule while the country faces a rather weak economy, domestic discontent remains limited – in part because of growing domestic surveillance and repression. The main external risks to the Turkish government may come from its involvement in northern Syria and Iraq. Turkish operations in these areas risk triggering militant activities by Kurdish groups like the PKK, or even YPG (Peoples' Defense Unit), on Turkish soil. Whereas the Kurdish issue started as a largely intrastate conflict (civil war) with transnational elements (due to Kurdish population groups in neighbouring countries), the creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Syrian civil war internationalised the conflict. Additionally, a sudden influx of refugees from Syria due to rising conflict there might lead to additional tensions, given existing anti-refugee sentiments in Turkey.

**Jordan** is facing a severe economic decline as Covid-19 worsened the country's fiscal position and led to the imposition of increasing austerity measures.

Yet the regime has historically proven to be highly capable of managing crisis and is expected to maintain stability – especially by leveraging international economic support. Yet, the Israeli military campaign in Gaza is generating additional challenges. The large number of Palestinian refugees in Jordan raises the stakes of the conflict, while the extensive presence of US military personnel is increasingly resented. Such tensions will become harder for the Jordanian state to mitigate, and may boil over should Israeli settlement and Israeli settler violence on the West Bank accelerate further, let alone result in a new wave of Palestinian displacement towards Jordan.

In **Egypt**, there is substantial popular discontent with the political regime, largely due to the declining economy that is in part due to military control of major economic sectors with all the associated corruption and lack of investment. Yet the popular willingness to mobilise is limited. Following the Arab Spring uprisings, the Egyptian security forces have substantially improved their ability to prevent domestic discontent from being mobilised not only through extensive surveillance, high levels of repression and extensive detention, but also through administrative tools such as the selective granting of access to land, permits and bank accounts. This has largely put an end to years of guerilla-style extremist violence in the Sinai (an intrastate conflict with transnational elements due to links between Hamas and Ansar Beit al Maqdis). Another result has been that the recent presidential elections were not seriously contested. Yet fractures exist within the regime, as the decision to lease out part of the Suez Canal has reduced domestic sources of rents available to security elites. Such fractures between the executive and security actors may increase should Egypt come under greater economic or fiscal strain. Yet, Egypt's geostrategic position will likely enable it to attract sufficient economic support from the international community to survive, especially in view of the present situation in Gaza. Financial support from the Gulf has become more sensitive, however, as Egypt's support to the Sudanese Armed Forces in Sudan has pitted it directly in opposition to its longstanding Gulf partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Meanwhile, Egypt's proximity to Gaza creates reputational and material risks to the regime should Palestinian refugees move across the Egyptian border in large numbers, although they would be unlikely to affect domestic stability in the short run.

## 2.3 Conclusion

This chapter has assessed conflict vulnerability in the Middle East based on two Delphi sessions that separates countries already in conflict from potential conflicts. Overall, it appears that country scores on both ongoing political violence and vulnerability to future political violence appear to correlate heavily. This suggests that the vulnerability to political violence is not merely a vulnerability but is already translating into significant current political violence (be that state repression or inter-group violence, for example). Potential vulnerabilities are already being mobilised by political actors. The view arising from the Delphi sessions also challenges conventional views of relative stability in the Gulf (excluding Iran) contrasting with conflict elsewhere in the Middle East.

The analysis situates four countries in the conflict resolution category, and all others (12) in the early warning category (i.e. none are in the low vulnerability category). In the conflict resolution category one finds Israel, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. For Israel and Palestine, as well as the spiralling violence in Gaza following the 7 October attacks, placement also reflects increasing violence in the West Bank and expropriation, settler intimidation and police repression in East Jerusalem. With no indication of changes to Israeli occupation and a continuing Gaza campaign, structural violence will remain a permanent feature, with occasional flare-ups. For Syria the conflict resolution placement reflects both a fragmented domestic security landscape, unresolved domestic sources of tension, and rising tensions between several geopolitical actors (the US, Iran, Turkey and Russia) with affiliates or even national forces inside Syria. Despite ongoing violence, such factors risk further escalation in the next few years. Yemen stands out somewhat in the conflict resolution grouping from a domestic perspective given the relative calm as the mediation process continues. This situation is considered to be temporary, however, as the civil conflict is likely to resume with increased intensity following the withdrawal of Saudi and UAE resources. Escalation is especially likely given the increased domestic legitimacy of Houthi actors due to their support for the Palestinian cause following the 7 October attacks by Hamas, as is reflected in recurrent strikes already taking place in the Red Sea.

Within the early warning group, two sub-groups can be distinguished. The first is a group of Arab monarchies on the Persian Gulf that are relatively stable but threatened by a weakened fiscal position due to low oil prices, and featuring different degrees of state repression of their population. In contrast, the second

group of Arab countries not on the Persian Gulf feature a wider variety of state, semi-state and social groups engaging in political violence. This category contains Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt.<sup>22</sup> The sources of vulnerability to conflict vary substantially across each of these cases.

While this chapter clarifies the vulnerability to conflict across the Middle East, such an overview is insufficient to establish a prioritisation of countries for Dutch policy makers. Conflict in these countries will affect the Netherlands in different ways, depending on the ties these countries have with the Netherlands. The next chapter will therefore explore the impact that conflict in these countries might have on vital Dutch interests.

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22 Note that Lebanon is not placed in the conflict resolution category despite ongoing clashes on the Israeli border. Turkey is not placed in the conflict resolution category either, despite regional conflict with the PKK.

# 3 Impact of conflict in the Middle East on Dutch national security

Establishing the vulnerability to ongoing or potential conflict of 16 Middle Eastern countries, has generated half of the analysis required to outline risks to the national security of the Netherlands. The other half of the equation, that is, the potential impact of these conflicts on the Netherlands, is the focus of this chapter. It explores the potential impact of conflicts in and between various Middle Eastern states on five dimensions of Dutch national security. To this end, it applies a framework modified from the one developed by the Analyst Network on National Security.<sup>23</sup> The assessment and resulting impact ratings are based fully upon insights derived from the authors' previous work on Dutch foreign policy in the Middle East. The chapter starts by providing a bird's eye view of potential points of impact on the Netherlands and subsequently analyses impact on each dimension of national security in greater detail. Note that the time horizon for impact estimation is five years.

## 3.1 A bird's eye view of conflicts affecting Dutch national security

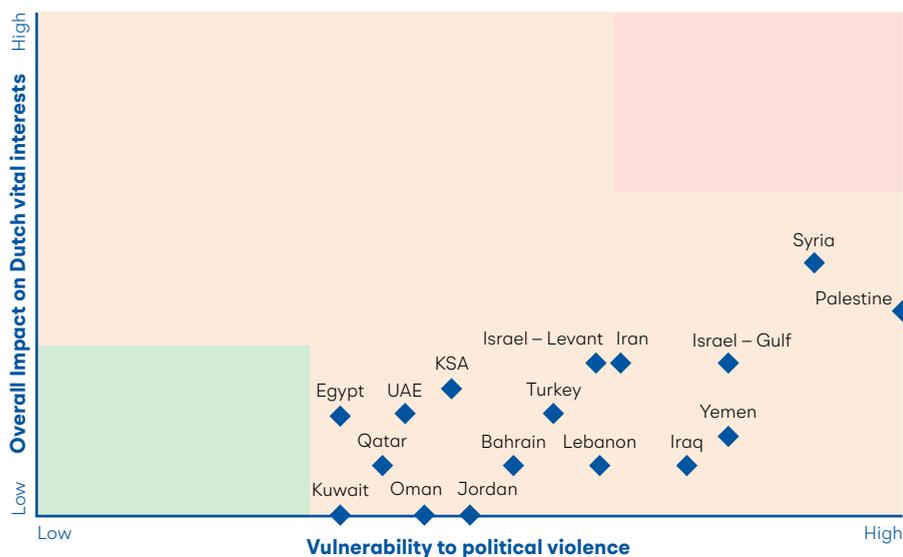
A bird's eye view of the Middle East suggests that the likely overall impact of current conflicts and conflict risks in the region on different aspects of Dutch national security – territorial, physical, economic, socio-political and international legal order – is limited, especially in the time horizon under consideration (see Figure 3). There are only a few high-impact risks, which are all linked to the international legal order. Because of the normative and slow-moving nature of this dimension, such impact is likely to be smaller in the short term and more profound in the long term. The one medium-to-high risk in the category of economic security centres on the threat of the Houthi further disrupting shipping

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23 The original framework as developed by the *Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid* contained six vital interests. However, considering that the impact of conflict in a country on Dutch interests in 'ecological security' could not be adequately defined nor operationalised, this vital interest has been omitted from this analysis.

through the Red Sea in response to the Israeli military campaign in Gaza. Such a move could further increase shipping insurance costs and force a complete rerouting of cargo ships via the Cape of Good Hope. In addition, conflicts across the region also generate a sizeable number of medium-impact risks to Dutch national security, which are fairly evenly spread across different dimensions.

Figure 3 Potential overall impact of conflicts in various Middle Eastern countries on Dutch national security, set out against countries vulnerability to political violence<sup>24</sup>



24 Countries score on the vertical axis 'Impact on Dutch vital interests' is derived by combining the scores of a country on each of the five sub-dimensions of the vital interests framework. One point is added for each 'low' score, 2 points for each 'medium' score and 3 points for each 'high'. For an overview of all scores, see the Appendix. Also note that Israel is reflected twice given the central significance of the Israel military campaign in Gaza to geopolitics across all countries in the region. The first placement ('Israel - Levant') reflects the consideration of the first Delphi session focused on and around the Levant, while the second placement ('Israel - Gulf') reflects the placement determined by the second Delphi session focused on the Gulf. Note that Yemen and Saudi Arabia are awarded 2.5 and 1.5 points for their scores on economic security and socio-political security respectively, considering their ratings fall on the edge of two categories.

## 3.2 Analysis of potential risk impact by national security dimension

This section provides a brief analysis of risks originating in ongoing and potential conflicts in Middle Eastern countries that could affect Dutch national security. It is limited to risks with a low-medium, medium, medium-high or high level of potential impact with regards to each of the five dimensions of Dutch national security. The countries of greatest concern to the Netherlands are those that already feature significant ongoing conflict (Syria, Israel/Palestine), as well as those that are deeply implicated in regional conflicts outside of their own national boundaries (Iran).

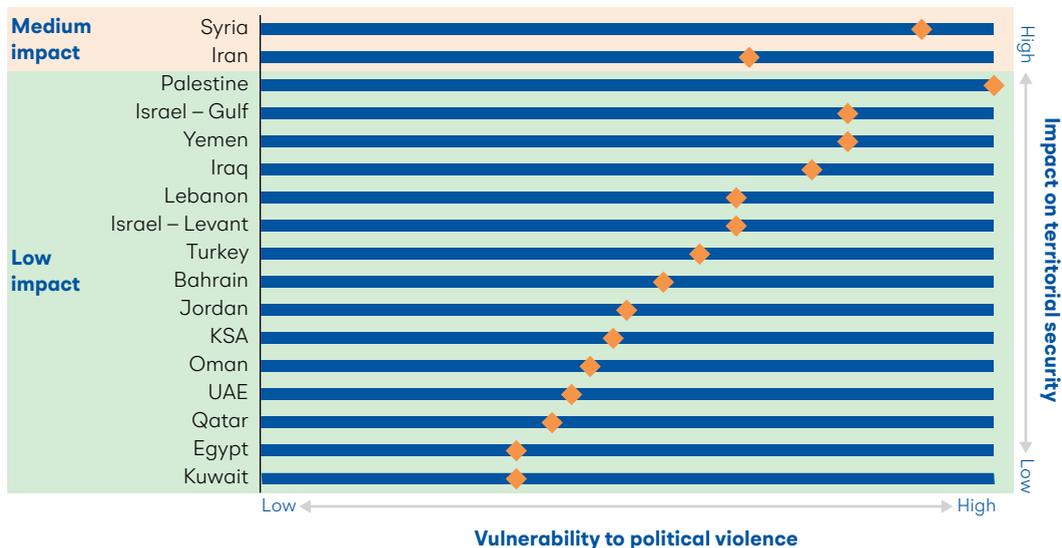
### 3.2.1 Territorial security

Territorial security refers to threats against the territorial integrity of the Netherlands and other members of the kingdom, as well as key allies – namely France, Germany, US and UK.<sup>25</sup> This includes military threats and terrorist attacks as well as non-violent threats such as initiating cyberattacks, sanctions or demonstrations. On balance, risks to Dutch territorial security that emanate from conflicts in the Middle East seem relatively small and isolated, according to the discussions and findings of the current research effort, as reflected in Figure 4. The two main sources of medium-impact threats to Dutch territorial security emanate from Syria and Iran, but it bears noting they are rather different in nature.

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25 Due to the limited amount of research time available, territorial risks to Dutch allies are left out of account in this section, as the US in particular would require substantial in-depth analysis of its own, given Washington's backing of the Israeli campaign in Gaza. The other members of the Kingdom of the Netherlands include Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, as well as Bonaire, Sint Eustasius and Saba.

Figure 4 Overview of Middle Eastern countries, setting out the impact of conflict on Dutch territorial security interests against the country’s vulnerability to political violence



In northern **Syria**, and to a lesser extent in southern Turkey and northern Iraq, there are around 250 individuals with ties to the Netherlands who are accused of an association with extremist violence linked to groups such as Islamic State. Most of these individuals, among whom there is a significant group of children, live in captivity. The majority are held in camps in northeast Syria under control of the Syrian Kurdish YPG, such as Al-Hol and Al-Roj.<sup>26</sup> These individuals are part of a much larger group of around 50,000 detainees similarly accused, of whom the majority are Syrian or Iraqi.<sup>27</sup> Given the woeful nature of local penitentiary facilities, the lack of due process and poor living conditions, radicalisation of

26 Algemene Inlichtingen en Veligheidsdienst, 2024. 'Uitreizigers en terugkeerders,' Algemene Inlichtingen en Veligheidsdienst, 29 February, [Uitreizigers en terugkeerders | Terrorisme | AIVD](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

27 Gluck, M., 2023, 'Unpacking the UN Report on Detention Facilities in Northeastern Syria,' *Law Fare Media*, 1 November, [Unpacking the UN Report on Detention Facilities in Northeastern Syria | Lawfare \(lawfaremedia.org\)](#), 1 November (accessed 8 January 2024).

these individuals is possible.<sup>28</sup> The Dutch government has made some effort to repatriate its nationals who travelled abroad to support Islamic State and similar groups, but this effort got underway late and remains incomplete.<sup>29</sup> On balance, the situation poses a risk that individuals currently residing in captivity in Syria might commit terrorist attacks in the Netherlands by way of revenge upon their return.

**Iran** represents a medium-impact threat to Dutch territorial security by virtue of its longstanding efforts, perceived and real, to assassinate prominent dissidents abroad. Assassinations have happened across Europe and carried out using methods such as car bombs, stabbings and shootings, usually via local contractors. In two recent cases, Dutch intelligence made it known that it possesses clear indications of Iran's involvement.<sup>30</sup> Tehran usually resorts to such assassinations either because the individuals involved have, in its view, committed acts of terrorism in Iran itself, or because they are deemed to pose a political risk to the Islamic Republic. Iran also perceives Europe to be soft in its response to such assassination efforts. Iran's perceptions of the EU as a credible partner diminished when the EU proved unable to stay the course on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after former President Trump withdrew the US from the agreement in 2018.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2.2 Physical security

Physical security relates to politically motivated threats against Dutch citizens abroad, whether from the Netherlands or other parts of the kingdom. On the whole, risks to Dutch physical security emanating from conflicts in the Middle East exist, in particular to diplomats, officials and military capacity as a result of the supportive stance of the Dutch government towards Israel after 7 October,

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28 OCHR, 2023. 'Technical Visit to the Northeast of the Syrian Arab Republic; End of Mission Statement,' *United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures*, 1 November, [EoM-Visit-to-Syria-20230721.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

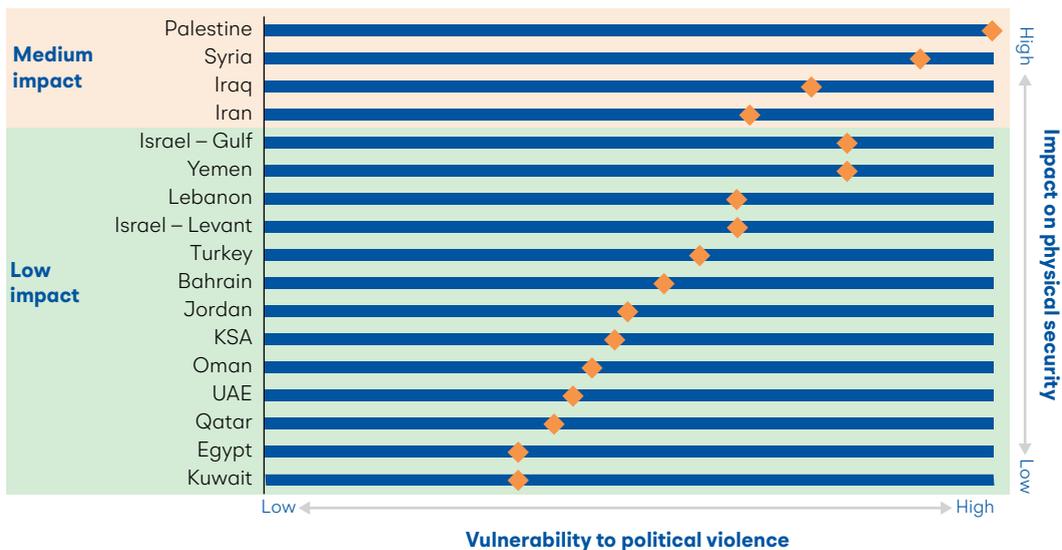
29 Tayler, L., 2022. 'Nederland Doet Mee aan Repatriëringen uit Noordoost Syrië Zorg voor Teruggehaalde Kinderen is Essentieel,' *Human Rights Watch*, 3 November, [Nederland Doet Mee aan Repatriëringen uit Noordoost Syrië | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

30 Borm, B., et al., 2020. 'De Lange Arm van Iran,' *Argos*, 10 December, [De lange arm van Iran - HUMAN - VPRO](#), (accessed 8 January 2024).

31 Karnitschnig, M., 2022. 'License to Kill: How Europe Lets Iran and Russia Get Away with Murder,' *POLITICO*, 1 December, [License to kill: How Europe lets Iran and Russia get away with murder - POLITICO](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

and require mitigation.<sup>32</sup> The assessment in Figure 5 identifies four sources of threats with a medium-impact potential on the physical security of Dutch citizens abroad: Syria, Iraq, Iran and Palestine.

Figure 5 Overview of Middle Eastern countries, setting out the impact of conflict on Dutch physical security interests against the country’s vulnerability to political violence



The issue with **Syria** links directly with the previously noted risk to Dutch territorial security as a possible result of detainees held in northern Syria with links to the Netherlands who might want to take revenge for the slowness and unwillingness of the Dutch state to repatriate them, regardless of the choices they themselves made. In addition to such revenge taking place on Dutch territory, it could also be directed against Dutch citizens abroad. With the global jihadi discourse currently leveraging and amplifying Hamas in its fight against the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza, the risk of such 'lone wolf' attacks on Dutch citizens abroad is undeniably present.

32 Consider for example the Dutch abstention in the UNGA regarding resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza (twice), the continued export of spare parts for Israeli F35s in the knowledge these are used for the bombardment of Gaza, the Dutch government’s embrace of Israel’s ‘right to self-defence’ even though the ICJ has ruled this as not applicable to the occupied territories, cutting future funding for UNWRA on the basis of unsubstantiated Israeli charges and the general refusal of The Hague to take meaningful action to advance the two-state principle as the internationally accepted formula for conflict resolution despite decades of Israeli intransigence.

With regards to **Iraq**, the main risk centres on the unconditional support of the Dutch government for Israel since 1948 – and especially since 7 October 2023 – in combination with recent anti-Israeli legislation and sentiment in Iraq, as well as the practice of some Iraqi political leaders to encourage large street protests to condemn foreign countries if it suits their own political agenda. If the Israeli destruction of Gaza, and Dutch government support for this endeavour persists, as already manifested in the two Dutch ‘abstentions’ on UNGA resolutions calling for a permanent ceasefire, it is possible that Dutch diplomats and officials in Iraq will face growing threats to their security. This could extend to Dutch personnel active in the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, the NATO Mission Iraq or the European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq.

The issue with **Iran** is its more recent practice of taking citizens of Western countries hostage who have neither a double nationality nor an official function, such as the unfortunate Belgian Olivier Vandecasteele, simply to obtain leverage in securing an objective of its own (in this case, the release of Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi, imprisoned in Belgium on a conviction of engaging in terrorist activity). While this Iranian practice poses no specific threat to Dutch nationals, neither are they explicitly excluded from it.

Regarding **Palestine**, the medium-impact rating of possible risks for Dutch citizens abroad results directly from the Dutch government’s unconditional support for the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, including its indiscriminate bombing of the area.<sup>33</sup> Threats to Dutch nationals would not likely originate from ordinary Palestinian citizens or Fatah-dominated security forces, but rather from

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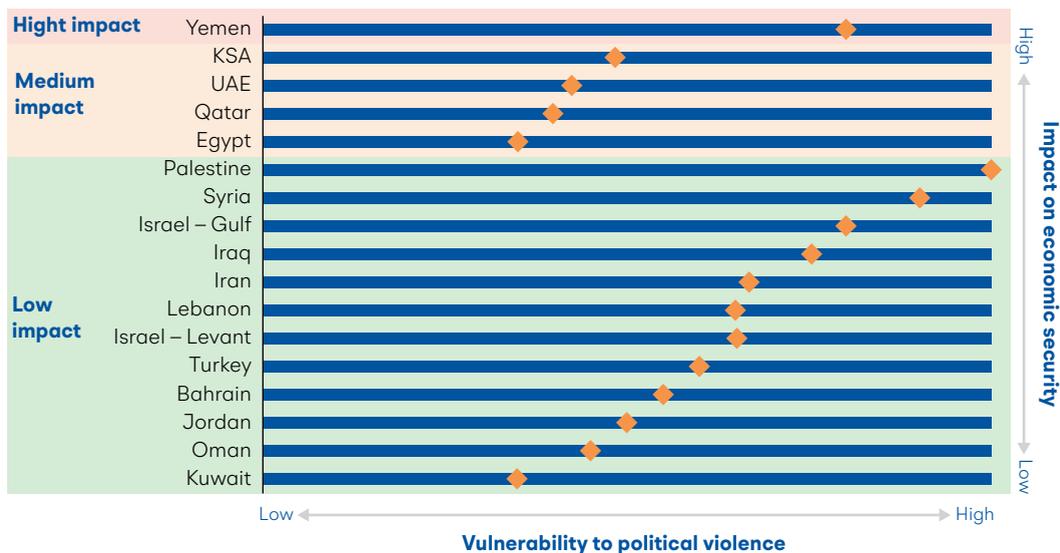
33 See: Levy, Y., 2023. ‘The Israeli Army Has Dropped the Restraint in Gaza, and the Data Shows Unprecedented Killing,’ *Haaretz News*, 9 December, [The Israeli Army Has Dropped the Restraint in Gaza, and the Data Shows Unprecedented Killing - Israel News - Haaretz.com](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/the-israeli-army-has-dropped-the-restraint-in-gaza-and-the-data-shows-unprecedented-killing-israel-news-haaretz-com), (accessed 1 March 2024). A *condition* is a requirement that another party must agree to on pain of facing a negative consequence in case of non-compliance, which intends to bring the required action or behaviour about. Demands or requests can have conditions attached to them, but do not have to. Apart from the two UNGA resolutions on which the Netherlands abstained (see above), other indicators of unconditional Dutch support for Israel include the caretaker PM’s steadfast prioritisation of Israel’s right to self-defence over recognition of the structural violence of decades of occupation and blockade; continuation of the export of F35 fighter spare parts to Israel in the full realisation that these planes are used to bombard both militant and civilian targets in Gaza; cutting future UNRWA funding on the basis of unsubstantiated Israeli charges; and a lack of forceful action to help implement the ICJ’s demand that Israel ensure greater humanitarian access – given that the present humanitarian crisis was purposely created by the Israeli government.

those Hamas militants who have been further radicalised due to the massive destruction wrought upon the Gaza strip. It is likely that Dutch officials and diplomats in the West Bank and East Jerusalem will be most at risk, given the existence of Hamas cells in the former and sympathisers in the latter.

### 3.2.3 Economic security

Economic security refers to Dutch trade interests and is based on indicators relating to import/export flows and fossil fuel reserves, as well as on maritime indicators. Overall, risks to Dutch economic security emanating from conflicts in the Middle East seem modest given that the region is not a prominent area for trade or foreign direct investment (FDI) to the Netherlands. Moreover, most risks are incipient rather than mature at this point in time, according to the discussions and findings of the current research effort. The one exception that requires urgent attention is Yemen. According to the present assessment shown in Figure 6, there are four sources of medium-impact threats to Dutch economic security originate from Egypt, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the UAE.

Figure 6 Overview of Middle Eastern countries, setting out the impact of conflict on Dutch economic security interests against the country’s vulnerability to political violence<sup>34</sup>



34 Note that Yemen scores on the edge of medium and high risk.

The issue with **Qatar**, the Kingdom of **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE** is that part of the enormous financial resources of their Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) might be invested in strategic sectors or strategic companies in the Netherlands (in analogy to the Chinese stake in the port of Piraeus in Greece, or its effort to obtain an important stake in the port of Hamburg). Since state and economy in these three countries are both authoritarian and tightly interwoven, such investments bring a modest risk of being leveraged at a later stage in pursuit of other purposes, which can range from industrial espionage to influencing Dutch foreign policy on particular issues. Given the relatively opaque governance and bookkeeping of Gulf-based SWFs, it is unclear at present to what extent this risk is real rather than hypothetical. Finally, it should also be noted that with the sanctioning and diversification away from Russian gas, hydrocarbon production in the Gulf has become a more important factor in oil and gas prices paid in Europe.

With regard to medium-impact risks to Dutch economic security originating from **Egypt**, it is worth noting that the Netherlands is a more significant trading partner to Egypt than the other way around, in the sense that exports to and imports from the Netherlands represent a larger part of total Egyptian trade than what these flows represent in total Dutch trade.<sup>35</sup> Egypt is not a major trading partner to the Netherlands and FDI is also modest.<sup>36</sup> The Netherlands-African Business Council notes that 15 Dutch companies are active in Egypt, together with around 100 joint ventures.<sup>37</sup> With this in mind, the main source of risk is the poor fiscal position of the Egyptian government and its imminent necessity to obtain additional resources to keep the country's political settlement afloat, in particular to ensure the continued support of the military-business elite for President El-Sisi. One way to do so is to ensure that foreign and Egyptian companies make a contribution, which could be encouraged or enforced through all manner of (new) fees and (unexpected) tax claims.

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35 World Bank, 2021. 'Egypt, Arab Rep. trade balance, exports and imports by country 2021', *World Integrated Trade Solution*, [Egypt, Arab Rep. trade balance, exports, imports by country 2021 | WITS Data \(worldbank.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024); World Bank, 2021, 'Netherlands trade balance, exports, imports by country and region 2021', *World Integrated Trade Solution*, [Netherlands trade balance, exports, imports by country and region 2021 | WITS Data \(worldbank.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

36 Aerts, N., 2022. *Dutch Trade in Facts and Figures*, CBS, [International trade in goods: composition and geography - Dutch Trade in Facts and Figures | CBS](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

37 NABC, 2023. 'Country Profile Report,' NABC, [Egypt - NABC](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

Another potential impact vector would be the Suez Canal, functioning as a major artery for world trade. While the Suez Canal may be vulnerable, it should be noted that its economic importance for Egypt is even greater than for the Netherlands. A unilateral shutdown thus seems unlikely. A state-centred security threat emanating from the region seems unlikely as well, given the interest of virtually all major powers in continued trade through the channel. Risks to shipping are more likely at other chokepoints in the Red Sea, where clandestine actors can operate easier (see also the paragraph on Yemen below).

An additional risk to the economic security of the Netherlands lies in the grey listing of the **UAE** by the Financial Action Task Force (technically called ‘jurisdictions under increased monitoring’) which, if not addressed by Abu Dhabi, could create both regulatory and reputational risks for Dutch companies registered or doing business via one of the UAE’s many free-trade zones, such as the Jebel Ali Free Zone.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the poor regulation of these free-trade zones and their role in both Iranian and Russian sanction evasion means that EU-imposed sanctions on both countries are diminished in terms of their effectiveness, undercutting part of Dutch policy regarding Ukraine, Iran and Russia. This is a well-known fact in policy circles, but there seems to be insufficient political appetite to take a more critical stance in relation to the UAE. Incidentally, Emirati free-trade zones also very likely play a role in facilitating criminal activity related to the Netherlands, especially with regards to money laundering options. However, the UAE has mounted an effective advocacy campaign against its grey listing that provides Western policy makers with a convenient excuse not to take action, and perhaps even agree with a delisting in due course.<sup>39</sup>

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38 Blore, S., et al., 2022. *Dubai’s Role in Facilitating Corruption and Global Illicit Financial Flows*, eds. Paige, T., and Vittori, J., Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [Dubai’s Role in Facilitating Corruption and Global Illicit Financial Flows - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), (accessed 8 January 2024).

39 FATF-GAFI, 2023. ‘Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring,’ FATF-GAFI, 27 October, [Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring - 27 October 2023 \(fatf-gafi.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

Finally, the main threat to Dutch economic security has a medium-to-high impact potential and emerges from **Yemen**. It centres on the ability of the Houthi movement to harass maritime traffic in the Red Sea, or even effectively close it to commerce by blocking the Bab el-Mandab. While a sudden closure would likely trigger the intervention of an international naval task force, a more gradual strategy could nevertheless cause a swift increase in shipping insurance and similar costs. In turn, this could cause traffic with lower profit margins to cease being viable whereas traffic with higher profit margins might be forced to re-route via the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>40</sup> The Israeli invasion of Gaza has made it clear that the Houthi are able and willing to make good on such a threat and therefore even if that does not happen, the risk of future repetition will persist.

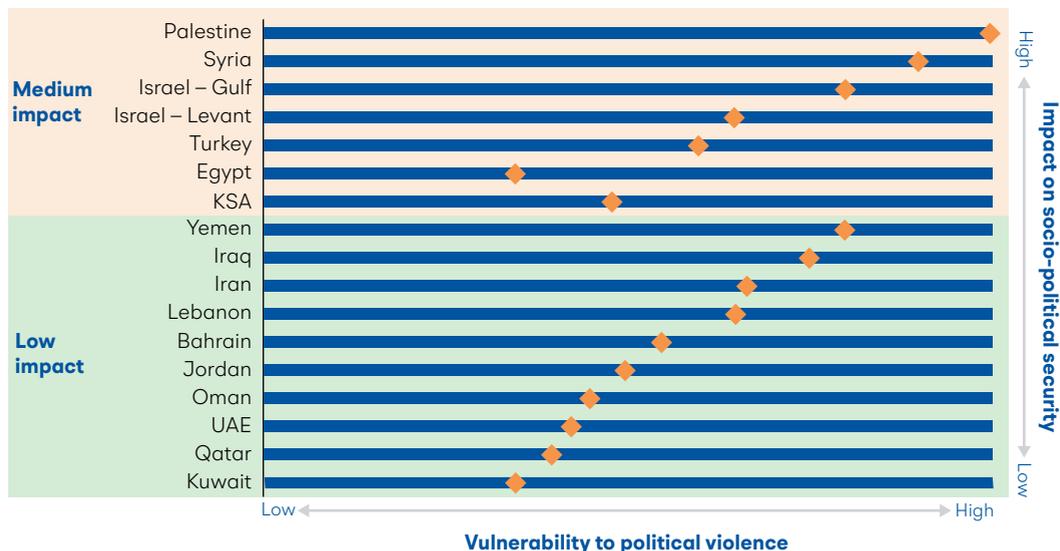
### 3.2.4 Socio-political security

Socio-political security refers to the dynamics by which countries affect socio-political conditions in the Netherlands, such as diaspora politics in the Netherlands, disinformation activities, migration flows and transnational organised crime. On balance, risks to Dutch socio-political security originating from Middle East conflicts are diverse in nature – ranging from migration and organised crime to polarised relations between different population groups in the Netherlands and the spread of values conflicting with prevailing legal and social norms. The assessment shown in Figure 7 identifies six sources of threats with a medium-impact potential on socio-political security in the Netherlands: Syria, Israel and Palestine, Turkey, Egypt and KSA.

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40 In recent months, freight rates (USD per 40 foot container) from Shanghai to Rotterdam have tripled from 1,500 USD in December to 4,500 USD in January. Rerouted ships past the Cape of Good Hope have required approximately 10 extra days in transit (at higher speeds), leading to delivery delays, local temporary shortages and higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In the short term, consumers are unlikely to be affected by price rises due to longer-term shipping contracts, but may be affected by shortages of imported goods. Navigating troubled waters: Impact to global trade of disruption of shipping routes in the Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal. UNCTAD rapid assessment, UNCTAD/OSG/INF/2024/2, 22 February 2024, [Red Sea shipping disruption is set to rage on well into this year; Navigating Troubled Waters: Impact to Global Trade of Disruption of Shipping Routes in the Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal](#). (accessed 8 January 2024).

Figure 7 Overview of Middle Eastern countries, setting out the impact of conflict on Dutch socio-political security interests against the country’s vulnerability to political violence<sup>41</sup>



Regarding **Syria**, the main risk with a medium-impact potential is the trade in the illegal drug Captagon, which is mostly manufactured and exported from Syria. In 2022, over 370 million pills were seized in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Iraq have turned into regional trading hubs.<sup>42</sup> The estimated retail value of the total trade in 2021 was slightly below USD 6 billion per year and growing.<sup>43</sup> While seizures in Europe have been limited so far and they mostly concern shipments in transit to the Gulf via, for example, Italian ports, there is no reason to assume that the trade in this drug (nicknamed ‘cocaine for the poor’) will not make its way to lucrative European markets at some point, especially given the existence of a well-developed logistical and distribution network for

41 Note that Saudi Arabia scores on the edge between low and medium risk.

42 Shaar, K. and Rose, C. 2023. *The Syrian Regime’s Captagon End Game*, Washington DC: New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, [20230525-Dossier-Syrian-Regime-Captagon-NLISAP-1-1.pdf](https://www.newlinesinstitute.org/20230525-Dossier-Syrian-Regime-Captagon-NLISAP-1-1.pdf) ([newlinesinstitute.org](https://www.newlinesinstitute.org)) (accessed 8 January 2024).

43 Rose, C. and Söderholm, A., 2022. ‘The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities,’ *New Lines Institute*, 5 April, [The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption, and Regional Realities - New Lines Institute](https://www.newlinesinstitute.org/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities) (accessed January 8 2024).

drugs in places like the Netherlands. Additionally, the escalation of conflict in Syria may lead to increasing numbers of refugees leaving Syria.

As to **Israel** and **Palestine**, a side-effect of the tragedy of the 7 October attack by Hamas on Israel, as well as the ensuing Israeli destruction of the Gaza strip and the concomitantly large numbers of civilians its forces have killed, has been a substantial increase in both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia across the world, and in a number of Western countries in particular. Given that many European societies, including the Netherlands, have large groups of citizens that adhere to the Islamic faith and smaller groups of citizens that adhere to the Jewish faith, this has inevitably led to domestic tensions. So far, these have been mostly at the level of debate, demonstrations and acts of protest. Yet, violence cannot be excluded. Polarisation is further amplified by intense public debate between pro- and anti-Israeli voices that tend to focus on Israel's presumed right to defend itself on the one hand, and Israeli occupation and international law violations in Gaza on the other hand.

Regarding **Turkey**, similar tensions are in play in the Netherlands that result from political tensions originating in Turkey. As Turkish ultra-nationalism and Islamism have increased during the reign of President Erdogan, several groups in Turkey have faced state repression, causing tensions and political conflict. These groups are also present in the sizeable Turkish diaspora, including in the Netherlands. Consider for example Turkish Kurds, Gülenists, Atlanticists and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as Alevis. Tensions in Turkey are to some extent replicated among such diaspora groups and further augmented by the active diaspora policies of the Turkish government, which essentially seek to maintain patriotic and religious sentiments among Turkish migrants loyal to the AKP-run state. Hence, tensions between pro- and contra-AKP segments of the Turkish diaspora community in the Netherlands are likely to remain a fact of life in the coming years.

With respect to **Egypt**, if the country's poor fiscal situation results in the government having to tighten its purse strings in a manner that affects the Egyptian population directly (e.g. by further cuts to bread or fuel subsidies), or indirectly (e.g. by a rise in unemployment or inflation), migration from Egypt to Europe might begin to increase. Although domestic violent conflict is nowhere on the horizon, due to the size and strength of control of the Egyptian security forces, and hence mass-migration is unlikely, better-off and higher-educated Egyptians might increasingly be likely to move abroad, followed by the (lower) middle class. Given that Egypt has around 110 million inhabitants today, even minor flows could represent significant numbers.

Finally, **KSA** and **Turkey**, as well as to a lesser extent **Kuwait**, **Qatar** and the **UAE**, have drawn attention over the past few years regarding their financial, organisational and ideological relations with respectively Wahabi and Diyanet clergy members based in the Netherlands.<sup>44</sup> The concern is that such individuals might intentionally disseminate values through a variety of methods and channels linked with their religious institutions that run counter to the democratic foundations of the Netherlands and/or well-established legal rights (e.g. regarding the rule of law, gender equality or non-discrimination). Alternatively, such values may hinder adequate integration into Dutch society even when they are not illegal (e.g. concepts of gender roles, matters of divorce and freedom of speech). Although such relations exist and a range of past cases illustrates that these kinds of concerns are justified, it is not clear what impact such relations have had in terms of scope and depth of actually producing negative effects. It appears that a limited number of cases have dominated the headlines.<sup>45</sup> Either way, tension between values defined by particular strands of religion (Islam as well as, incidentally, Christianity) and values anchored in Dutch legal and regulatory frameworks will remain. Such tensions constitute a medium-impact risk to Dutch socio-political security insofar as they lead to behaviour that is either violent or that substantially transgresses broadly accepted social norms.

### 3.2.5 International legal order

The international legal order here refers to the importance for a small country like the Netherlands of creating and maintaining a global level playing field that puts law before power politics where possible (i.e. the international legal order is viewed as a public good with particularly attractive benefits for smaller countries), as well as to the role of the Netherlands in upholding such a legal order in line with the requirement laid out in Article 90 of its own constitution. Risks to the international legal order are assessed using indicators relating to how domestic conflicts within other countries are decided and adjudicated

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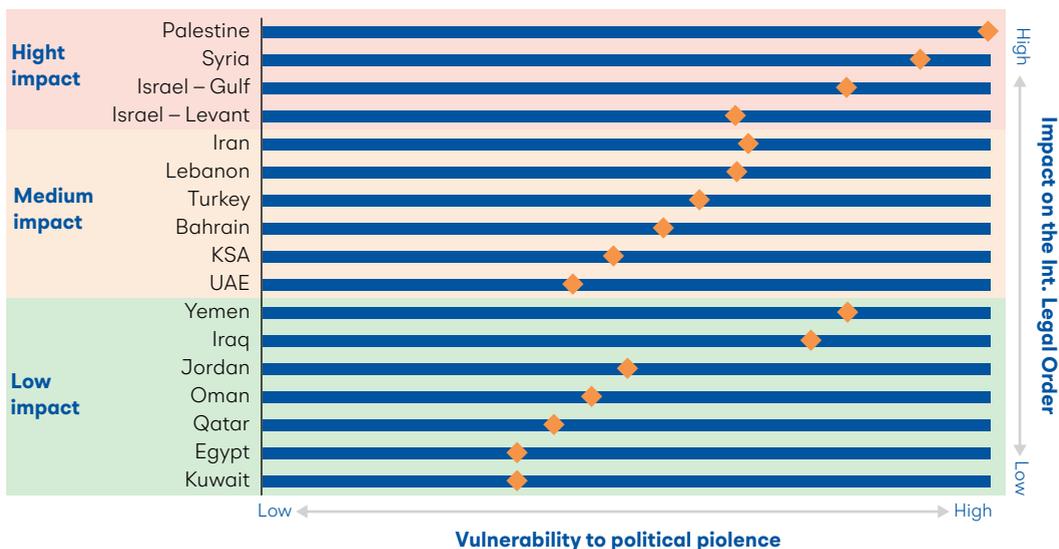
44 Such links may run via Islamic charity organisations that tend, however, to be linked to the state. Diyanet is an official part of the Turkish administration.

Hoorens, S., et al. 2020. *Onderzoek naar buitenlandse financiering van religieuze instellingen in Nederland*, Cambridge: Rand Corporation, [Onderzoek naar buitenlandse financiering van religieuze instellingen in Nederland \(overheid.nl\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024).

45 35 228 *Parlementaire ondervraging ongewenste beïnvloeding uit onvrije landen, Nr. 4 Brief van de Parlementaire Ondervragingcommissie*, Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 25 June 2020, [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/eindverslag\\_pocob.pdf](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/eindverslag_pocob.pdf) (accessed 8 January 2024).

with a view to international law, the practices of powerful geopolitical allies and adversaries (US, China, Russia and several other regional powers), as well as countries’ human rights records and trade disputes filed as cases at the World Trade Organization. In the main, risks to the international legal order (as a dimension of Dutch national security) that originate from conflicts in the Middle East, as well as Dutch policy in relation to some of these conflicts, represent the largest category in this assessment and are substantial.<sup>46</sup> According to the present assessment, shown in Figure 8, the main sources of medium impact risks to the international legal system as part of Dutch national security originate from Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, Bahrain, the UAE and KSA. In addition, the main sources of high impact risks to the international legal system as part of Dutch national security originate from Syria, Israel and Palestine.

**Figure 8** Overview of Middle Eastern countries, setting out the impact of conflict on the international legal order against the country’s vulnerability to political violence



<sup>46</sup> International law, especially UNSC resolutions, has held little sway in the Middle East for long periods of time due to intensive regional/great power competition as well as the prevalence of authoritarian regimes that operate on the basis of repression and scant regard for human rights. However, it should also be noted that negligence of the enforcement of international law by the Dutch government is particularly pronounced in a few cases due to its own foreign policies.

With respect to **Lebanon**, the main risk with a medium-impact potential on the international legal order as a relevant dimension of Dutch national security is the non-implementation of UNSC RES 1701 (2006). Among other things, the resolution calls for final negotiations about a territorial arrangement between the Israeli and Lebanese governments, disarmament of all non-statutory Lebanese armed forces, the establishment of security arrangements in the border area up to the Litani River and the cessation of Israeli (aerial) incursions into Lebanon. None of these core provisions has been implemented, which ensures that a situation of permanent hostility persists which is underlined by regular incidents between Israeli forces and Hezbollah. In practical terms, this undermines Lebanon's long-term stability and creates a risk to Israel's security.

Additionally, any escalation of conflict in the country – whether as a function of greater domestic political violence (less likely) or an Israeli-Hezbollah confrontation (more likely) will challenge the Dutch 'Opvang in the regio' policy (accommodating refugees in the region), as the conditions for successfully and humanely doing so would likely deteriorate rapidly. Escalating violence would probably lead to an outflow of Lebanese refugees, but also put in doubt the feasibility and morality of Dutch policy to keep Syrian and Palestinian refugees who have nowhere to go hosted in Lebanon – especially as these refugees are frequently unable to leave Lebanon and do not enjoy substantial civic or political rights despite years of residence.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding **Iran**, the main problem regarding the international legal order as far as Dutch national security is concerned has been the inability of the EU (including the Netherlands) to uphold its side of the bargain after US withdrawal in 2018 from the JCPOA. The EU did establish an instrument to stimulate investment and trade, but in practice did not manage to catalyse greater investment in, and trade with, Iran in exchange for Tehran temporarily mothballing its nuclear programme. This was mostly due to the EU's political unwillingness and commercial disincentives to chart a contrary course in the face of US pressure. In brief, the EU underdelivered, as manifested by the late creation and limited

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47 In case of escalating tensions with Israel, departure across the Israeli border is likely not feasible. Departure to Syria remains undesirable, especially for refugees who fled the Assad regime to begin with. Departure by sea or air is generally not within the means of the Palestinian or Syrian refugee population present in Lebanon. For more details, see Uzelac, A. and Meester, J., 2018, *Is there protection in the region? Leveraging funds and political capital in Lebanon's refugee crisis*, Clingendael: The Hague.

scope of Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX). As a result, the EU took a major reputational hit in Tehran and is no longer seen as a reliable independent foreign policy actor on this topic, but rather as a follower of the US.

**Turkey's** ongoing repression of its domestic Kurdish population together with its regional security strategy against the YPG and PKK constitute its main threat to the international legal order with medium impact. On the one hand, Turkey maintains a level of domestic repression that runs counter to its international obligations under the Council of Europe framework and the associated European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. On the other hand, Turkey has created a situation of permanent occupation in both Syria and Iraq to take the fight against the YPG and PKK directly to those territories, which starkly violates the sovereignty of both countries. Successive Dutch governments have been mute on this matter in relevant international fora even though protests supportive of the PKK – and likely the presence of PKK-sympathetic organisations – in the Netherlands are tolerated.

Finally, in the category of risks with a medium-impact potential, it is worth mentioning that the process of normalising ties between **Israel**, **Bahrain** and the **UAE** (the 'Abraham Accords'), which the **KSA** strongly considered and would like to resume, ignored the resolution of the Palestinian issue on the basis of existing parameters of international law, as well as existing soft law in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative adopted at Arab League Summits in 2002, 2007 and 2017 respectively. This development threatens the international legal order insofar as it removes an incentive to resolve the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories as condemned by a significant number of UNSC resolutions. Another negative influence on the international legal order emanating from the Arab countries on the Persian Gulf is their general disrespect for human and labour rights through their temporary migrant and guestworker systems that run counter to various international agreements, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Dutch government maintained diplomatic and trade relations with these three Arab countries notwithstanding, and without uttering as much as a word on the matter in public.

In the category of risks with a high impact potential, it is clear that the **Israeli** occupation of the Palestinian territories, and especially Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza, pose a grave threat to the international legal order,

which is viewed as a relevant dimension of Dutch national security. This issue has at least four aspects. One is the structural context of Israeli occupation and blockade in which illegal settlement construction manifests the longstanding Israeli intent of annexation. Despite its violations of international law in this regard, Israel has faced few international consequences for its actions. Another aspect is the large-scale violation of human rights that Israel, and to a far lesser extent the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, commit on a daily basis to maintain their rule, 'protect' settlements (only Israel) and advance annexation (also only Israel). A third aspect are the regular clashes between Hamas and Israel in and around Gaza, most prominently the gruesome attack on a number of kibbutzim on 7 October 2023 and its aftermath. Each time, these cycles of violence consist of an attack on Israel by Hamas in a structural context of the Israeli/Egyptian blockade that has produced disastrous humanitarian conditions in Gaza, which is followed by a highly disproportionate Israeli response that worsens the original situation and sets the scene for a future repeat. A final aspect is Dutch policy itself, which has been consistently pro-Israel in deeds (or their absence), especially after 7 October, even though it pays lip-service to a two-state solution.<sup>48</sup> The absence of a track record of interventions by the Dutch government that effectively addresses the excesses of Israeli occupation, and its illegal aspects, create the perception that it views international law as non-applicable to the Israeli government. This sets a dangerous global precedent

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48 Notable recent examples include statements by Prime Minister Rutte in support of Israel's right of self-defence even though Gaza is a territory already occupied by Israel (NOS, 2023, 'Premier Rutte: 'Nederland staat achter Israël,' NOS, 7 October, [Premier Rutte: 'Nederland staat achter Israël' \(nos.nl\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024)), Dutch abstention on two UNGA resolutions calling for a ceasefire (*Tenth Emergency Special Session, 40th & 41st Meeting: General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling for Immediate, Sustained Humanitarian Truce Leading to Cessation of Hostilities between Israel, Hamas, GA/12548*, 27 October 2023, [General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling for Immediate, Sustained Humanitarian Truce Leading to Cessation of Hostilities between Israel, Hamas | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases \(un.org\)](#) (accessed 8 January 2024); UN News, 2023, 'UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session', UN News, 12 December, [UN General Assembly votes by large majority for immediate humanitarian ceasefire during emergency session | UN News](#), (accessed 8 January 2024)), the continuation of the export of F-35 fighter jet spare parts to Israel despite the significant risk of contributing to large-scale violations of international humanitarian law (NRC, 2023, *Nederland blijft Israël F-35-onderdelen leveren ondanks waarschuwing schending oorlogsrecht*, 7 November) and halting future contributions to UNRWA based on claims (not evidence) of the organisation employing Hamas militants by one of the fighting parties (Israel) in a context of an ICJ order to improve the humanitarian situation for Palestinians in Gaza.

and weakens the international legal order as long as Israel continues to operate with impunity.

In addition to Israel, **Syria** constitutes another grave threat to the international legal order as the implementation of UNSC RES 2254 (2015) increasingly disappears and large-scale human rights violations continue with impunity, while both the US and Turkey occupy parts of Syria in a paradoxical violation of its sovereignty. Whereas the destruction of historical Palestine has been a 75-year process, the destruction of Syrian society has taken place in a mere decade with the dust still settling and major questions remaining unresolved about the status of both northwest and northeast Syria. Assad's recent rehabilitation in the Arab League was, in a sense, the nail in the coffin of international law with regard to its application to the Syrian civil war. It also offered a powerful testimony to the inability of the United Nations and its members, the Netherlands included, to craft a diplomatic and military strategy in an earlier stage of the conflict to bring it to a halt. The lesson for the world is that an authoritarian ruler can effectively take his country apart to stay in power, provided he does it tactically and has sufficient international support.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In sum, and according to the discussions and findings of the current research effort, medium-impact risks to Dutch territorial security that emanate from conflicts in the Middle East seem relatively few and emanate from different areas. There are medium-impact risks to the physical security of Dutch citizens abroad, in particular to diplomats, officials and military capacity as a result of the pro-Israel policy of the Dutch government after 7 October. These require mitigation. Medium-impact risks to Dutch economic security emanating from conflicts in the Middle East also exist, but are modest in the general sense, as the region is not a prominent area for Dutch trade or FDI. Moreover, most medium-impact risks identified are incipient rather than mature at this point in time. However, the one high-impact risk on Dutch economic security that represents the exception to this statement – namely the Houthi threat to global shipping in the Red Sea – requires urgent attention. Of medium-impact risks to Dutch socio-political security originating in conflicts in the Middle East there are quite a few, but they are diverse in nature – ranging from migration and organised crime to polarised relations between different population groups in the Netherlands and the spread of values conflicting with prevailing legal and

social norms. Finally, high-impact risks are particularly prevalent with regards to the international legal order (as a dimension of Dutch national security by way of global public good). They arise from a few selected conflicts in the Middle East, especially Syria, Israel and Palestine, as well as from Dutch policy in relation to these conflicts. These specific risks are slow to manifest and hard to alleviate, but should nevertheless be considered important in any risk mitigation efforts the Dutch government might wish to consider on the basis of this assessment.

## 4 Overall conclusion

The government of the Netherlands prioritised conflict prevention as the first goal of its Integrated International Security Strategy. Yet in order to enable meaningful and early action in relevant locations, a detailed, grounded comparable assessment of conflict vulnerability across countries is required. The combination of conflict vulnerability with the impact of conflict on the Netherlands could provide an input for the prioritisation of early-action initiatives, as well as conflict-resolution approaches.

This report presents the outcomes of an EWEA analysis of the Middle East assessing conflict risks with a five-year time horizon, and the potential impact of these conflicts on the vital security interests of the Netherlands. This conclusion summarises the findings of the analysis and presents a prioritisation list for (early) action. It also offers a number of lessons that have been identified in the course of the implementation of this project, and which could improve subsequent EWEA analyses.

### 4.1 Prioritisation

Throughout this report, the vulnerability of countries in the Middle East to conflict has been examined, as well as the impact of such potential conflicts on the Netherlands. By multiplying the scores assigned to both the qualitative vulnerability and the impact variables, a combined score is derived highlighting a potential prioritisation of countries, as can be seen in Figure 9. Note that Israel is reflected twice in this figure, reflecting the differing ratings by experts across both Delphi sessions.<sup>49</sup> While this multiplication provides for a logical rank-ordering, it cannot profess to provide more than a starting point for a discussion

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<sup>49</sup> Israel is reflected twice given the central importance of the Hamas attack on Israel of 7 October and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza to geopolitics across all countries in the region. The first placement ('Israel – 1') reflects the consideration of the first Delphi session focused on and around the Levant, while the second placement ('Israel – 2') reflects the placement determined by the second Delphi session focused on the Gulf.

on the appropriate prioritisation.<sup>50</sup> Further steps in the prioritisation should include a closer review of these countries against ministries' policy frameworks, as a well as the national and international political and operational opportunities to take meaningful action.

Figure 9 Suggested prioritisation<sup>51</sup>

Country		Vulnerability	Impact	Combined score
Syria	Conflict Resolution	0,90	0,50	0,450
Palestine	Conflict Resolution	1,00	0,40	0,400
Israel – Gulf	Conflict Resolution	0,80	0,30	0,240
Iran	Conflict Prevention	0,67	0,30	0,201
Israel – Levant	Conflict Prevention	0,65	0,30	0,195
KSA	Conflict Prevention	0,48	0,25	0,120
Yemen	Conflict Resolution	0,80	0,15	0,120
Turkey	Conflict Prevention	0,60	0,20	0,120
UAE	Conflict Prevention	0,43	0,20	0,085
Iraq	Conflict Prevention	0,75	0,10	0,075
Egypt	Conflict Prevention	0,35	0,20	0,070
Lebanon	Conflict Prevention	0,65	0,10	0,065
Bahrain	Conflict Prevention	0,55	0,10	0,055
Qatar	Conflict Prevention	0,40	0,10	0,040
Jordan	Conflict Prevention	0,50	0,00	0,000
Oman	Conflict Prevention	0,45	0,00	0,000
Kuwait	Conflict Prevention	0,35	0,00	0,000

50 Countries score on the vertical axis 'Impact on Dutch vital interests' is derived by combining the scores of a country on each of the five sub-dimensions of the vital interests framework. One point is added for each 'low' score, 2 points for each 'medium' score and 3 points for each 'high'. For an overview of all scores, see the Appendix. Also note that Israel is reflected twice given the central importance of the Israel military campaign in Gaza to geopolitics across all countries in the region. The first placement ('Israel – Levant') reflects the consideration of the first Delphi session focused on and around the Levant, while the second placement ('Israel – Gulf') reflects the placement determined by the second Delphi session focused on the Gulf. Note that Yemen and Saudi Arabia are awarded 2.5 and 1.5 points for their scores on economic security and socio-political security respectively, considering their ratings fall on the edge of two categories.

51 Reflecting the importance of both geopolitical and domestic dynamics, the Israel military campaign in Gaza was included in both Delphi workshops by including Israel in both. This led to two slightly different placements of Israel on the vulnerability variable. For more details, see 4.2.

The enduring Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories, which was brought into sharp focus by the events of 7 October and their aftermath, stands out on this list as a growing risk to the effectiveness of Dutch foreign policy writ large, and even as a potential threat to Dutch national security. This is largely due to the fact that the unconditional support of the Dutch government for Israel's military campaign in Gaza exposed the hitherto dualistic nature of Dutch policy towards Israel/Palestine, even though it was already threadbare and untenable due to its inbuilt tension. On the one hand, Dutch policy recognises the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and encourages a two-state solution. On the other hand, it has undertaken little effective action over the past decades to address decades of violations of international law and human rights, and more recently maintained full support for the destructive Israeli military campaign in Gaza. When tallying the available evidence, the bottom line is that Dutch policy professes goals that are not supported, or are even contradicted, by Dutch actions. The Dutch stance since 7 October undermines the international reputation of the Netherlands in the Middle East, will be used against it globally – for example by China, Russia and Iran to strengthen narratives of Western duplicity and hypocrisy, and risks turning a moral embarrassment into a tangible loss of relationships and credibility. It also creates moderate longer-term risks to Dutch national security by heightening physical risks to Dutch officials and citizens. Finally, the events of 7 October have brought the normalisation process between Saudi Arabia and Israel to a screeching halt while reinforcing the position of Iran and its partners.

A second theatre of note is **Syria**. As well as ongoing conflict, Syria features a myriad of vulnerabilities that might lead to future escalation. The state sees a proliferation of weakly controlled military actors, influences from a range of geopolitical actors and myriad domestic fault lines. A weak state, the potential fall-out of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, and Syria's rising role as a drug production hub supplying the Gulf provide ample possibilities to trigger further unrest. This might affect the Netherlands through a range of transmission mechanisms, notably the return of individuals with ties to extremist violence groups, the expansion of drug exports to the port of Rotterdam, and negative implications for the international legal order as large-scale human rights violations in Syrian continue with impunity despite international condemnation. While none of the individual risks posed by the situation in Syria are major, escalation of conflict at some point is likely and the potential pathways for transmission towards the Netherlands are many. Although pushing attempts at conflict resolution may be beyond the scope of Dutch foreign policy,

consideration of how the risks stemming from Syria could be mitigated seems in order.

Besides these two more immediate countries of concern, a third central concern revolves around the role of **Iran**. Although Iran domestically faces a deep state-society divide and heavy repression, the risks regarding Iran largely stem from its geopolitical role. While its regional deterrence and security strategy appears to be stable, it presents some indirect risks to the Netherlands through Iranian grey-zone operations. Such operations include the assassination of dissidents abroad and the kidnapping of foreign citizens to increase Iranian leverage on various issues. While such practices pose no specific threat to Dutch nationals, neither are they explicitly excluded from it. Finally, it should also be noted that the inability of the EU (including the Netherlands) to uphold the JCPOA after US withdrawal has resulted in a reputational hit for the EU, reducing its credibility as a foreign policy actor on this topic, with collateral damage on other issues.

In addition to the country specific risks mentioned above, the increasing vulnerability of nearly all Gulf states to rising political violence should be noted (recall that such violence does not have to be lethal but includes repressive measures). Most Gulf states are facing an economic slowdown with hydrocarbon prices declining and/or becoming increasingly uncertain, rising consumer prices affecting citizens' livelihoods, a weakened financial position due to Covid-19 and the slowly approaching threat posed by global efforts to reduce hydro-carbon consumption. While most Gulf states have recognised these problems and defined strategies tackle them, the ability of a number of Gulf states to deliver on these strategies is questionable. Such factors have led to rising domestic dissatisfaction, which has received ample additional fuel since the onset of the recent round of fighting in Gaza given some Gulf states' previous attempts to normalise relations with Israel. Rising repression and a shrinking civil space have been the responses in places, but may not be able to contain domestic unrest on the longer term. While significant from humanitarian, local and regional perspectives, rising vulnerability in many Gulf states is unlikely to affect the

Netherlands. Regionally, unresolved border issues reappear as a means to apply pressure when relations between Gulf states deteriorate.<sup>52</sup>

Exceptions to this limited impact of Gulf unrest on the Netherlands are **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**. These countries hold appreciable stakes in a number of Dutch companies through their sovereign wealth funds. Since state and economy in these countries are both authoritarian and tightly interwoven, such investments bring a risk, however small, of being leveraged at a later stage in pursuit of other purposes, which might range from industrial espionage to influencing Dutch foreign policy through its economic interests. Given opaque data on Gulf investments, it is unclear at present to what extent this risk is real or hypothetical. Besides an economic risk, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also pose a range of risks in relation to the international legal order. The normalisation of ties with Israel ignoring the resolution of the Palestinian issue on the basis of existing parameters of international law, as well as existing soft law in the form of the Arab Peace Initiative, effectively remove an incentive to resolve the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Regarding Ukraine, the UAE's role facilitating the evasion of sanctions on Russia presents a threat to the effectiveness of Western foreign policy and international norms. On the domestic front, the prevalence of modern-day slavery and the harsh treatment of migrants and refugees directly weakens international human rights norms.<sup>53</sup>

As a final note, the risks presented by **Yemen** bear mentioning. The Yemeni conflict is currently in a state of flux. With Saudi Arabia likely to significantly downscale its support to the Yemeni government forces as the mediation process between Saudi sponsored factions and Houthi forces draws to a close, and the UAE likely to reduce involvement as well, power between the various factions

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52 Saudi Arabia currently faces a number of border issues with its neighbouring countries. Examples include the ongoing Yemeni civil war, which continues to lead to numerous clashes along the border. Additionally, Saudi Arabia imposed border tariffs on goods from the UAE, despite being in a customs union with it. The country also voiced objections regarding the Qatari Dolphin project, a Qatar-Kuwait oil pipeline. The project further entails granting Chevron concessions to Qatari oil in contested territories.

53 A recent example is the execution of Ethiopian labour migrants on the Saudi border (see Human Rights Watch, 2023, 'They Fired on Us Like Rain' Saudi Arabian Mass Killings of Ethiopian Migrants at the Yemen-Saudi Border, Human Rights Watch). Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey and Kuwait are represented in the top 10 of the Global Slavery Index (see Walk Free, 2023, 'Global Slavery Index,' Minderoo Foundation, [Global Slavery Index | Walk Free](#). (accessed 8 January 2024)). Note that several states have made some efforts in reforming the legal position of migrant workers.

in Yemen is likely to shift with domestic conflict both resuming and intensifying in the near future. This power shift is further augmented by the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, as it has enabled the Houthi to significantly bolster their popular legitimacy by publicly supporting the Palestinian cause, as well as Hamas. This poses a considerable threat to Dutch economic security specifically, due to Houthi attempts to harass maritime traffic in the Red Sea. While a complete closure of shipping lanes would likely trigger a larger international intervention, increases in shipping insurance and the rerouting of traffic with higher profit margins via the Cape of Good Hope is already a fact. Traffic with lower profit margins might cease altogether. In turn, such developments could severely affect Dutch trade, as well as a range of Dutch companies relying on global value chains.

## 4.2 Lessons learned

This report represents a fourth iteration in a series of EWEA efforts undertaken by Clingendael and the Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. These efforts are based on an in-depth early warning quantitative methodologies and qualitative expert analysis to assess the vulnerability to conflict of countries in a particular region, as well as the potential impact of ongoing and future conflict on the Netherlands.<sup>54</sup> This report specifically aimed to streamline the process and reduce the time and effort required. This has led to several process innovations, notably the simplification of the quantitative analysis of conflict vulnerability and impact on the Netherlands, as well as a shift towards a qualitative assessment of the impact of conflict on the Netherlands. Based on the experiences of this project, several lessons relevant to the future execution of EWEA assessments emerged:

- **Streamlining of the quantitative assessment:** For this iteration of the EWEA analysis, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Datalab executed a simplified and less resource-intensive version of the quantitative analysis. To an extent this reflects the methodological limits to quantitative conflict forecasting.

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54 Previous efforts are captured in Deen, B., et al. (2021) *From Indices to Insight: A proposal to enhance the risk assessment of the Dutch Early Warning/Early Action process*, The Hague: Clingendael; de Bruijne, K. (2021) *Costing Conflict: An early warning method to assess the impact of political violence on vital security interests*, The Hague: Clingendael; Meester, J. et al. (2023) *Early Warning, Early Action, in Practice: Early warning assessment of Africa*, The Hague: Clingendael.

Most quantitative early warning models are relatively strong at forecasting high-conflict vulnerability in cases that revolve around the continuation or resumption of conflict, given that fragility in a context affects many common indicators while simultaneously leading to recurring cycles of violent conflict. In contrast, these models tend to perform poorly on detecting the onset of conflict in locations without a history of violent conflict.<sup>55</sup> The abridged approach to the quantitative analysis of conflict vulnerability maintained most of the ability to detect conflict vulnerability in countries with a strong history of violent conflict (e.g. Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon), yet weakened the ability to detect vulnerability in countries without such a history (e.g. UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Israel). This gap was reflected in the different assessments between the quantitative analysis and the expert input from the Delphi sessions, especially in the session on the Gulf states. While this represents a loss of validity in the initial phase, it follows current advances in early warning approaches, shifting more weight to qualitative assessments to detect the onset of conflict. The abrogated quantitative assessment hence provided a somewhat controversial placing of countries as a starting point for the discussions in the Delphi rounds, and lacked adequate motivation. While it succeeded in reducing the resource intensity of the quantitative analysis, it increased the strain on the Delphi sessions to a degree.

Changes to the quantitative assessment of current intensity of political violence proved more contentious. The adapted quantitative methodology appears to severely underestimate current levels of political violence across the board. While this variable is not essential for the forward-looking aim of this analysis, it does form an important input to the expert discussions in the Delphi sessions. The low scores assigned to all countries under discussion raised a degree of disagreement that distracted from more focused

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55 As noted in the evaluation of the VIEWS (Violence & Impacts Early-Warning System) prediction competition, it is clear that even the best quantitative models available struggle to predict changes in levels of political violence, and the emergence of new political violence in places that have historically been peaceful, in particular. To some extent, this is due to the intrinsic difficulty of such predictions. Many observers, for instance, note that Russia's decision to initiate a large-scale, formal attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was due to a miscalculation of both Russia's capabilities and Ukraine's willingness and ability to resist. Such miscalculation is almost impossible to predict – in other words, 'war is in the error term'. See Rød, E. et al., 2022, A review and comparison of conflict early warning systems, *International Journal of Forecasting*, 40(1), p. 96-112; Fearon, J., 1995, Rationalist Explanations for War, *International Organization*, 49(3), p. 379-414; Gartzke, E., 1999, War is in the Error Term, *International Organization*, 53(3), p. 567-587.

discussion on conflict vulnerability. Improvements in the measurements of current intensity of political violence may improve the quality of the Delphi sessions in future iterations.

- **Qualitative approach to impact assessment:** In previous iterations, the assessment of conflict in various countries was based upon a quantitative methodology. While the method provided a relatively broad and comparable assessment across countries, it failed to capture country-specific strategic considerations. For example, while a country like Yemen may represent a negligible economic partner for the Netherlands, the ability of Houthi militias to threaten shipping lanes in the Bab-el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden represents substantial economic risks to the Netherlands not reflected in trade data. In order to overcome such deficiencies, the quantitative impact assessment was replaced by a qualitative impact assessment based on existing work of the authors, grounded in extensive experience with Dutch foreign policy in the Middle East. This method ensures that policy-relevant strategic considerations are taken into account and appears to have increased the validity of the impact assessment. Yet, the reliance on existing research focused on the Netherlands raises potential risks, as it focuses the assessment of risks on the reappearance of issues similar to incidents previously affecting Dutch policy, while reducing the focus on new future risks as well as risks to the interests of key Dutch allies in the region.
- **The impact of geopolitical developments:** Shortly before the onset of this research, the Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza took place. It had a regional dimension from the start. The central importance of this single issue had an impact on conflict vulnerability across many countries in a way not seen in previous iterations of this EWEA approach in Africa. Both Delphi sessions hence considered the role of the main geopolitical actors in order to capture geopolitical dynamics, creating an overlap in the coverage of both sessions. While this resulted in two somewhat differing placements of Israel across the Delphi sessions, it ensured that the rapidly evolving geopolitical concerns affecting countries' future vulnerability to conflict were adequately captured.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> While experts in both Delphi sessions provided similar ratings on Israel's vulnerability to conflict, assessments of current levels of political violence differed somewhat. Experts in the Gulf-centred Delphi session rated current political violence in Israel higher, potentially reflecting the higher levels of violence in the Gulf region as compared to the other Middle Eastern countries under discussion in the first Delphi session.

# Appendix: Methodology

In order to support the Dutch government in its ambition to enhance its ability to detect and interpret early warning signals and in order to improve conflict prevention efforts, Clingendael has developed an Early Warning Early Action methodology aiming to assess the risk of violent conflict and instability across a range of states. With a strong methodological basis and a range of lessons from the pilots in earlier years, this appendix clarifies the operationalisation of this analysis' early warning activities. It details the qualitative Delphi method used to validate and enrich quantitative analysis conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Datalab with timely and grounded insights from local experts. The workshops discuss the vulnerability of countries to political violence in the Middle East (but not the impact of conflict on the Netherlands). The region is divided into two sub-regions, which are each covered by a separate workshop in order to keep the scope per workshop manageable.

Methodologically, the workshops are structured according to a Delphi methodology. Unlike conventional surveys, the Delphi method consists of an iterative and interactive consultation: a panel of participants is consulted during several rounds, and in each of these rounds, the panel receives viewpoints from the previous round while taking position once again with respect to the previous results (controlled feedback process). In this way, participants are aware of the opinions of the entire panel. They can then provide complementary feedback and refine the results.<sup>57</sup> Where a conventional survey measures the prevalence of a variety of opinions among a population, the Delphi methodology incentivises experts to pool insights and information in order to arrive at a better understanding of a phenomenon than any expert could have provided on their own.

The innovative aspect of the Clingendael Delphi methodology is the ambition to integrate quantitative data with the expert assessments as an additional step. This helps to account for the wide variety of ways in which conflict and violence occurs. Experts were given access to their own scoring, and an overview of

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57 M. Turoff, 'The Policy Delphi' in H. A. Linstone, & M. Turoff (eds.), *The Delphi Method: Techniques and Applications* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing 2002) 80-96.

the gap between the quantitative analysis and their own scoring. Following structured interactions the experts are able to adjust their views on key issues. By focusing conversations with experts on the overlap and differences between their opinions, the group will work towards a converging position. This process will facilitate a valid understanding of the situation in a country that can serve as a basis for early warning-based decision making, and is guided by a methodological workshop lead and a regional expert.

The first Delphi iteration begins before the workshop. Experts are asked to score key aspects of the conflict risks and dynamics in each country within the scope of the workshop by completing a questionnaire before the workshop. The questionnaire asks the experts to score the intensity of political violence and vulnerability in a country that may drive future political violence in the coming five years (political/institutional, economic, social, environmental). The project team analyses the acquired insights from this first Delphi iteration which will in turn be shared with the experts before the workshop takes place.

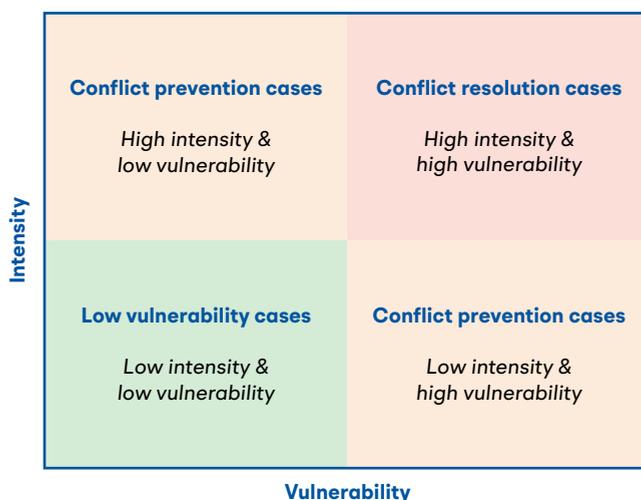
The first section of the workshop evaluates findings based on the vulnerability data and expert input received from the completed pre-workshop questionnaires. The key output of this analysis includes a first classification of countries perceived to be already experiencing high-intensity political violence and cases that may do so in the future. This classification forms the starting point of the workshop discussions. Through a mix of group work and plenary conversations the classification is discussed and adjusted where necessary. The results of this round are in turn validated again through a second and third round of expert scoring.

The second section of the workshop zooms in on cases that are difficult to classify, and on localisation of countries in relation to one another in the matrix. This is done by reviewing and – where necessary – adjusting the vulnerability scores. Cases where experts do not converge are highlighted during this second section of the workshop. Again, through a mix of group work and plenary discussions, the experts validate findings and facilitate adjustments of scores to work towards expert consensus.

The classification structuring the workshop is based on two key factors: the intensity of and vulnerability to political violence. Based on these two variables, countries are categorised as either conflict resolution cases, conflict prevention cases or low-/no-priority cases (see Figure 10).

- **Conflict resolution cases:** These countries are experiencing highly intense political violence and are highly vulnerable to renewed/ongoing political violence. These countries have two roles within early warning approaches: first, these cases present a risk of future escalation or spillover effects to other cases; second, these cases are already experiencing high levels of political violence and thus require conflict resolution rather than conflict prevention efforts.
- **Conflict prevention cases:** These countries score high on either intensity of or vulnerability to political violence. These countries are relevant to policy makers because there still is potential for conflict prevention, for example by addressing underlying structural factors that shape vulnerability to political violence or to help contain dynamics that may trigger or drive the escalation of conflict towards further political violence.
- **Low vulnerability cases:** During the workshop the experts are also asked to highlight cases where they see no or low vulnerability for early warning, and thus no scope for prevention programming given the very limited vulnerability to political violence.

Figure 10 Classification matrix



By limiting the geographic scope of the workshops to sub-regions of the Middle East, sufficient space is generated to allow for in-depth and coherent discussions to take place on the relevant countries as well as regional and cross-border issues. In order to facilitate an in-depth and contextualised discussion that includes

regional dynamics and potential spillover effects, countries were grouped by geographical, cultural, political and economic proximity, and limited to a maximum of ten countries per workshop in order to retain ample time to discuss each country in sufficient depth.

Each workshop included a maximum of 15 experts.<sup>58</sup> Experts were selected by the roundtable hosts, and were drawn from the networks of Clingendael, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. Roundtable hosts were regional experts themselves, with substantial field experience across the area covered by the roundtable they presided. Invited experts had significant field expertise in the countries under discussion, to ensure the discussion focused on the vulnerabilities within these countries rather than perceived risks regarding the countries from a European perspective. The selection of experts aimed to have three or more experts per country context, covering political/institutional, economic, social and ecological developments.<sup>59</sup> The following three workshops were conducted:

- **Workshop 1** – 12 experts joined on 31 October 2023, discussing: *Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and Iranian influences in this region.*
- **Workshop 2** – 9 experts joined on 9 November 2023, discussing: *Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen.*

In order to prioritise countries for early action, the potential cost of conflict to the Netherlands is an important factor in addition to the country's vulnerability to conflict. The assessment of impact presented in this report uses the framework of Dutch key interests abroad, as recognised in the framework of the *Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid*. It centres on five vital interests<sup>60</sup>

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58 Experts are country- and/or regional experts with various backgrounds and areas of expertise covering the thematic drivers of political violence. Experts have significant in-field experience or originate from the countries and regions under discussion. Participants receive a reimbursement. Additionally, an optional pre-workshop online 'walk-in' session is conducted to allow participants to raise issues and questions before the workshops.

59 Although the expert selection aimed for three experts per country, this was not achieved for a few countries. Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain were covered by two individuals with extensive expertise, while Oman was tackled by a single expert.

60 The original framework as developed by the *Analistennetwerk Nationale Veiligheid* contained six vital interests. However, considering that the impact of conflict in a country on Dutch interests in 'ecological security' could not be adequately defined nor operationalised, this vital interest has been omitted from this analysis.

potentially affecting the Netherlands and its main allies (UK, US, France and Germany). Impact thus relates to various transmission belts that translate the consequence of conflict in a country to a negative change that affects Dutch interests. Countries were scored along each of these dimensions based on the qualitative assessment of the authors of this report. This assessment is based on extensive experience on assignments supporting the adaptation of Dutch foreign policy to realities on the ground in the target country, as well as adapting policies based on their interaction with other geopolitical actors' presence in said country. As such, the authors of the report were able to present a relatively in-depth view of Dutch interests. The assessment of the impact of conflict in a country on the interests of Dutch allies remains more high-level, given the authors more limited experience working with institutions from these countries and the fact that further in-depth research was beyond the scope of this assignment. The resulting qualitative rankings on the vital interests are illustrated in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11 Potential impact of conflicts in various Middle Eastern countries on Dutch national security

Country	Territorial security	Physical security	Economic security	Socio-political security	International legal order
Lebanon	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
Syria	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	High
Iraq	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Iran	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Medium
Jordan	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Israel	Low	Low	Low	Medium	High
Turkey	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Palestine	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	High
Egypt	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Low
Bahrain	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium
Kuwait	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Oman	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Qatar	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
KSA	Low	Low	Medium	Low-Medium	Medium
UAE	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Yemen	Low	Low	Medium-High	Low	Low