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NATO and the Arab Spring: Challenge to Cooperation, Opportunity for Action?

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Recommendations

- The consequences of the Arab Spring will be the key determinant of NATO's activities in the MENA region. The Alliance should not only acknowledge and reflect this, but also react to the fact that for foreseeable future, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East will provide the main backdrop against which its credibility and prestige will be judged.
- While the North African countries like Egypt and Tunisia tacitly acquiesced to the intervention in Libya, their position should not be misinterpreted as a carte blanche to future NATO activities in the region. In relation to these partners, the Alliance should focus on cooperation which will support the transformational processes, including security sector reform, civilian accountability of armed forces, transparency of defence budgets or joint military exercises and training programmes. Rescue operations, logistics and procurement of military material constitute additional areas for possible enhancement of mutual cooperation.
- NATO should aim at eventually enticing the remaining GCC members to join the ICI, not the least to gain access to their consistently growing military capabilities. The Alliance should also establish NATO-ICI centres in the GCC countries, with the main one in Qatar. While not ignoring the gap in values and political preferences, NATO should nevertheless seek practical cooperation in the region, focusing on countering religious extremism, combating transnational crime and enhancing energy security by protecting transit areas and lines.
- Despite initial hesitation, Turkey has seized the opportunity offered to it by the Arab Spring and attempts to boost its role as a model 'Muslim democracy'. NATO should willingly acknowledge this role of its only member with direct geopolitical footing in the Middle East, and actively use it in its policies. This implies intensifying intra-Alliance dialogue which must address and overcome the suspicions of Turkey's motives among its allies.
- In relation to Israel, NATO can do little to effectively alleviate the fears raised by turmoil in the neighbouring countries, particularly Syria. What it can and should do is insist on further development and extension of practically oriented cooperation, especially when focusing on terrorism and WMD proliferation. NATO and its members should clearly emphasize to its partner that their support for transformation processes in the Arab countries does not by any means lessen their readiness to cooperate closely with Israel.
- NATO and its members cannot avoid their responsibility towards the conflict in Syria, especially after their action against Gaddafi. Circumstances dictate prudent and cautious approach, but even inaction will have its costs, measured in the Alliance's influence and credibility in the region. At the very least, NATO should clearly formulate their preferred outcomes of the conflict and possible ways of achieving them. It should also be ready to react to a possible call for its involvement – even if the answer is negative.



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Arab Spring from the NATO Perspective: Hope Full of Fears

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization started its engagement in the Mediterranean practically since its inception, including the formal commitment to the defence of the Algerian Departments of France in Article 6. Given its importance, with the geopolitical focal points in Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean was destined to remain one of NATO's strategic priorities throughout the Cold War. The end of the superpower conflict only highlighted the region's importance which was reflected both militarily by the establishment of the Standing Naval Force Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED) in 1992 and politically through the launch of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) in 1994. After 9/11, the threats emanating from the region of the wider became the core strategic focus of the Alliance, with the operation Active Endeavour becoming an important maritime component to NATO's fight against terrorism and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) extending the political dialogue with local actors.

Given their longstanding rhetorical emphasis on democracy, rule of law and the protection of human rights, seemingly NATO and its members should welcome the developments of the Arab Spring with satisfaction, as a fulfilment of their strategic goals. They have not. While the assessment of the impact and consequences of the Arab Spring vary greatly across the political and expert scene, it is safe to argue that at least the initial reaction of the Euro-Atlantic community ranged from nervous uneasiness to outright consternation. Far from welcoming the fall of regional autocrats and democratization, NATO members feared the rise of Islamism, radicalization and destabilization.

While the initial shock of witnessing the 'friendly autocrats' fall has since worn off, the general unease over the course of developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is still palpable. The Arab Spring generated the most serious strategic challenge NATO has faced in the region for decades. It is a challenge of a specific nature, not easy to categorize either as an outright threat or an undeniable opportunity. The (so far) smooth transition on Tunisia and even the muddling through of the Egyptian revolution raise the hopes for a better future, including the moderation of political Islam, while the conflicts in Libya, Yemen and especially Syria have aptly demonstrated the dangerous contours of the ongoing transformational processes.

For NATO, the results of present developments will likely determine the success of its future policies in the MENA region. It should make no mistake that its actions – and inactions – will have direct influence on its credibility, prestige and scope of its operational space. No matter what individual member states think, the situation in the Middle East will continue to provide an inescapable backdrop against which NATO will be judged.

It is of crucial importance that the interests and motives of NATO's regional partners (and occasional foes) are properly understood and taken into account. This paper aims at contributing to the debate by focusing on several key players in the MENA region who will likely be important components in the overall NATO strategy. The first chapter is devoted to Egypt and Tunisia as two North African countries which have been undergoing political



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transformation and, equally important, are direct neighbours of Libya where NATO's recent engagement reached its apex. The next focus is on Qatar, one of the most active participants in current developments which underlines the importance of the ICI. Turkey and Israel are presented as 'outliers' in the predominantly Arab region – and at the same time actors whose interests and influence may prove crucial for the success of NATO's regional policies. Finally, the paper debates Syrian conflict, the most violent eruption the Arab Spring has generated so far, contemplating the possibility of possible NATO engagement.

The Reception of NATO Initiatives in North African Countries

NATO initiated the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) scheme in 1994 with Egypt, Tunisia, Israel, Mauritania and Morocco as co-founding countries. Jordan joined in 1995, followed by Algeria in 2000. The aim of the MD was to promote discussion about political and security issues between the Mediterranean and Euro-Atlantic countries. In addition, it sought to contribute to regional security and stability, to achieve better mutual understanding and to strengthen mutual ties, facilitating interoperability of military forces in the region. Moreover, NATO members aimed at enhancing their energy security and economic interests, as approximately 65 % of the gas and oil imports to Western Europe pass through the Mediterranean region.

NATO's strategic objectives from the 1990s sought regional stability and promoted the ability of rapid deployment of its forces if a need arose. The strategy required stationing NATO troops in various bases, which led NATO to redefine its connections with regional partners. The new Individual Cooperation Programme (ICP) – launched in 2006 – endorsed the NATO+1 formula to enhance partnerships with the Mediterranean countries on an individual basis. This update moved the partnership from a dialogue-only mode to practical cooperation in tackling security threats and advocating mutual security interests.

Despite shared security concerns, the MD countries have adopted a lukewarm approach to the ICP scheme. The reason lies in different incentives for cooperation within NATO and among regional partners. While Europe and the U.S. believed that political debates and information exchange constituted sufficient ground for cultivating dialogue and developing mutual cooperation in the security area, the Arab MD members conditioned such cooperation by resolving weighty issues first, including the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.¹ To demonstrate the positions of the MD members in North Africa, the cases of Egypt and Tunisia are especially illustrative, given their role in the unfolding of the Arab Spring, as well as their close proximity to the Libyan battlefield.

¹ Said, M. K., 2004. Assessing NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. *NATO Review*, 2004. [online] Available at <<http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue1/english/art4.html>> [Accessed 21 March 2012].



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Where the Generals Rule: Egypt's Cooperation with NATO

With the exception of Israel, NATO considered Egypt its most valuable strategic partner for the implementation of its policies in the region. This was confirmed during the first visit of a NATO leader, then Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, to Cairo in October 2005. Scheffer met with former Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Defence Minister Mohammed Hussain Tantawi (the current head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces – SCAF) and held talks on issues of common concern and the prospects for future cooperation between Egypt and NATO within the MD and ICP frameworks.²

Egypt joined the ICP programme in 2007. Border control, war on terror, exchange of intelligence, and stabilization of sensitive areas were identified as key areas for mutual cooperation and NATO's assistance. Cairo's participation in ICP also stimulated economic assistance and, in particular, military support to Egypt from Washington whose origins date back to the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1978.

When the protests of the Arab Spring broke out in Egypt, its representatives were repeatedly consulting the ongoing developments with senior military officers of the U.S. Central Command, who are responsible for co-formulating the American policy towards the Middle East. After the SCAF took over on 11 February 2011, an Egyptian military delegation paid several official visits to Washington. The most recent exchange of officials revolved around two topics: the security forces' crackdown on Egyptian NGOs linked to and financed by their mother organisations in the U.S., and the U.S. Congress' deliberations over reducing military aid to Egypt. These debates took place against a broader context of redefining the military relations between Egypt and the United States in the wake of alleged threats to the peace treaty with Israel. That said, it must be acknowledged that while the authority to review the treaty now lies in the hands of the elected parliament, this has not yet been granted proper authority and the peace treaty with Israel is therefore likely to come on the agenda only after the transformation period ends.

The NATO operation Unified Protector in Libya constitutes the most tangible issue against which future relations between Egypt and NATO can be assessed. The Arab League unanimously voted on the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya ahead of the NATO intervention. Moreover, Egypt was considered the only non-NATO country directly supporting Libyan rebels by transferring small arms across its border. Cairo also boosted the Libyan revolution by providing Internet access in rebel strongholds and health care for wounded Libyans in Egyptian hospitals. These activities were reportedly organized with the knowledge of the United States and in response to Western calls for regional backing of the NATO operation.³

² NATO, 2005. *Secretary General calls for expanding cooperation with Egypt*. [online] Available at: <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_21543.htm> [Accessed 20 March 2012]

³ NATO Watch, 2011. *Former UK Foreign Secretary Calls for NATO and Egypt to Enforce Libyan No Fly Zone*. [online] Available at <<http://www.natowatch.org/node/470>> [Accessed 20 March 2012]; Levinson, Ch., Rosenberg, M., 2011. Egypt said to Arm Libya Rebels. *The Wall Street Journal*. [online] Available at, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704360404576206992835270906.html>> [Accessed 20 March 2012]



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Such a claim, however, remains doubtful. The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in March 2011 that Egypt will not be involved in any military intervention and arms transfers were never explicitly confirmed by either Cairo, Washington or NATO. Egypt's approach to the NATO-led intervention in Libya was more likely designed to prevent a spill-over effect and to protect approximately one million Egyptians living in Libya. Egypt's support for NATO in Libya seems ambiguous also in light of the fact that Cairo recognized Libya's rebel-led National Transitional Council (NTC) only in August 2011.

Moreover, the recognition of NTC and extended logistical support for the Libyan revolution does not necessarily suggest that Egypt endorsed the NATO intervention. It may rather indicate that the ruling Egyptian army took the necessary initial steps to secure its economic interests in the neighbouring country. Beyond the original support for rebels, Egypt has since offered assistance in clearing landmines and building a new national Libyan army. In addition, Egyptian construction companies and other businesses owned by the military apparatus have stated their ambitions to get involved in the reconstruction of Libya.

SCAF's reluctance to officially acknowledge its support for Libya's rebels can also be interpreted as a precaution against setting a precedent which would endorse support for other foreign interventions in the region. Egyptian public observes foreign - in particular military - operations in the region with widespread hostility. Public poll conducted by the Gallup Institute in December 2011 indicated that 46 % of Egyptians opposed the NATO intervention in Libya, while only 18 % supported it. This result does not necessarily point to the population's support for Gaddafi's but rather reflects its scepticism over NATO's motives.⁴ On top of this, Egyptians tend to see Western powers as supporters of the recently toppled authoritarian regimes, and thus as counter-revolutionary forces. Therefore, support for the Libyan revolution voiced by the SCAF and Egyptian politicians is unlikely to be supplemented by open consent with NATO military presence in the region.

Meanwhile, obstacles of yet another kind have emerged. Egypt announced it will join Russia's initiative calling for an investigation of the death of Libyan civilians during NATO operations. Cairo's cooperation with Moscow indicates a potential area of misunderstanding and possibly conflict between NATO and Egypt. Should the initiative be implemented, it may build a long-term obstacle to the implementation of NATO's strategic goals in Egypt within the ICP. As before, the solution to such tensions will likely not come through Egypt's interaction with NATO but rather from its cooperation with the U.S. The bilateral relations between Cairo and Washington thus constitute the most secure foundation for possible enhancement of NATO-Egypt military ties in the future.

Tunisia's Transition between the Libyan War and Hopes for Regional Cooperation

Tunisia has been a member of the Mediterranean Dialogue since its inception. It participated in the NATO MD summits but most activities were implemented on a bilateral basis.

⁴Younis, M., Younis, A., 2012. *Opinion briefing: Egyptians on the Arab Spring*. Gallup [online] Available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152879/Opinion-Briefing-Egyptians-Arab-Spring.aspx> [Accessed 21 March 2012]



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However, since Tunisia broke diplomatic relations with Israel in 2000, the cooperation has grown more contentious.

NATO intervention in Libya was neither fully supported nor directly opposed by Tunisia. The interim government explicitly refused to join the NATO-led operation in March 2011 but, on the other hand, it bore the costs of a war next door without much outcry and let Tunisia become the basis of a supply chain for the insurgents. This is not insignificant, given the fact that Tunisia was directly threatened by the effects of the war, including the spread of violence, smuggling of weapons and other material across the border as well as the influx of refugees (200000 to 300000 third-country nationals and up to 100 000 Libyans, of whom only a dozen thousands had to be sheltered in refugee camps).⁵ For a country of a limited refugee absorption capacity and a long desert border, the war represented a serious risk. Tunisia also had to deal with a number of prominent defectors⁶, continuing inability of the Libyan government to control the border crossings, residual emigration, as well as a large volume of weapons circulating in the Sahara.

As regards relations to NATO, Tunisia's new political elite may prove more difficult to negotiate with than its predecessors as its political interests will be more complex and more responsive to public preferences. The victory of mainstream Islamists and intense agitation of the Salafists brought a new sense of national interests into politics. While the new political elite demonstrates a tangible degree of pragmatism, support for Palestine and opposition to any perceived displays of neo-colonialism will remain strong foreign policy factors, the more so the more populist the democratic scene turns.

Regional security cooperation, be it in Maghreb or in the broader Arab world, can be expected to carry more weight than the relation to NATO. Tunisia's new president, the liberal centrist Marzouki, has largely taken over the foreign policy agenda and promotes Arab integration on two levels: the Arab Maghreb Union and coordination regarding the Syrian crisis. Tunisia profiles itself as the only western Arab country matching Qatar's stance and activity towards Syria. Tunisia hosted meetings of Syrian opposition, of "Friends of Syria", and of Arab foreign ministers, expelled the Syrian ambassador and offered asylum to the Assads. Yet Tunisia's government also made clear that any further NATO intervention in an Arab state was out of question.

On the other hand, the regime change also opened a number of areas where cooperation between Tunisia and NATO can develop to mutual benefit. Tunisian process of political changes was unique regarding the minimal role of the army which does not have a political role. Consequently, Tunisia's army maintained staff continuity and became a candidate for reforms in the direction of NATO's support for civilian oversight and budget transparency. Also, Tunisia faces a heightened number of regional security threats: cross-border organized crime and terrorism, weapon smuggling and people trafficking among them. It will certainly seek regional cooperation, and possibly also support from NATO in tackling them.

⁵ In Tunisia, Nations Compete to Aid Libyan Refugees, 2012. *The Atlantic*. [online] Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/in-tunisia-nations-compete-to-aid-libyan-refugees/241394> [Accessed 20 March 2012]

⁶ Most notably the extradition of the former Libyan PM Al-Mahmoudi. See http://magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/11/09/feature-01



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Future Prospects

In the short term, the Arab revolutions may result in a more conservative and nationalist political leadership which will focus on regional integration and bilateral relations (particularly with the United States and France) rather than the NATO-led multilateral forum (also, but not only, due to Israel's membership in the MD). Prospective NATO cooperation effort will need to identify areas of mutual benefit, such as combating organized crime, trafficking, terrorism, reform assistance and joint military drills.

Although the capacities of the MD states to build regional political, economic or security structures remain low, this will not automatically translate into more support of NATO's presence in the region or even strengthened cooperation with the Alliance. Egypt has voiced strong concern over media reports that the NTC may consider accepting NATO military bases in the Libyan territory in exchange for the release of frozen Libyan assets. This opposition stems from the fear that NATO's continuing presence in the region may disturb the national security of both Egypt and Libya. In the light of this stance – but also the fact that previous attempts to open a NATO office in Israel were blocked by Turkey – it is safe to conclude that NATO's direct presence in the region remains unwelcome.

This, however, does not prevent further enhancement of mutual cooperation on the NATO+1 basis, including joint exercises. Since 1999, the MD countries have been invited to attend to the NATO Defence College in Germany. NATO's Mediterranean fleet could also boost the number of participating countries. In addition, Egyptian-U.S. military training programme "Operation Bright Star" has already been expanded to include other Arab and Euro-Atlantic countries.

Further steps might include the transformation of the prevailing NATO+1 approach to joint exercises on both regional and transnational levels. Empowerment of regional players through joint exercises and other means may boost interest in establishing regional cooperation structures. These may then become a guarantee of the regional stability and security, and consecutively a guardian to Euro-Atlantic security interests in the region. The effectiveness of such cooperation has already been tested during the deployment of the MD countries' troops in the Balkans. Egypt, Jordan and Morocco also participated – albeit outside the MD framework - in the Alliance's peacekeeping operations under both IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Last but not least, rescue operations, logistics and procurement of military material constitute additional areas for possible enhancement of mutual cooperation.

Beyond the Mediterranean: ICI and Cooperation with GCC countries

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative was launched in June 2004. It seeks to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO. The ICI has currently 4 partners who are also members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United



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Arab Emirates. It cannot, however, be regarded as a bilateral mechanism between NATO and the GCC since its other members, Saudi Arabia and Oman, have not yet joined.

The ICI is based on a number of principles which allow flexible, non-binding partnerships adjusted to individual needs of each participating country. This materializes in six main fields of practical security cooperation: defence (including security sector reform and civil-military relations), military-to-military cooperation, fight against terrorism and proliferation of WMD, border security and civil emergency planning. In general, the ICI is about regular dialogue and political consultations aimed at confidence-building, information networking and the creation of a “dense web of cooperative efforts”.

Arab members perceive the ICI as a valuable contribution to their security with great potential for future cooperation. Iranian regional ambitions and its nuclear programme as well as the role of GCC countries in the Syrian conflict and the Arab Spring only stress the importance of mutual partnership which can pay long-term dividends and has already proved beneficial during the war in Libya. Moreover, NATO declared its intention to deepen the ICI cooperation in article 35 of its Strategic Concept: “...develop a deeper security partnership with our Gulf partners and remain ready to welcome new partners in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.” For all these reasons, the ICI is no longer in a limbo. Quite to the contrary, the ICI Gulf members are eager to cooperate, as was shown during the visit of the Secretary General of the GCC, Mr. Abdul Latif Bin Rashid Al Zayani, at NATO Headquarters in January 2012. In particular, NATO and Qatar maintain close and warm relations.

Qatar: NATO's Guide, Mediator and Legitim�izer in the Middle East

Qatar likes to play the role of NATO's regional guide, mediator and legitim�izer, as demonstrated by its activities and participation in NATO's Libyan campaign. There are several reasons for this behaviour. First and foremost, Qatar is trying to ensure its security by finding external allies and strengthening international and transnational means of security cooperation (e.g. GCC, ICI) in order to become a more influential – and eventually indispensable - regional actor for the international community. Qatar's foreign policy is at the same time very ambitious and consistently pragmatic, and it clearly enjoys media limelight and the attention of the public. The most obvious example is Qatari public diplomacy, including the renowned al-Jazeera channel. Qatar regime is already enjoying warm relations with NATO and Washington, too.

The primary motivation for Qatar's (as well as other GCC countries) policies is the concern over Iran's regional ambitions. GCC members fear that U.S. influence is waning and there is an urgent need to diversify their alliance portfolio. NATO is regarded as a welcome partner for security sector reform and determent of Iran because of its cutting edge weaponry and ability to project its forces. Additionally, Qatar is interested in the ICI thanks to NATO's expertise of environmental security, combating piracy, peacekeeping and other related issues.

However, the scope of Qatar's ambition can occasionally make it a problematic partner for NATO. Good example is Qatar's interference in Libya's internal affairs after the overthrow of Gaddafi which was criticised in the United Nations by representatives of the interim



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Libyan government. There is also fierce rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Whereas Qatar prefers ambitious but cooperative foreign policy promoting change (hence the active role of al-Jazeera in the Arab Spring), Saudi Arabia values stability and status quo above all. Last but not least, all GCC countries, including Qatar, have bad human rights records and it is hard to imagine in foreseeable future their sincere commitment to human security or democratic and transparent control of armed forces. The suppression of Bahrain's revolution provides an illustrative example to this concern.

But the ICI can still prove to be optimal tool for Western influence in the Gulf Region. All NATO out-of-area operations are ultimately about capabilities and relations with regional partners. The ICI provides a viable platform for bolstering capabilities of the regional partners as well as creation of a political and security environment suitable for NATO's role in the Gulf – be it direct engagement or other forms of presence. If the Alliance wants to do 'more with less', then the ICI and its members represent an excellent external component to the smart defence concept.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The most ambitious – and potentially most rewarding – step would be the inclusion of the remaining GCC members, Saudi Arabia and Oman, into the ICI. This would allow streamlining NATO-GCC cooperation and enable its deepening via development of institutional links between the organizations, putting them in a multilateral and inclusive framework. NATO could then make use of the consistently growing military capabilities, as well as economic and political integration, among GCC members. However, the Alliance needs to explain what it can offer and what it wants to achieve via the ICI. Clear definition of priorities, goals and benchmarks would be desirable for the evaluation of NATO-GCC cooperation. Otherwise the ICI will remain a platform for security dialogue rather than real partnership.

Short of a full-blown NATO-GCC partnership, the Alliance could establish NATO-ICI centres in GCC countries. Creation of one of such centres is currently under discussion in Kuwait. However, due to the current political turmoil in Kuwait and other GCC states, the most suitable place for the establishment of the main NATO-ICI centre in the region is Qatar. This preference is further underlined by the fact that Qatar is a home of forward headquarters of USCENTCOM, holds a favourable geopolitical position right in the middle of the Gulf region and, last but not least, its regime is the most willing to cooperate with NATO.

NATO and members of the ICI should also increase mutual cultural awareness. Especially NATO should take into consideration that GCC regimes do not distinguish between the threat posed by Iran and legitimate social and political demands from Shia minorities in GCC countries. NATO should not bypass its commitment to the values of individual liberty, democracy and human rights and must not compromise them before the eyes of Arab public, especially after the events of the Arab Spring. This, however, should not preclude practical cooperation e.g. in countering religious extremism, combating transnational crime or enhancing energy security by protecting transit areas and lines. Shared intelligence should also not be omitted as it represents an efficient means to improving early warning of potential security threats.



Opportunity or Threat? The View from Turkey and Israel

The Arab Spring provides a challenge to established paradigms not only for NATO as a whole, but also for its individual members. None is more significant in this regard than Turkey, a country whose standing as a democratic Islamic country seems to make it an ideal role model for the countries undergoing the phase of political transition. Turkey's recent shift in the priorities and focus of its foreign policy reflects the growing confidence of this long-standing NATO member – but at the same time it highlights the risks that any country seeking influence in the MENA region experiences.

On the other hand, for Israel the immediate effects of the Arab Spring have hardly been positive, at least in its own perception. While the neighbourhood of previous Arab autocracies could hardly be considered ideal, eventually Israel managed to overcome the enmity and establish cooperation with at least some of them. Especially the prospect of the new, democratic Egypt reneging on its peace pledges of the past is truly discomfoting for the Israeli leadership, and it is through this filter that the reaction of Israel to the Arab Spring needs to be understood.

While significantly different in their position vis-à-vis NATO, both Turkey and Israel present cases of special concern in the analysis of the impacts of the Arab Spring on the Alliance and its regional partnerships.

A Bridge (Not) Too Far: Turkey as NATO's Emissary in the Middle East

Despite obvious challenges, the Arab Spring made the future role of Turkey as a bridge between NATO and the Middle East look increasingly promising. However, the role that Turkey will play in relations between NATO and the MENA countries very much depends on its ability to manage the delicate balance between the two.

During the Cold War, Turkey emphasized primarily the link to its Western allies, and its policy towards the Middle East was influenced by Kemalist isolationism. However, with the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet threat disappeared and Turkey could no longer play a crucial strategic role for NATO and its Western partners, it started opening up to the Middle East, seeking new alliances in its immediate neighbourhood. Since then, relations with its regional neighbours have significantly improved and flourished.

The arrival of the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002 and the subsequent shift in the orientation of Turkey's foreign policy – which was a result to certain extent of Turkish society's alienation from the EU and - led some to believe that Turkey was turning away from the West. Turkey's mediation efforts in the Arab-Israeli conflict, its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy and its growing leadership role in the region have been contested in the West and not sufficiently made use of. It has been believed that Turkey is pursuing its own particular interests which do not necessarily converge with those of NATO or the West, and sometimes even go against them. Turkey's flourishing relations with Iran and Syria and worsening relations with Israel since the Cast Lead



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operation in Gaza in 2008 have been regarded as a proof of its drift away from the NATO allies. Although Turkey was occasionally touted in the West as a model Muslim democratic country for the Middle East or a bridge between the West and the region, this always remained in the sphere of rhetoric rather than becoming a practical guideline for policy.

However, with the Arab Spring one can see a new turn in the relationship between Turkey and its NATO allies. For one thing, the Arab Spring seems to have returned Turkey back onto the Western track. The decision-making involved in Turkey's reactions to the events was sometimes painful for Ankara. It was not difficult to support the popular Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, as Turkey's relations with these countries had not been very warm (Mubarak's Egypt used to be seen as a regional rival). Yet, with the uprisings moving to Libya and Syria, Turkey was confronted with a major dilemma – retaining its lively commercial and political ties with 'new' regional allies or abandoning its 'zero problems policy' to support of the people's democratic aspirations.

Eventually, Turkey chose the latter. Central to the decision was the fact that the 'zero problems policy' was no longer sustainable and under the circumstances it was nigh impossible to maintain neutrality. Particularly in the case of Syria, Turkey has moved from a hesitant player to a full supporter of the opposition through a series of concrete measures. As a consequence, Turkey was also forced to reconsider two of its other developing alignments – with Russia and, even more significantly, with Iran. Turkey's relations with Iran have been damaged not only by their differing stance on Syria but also by Turkey's decision to participate in the NATO missile shield.

On the part of NATO, Turkey's role as a bridge and democracy model for the Middle East has been increasingly recognised and counted on. It has become clear that Turkey, a crucial player in the region, is an indispensable partner in any future NATO role and engagement in the region. The reasoning behind this is simple. Turkey's regional role and the 'Turkish model', reconciling democratic political system with Islam, are probably for the first time in history widely accepted in the region, making Turkey's importance for NATO greater than ever. Prime Minister Erdoğan has gradually become very popular on the Arab street and largely contributed to the popularity of Turkey in the region. Erdoğan has won praise for his harsh criticism of the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians (particularly in regard to Operation Cast Lead and the blockade of Gaza) and most recently for siding with protesters and the opposition in countries struck by the Arab revolutions. Even though the interpretations of the 'Turkish model' vary considerably across the region and its weaknesses are recognized, it continues to serve as a valuable inspiration for countries which strive for their own distinct version of Muslim democracy.

Turkey and its NATO allies are fully aware that a joint action is needed in the current situation. In the ongoing complex and intricate transformation of the region, Turkey can no longer act autonomously as it has done in the past years, nor can the U.S. and NATO omit Turkey's regional popularity and respect which can facilitate NATO's role and engagement. The biggest challenge, in this regard, is Turkey's ability to manage the delicate balance between its interests in NATO and the Middle East. Recent examples of the Syrian uprising and the missile defence shield have shown that Turkey is able to find the path between its newly found Middle Eastern identity and inclination and its relations with the West. However, other impediments to Turkey's role as a bridge between NATO and the Middle



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East persist: Turkish population's low support for NATO, status of the Kurds and infringements of press freedoms among them. If the relevance of the Turkey as a model democracy is to be secured, the country and its NATO allies should not turn a blind eye to its political developments.

Special Partnership? NATO and Israel

Israel is not only one of the founding members of the Mediterranean Dialogue, but is also the first country which signed the Individual Cooperation Programme (ICP) in 2006. The ICP provides a bilateral framework for a strategic dialogue which focuses on the prevention of the proliferation of the weapons of mass distraction, fight against terrorism or sharing of intelligence informations.

In June 2005, the Israel Defense Forces participated in an extensive joint exercise in Ukraine with 22 participating countries, followed by other such enterprises. Israel indirectly participates in the Active Endeavour operation monitoring and detaining suspicious shipments, by patrolling the eastern Mediterranean. Good relations between Israel and the Alliance were confirmed by the visit of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoof Schefer in Tel Aviv in January 2009.

For Israel, the partnership with the West's most potent political-military organization is beneficial in several ways. The ICP facilitates the cooperation of Israel's intelligence agencies with their foreign counterparts and allows its armed forces to gain new experience in joint operations. According to some commentators, such cooperation provides Israel with an additional degree of international legitimacy and recognition which would otherwise be beyond its reach.⁷

NATO's presence in the Middle East contributes directly to Israel's security, as demonstrated by the aforementioned operation Active Endeavour with its focus on WMD proliferation and terrorist activities. Israel also benefits from the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative which strengthens NATO's relations to the Persian Gulf countries. Building a political-military bloc against Iranian influence in the region neatly fits Israel's strategic priorities.

On the other hand, NATO-Israel cooperation has clear limits. One of them involves the worsening of relations with Turkey, especially dramatic after the incident on board Mavi Marmara in May 2010. On a more general level, it is clear that Israel jealously guards its operational and strategic independence which prevents the country from crossing certain level of the coordination of its military activities with NATO members.⁸ Israel's political elites are also traditionally sceptical of the role of international institutions and organizations which have repeatedly been used as a tool of one-sided criticism of the country. It is also hard to overcome problems and disputes in bilateral relations with individual NATO members. In the light of these facts, it is hard to imagine e.g. that NATO forces could replace

⁷ Asmus, R. D. and Jackson, B. P., 2005. Does Israel Belong in the EU and NATO? *Policy Review*, February and March, pp. 47-56.

⁸ Hendrickson, R. C., 2005. NATO Membership for Israel: Assessing the Risks. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 7, pp. 19-22.



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Israel's units in the Palestinian territories, as some of the keenest proponents of Israel-NATO cooperation have suggested.⁹

As regards the Arab Spring, the process has been met with a large degree of scepticism in Israel. For a country which has long emphasized stability as its primary regional objective and necessary condition for security, the current flux with uncertain outcomes presents a particularly difficult strategic conundrum. The situation in Syria provides a good illustration. Though historically one of its major enemies, the Assad regime at least provided Israel with a largely predictable opponent. Its anticipated fall threatens to undermine even that limited degree of stability. An outside intervention in the Syrian conflict would surely hasten the regimes demise, but whether it could guarantee a peaceful post-conflict development is far from certain, especially if the intervention were executed by the GCC units. As seen from Israel, the fall of the regime in Damascus will inevitably deepen the political chaos in the country, with tangible negative impacts on Israel's security.

The link to NATO presents a welcome extension of Israel's security and defence policies, and due to its mutual benefits will most likely remain active and develop further in the future. But while the presence of the Alliance in the region improves Israel's security and strategic standing, the country knows it cannot perceive it as an ironclad security guarantee. Differing perceptions of the current developments of the Arab Spring, as well as pertaining complications in Israel's bilateral relations with NATO members draw a clear line which prevents both sides to make their relationship truly special.

Libya Redux? The Dilemmas of NATO Intervention in Syria

The conflict in Syria presents the most serious imminent challenge to NATO's relations to the Middle East. Without successful resolution to the conflict it will be impossible to improve the broader regional situation. And while irresponsible NATO's activism would surely backfire, lethargy and passivity could also damage its standing. On the other hand, successful engagement in the crisis might increase the Alliance's credit in the region and boost its relations with local actors. However, NATO's position is further complicated by the fact that it has not yet finally resolved the debate about its engagement in Libya, especially in the light of the country's post-conflict development.

Despite frequent official statements to the contrary, it is not far-fetched to imagine a situation which will call for some sort of the Alliance's intervention. Though President Assad accepted the peace plan presented by the UN and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan which calls for a quick ceasefire, there are no guarantees the plan will work as designed. After more than 9000 people killed - not speaking about several more thousand casualties among the

⁹ Penketh, A., 2011. Should Israel Join NATO? *British American Security Information Council*. [online] Available at <http://www.basicint.org/news/2011/should-israel-join-nato> [Accessed 20 March 2012]



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security forces and defectors – and thousands more who have been wounded or arrested and tortured, the conflict can easily escalate and regionalize, including direct implications for the situation in south Lebanon and Iraq. It can also touch basic security interests of Turkey which could then raise the case with its allies.

The Intervention Conundrum...

Hypothetical NATO engagement in the Syrian conflict represents a case of several ‘two sides of a coin’ dilemmas. Starting with ethical and legal arguments, it is safe to claim that the operation in Libya, just like previous operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, created a moral (if not necessarily legal) precedent for the consideration of necessity and suitability of an armed intervention to protect basic human rights. In comparison to Libya, the Syrian conflict today appears graver in every possible measure which gives credence to the voices calling for an outside intervention.¹⁰ If the principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ is to be taken seriously and applied universally, then it is not logical and right to intervene in Gaddafi’s Libya while letting Assad’s forces massacre the Syrian opposition.

Secondly, from a strategic perspective it is impossible to leave the Syrian conflict to its own fate. Unlike Libya, Syria is situated in a geopolitically sensitive intersection of local, regional but to some extent also global interests. Among those affected are - besides the already mentioned Syria and NATO as a whole - Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, the Gulf countries and Russia. Syria may not be the epicentre of global politics, but its crucial role for the stability of the Middle East is undeniable.

Furthermore, just like in the case of Libya, important regional actors have been openly calling for a more resolute approach to tackling the conflict which could provide NATO with the necessary legitimacy. The Arab League and the GCC may not yet explicitly demand NATO’s involvement but might not refuse the Alliance’s support (e.g. intelligence or logistical) if the situation in Syria deteriorates.

Finally, from a more long-term perspective, NATO’s successful participation in the resolution of the Syrian conflict could significantly boost its prestige in the region. While even a successful completion of the mission in Afghanistan would only have limited direct impact on the security and strategic interests of its members, successful engagement in the heart of the Middle East could provide a new impulse to the increasingly disillusioned NATO members. Syria presents a direct challenge to the Alliance’s regional standing and to the credibility of the commitment to its core values, not to speak about the quality of the relations between the West and the post-Assad Syria.

However, all these assumptions can also be treated much more pessimistically. As regards the R2P principle, there is no guarantee, nor shared will of the international community to

¹⁰ Cook, S. A., 2012. It's Time to Think Seriously About Intervening in Syria. *The Atlantic*. [online] Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/its-time-to-think-seriously-about-intervening-in-syria/251468/?single_page=true> [Accessed 28 March 2012]; Hamid, S., 2012. *Why We Have a Responsibility to Protect Syria*. Brookings [online]. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2012/0126_syria_intervention_hamid.aspx> [Accessed 28 March 2012]



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apply it proportionately without taking into account other considerations. The practice so far raises hopes that Syria will be judged against the same criteria as Kosovo or Libya, but it can just as likely end up like Rwanda or Chechnya. After all, the context of possible intervention in Syria is a diplomatic antipode to the situation in Libya in 2011. As of yet, there is no UN mandate, no consolidated and territorially delimited opposition, not even an elementary agreement among the great powers.

Syria's strategic importance which makes the resolution of the conflict one of the priorities of the global agenda is also the main obstacle to reaching an international consensus – as the Russian-Chinese veto at the UN Security Council in February clearly demonstrated. The regime in Damascus is a key ally of Iran and its connection to Lebanon's Hezbollah; its end would be watched wearily also by the Shiite politicians who currently dominate the neighbouring Iraq. Both Iran and Iraq would likely interpret the Assad's fall through the prism of power struggle with the Sunni states of the Gulf, whose representatives Saudi Arabia and Qatar belong to the most vocal critics of the Syrian regime. The change would be especially sensitive for Iraq which fears it might then become Iran's new Arab intermediary in the Middle East. For Russia, Assad is one of the few reliable allies in the region and the prospect of losing him resuscitates the associations with the decrease of Russian influence in the Balkans in the 1990s. Geostrategic considerations, such as the possibility to maintain a Mediterranean naval base for its Black Sea fleet in Tartus, are also hard to ignore.

The opportunity for a successful NATO intervention (in any form) needs to be weighed against the perils of failure. Once again, the parallel to Afghanistan is useful, since the impact of a debacle in Syria would be much more palpable. Unlike the isolated Afghanistan, Syrian actors and the country's neighbours would hardly tolerate a long-term NATO engagement, even in the form of a limited air or naval campaign. This argument is all the more valid when considering how long it took to break the resistance of the substantially weaker Libyan regime.

Clearly, the possibility of a NATO operation in Syria is highly unlikely at the moment – but at the same time it is nigh impossible to categorically exclude it. The expert community has already drawn detailed scenarios of a hypothetical intervention¹¹, but the analysis of military and political pros and cons often misses two general points which need to be considered if even the deliberation about the intervention is to be concluded successfully.

First of all, it is essential to distinguish between four specific goals which the outside intervention in the Syrian conflict could follow: these are humanitarian (protection of civilians against armed violence), political (the support of Syrian opposition and the overthrow of Assad's regime), strategic (weakening of Iranian or Russian influence) and value-based (NATO's domestic credibility and regional prestige, based the consistency of the protection of values declared as crucial during the campaign in Libya as judged against the behaviour towards Syria). These goals can, but do not have to be mutually compatible and reinforcing. For example, despite the moral outrage over the conduct of the Syrian

¹¹ Byman, D. Doran, M. Pollack, K. and Shaikh, S., 2012. *Saving Syria: Assessing Options for Regime Change*. Brookings [online]. Available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2012/0315_syria_saban/0315_syria_saban.pdf [Accessed 28 March 2012]



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government, it is still possible to imagine a solution which will protect the civilians from open violence without the fall of the regime. After all, the international community has been able to negotiate with governments guilty of far worse abuses, including Burma or North Korea. Likewise, it is conceivable to combine Western threats of the use of force with a parallel, discrete coordination of the actions with Russia.¹² After all, this combination proved surprisingly effective during the conflicts in the Balkans and can start from the assumption that for Russia and China a guided, step-by-step reform of the regime is preferable to its uncontrollable collapse.

Finally, it would seem wise for NATO not to exclude the possibility of its intervention even (and especially) if it wants to avoid it. The Alliance cannot rule out the possibility that future developments may result in so intense requests for its engagements that it will find them hard to ignore. To be prepared for such an occasion, the member states should be ready to answer several key questions: Are they ready to accept a resolution of the conflict which would leave Assad's regime in place? If not, who should replace him and how can the international action ensure the most effective handover of power? And, should the current regime fall, how is it possible to prevent negative implications to regional stability (especially concerning Iraq, Israel and Lebanon) and limit needless harm to the West's relations with Russia?

Without clear answers to these questions, it is pointless to even consider NATO's involvement. At the same time, the lack of such answers will probably result in a failed policy even when NATO decides to avoid direct engagement. The disintegration of the Syrian society has reached such levels that even NATO's passive approach and the 'victory of the Syrian regime' (however defined) over the opposition will not return the situation to the imaginary 'point zero'. Alongside Egypt, Syria has become the bloody highlight of the Arab Spring. The previous revolutions, reforms and interventions can be understood as a precursor to this crucial confrontation. It is in Syria where the future influence of the Arab Spring in Iran, Lebanon or the Gulf monarchies will be decided. Even when standing aside, NATO will not be spared the results of its decisions.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring caught the world by surprise. While it is not yet possible to predict with sufficient certainty its results, effects and consequences, it appears to have transformed the region of North Africa and the Middle East for good. The habitual – and, for many actors, comfortable – complaints about the immovable political backwardness of Arab autocracies have lost their basis, and the region has already started shifting towards a new paradigm of governance. How it will look like and when it will take a definite shape is too early to say.

The eruption of armed violence in many places of the region warns that the process will be far from smooth. This, however, is no excuse for complacent yearning for the – largely

¹² Burke, E., 2012. *Russia is not completely wrong about Syria*. Centre for European Reform [online]. Available at: <<http://centreforeuropeanreform.blogspot.com/2012/02/russia-is-not-completely-wrong-about.html>> [Accessed 28 March 2012]



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imaginary – stability of the previous era. Regional actors and external players, including NATO, will have to adapt to the new conditions. They will be judged by their actions towards the key events, such as the conflict in Syria. Avoiding solutions risks not only depriving the region of the opportunity which has opened before it, but also damaging the standing of those who can and should wield their influence. For NATO, failing to recognize its proper role in the process might amount to a fatal mistake.



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