

OF CONCERNS AND IMAGE:

The Alliance and Its Southern Flank

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Arab Spring



OF CONCERNS AND IMAGE: THE ALLIANCE AND ITS SOUTHERN FLANK

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INTRODUCTION

NATO has a track record of policies and statements which demonstrate its commitment to what is often dubbed the Southern flank, i.e. the MENA region.¹ Consequently, one could expect the Alliance to develop a firm set of policies aimed at this flank. However, as one shrewd commentator put it, NATO does not “so far” possess a “level of understanding” of the “South” which would equal its grasp of the Eastern flank. This, the argument goes, is down to the complexity of the challenges emanating from the South and the relative simplicity of those related to “a state actor that is the successor to the Alliance’s traditional adversary” in the East.² No equivalent of Russia exists in the South, although Moscow is increasingly present in the region, and the security threats related to this flank are often sub-state and non-military in nature.

This paper, written in support of the GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative, which developed to “address the nature of NATO adaptation and the challenges it must overcome if it is to remain a viable and credible alliance for the peace and stability in the transatlantic area,”³ will offer a set of clear-cut recommendations aimed at helping the Alliance “understand” its Southern neighbourhood. The recommendations will be preceded by 1. a short description of NATO’s existing priorities in its relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, 2. description of the Alliance’s image and standing in MENA, and 3. an outline of the latter’s threat matrix. These three issues are closely interlinked as we are of an opinion that the Alliance must work on improving its credibility in the region (2.) via addressing MENA countries’ genuine security concerns (3.) and not via imposition of a transatlantic threat perception. This could eventually lead to the “realisation of NATO’s priorities in MENA (1.). In other words, **NATO must contribute to addressing the genuine security concerns of its Southern partners in order to begin the process of fixing its image in the MENA. This could help in persuading MENA leaders of the merits of assisting with countering threats to the Alliance emanating from the South. Thus, it is about “their” concerns and NATO’s image first before the Alliance is capable of building up the “level of understanding” on par with its Eastern Flank.**

SOUTHERN PRIORITIES

In 2013 Dirk Brengelmann, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy, outlined NATO’s approach to the MENA region in a speech in Marrakech, Morocco.⁴ He stressed the common characteristics of security threats (terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, potential disruption

¹ See: The Alliance’s Chicago Summit which mentions the existence two foras: the Mediterranean Dialogu (MD, engaging the North African countries), and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI, engaging the countries of the broader Middle Eastern region), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm#libya. See also Wales Summit Declaration (http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?mode=pressrelease) and Warsaw Summit Communiqué (http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm).

² K. Mezran, “Saving Libya to Defend NATO’s Southern Flank,” MENASource: News, Analysis, Perspectives, Atlantic Council, 6 October 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/saving-libya-to-defend-nato-s-southern-flank>

³ See: GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Project: NATO in a Changing Strategic Environment , 28 November 2016, <http://www.globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-nato-adaptation-project-nato-in-a-changing-strategic-environment>.

⁴ See: D. Brengelmann, “NATO’s Approach to a Rapidly Changing MENA Region,” 3 April 2013, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_99693.htm?selectedLocale=en.

to energy supplies, and illegal trafficking) for both the Allies and the MENA countries, and underscored the need for a joint approach to meeting them. Speaking two years after the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, Brengelmann also emphasised NATO willingness to help “promote reform and the rule of law” in the region. Looking ahead, he outlined “three main strands in NATO’s future engagement with the countries of the wider region:”

1. “firm” assistance with defence and security sector reform.
2. “deepening” of cooperation via tailor-made, bilateral programmes addressing “not just the individual needs of our partners, but also our common security challenge.”
3. “capacity building” so that “countries of the region” could more successfully “address their own security” and “participate in international community’s peacekeeping and crisis management operations – including those led by NATO.”⁵

More than three years later, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, while delivering a keynote address on “cooperation with Partners in the Mediterranean and the Middle East” at the NATO Defence College, chose not to focus on the Alliance’s desire to promote reform and rule of law in the region, nor defence sector reform (DSR) or security sector reform (SSR) (Brengelmann’s strand no. 1). Acknowledging the post-Arab Spring conditions in the MENA countries, he focused on Brengelmann’s strand no. 2, i.e. “deepening” of cooperation via tailor-made programmes. He also stressed the fact that such activities would further empower the MENA partners who would consequently become more effective in addressing joint security threats such as terrorism (Brengelmann’s strand no. 3). The Secretary General concluded with an assurance that “the cooperation between NATO and the partners in the MENA region is of great importance for NATO” and a hope that “it’s of great importance for the countries in the MENA region.”⁶

To a large extent, Brengelmann’s three strands have survived I the turmoil of the last decade in the region and the challenges associated with the Arab Spring. Accordingly, contours of NATO involvement and engagement remain the same: the deepening of bilateral cooperation and focus on capability building. In this sense, the underscoring of the “rule of law” in the region was the only victim of NATO’s re-adjustment to the ever-changing conditions on the ground in MENA countries, no longer dominated by enthusiasm around the prospects of the Arab Spring. However, such an approach, perfectly legitimate and sensible from the Alliance’s point view, might not be received as intended amongst NATO’s Southern interlocutors, and could be distorted by the pre-existing and possibly ill-conceived image of the Alliance amongst the decision makers and the publics of the region.

IMAGE AND PERCEPTION

Leaders of the MENA region are not automatically inclined towards an Alliance which is “founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.”⁷ Some of these principles, if applied to their countries, would work against the prolongation of their rule which they perceive as a key security paradigm. In a region where incumbent power survival is often the key concern, a democratically oriented transatlantic Alliance is not a natural political-military partner. Consequently, **less principled and more transaction-oriented partners, like China and Russia, often enjoy a considerable head start when competing with the likes of NATO, the EU or their individual Allies or Member States. Thus NATO, to an extent, faces an uphill battle while attempting to (re)define its regional role as its MENA interlocutors often do not share the values underpinning the Alliance, or are ambivalent about its intentions.**

In general, NATO’s standing in the region is conditioned by two factors: 1. the actions of the U.S. which is rightly identified as the main force in the Alliance, and 2. NATO presence and involvement in MENA – especially in the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Defense College conference “NATO cooperation with Partners in the Mediterranean and the Middle East,” 14 October 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_135889.htm.

⁷ See: The North Atlantic Treaty, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

aftermath of Colonel Gaddafi's downfall in Libya, assisted by NATO's Operation Unified Protector. In this sense, NATO is often perceived as an extension of U.S. political and especially military power. The latter is popularly associated with the U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq which did not endear Washington to Muslim audiences. Consequently, real or imaginary grievances held against the U.S. government affect the Alliance's reputation in the region and its ability to successfully co-operate with MENA countries. The situation in this respect is not made any easier by the fact that some of the Alliance's leading members are former colonial powers which controlled large swathes of territories in the MENA region, and are often viewed with a degree of suspicion by some North African or Middle Eastern partners. Of course, most NATO Allies do not have colonial experiences and potentially could offer added value in the process of transforming the Alliance's image in the region. At the same time, however, their often modest capabilities, limited expertise on the region, and most paradoxically, their relative anonymity for MENA audiences, would work against them during any potential attempts to act as "faces" of a broader, multinational and transatlantic effort in the region.

The post-colonial backdrop muddies the waters as far as the MENA region's understanding of NATO's capacity building is concerned. The Alliance's Southern neighbours will be suspicious of not only NATO's intentions as it drives this process but also of their extent. NATO, one strand of thinking in the region goes, might then want these built-up capacities deployed in joint operations and missions in which MENA countries would have very little interest (either in the region or beyond). This approach would destroy any notion of agency on behalf of the MENA partners who would be reluctant to endorse the primacy of a Western political-military alliance in any joint venture.

The Libyan civil war is an example of this situation, with the majority of NATO's MENA partners effectively neutral in the conflict and reluctant to support Operation Unified Protector. What is more, this endeavour only increased the MENA's authorities suspicion of NATO, and the West's intentions, with the Alliance partially regarded as a tool for regime change. One could rightly see it as an unfortunate and an unfair assumption. Nonetheless, if we were to accept that this might be one of the views widely held in the region then we should be aware that the Alliance could face a credibility problem in the MENA. This is not necessarily a problem with the content of its message but with the messenger itself who is neither seen as a force for good nor a defender or stabiliser.

NATO must accept that in the eyes of many of the MENA leaders and local public, the Alliance is not necessarily a pro-democracy, pro-peace and liberal defensive security arrangement but a regime change tool and destabiliser. Algeria's "strict neutrality" vis-à-vis the Libyan civil war in 2011 was indicative not only of regional concerns related to the success of the anti-government revolt but also North African attitudes towards an external intervention in the region.⁸ As it later transpired, the Arab publics were of a similar opinion with "not one Arab country [...with] a majority of its population supporting the [NATO] intervention."⁹

THE SOUTH'S SECURITY CONCERNS

Just as NATO could be regarded as a force tackling issues of little interest to MENA decision-makers or local audiences, it is simultaneously often perceived as an actor that is unable to address individual MENA states' most pressing security concerns. These include: countering Iranian expansionism (Gulf Cooperation Council countries), rising and evolving threat from the Lebanese Hezbollah (Israel), mass emigration/brain drain, troubles with economic diversification, or the acute issue of desertification (shared by a string of MENA states). Whether the Alliance could be of assistance in all of the above remains to be seen. What is more certain is that NATO could assist MENA countries in countering terrorism.

Unfortunately, one can hardly expect Arab leaders to outsource counter-terrorism to an Alliance involving the U.S. and former colonial powers as this would provide a perfect propaganda boon for the likes of Al-Qaeda, ISIS local insurgencies and non-violent domestic opposition groups. Even if the Allies were to be granted a very unlikely invitation to provide more direct assistance and involvement in domestic counter-terrorism in different MENA states then one could have serious doubts about their capacity to fill this role. Different MENA leaders

⁸ C. Ayad, "L'Algérie se sent menacée par la révolution en Libye," *Le Monde Afrique*, 30 August 2011,

http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/08/30/l-algerie-se-sent-menacee-par-la-revolution-en-libye_1565153_3212.html.

⁹ "Arab public opinion and the NATO mission in Libya," *Al-Akhbar English*, 9 July 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9555>.

perceive the U.S. as the less involved or even diminishing world power with the likes of the UK and France unable and unwilling to act as “overseas balancers” or security providers in the region. Such an outlook only strengthens the already dominant MENA security perception which is profoundly realist in nature. This reinforces local reliance on self-help (see: the conflict in Yemen and the Saudi/Gulf Cooperation Council intervention or the Egyptian/Emirati bombings in Libya) and zero-sum games developing in relations between different regional actors whose security priorities are not aligned. What is more, increased competition between regional powers (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates) translates into interference in neighbouring states’ affairs or effectively fighting proxy wars with each other in a different MENA country. In such an environment, NATO will find it difficult to engage all MENA partners simultaneously (as there is no overarching security structure akin to NATO grouping them), and if it deepens its co-operation with some then its relations with “laggards” will deteriorate.

Moreover, any attempt to strengthen or further institutionalise co-operation with individual MENA countries will be hampered by the fact that the collapse of state structures in the likes of Libya or Yemen, and the ongoing civil war in Syria, limits the number of interlocutors in this process. In addition, attempts to externally “stabilise” the aforementioned countries reduces any willingness for engagement with non-local actors who are often seen by MENA leaders as complicit (because of their actions or inactions) in the fallout from civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen. Finally, the slow pace (or less diplomatically – agony) of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and two-state solution jeopardises any hope for the construction of a regional security infrastructure modelled on or able to act as an equal partner with NATO.

Reduced Western influence – hastened by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, fall-out from NATO’s Operation Unified Protector in Libya, and the “America First” approach of the Trump Administration – has generated a power vacuum that has enabled the aforementioned MENA powers, but also outsiders like Russia, to fill this gap. The latter’s involvement will be welcomed not only by Iran and Syria but also by small and mid-size regional powers that utilise it to counterbalance the diminishing Western influence and presence. To this end, the likes of Tunisia are closely monitoring NATO-Russia relations and have invited Russian MoD experts to contribute to the Tunisian White Paper on Defence (Tunisia’s own Quadrennial Defense Review). There exists, however, a cap on Russia’s success in terms of its political and military involvement in MENA. Its emergence will be conditioned by how well Moscow handles the Libyan portfolio, and successfully inserts itself into the power game raging in this country without alienating other regional actors, nor paying the price for yet another (after Syria) political-military MENA venture.

One of the elements of increased Russian engagement in the MENA is manifested by an upsurge in its information operations targeting local governments and populations. These are : 1. increased reliance of regional media outlets and platforms on Russian or outright pro-Russian news providers (with RT and Sputnik as points of reference); and 2. a reverse process in which Russian or pro-Russian media give floor to anti-U.S., anti-NATO and conspiracy theorists from the MENA region. Both tactics provide Moscow with a legitimacy boost and augments its standing among local publics.

These two trends are also progressing against the backdrop of the susceptibility of poorly-educated MENA audiences to disinformation, especially that coming from a power broadly seen as rival to the U.S. and the broader West. At the same time, MENA governments are losing their ability to dominate and exert authority over societies in the information sphere. These enjoy increasing levels of connectivity which, in turn, often results in their subsequent fragmentation and a more prominent role for sub-state networks such as tribes, interest groups and ethnic groups . This development also produces a string of challenges related to: the effectiveness of national, top-down strategic communications, elevated risks of internal conflicts, the development of ungoverned spaces ++ and subjugation of some of the aforementioned networks to hostile actors (regional or external powers, transnational criminal/terrorist organisations, domestic insurgencies).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATO

Given NATO’s standing in the region -not to mention the different but also robustly metastasizing security concerns of different MENA countries - the Alliance should pursue a balanced approach to its Southern neighbours. The policy options outlined below will allow for a more practical and substantial engagement with

MENA partners, and simultaneously reinforce the narrative of “deepening” cooperation and “capacity building” – both of crucial interest to NATO.

Bilateralism. NATO provides relatively limited incentives for MENA partners to engage with the Alliance and has yet to define its vision for this partnership. What is more, any vision would be developed against the backdrop of a string of bilateral ties between individual Allies and MENA partners. Under such conditions, one must remain cautious about the chances of multilateral foras, such as a NATO-Arab Maghreb Union/Gulf Cooperation Council partnership. These would be viewed with suspicion by individual MENA states not wishing to be pushed towards a transregional “concert of powers,” once again dominated by representatives of the transatlantic area. **Accordingly, NATO should work on the further development of the bilateral ties.**

Empowerment. NATO should ensure that its Southern partners do not perceive these ties as an exercise in threat management on behalf of the Alliance and individual members, but as genuine dialogue between partners. **Thus, MENA states should not only receive assistance from their Northern neighbours but also be empowered as partners with things to offer and share with the Allies (see Track II diplomacy recommendation).**

Track II diplomacy. NATO organises activities for MENA officials and experts which introduce the Alliance’s strategic thinking and culture to the security communities of North Africa and the Middle East. At the same time, no such programmes are being developed by NATO’s Southern partners. Of course, this is hampered by a lack of funds. But **what if the finances were to be provided by the Alliance (or alternatively, and again in the spirit of the Joint Declaration – in cooperation with much the more financially-able EU)? Such an approach could empower the local expert community (e.g. universities and think tanks) and effectively lead to a creation of track II diplomacy forums** which would strengthen ties across the Mediterranean and build up Western understanding of the MENA region. Such forums could help counter some of the entrenched narratives on both sides.

Assistance. The Alliance’s focus on interoperability creates perceptions among MENA states that the aim of cooperation is to prepare them to contribute to multi-national operations under NATO leadership. **Thus, focus should shift towards MENA states’ specific needs.** These include: assistance in the reform of the highly vertical and centralised command and control of military organisations; their inability to deliver combined arms operations due to poor communication and coordination mechanisms; their armed forces- out of date (if not archaic) human resources systems ; the poor state of professional military education, and consequently low capabilities related to strategic planning and military doctrine development; domestic resistance to the professionalization of armed forces; out of date training regimes focused on conventional warfare rather than hybrid threats.

Counterinsurgency (COIN). One of NATO’s main challenges in the region is to help MENA states build their COIN capacity rather than taking ownership of the latter’s potential domestic conflicts. The line between internal and external security is blurring as military outfits are called to perform internal security tasks and their scope of action increasingly overlaps with that of the internal security forces. As the primary security challenge (unconventional warfare) is multidimensional, civilian lines of effort and internal security bodies are as relevant to regional stability and security as military outfits. **As part of future efforts to build COIN capacity, NATO-MENA activities should not be confined to military-to-military cooperation.** Indeed, NATO should be able to provide support to all domestic actors involved in COIN and help MENA states develop comprehensive civil-military approaches to security.

“Soft” skills. Going beyond the military-to-military cooperation, NATO could also act as a “one stop shop of expertise,” that is a provider of different menus from which MENA partners could choose capabilities and skills beyond the simple transfer of equipment(methods, doctrines, processes). **These could then be used by MENA partners to not only combat or counter threats but also to foster best practices among domestic actors that share a vested interest in their implementation.**

Public diplomacy. It is often said that the messenger is more important than the message itself, with the broader West and consequently NATO currently suffering from a serious handicap when communicating to MENA audiences. **At the same time, however, Europe possesses a range of strong (but nonetheless overlooked)**

public/cultural diplomacy tools that appeal to MENA publics and decision-makers. One example is football.

With millions of followers and fans of European football competitions in the region, NATO and the EU (in the spirit of the Joint Declaration from July 2016) should jointly create a public diplomacy programme which would focus on footballers from Allied states and MENA countries . As they are quite often teammates, the message of this programme should stress the value of teamwork and cooperation in achieving results. This is fundamental to any team sport and also to neighbours who encounter the same security threats. ■



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