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NATO's Sub-strategic Role in the Middle East and North Africa

Thierry Tardy

NATO's role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is indispensable, yet politically and operationally complex. That a security organization would play a role in a contiguous region from which numerous threats emanate makes intuitive sense. However, NATO's presence and impact there have so far been constrained by issues that pertain to prioritization and feasibility.

Not only have its members diverged on whether the alliance should be engaged in its southern flank, but its ability to bring responses to the broad range of problems in the region has also been restricted. NATO's role in the MENA has remained sub-strategic as a consequence. Bearing in mind the forthcoming Strategic Concept, a renewed cooperative-security ambition is imperative if NATO wants to weigh on the region's overall stability.

Whether when the United States pivots to the Indo-Pacific is the best moment to do that is not sure, but while other external powers seem to have clear ideas about what they want in the MENA, any disengagement by NATO or Western powers would likely carry enormous risks.

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Introduction

NATO's role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is politically and operationally complex.[1] That a security and defense organization would play an important role in a contiguous region from which numerous security threats emanate makes intuitive sense. As NATO seeks to adapt to the evolving security environment while revisiting its Strategic Concept, its ambition and role in the MENA need to be factored in.

The security environment on NATO's southern periphery is challenging. From Libya to the Near East and the Persian Gulf, the MENA concentrates a fair number of threats that range from regional conflicts to state fragility, terrorism, and transnational organized crime. These also pose direct and indirect risks to the security of NATO members and their societies, including those related to uncontrolled migration, human insecurity, and climate change. More recently, the reemergence of Russia and the emergence of China in the MENA have made a NATO role there even more pertinent. If Russia is in Libya and Syria, both countries that generate insecurity for the alliance, then there is an additional rationale for some sort of presence in the region.

The reality is, however, different as NATO has for long struggled to assert itself as a security provider on its southern periphery. Not that it has abstained from intervening. From Libya to the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aden it has been very present, but the coherence and impact of its interventions have been fragile.

Three factors can explain the difficulties that NATO is encountering in the MENA. First, the broad range and diffuse nature of the threats and risks in the region make it difficult to come up with a response that is coherent yet sufficiently targeted. Simply understanding what and where the problems are is daunting. Second, it follows from the nature of the threats that NATO might not be the best-suited institution to tackle them. Many of the risks relate to political or socioeconomic factors for which a military alliance brings little added value. Third, NATO's role is hindered by the diverging agendas of its members. Not only do allies disagree about how central the region should be for NATO but some are also openly confronting one another in some of the sensitive southern theatres.

NATO has for long struggled to assert itself as a security provider on its southern periphery.

This brief looks at NATO's agenda in the MENA, the challenges it faces, and the way forward. It analyzes the complexity of the region and how this impacts NATO's positioning, and it presents the mixed record of NATO's involvement there. The brief then offers three sets of recommendations. First, it is difficult to see how NATO could play any meaningful role in the region without developing some sort of strategic framework that would lay out its level of ambition and reflect a certain degree of political cohesion. Second, such a strategy will have to consider the type of division of tasks that NATO should consider with other international actors, starting with the European Union. This should be guided by the comparative advantages of all the security actors involved. Third, any purposeful role for NATO in the region will have to take a fresh look at the type of relationship that the alliance needs to have with its local partners, be it through its traditional partnership programs, or in interaction with other international organizations, such as the African Union, the League of Arab States, or the G5 Sahel.

The State of Play

The Middle East and North Africa is characterized by structural instability: from Libya to the Persian Gulf, from Syria and Iraq to Yemen, not forgetting the long-

1 Here, the region is understood as including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

lasting Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the region has gone through a series of crises and conflicts over the last 20 years that have largely shaped its political, economic, and human development.

Insecurity in the region is driven by three categories of interrelated issues. First, threats that produce direct violence, such as internal or international conflicts, terrorism, or organized crime. The second category consists of issues that relate to the deficiencies of governing bodies such as state fragility, bad governance, or the porosity of borders. In the third category are the more diffuse human-security issues that result from underdevelopment, uncontrolled demographics or migration, or climate change. This typology is useful when looking at NATO's role in the MENA as it helps identify where it could possibly intervene (see below). Another way to look at security dynamics in the region is to distinguish between interstate competition and related foreign military interventions on the one hand, and internal conflicts or violent processes on the other hand, while acknowledging that the two levels are intertwined and often difficult to disentangle. The US-Iran confrontation, the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the more recent Russian activities in several countries of the region are at the interstate level. At the internal level are phenomena such as terrorism, violent extremism, political violence, and transnational organized crime.

Insecurity in the region is driven by three categories of interrelated issues.

This said, all these conflicts or violent processes are at least partially international and to a degree multidimensional.[2] They all have ramifications outside of the territory where most of the violence takes place. The conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Libya, or Yemen, though different from one another, provide examples of the international linkages that make it impossible to analyze them in isolation. And they are all multidimensional in the sense that they are driven by a wide range of issues, from the political and socioeconomic to cultural, and beyond. The combination of these two patterns makes it difficult to comprehend the challenges fully, let alone manage them.

Conflicts and Terrorism

The Middle East and North Africa counts six conflicts currently (in Egypt, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Libya, Syria, and Yemen) as well as three situations of socioeconomic instability and uprisings (in Algeria, Iran, and Lebanon). Terrorist groups operate in most of the conflict areas, and even more MENA countries are involved in what began as intrastate conflicts (like Iran in Syria, the United Arab Emirates in Libya, or Saudi Arabia in Yemen).

Indeed, conflicts in the region have long ceased to be politically and practically confined to a geographically limited area, and most involve international interference. Such interference can be a response to existing conflicts, in particular in the broad domain of multilateral crisis management, but it can also add to existing insecurity or even create new conflicts. This was the case with the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, the NATO operation in Libya in 2011, and the Turkish and Russian presence in Libya and Syria over the last few years. Russia's policy in the region has been of particular concern from a NATO perspective. Not only does the recent Russian interference in these spaces—directly or through mercenary groups—contribute to the deterioration of the security environment, it also constrains the Western political agenda by altering the nature of the relationship between the West and local interlocutors, be they governments or non-state actors.[3] The Russian presence in the region further tests NATO's deterrence and defense agenda, and its current focus on its eastern flank.

2 See International Crisis Group, Tackling the MENA region's intersecting conflicts, December 2017.

3 See Eugene Rumer, Russia in the Middle East: Jack of all trades, Master of none, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2019.

Furthermore, the MENA remains one of the regions most affected by terrorist attacks (although their number has decreased since 2016).[4] Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its affiliated groups have been instrumental in this since 2014. The group has been weakened in Iraq and Syria, yet it and its affiliates have been resurgent in these two countries in 2020 and 2021. ISIS has also become active in North Africa (in Libya) and sub-Saharan Africa (in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and the Lake Chad region), where other jihadist groups (like Boko Haram) operate.[5] Countries such as Egypt and Lebanon are also confronted with internal terrorist groups, some of which act as proxies for third parties (such as Lebanon's Hezbollah being backed by Iran). Beyond their jihadist agendas, many of these groups also attract part of the disillusioned and socially/economically excluded youth who are not necessarily religious. These groups are also linked to criminal activities (cross-border trafficking) and take advantage of ungoverned spaces while contributing to further social disintegration and state collapse.

Human Security and Governance

Human-security concerns feature prominently in the analysis of the region's evolution. Dysfunctional economies (with the exception of Israel and the Saudi peninsula, bar Yemen), the effect of climate change (regarding access to water in particular), social inequalities, and violations of political rights are systemic sources of insecurity and conflict. These issues triggered the Arab Spring a decade ago and the situation has hardly improved since,[6] with the possible exception of Tunisia. More recently, the coronavirus pandemic has challenged the region's health systems and resilience. Nonetheless, between 2011 and 2019, the performance of most MENA countries in the Human Development Index has improved (with progress in particular in Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, and Oman), while it has stagnated in Lebanon, Qatar, and Yemen, and decreased in Libya and Syria.[7]

Faced with these multi-dimensional challenges, states and other governing bodies of the region present manifest deficiencies. Fourteen countries of the MENA (out of 20) are characterized as "not free" (in political rights and civil liberties) by Freedom House,[8] and quite a few are plain authoritarian regimes. High levels of corruption, inefficiency of public policies and bureaucratic abuses, and weak or non-existing accountability mechanisms are rampant. The impact on human capital is direct, with indicators not showing much improvement over time.[9] Most states also lack functioning and legitimate security structures. Overall, this leaves a large part of the region chronically challenged in the public-policy domain, including in terms of security governance. And there appears to be little reason to believe that the situation will significantly improve in the coming years; instead, insecurity will likely continue to be a major issue at all above-described levels.

NATO's Response to Insecurity on Its Southern Periphery

NATO has been involved in the Middle East and North Africa at different levels over the last decade, in activities that fall within its two core tasks of crisis

4 See Kim Wukki and Todd Sandler, "Middle East and North Africa: Terrorism and Conflicts", Global Policy, 11:4, 2020. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2020 though, the number of terrorist attacks in the MENA has decreased since 2016, while it has increased in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia. See Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, 2020.

5 See Colin Clarke, After the Caliphate, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.

6 See Brookings Institution, The Middle East and North Africa over the next decade: key challenges and policy options, March 2020.

7 See UNDP, Human Development Report 2011. Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All, 2011; and UNDP Development Reports, 2020,

8 Freedom House, Freedom in the World. Countries and Territories, 2021. Only Israel and Tunisia are assessed as "'free" by the index, while Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Morocco are assessed as "partly free."

9 The 2020 World Bank Human Capital Report notes that while Gulf Cooperation Council countries have relatively high human capital values, overall MENA countries tend to lag behind. See World Bank, World Bank. 2020. The Human Capital Index 2020 Update: Human Capital in the Time of COVID-19, September 16, 2020.

management and cooperative security.[10] The overall objective has been to address what NATO calls "pervasive instability"[11] on its southern flank through a broad "projection stability" agenda. The June 2021 NATO summit reiterated the alliance's commitment to "enhancing our long-standing engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region" and to "build stronger security and defence institutions and capacities, promote interoperability, and help to counter terrorism."[12]

Cooperative Security

In the cooperative-security domain, NATO's activities have taken the form of training and defense capacity-building for partner countries, and there has also been a socialization endeavor through the establishment of staff-to-staff relations and including partners' officials in NATO's education programs.[13] In doing so, NATO has mainly operated in the frameworks of the Mediterranean Dialogue and to a lesser degree the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).[14] It has also developed bilateral activities through the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program agreements, and more specifically through the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, with agreements with Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia;[15] and through the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, with agreements with Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia.[16] These initiatives aim at developing interoperability of partners' forces with NATO's and at strengthening their defense capacities through advising on defense and security-sector reform, institution-building, development of local forces through education and training, or advice and assistance in specialized areas.

In 2016, a Framework for the South was adopted to give some political cohesion to NATO's activities on its southern periphery. The ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait was established in 2017 as an education institution targeting officials of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The following year, NATO created its Strategic Direction South ("Hub") within the Joint Force Command in Naples, mandated to produce open-source analysis on various south-related security issues. The NATO Defense College in Rome also offers courses for officials of the MENA. A Package for the south was subsequently adopted at the 2018 NATO summit.

Crisis Management

In the crisis-management domain, NATO has run six operations in the MENA since 2011, including Operation Unified Protector in Libya (in 2011) and two training missions in Iraq (from 2004 to 2011 and then since 2018). It was also involved in maritime security, with Operation Ocean Shield in the Gulf of Aden (2008–2015) and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean (since 2016). Finally, NATO provides support, mainly through its AWACS planes, to the Global Coalition against ISIS.

All these activities were encapsulated in the concept of Projecting Stability, introduced in the mid-2010s.[17] Projecting Stability operated a merger of crisis management and cooperative security, with a range of military and non-military activities aiming at shaping "the strategic environment in order to make neighbouring regions more stable and secure."[18]

10 Although Operation Active Endeavour, deployed in the Mediterranean Sea from 2001 to 2015, was technically a collective-defense operation.

11 NATO, Brussels Summit Communiqué, 14 June 2021.

12 Ibid., para.74.

13 See Jean-Loup Samaan, The limitations of a NATO-Middle East Military Cooperation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2020.

14 The Mediterranean Dialogue was established in 1994 and includes Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative was established in 2004 and includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

15 See NATO, Partnership Interoperability Initiative.

16 See NATO, Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative.

17 See Benedetta Berti and Ruben-Erik Diaz-Plaja, "Two Ages of NATO Efforts to Project Stability – Change and Continuity", in Ian Hope (ed.), Projecting Stability: Elixir or Snake Oil?, NATO Defense College, 2018.

18 NATO Military Committee, MC 400/3, non-dated.

NATO's Mixed Record

Within this broad arena of activities, questions persist about NATO's record and added value there. How much has it contributed to regional security? What are its comparative advantages? How much allies converge on policy in the region and how much they want NATO to be involved there as opposed to the eastern flank or elsewhere? And how much do local actors want or are willing to request NATO's involvement?

NATO's record is uneasy to assess holistically as its activities vary from one place to the other and over time. In general, though, it is difficult to see any tangible impact in the various areas where NATO has deployed assets.

To start, resources allocated to the operationalization of partnerships in the region have been scarce, and observers often note the mismatch between the ambition of official statements and the reality of implementation.[19] Most importantly, NATO's overall crisis-management record has been tarnished by the operation in Libya and its medium-term consequences for the region. What NATO has achieved in Iraq through its two successive capacity-building operations is also unclear. Paradoxically, it can even be argued that its operation in Libya and the non-NATO-led operation in Iraq have contributed more to the region's insecurity than to its stability. What is more, it is the impact of third-party interventions in general that is dubious, as illustrated by the 20 years of US and NATO presence in Afghanistan.

Second is the issue of prioritization. In general terms, NATO's engagement with the region has been significantly lower than the attention paid to its eastern flank. In the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the alliance's focus turned back to Russia and how to deter it, at the expense of the southern flank. And initiatives such as Projecting Stability or the establishment of the Strategic Direction South "Hub" in Naples were to an extent aimed at covering over the alliance's weak commitment to the south. In fact, even the notion of Projecting Stability seems to have lost relevance in 2021—it is barely mentioned in the June 2021 summit communiqué, partly as a result of the debacle of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Such prioritization also takes place in the context of the United States' pivot to Asia, which further complicates NATO's involvement in the South. If the United States' disengagement from the region is confirmed in the coming years, the vacuum this will leave is more likely to be filled by other external powers such as Russia or Turkey than by NATO as an organization.

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Third, NATO's comparative advantages are at stake. A major issue for the alliance is how it can, as a military organization, respond to problems that are largely of a non-military nature, furthermore in countries where it is not necessarily welcome. The intersecting nature of security in the MENA, as described above, leads to two related considerations. First, there are limits to what a military-focused actor can achieve or solve when the military aspects of the problem are peripheral. This explains NATO's difficulties in countering migration or radicalization, for which social or economic explanatory factors are central. Second, any attempt to address only one aspect of the problem without considering the whole picture is unlikely to produce long-term achievements, and it can even be counterproductive.[20] In other words, the *narrow* NATO answer to a much *larger* problem may simply not produce anything tangible or sustainable.

The European Union and the United Nations are confronted with a similar range of challenges in the MENA and their record over the last two decades is not always solid, either. Yet the multifaceted nature of the security issues combined with the general mandate

19 See Samaan, "The limitations of a NATO-Middle East Military Cooperation"; Rolf Schwarz, NATO and the Middle East. In Search of a Strategy, Lynne Rienner, 2021; and interview by the author.

20 International Crisis Group, Tackling the MENA region's intersecting conflicts, December 2017, p. 2.

and comparative advantages of these two institutions tend to place them in a better position than NATO in quite a few non-military domains. It may also be the case that the EU and the UN will be better accepted by local actors.

A fourth level of issues relates to political divergences among NATO's member states when it comes to the MENA. Be it in the Mediterranean Sea, in Libya, in Syria, or in relations with countries such as Egypt or Israel, the allies do not present a united front while some diverge in terms of priorities or policy options. For example, in 2019, France and the United States on one hand and Turkey on the other ended up on opposing sides in the fighting in northeastern Syria.[21] The incident between France and Turkey in the Mediterranean Sea in 2020 also illustrated intra-alliance friction, even while both were contributing to the NATO-led Sea Guardian maritime operation. The long-lasting Greek-Turkish tensions provide another example of deleterious dissent. This negatively impacts NATO's ability to come up with a cohesive policy in the region and may even hinder such commitment in the future.

Finally, NATO is confronted with the question of acceptance by local actors. In theory, any NATO security role in the region is conditioned on the consent of the recipient country (Libya in 2011 was an exception in this respect.) Yet the last 30 years of third-party crisis management have shown how this can be resisted by local actors. And NATO is far from being a benevolent intervener. One 2018 study noted that, while "partner attitudes toward NATO [were] not uniformly positive," local resistance was "far less of a constraint than sometimes assumed," with ambivalence being often "overshadowed by security interest."[22] This might well be what is observed on the ground, especially when NATO provides a really needed service or when its long-term commitment allows for some trust to emerge. Yet reconciling the alliance's interests with the needs of the recipient states or societies will remain no easy task.

The Way Forward

There is a consensus on the fact that the security challenges in the Middle East and North Africa can create instability in NATO member states, which therefore ought to do something about it. Whether there exists a consensus on what to do and whether NATO should be a central component of the response is less obvious. With these reservations in mind, below are three steps that NATO ought to take were it be willing to shape the security environment in the MENA.

Strategy

The ongoing Ukraine crisis has given NATO a new direction in the sense that it has provided it with a relatively straightforward task: to deter and defend against Russia on the eastern flank. The alliance has adopted doctrinal documents and taken measures aimed at operationalizing this agenda. Nothing like this really exists with regard to the southern flank.[23] Policy documents like the Framework for the South or the Package for the South are not strategic texts nor do they define a level of ambition for NATO in the region. This is partly a sign that the allies want to concentrate on the eastern flank (and maybe then on China) and that the attention and energy that they are ready to dedicate to the MENA is limited as a consequence.

If, on the contrary, NATO wishes to upgrade its presence and impact in the MENA, then a significant effort is to be made at the strategic level. The alliance could not by itself address the root causes of instability in the region, which is clearly beyond its remit, but it could at least give more purposefulness to what it has done so far.

21 With France and the United States supporting the Popular Protection Units (YPG) against ISIS while Turkey considers the YPG as an extension of the Syrian Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and as such as a terrorist organization.

22 Ian Lesser et.al., The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2018, p. 25.

23 See Schwarz, NATO and the Middle East.

This first implies a comprehensive analysis of the security situation in the MENA and of the issues that are likely to spill over into NATO in the near future. This does not need to be carried out by NATO itself. It could rely on national input or a mix of open-source and classified information. On this basis, a strategic reflection and document, as part of the current Strategic Concept process, defining the objectives, methods, and resources of NATO's presence in the region is of the essence. A dedicated document or a section in the Strategic Concept would not only give visibility to a policy that has suffered from a lack of strategy, it would also clarify the level of ambition of the allies. A strategic narrative laying down a "renewed cooperative security" ambition for the region would also help articulate such ambition with NATO's deterrence and defense agenda. Resources and political commitment would have to follow suit and be sustained over time. No quick fix will do.

Furthermore, a "renewed cooperative security" plan should be accompanied by strategic communication (in English, French, and Arabic) on what NATO intends to do, how, and why it matters to the recipient entities. Any strategic-communications or public-diplomacy effort should also include a counter-disinformation component. Ideally such communication would be paired with a similar exercise carried out by the EU. Realistically, the chance that such a strategic framework will be adopted is not high; conversely, the chance that NATO would achieve anything meaningful in the region absent a strategic vision is equally low.

Division of Tasks and Concentration of Efforts

Second, any purposeful NATO presence in the MENA will have to be the result of a well thought-through partnership with the EU. The two institutions must capitalize on what they do best and refrain from developing activities that are better covered by the other.[24] This also applies to cooperation with the UN and its development and humanitarian agencies.

The typology of security issues in the region presented above is useful in this respect. Distinguishing between conflicts, terrorism, or organized crime; between state fragility, bad governance, or the porosity of borders; and the more diffuse human-security issues makes it possible to identify areas where a military alliance can add value and others where it most likely will not. NATO can play a role in response to open conflicts or terrorism, and it can contribute to the strengthening of military and security institutions, but it is unlikely to be able to bring anything tangible in human-security domains. This prioritization matters to the definition of where the alliance should go, but it also calls for partnerships insofar as any NATO activity on a narrow segment will only produce an effect if complemented by parallel actions on the other (economic, political, etc.) segments, by other entities.

If NATO and the EU are engaged in capacity-building and training in the region, NATO must concentrate on the defense segment for which it offers the best know-how or resources.

With this logic in mind, if NATO and the EU are engaged in capacity-building and training in the region, NATO must concentrate on the defense segment for which it offers the best know-how or resources. This includes tasks such as defense-sector reform, capacity-building on operations in high-temperature environments, military counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, assisting in building interoperability between allies and partner countries, and handling improvised explosive devices.[25] But NATO should probably refrain from investing in security areas where the EU or the UN are better placed or only

24 See Fernando Puebla, Projecting stability on NATO's Southern Flank. How can NATO and the EU ensure efficient cooperation?, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, November 2018.

25 See Chloé Berger, What role for NATO in the Sahel?, NATO Defense College, December 2021.

embrace these tasks in places where the others cannot go. Focus on the defense segment suggests that NATO alone is unlikely to play a strategic role, in the sense that its limited presence will in most cases be insufficient to be transformative. Hence the importance of inter-institutional cooperation.

Beyond cooperative security, NATO must retain the capacity to conduct military operations in a crisis-management mode in the region. This goes against the current post-Afghanistan mood, yet the nature of the environment makes it impossible to rule out a major military operation one day. (There was similar intervention fatigue in 2010 while NATO was drafting its Strategic Concept and a year later it got involved in Libya.) This carries implications for NATO planning and exercises as well as for the projection capabilities of European states, at a time when the collective-defense agenda tends to concentrate on territorial defense.

Revisiting Partnerships

When it comes to NATO's partnerships, there is a broad consensus advocating an overhaul so that they better reflect evolving needs and NATO interests, while recognizing the limited appetite of allies to do so.[26] Whether the process leading to the new Strategic Concept will allow for such a revision is uncertain. One consideration here is to move away from the geographical feature of the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, and to approach partnerships more functionally and/or politically. The connections between North Africa and the Sahel, or between the Near East and the Arabian peninsula, attest to the narrowness of existing partnerships, especially as some of the most problematic countries (such as Lebanon, Libya, or Syria) are not partner countries. The "30+1" or "30+7" Mediterranean Dialogue formats[27] can prove ill-adapted in this respect as they do not allow for third countries or organization like the African Union or the G5 Sahel among other to take part.

The political dialogue with partners in the region so far has been often criticized as too formal and superficial, and it has not been held sufficiently regularly.

NATO's political role could also be improved within and outside formal partnerships. The political dialogue with partners in the region so far has been often criticized as too formal and superficial, and it has not been held sufficiently regularly.[28] At a time when NATO seeks to develop its political profile, engaging MENA partners as well as other countries of the region in a more flexible and strategic dialogue is to be considered; for example, with more regular meetings with various levels of participation.[29] Not only would a sustained political dialogue help socialize MENA officials with their NATO counterparts at different levels, it could also be part of broader diplomatic processes in which NATO sits together with some of the allies. By doing so NATO would become a more natural interlocutor and therefore a potential partner. In this process, other levels of governance such as international organizations (the African Union, the League of Arab States, the G5 Sahel) will have to be included. In 2019, NATO and the African Union signed a cooperation agreement to enhance their relationship. The alliance has also established contact with the G5 Sahel and started to explore avenues for cooperation. These exchanges are useful insofar as they

26 See Lesser et.al., The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue; Thierry Tardy, "From NATO's partnerships to security networks", in Thierry Tardy (ed.), NATO 2030: new technologies, new conflicts, new partnerships, NATO Defense College, 2021.

27 These formats allow the 30 NATO allies to meet with either one Mediterranean partner, or with the seven of them.

28 See Lesser et al., The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, p. 29.

29 See Lesser et al., The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, and Berger, What role for NATO in the Sahel?.

help establish trust among entities whose cultures and mandates can be very different. Yet the level of ambition has remained low and in practice only few activities have taken place.

Conclusion

NATO's presence and impact in the Middle East and North Africa have so far been constrained by issues that pertain to prioritization and feasibility. Not only have its members diverged on whether the alliance should be engaged in its southern flank, but its ability to bring responses to the broad range of problems in the region has also been restricted. NATO's role in the MENA has remained sub-strategic as a consequence.

Bearing in mind the forthcoming Strategic Concept, a renewed cooperative-security ambition is imperative if NATO wants to weigh on the region's overall stability so that its own security is also preserved. Whether the best moment to do that is when the United States says it pivots to the Indo-Pacific is not sure, but while other external powers seem to have clear ideas about what they want in the MENA, any disengagement or light presence by NATO or Western powers would likely carry enormous risks.

About the Author

Thierry Tardy is the director of the Research Division at the NATO Defense College in Rome and visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. The views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

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