

# What does the future hold for NATO in MENA?





# A moment of truth: how can NATO better engage with MENA?



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, there has been a major debate among policymakers in North America and Europe about the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). One issue the leaders of the alliance need to address is what its role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region should be.

While not strictly part of its area of responsibility, NATO cannot ignore the MENA region. Historical and recent events show that what happens there can quickly spill over into Europe.

A decade after the start of the so-called Arab Spring, many geopolitical challenges remain in the region, from the rise of transnational terrorism to the nuclear threat and state-sponsored terrorism from Iran. Many in NATO therefore have rightly decided to place a renewed focus on working with regional partners on the southern periphery of the alliance.

NATO already has structures in place to improve cooperation with partners in this part of the world but has done little to enhance these relationships in recent years. The organization carries out cooperative security tasks with its southern partners through two mechanisms: the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Launched in 1994, the Mediterranean Dialogue forms the basis of NATO's relations with its Mediterranean partners: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco

and Tunisia. Although talks generally take place on a bilateral basis between NATO and one Mediterranean partner (NATO+1), on occasion the forum meets as NATO+7. This places Israel at the same table as some of its regional neighbors, where it would not otherwise be.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which was launched in 2004, currently forms the basis of NATO's relations with Gulf states. Although all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council were invited to join, as yet only Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE have done so. Saudi Arabia and Oman have expressed minor interest in joining.

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, which runs to 40 pages and was intended to serve as a guide for dealing with future challenges, is now woefully out of date. The MENA region is barely mentioned in the document. The alliance is in the process of developing a new Strategic Concept and should use this as an opportunity to enhance and build on its relations in the region.

NATO leaders need to develop a strategy to engage with the region. Partnership leads to interoperability, which helps to promote understanding and security. As Iran becomes more of a destabilizing force, and transnational terrorism continues to plague the region, the alliance should build solid and enduring relations with friendly countries in MENA.

## NATO AND THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

In recent years, there has been a major debate among policymakers in North America and Europe about the future of NATO. This debate is nothing new. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War there has been much discussion about what the role of the alliance should be. More recently, however, the mainstream debate has shifted from whether or not NATO is still relevant to consideration of what it should be doing and where it should be doing it.

One issue the leaders of NATO need to address is the role of the alliance in the MENA region. The 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, the organization's founding document, states that its area of responsibility is "the North Atlantic region north of the Tropic of Cancer." But while not strictly part of NATO's area of responsibility as defined by Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the alliance cannot ignore MENA. Historical and recent events show that what happens in the region can quickly spill over into Europe.

To the south of Europe, from the eastern Atlantic Ocean through North Africa and on to the Middle East, there are pockets of stability and instability. The instability in this region is the result of demographic pressures, increased commodity prices, interstate and intrastate conflicts, tribal politics, competition over water and other natural resources, religious tensions, revolutionary tendencies, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and proxy wars involving regional and global actors.



*NATO has done little to enhance relationships with partners in the Middle East in recent years*

Complicating the situation even more for NATO is the fact that the region contains some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources and trade choke points. Meanwhile the fallout and consequences in the region of the COVID-19 pandemic remain to be seen.

## NATO PARTNERSHIPS AND OPERATIONS IN THE REGION

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There have been three NATO military operations in the MENA region.

1. Between 2004 and 2011, the alliance carried out a small training operation in Iraq designed to improve the capabilities of the Iraqi military. After 2011 its involvement in the country was reduced until 2015 when, after the fall of Mosul, the Iraqi government requested the organization’s support for another training mission based in Jordan. It was not until 2018, however, that the current NATO Mission-Iraq was activated. Last month the alliance decided to increase the number of trainers from about 500 to 4,000<sup>1</sup>.
2. Between 2009 and 2015 NATO led Operation Ocean Shield, one of several international missions to combat piracy off the Horn of Africa. The mission was successful and prevented or disrupted hundreds of pirate attacks<sup>2</sup>.
3. In 2011 NATO enforced a no-fly zone over Libya as part of its Operation Unified Protector. This tested the political cohesion of the alliance and also highlighted some of its shortcomings. For example, at times some NATO members were literally running out of munitions and others were able to provide only a limited number of fighter jets<sup>3</sup>.

**SHARED CONCERNS**

NATO member states share many of the same security concerns with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, including regional terrorism threats from extremist groups or the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran. Furthermore, many of the countries in the region have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the alliance and have even contributed troops to NATO-led missions. For example the mission in Kosovo at one time included 1,200 soldiers from the UAE<sup>4</sup>. More than 11,000 Moroccan soldiers also served in Kosovo over a span of 14 years<sup>5</sup>.

The NATO mission in Afghanistan has included troops from Jordan, the UAE

  
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(including Emirati special forces) and Bahrain<sup>6</sup>. Jordan, Qatar and the UAE provided aircraft and resources for the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011<sup>7</sup>.

The Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative remain two complementary, yet distinct, partnership frameworks. Within each there are varying degrees of cooperation between NATO and participating countries. Any nation in these groupings can also increase political and security cooperation with the alliance through an Individual and Partnership Cooperation Program (IPCP)<sup>8</sup>.

For many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, cooperation with NATO can be politically difficult. The offer of a bilateral NATO+1 relationship based on the IPCP format allows such countries to choose the degree of cooperation with which they are comfortable. This built-in flexibility is important when forging relations because some countries feel more comfortable about cooperating with NATO than others do. Even a little cooperation is better than no cooperation at all.

In the Mediterranean Dialogue, for example, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia have IPCPs with NATO. However, there is still a reluctance among some in the region to work more closely with the organization.

At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, for example, NATO announced plans to open an intelligence “fusion center” in Tunisia. Almost five years later, the proposal remains on ice as a result of domestic political disagreement in Tunis about cooperation with NATO<sup>9</sup>.

In 2017, the alliance opened a Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S) as part of Joint Forces Command Naples<sup>10</sup>. The focus of NSD-S is to serve as a hub for closer NATO cooperation with its partners in North Africa.

Enthusiasm in the Middle east for cooperation with NATO is also mixed. Important members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, such as Saudi Arabia and Oman, do not participate in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. And although NATO and Iraq have an IPCP, Iraq remains outside the initiative.

However, Kuwait is home to the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre (ICI-RC). Its goal is to improve the shared understanding of security challenges



between NATO and its partners in the region through high-level meetings, working groups and educational courses.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept, which runs to 40 pages and was intended to serve as a guide for dealing with future challenges, is now woefully out of date<sup>11</sup>. The MENA region is barely mentioned in the document. The alliance is in the process of developing a new Strategic Concept and should use this as an opportunity to enhance and build on its relations in the region.

There are also a number of practical steps NATO can take to improve its relations with its southern neighbors.

One of the first things it should do is appoint a special representative for the MENA region, a part of the world where personal relationships are paramount. The alliance should appoint to the position a highly respected diplomat with knowledge of the region, who can be an enduring point of contact.

NATO should push to enlarge the membership of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. In particular, the organization should include

**NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg chairs the NAC-ICI meeting to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Istanbul cooperation initiative in Kuwait City on December 16, 2019.**  
AFP

as members countries in which US and European lives have been lost and money invested, such as Iraq and Libya. The more cooperation, the better.

The alliance should also establish a Mediterranean Dialogue Regional Center, modeled on the ICI-RC in Kuwait. This will help NATO and the countries that participate in the Mediterranean Dialogue to improve interoperability and enhance relations. Perhaps Morocco would be a suitable location.

Neither the Mediterranean Dialogue nor the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative have held formal meetings during a NATO summit at the heads-of-government level. At the next summit, the alliance should emphasize the geopolitical importance of the MENA region by including high-level meetings for both groupings.

Partnership leads to interoperability, which helps to promote understanding and security. This is why cooperation between NATO and the countries of the MENA region is so important. As Iran becomes more of a destabilizing force, and transnational terrorism continues to plague the region, the alliance should build solid and enduring relations with friendly countries there.





**NATO on August 27, 2015 opened a training centre in Georgia as the ex-Soviet country eyes closer partnership with the Western military alliance amid tensions with Russia.** AFP

## NOTES

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