

NATO's Dilemma in the MENA Region: A Critical Reflection

by Giulia Daga

NATO's attention to its Southern neighbours, spanning from Mauritania to the Persian Gulf, has taken multiple forms in the past few decades. The Atlantic Alliance has addressed the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region both through multilateral platforms of cooperation and specific NATO-led operations to implement mostly two of the alliances' core tasks: cooperative security and crisis prevention and management. However, the organisation's activities and declarations – the latest after the Washington summit in July 2024¹ – underscore a lack of political consensus on a long-term vision that risks amplifying the regional security dilemma rather than contributing to a more stable environment.

¹ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

Multilateral platforms of cooperation

In 1994, NATO launched the Mediterranean Dialogue, a platform that currently includes Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia, in the spirit of the nascent Barcelona Process.² The Dialogue was launched in the post-Cold War context, just after the 1991 NATO Strategic Concept had broadened the Alliance's approach to security and emphasised the need for political dialogue and cooperation.³ The assumption behind this cooperation – originating from a unipolar and liberal understanding of the international system – was that most countries shared a similar notion of security that included reduced nuclear

² Nicola de Santis, "NATO's Outreach to and Cooperation with Mediterranean Countries through the Mediterranean Dialogue", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2010*, p. 139-143, <https://www.iemed.org/?p=33346>.

³ NATO, *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991)*, 8 November 1991, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm.

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proliferation, protection of resources and trade, and counterterrorism.

Similar objectives were translated in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), launched in 2004 between NATO and four Gulf monarchies: Bahrain, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. The Initiative answered to a specific NATO goal to expand out-of-area partnerships, in line with the 1999 Strategic Concept.⁴ In 2017, NATO opened the ICI regional centre in Kuwait, marking the first permanent footprint of the organisation in the Gulf.

NATO operations

In terms of operations involving NATO in the MENA region, the objectives in the past decades, and especially since 2001, have remained the same: to fight against terrorism, to avoid spillovers of regional conflicts, to enhance capacity-building and to guarantee the safety of maritime trade.⁵

In 2001, Operation Active Endeavour was launched as a maritime reaction to 9/11 with the specific goal of countering terrorism in the Mediterranean. In 2016, it was replaced by Operation Sea Guardian, with a broader focus beyond terrorism on countering human trafficking, so to complement the EU reactions to the so-called refugee crisis. To secure maritime flows beyond the Mediterranean, in the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa, Operation

Ocean Shield was launched in 2009 to fight against piracy, also in this case in cooperation with the EU efforts through Operation Atalanta. The NATO operation was terminated in 2016, due to a drastic reduction of piracy attacks.

With regards to specific interventions in countries in the region, in 2011 NATO launched the controversial seven-month Operation Unified Protector in Libya,⁶ with the Security Council's mandate to enforce a no-fly zone and the responsibility to protect civilians, but which some members further intended as a regime change operation. The operation fuelled a civil war with ramifications in the Mediterranean and the Sahel and increased international divergences over how to cope with the nearby Syrian civil war. Probably learning from the past and with its hands tied due to increasing Security Council and intra-Alliance disagreements, NATO narrowed down its ambition to counter the regional ramifications of the Syrian war and focused on reinforcing Turkey – an Alliance member – in its capacities to prevent spillovers on its territory.⁷ Since 2018, NATO has been active in Iraq through NATO Mission Iraq with a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission to increase the stability of the country while preventing the return of the organisation Daesh.⁸

⁴ NATO, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept (1999)*, 24 April 1999, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm.

⁵ NATO, *NATO's Maritime Activities*, last updated 3 August 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_70759.htm.

⁶ Carnegie Europe, "Libya: Missing Out on a Happy End", in *Strategic Europe Commentaries*, 10 May 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2013/05/libya-missing-out-on-a-happy-end>.

⁷ NATO, *NATO Support to Turkey: Background and Timeline*, last updated 19 February 2013, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_92555.htm.

⁸ NATO, *NATO Mission Iraq*, last updated 27 May 2024, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/>

In all these endeavours, NATO has looked south in a reactive way, without a long-term vision largely due to a lack of shared understanding among its members and with MENA countries on the definition of security threats.

The war in Ukraine and its impact on the MENA region

With the Russian war against Ukraine, the deterrence and defence task of NATO has also returned prominently in the Mediterranean. On one side, the war has led to an increased naval presence of the organisation as a deterrence effort against Russia.⁹ On the other side, it has increased the need to reflect on the long-term role of NATO in the south. An important step was already taken in that direction with the opening of the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples in 2017, which had the specific objective of increasing NATO's understanding of the regional dynamics in MENA and Africa. With the war in Ukraine, this 'understanding' intention seems to have taken a more prominent role.

In the communiqué released after the NATO Summit in Vilnius, in July 2023, the Middle East was mentioned very briefly.¹⁰ The region was addressed in the context of insisting on the fight against terrorism and reinforcing cooperation with existing partners

topics_166936.htm.

⁹ NATO, *Five NATO Aircraft Carriers Hold Drills in Major Naval Deployment*, 18 November 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_209232.htm.

¹⁰ NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

from the region to prevent proliferation of non-state armed groups and terrorism, in line with previous NATO's approaches. Moreover, it was explicitly underlined that NATO's Middle Eastern outlook should be aimed at preventing Russia from exploiting and fuelling regional tensions.

Despite the limited space that the region had in the document, the need for a broader reflection on the Middle East and North Africa was identified, fearing that the focus on Ukraine was ignoring important ongoing processes that could be exploited by the Alliance's rivals. This awareness seemed to suggest a path of possible substantial change in the Alliance's approach to the region.

Lost in translation: From the 2024 group of experts' report to the Washington declaration

The reflection led to the designation by NATO of an independent group of experts (including academics, think tankers, diplomats, members of the European Parliament, and military officers from several NATO countries) to draft a report with recommendations to the organisation on how to deal with the Southern neighbours.¹¹ The mandate to the group was given on 6 October 2023, one day before the Hamas' attacks against Israel, prompting the group of experts to deeply reflect on the issue.

The report was released in May 2024 with clear recommendations that

¹¹ NATO, *Secretary General Appoints Independent Group as Part of NATO Reflection on Southern Neighbourhood*, 6 October 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_219076.htm.

included the need to listen more to the countries' needs and visions through increased dialogue, credibility, trust-building, and coherence.¹² At the same time, it emphasised the need to provide the Southern neighbours with a better understanding of NATO, which is often biased by these countries' negative perception of the US or sometimes by a lack of perception altogether.¹³

Interestingly, the report recommends affirming the commitment of the Alliance to a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution and to supporting international peace efforts in that sense; moreover, it recommends inviting – once the conditions are in place – the Palestinian Authority to observe and participate in Mediterranean Dialogue activities. The report lucidly emphasises how other regional conflicts derive largely from the unsolved peace process in Israel and Palestine, and that NATO should be more aware of this and act in a way to advance its security and stability interests accordingly.

Despite the emphasis of the report, the Washington NATO summit declaration of July 2024¹⁴ omitted these recommendations. The MENA region has indeed taken more space compared to previous declarations,

¹² Independent Expert Group Supporting NATO's Comprehensive and Deep Reflection Process on the Southern Neighbourhood, *Final Report*, 7 May 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf.

¹³ Mathieu Droin et al., "NATO and Its South: Redefining the Terms", in *CSIS Critical Questions*, 17 May 2024, <https://www.csis.org/node/110657>.

¹⁴ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, cit.

and there was the request to nominate a special representative for the South. In the person of Javier Colomina, the new special representative started his mandate with a clear mission to reinforce NATO's outreach efforts and visibility.¹⁵

However, as some observers had predicted,¹⁶ the declaration failed to adopt a more inclusive, listening, and long-term oriented vision towards the MENA region. Instead, it insisted on the same direction as the previous ones. On one side, it underlined the need to increase cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jordan and Iraq in countering terrorism, irregular migration and human trafficking. On the other side, it insisted on the need to reduce Russian – but also Chinese – challenges, in line with the previous Vilnius communiqué. The Washington declaration has thus failed to provide any substantial change in the approach to the South.

The nexus NATO security-Middle East stability

The missed opportunity to address many of the recommendations of the group of experts' report, and in particular the ones on Palestine and Israel, triggers some reflections on what the Alliance should do in the South.

¹⁵ NATO, *NATO Secretary General Announces the Appointment of New Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood*, 23 July 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_228160.htm.

¹⁶ Alessandro Marrone and Gaia Ravazzolo, "NATO and Italy in the 75th Anniversary of the Alliance: Perspectives beyond the Washington Summit", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 24|06 (July 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18693>.

NATO has often stated that a clear nexus exists between Middle Eastern stability and the Alliance's security. This nexus implies that a stable Middle East is a prerequisite for guaranteeing NATO's interests. The 2011 intervention in Libya clearly went the opposite way, by contributing to more insecurity and more instability. But in the current escalating regional and global context, can NATO's actions reinforce this nexus, or are they doomed to create more security dilemmas in the region?

The Red Sea crisis is a case in point to illustrate the possible implications of a direct NATO intervention. Originating from an escalation in the Houthis' attacks on commercial vessels, the Red Sea crisis has triggered reflections on the need for a direct NATO role and more efficient interoperability between the Alliance and the EU and US efforts.¹⁷ More broadly, some observers look at the crisis as an example of the need for more rapid response capacity-building and burden-sharing between the EU and NATO from West Africa to the Gulf.¹⁸ The premise is that the Houthis are posing maritime threats to the Red Sea passages that threaten global trade, thus challenging one of the core interests of NATO¹⁹ (and especially NATO's European members).

¹⁷ Augusto Conte and Gonzalo Vázquez, "Naval Interoperability and NATO'S Naval Presence: Lessons from the Red Sea", in *CIMSEC Red Sea Topic Week*, 1 May 2024, <https://cimsec.org/?p=59879>.

¹⁸ Ian O. Lesser, "After the Washington Summit: NATO and the Southern Neighborhood", in *Policy Center for the New South Policy Briefs*, No. 60/24 (November 2024), <https://www.policycenter.ma/node/8961>.

¹⁹ Doug Livermore, "NATO in the Crosshairs of the Houthis", *CEPA Europe's Edge*, 12 July 2024, <https://cepa.org/?p=32044>.

However, this kind of argumentation specifically looks at the short-term maritime security dimension, but it does not consider regional long-term stability. The Houthis have explicitly framed their attacks as part of their war against Israel, which they officially declared at the end of October 2023.²⁰ Beyond these declarations, the Houthis have internally leveraged the US-led attacks to garner regional and domestic support,²¹ in a moment in which the group's capacity to govern in Yemen was increasingly put into question.²²

With this in mind, increased deployment of Western Israeli-leaning forces intended at guaranteeing maritime security would in practice contribute to fuelling the regional escalation and the Houthis' grip on power,²³ which would in turn likely create even more maritime security threats in the future, in a typical security dilemma situation.²⁴

²⁰ "Deep Dive: Houthis Effectively Declare War on Israel after Drone, Missile Barrage", in *Amwaj.media*, 31 October 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/houthi-front>.

²¹ Stacey Philbrick Yadav and Yazeed Al-Jeddawy, "The Houthis' Red Sea Campaign and Yemen's Political Future", in *Crown Conversations*, 31 January 2024, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-19.html>; Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, "The Battle over Shipping Lanes Tips toward the Houthis", in *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Policy Briefs*, 26 March 2024, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/5886>.

²² Gerald M. Feierstein, "Houthis See Domestic and Regional Benefit to Continued Red Sea Attacks", in *MEI Articles*, 11 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/node/86220>.

²³ Jeff Seldin, "Houthis Undeterred Despite US Action to Protect Red Sea Shipping", in *VOA News*, 8 August 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/7734735.html>.

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt, "Does Anyone Still Understand the 'Security Dilemma'?", in *Foreign Policy*, 26 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3vgkRoh>.

In this specific case, like many others, the long-term solution to the Israel-Palestinian question gets a central role as it would reduce the possibilities that actors like the Houthis exploit the conflict to stabilise their grip on power, and therefore also help reduce the risk of maritime security threats. While this line of argument does not include a whole other number of factors, it seeks to illustrate how only a deeper understanding of political dynamics allows taking actions in support of both security and long-term stability, as the 2024 expert report emphasised. The counterargument in this discussion is that a lack of short-term resolve means weakness and the incapacity of NATO – and NATO members – to effectively exercise sea control over global sea lines of communication, which will not pass unnoticed by global rivals such as China.²⁵ The central dilemma behind these diverging arguments lies in both the Alliance's ambitions and capabilities.

More NATO or less NATO in the South?

In terms of ambitions, one question that needs to be answered clearly is what are the long-term interests of the Alliance in the MENA region? NATO is oscillating between going back to being a fully defensive and deterrent alliance that prioritises its European Eastern flank, increasingly evident since the Vilnius communiqué, or enhancing its role as a guarantor of international peace and security through crisis management and stabilisation efforts,

²⁵ "NATO Warships Too Avoids Red Sea", in *India Seatrade News*, 30 October 2024, <https://indiaseatradenews.com/nato-warships-too-avoids-red-sea>.

more in line with the experts' report.²⁶ In the first scenario, NATO's southern outlook should be seen as functional to its current anti-Russian stance. This zero-sum approach seems to be at play when suggestions are made for strengthening a Western-leaning alliance in the MENA that includes Israel and the so-called 'moderate' authoritarian Arab states that can support the objective of limiting Iran and deterring Russia – and possibly China.²⁷

However, if the Alliance is really interested in promoting the nexus between MENA stability and NATO security, then it needs to substantially revise its approach to the region and be willing to cooperate with all regional actors to comprehensively advance this objective. Most importantly, it cannot exempt itself from engaging in a fair long-term political settlement of the Palestine-Israel question, contrarily to its current avoidance of the issue, as evidenced by the missed opportunity to translate the experts' report recommendations into the Washington declaration.

In terms of capabilities, the main problem remains connected to existing divergences between NATO members' interests, and how these differences affect NATO's credibility in the region.²⁸

²⁶ Alessandro Marrone and Gaia Ravazzolo, "NATO and Italy in the 75th Anniversary of the Alliance", cit.

²⁷ Eleonora Ardemagni, "NATO and Gulf Partners Should Advance Cooperation on Non-State Armed Actors", in *ISPI Analyses*, 9 July 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en?p=179504>.

²⁸ Shahd Hammouri, "NATO Obligations Cannot Override International Law", in *Al Jazeera*, 16 September 2024, <https://aje.io/ljgl61>.



The members' competing strategies during Operation Unified Protector, diverging interests between Turkey and NATO with regard to the stabilisation efforts in Iraq, or more broadly the different political positions with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian issue are all tangible examples of this lack of consensus.

Probably the lack of convergence between members' interests explains more than other reasons the focus on short-term security considerations and the lack of a comprehensive long-term approach to the region as was recommended by the report. Aware of this current state and approach of the Alliance, probably less NATO in the MENA region is better than contradicting actions with negative political repercussions and further losses of credibility.

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