



DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
STRANDGADE 56 • 1401 Copenhagen K
+45 32 69 87 87 • diis@diis.dk • www.diis

DIIS Brief

From Diplomatic Talking Shop to Powerful Partnership? NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and the democratisation of the Middle East

Dr. Helle Malmvig

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NATO plans to play a greater role in the Middle East. At the upcoming summit in Istanbul, the Alliance is expected to boost its neglected cooperation programme with seven states in the Middle East - the so-called Mediterranean Dialogue. The Dialogue is to be turned into a Partnership programme modelled on the Partnership for Peace (PfP) experience. This brief argues that NATO only can play a limited role in the efforts to reform and strengthen relations with Middle Eastern states. NATO does not have the political and economic tools necessary for tackling the root causes of the security problems in the Middle East, and there is a real danger that increased cooperation on terrorism and defence reform may undermine the overall goal of democratic and genuine change in the region.

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Democratisation, partnership and reform have become the new keywords of Western security strategies toward the Middle East. On both sides of the Atlantic it is believed that if the West is to combat terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and political instability emanating from the region, it is necessary to address the root causes of these threats. Over the last year both the EU and the US administration have prepared separate strategies and partnership initiatives for the Middle East aimed at tackling the grave political and economic problems of the region.

Despite of the apparent EU-US consensus on the long-term goals pertaining to the Middle East, discussions have raged on how these goals exactly are to be achieved, and which initiatives are to be in the lead. A growing convergence of views, however, now seems to be under way. Three major summits in June (EU-US, G8 and NATO) are expected to address how Europe and the US can work together on an overall strategy for the Middle East, and how it can be ensured that the various Euro-American initiatives complement, rather than compete with, one another.¹

NATO is, in this respect, supposed to play a significant role. NATO already has a cooperation programme – The *Mediterranean Dialogue* - with seven Middle Eastern countries.² This programme was initiated in 1994 but has, hitherto, received very little political attention and financial resources. The US and Europe are now planning to bring new life and political capital to the Dialogue. Thereby it is also hoped that NATO can take on a larger security role in the Middle East.

How the Mediterranean Dialogue more specifically should be strengthened is not yet settled. One way of reinvigorating the Dialogue is to transfer NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme with the former Soviet Union and the East and Central European states to the Mediterranean Dialogue countries. But critical questions remain as to whether the PfP model can be applied to an altogether different region, and whether NATO is the best suited organisation to bring democratic reforms and partnership to the Middle East. These questions are the topic of this brief.

¹ The EU already has a comprehensive partnership programme in the Middle East (the EMP) launched in 1995, which supports democratisation and economic liberalisation in 12 Middle Eastern/Mediterranean states. Recently the EU has also drawn up proposals for a strategic partnership in the region. See *Strengthening the EU's partnership with the Arab World*, Brussels, 4. Dec. 2003, D(2003) 10318, *EU's Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Brussels, 19. Mar. 2004, 7498/1/04. The US also launched a partnership programme in 2002, the Middle East Partnership Initiative/Greater Middle East Initiative.

² Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia.

The brief will argue that NATO *can* play a role in the efforts to reform and strengthen relations with Middle Eastern states, but that this only can be a very *limited role*. NATO does not have the political and economic tools necessary for creating long-term security and development in the Middle East. Moreover, there is a real danger that increased cooperation on terrorism and defence reform may undermine the overall goal of democratic and genuine change in the region.

The brief is divided into four sections:

- What is NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue?
- How successful has the Dialogue been so far?
- Proposals for an upgrade: moving from dialogue to cooperation
- Barriers and dilemmas of further cooperation and partnership

What is the Mediterranean Dialogue?

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue was launched in 1994. It is mainly a bilateral framework (NATO +1), but multilateral meetings and seminars do also take place (NATO +7). The formal aims of the Dialogue are to contribute to security and stability in the region, and to achieve a better understanding between NATO and the Dialogue countries - as well as between the Dialogue countries themselves. An equally important goal of the Dialogue is to lessen those fears, which the Mediterranean partners have regarding NATO's intentions and actions in the region. The Dialogue functions, in this way, as an institutionalised forum for discussion and exchange of views, and it gives its members an avenue for correcting misperceptions and disseminating information on security and defence politics.

The Dialogue is designed as a progressive cooperation programme, meaning that the number of members and the types of cooperation can expand over time. The current activities of the Dialogue can be divided into three types: 1) political consultations, 2) civilian training and seminar programmes, 3) and military activities. Until now the main activities of the Dialogue have consisted of political consultations between NATO and the individual Dialogue countries. Besides these meetings, the Dialogue also contains an increasing number of practical activities offered by NATO to the Mediterranean states in the form of an Annual Work Programme. These activities primarily take the shape of seminars and workshops. They cover a broad spectrum of fields from information to civil emergency planning, crisis management, science, border control, mine action, small arms/light weapons, and defence reform. All of the activities are offered to each of the

Mediterranean member states (the principle of non-discrimination), and they can in turn choose on a voluntary basis which courses and workshops, they wish to participate in.

The military programme – the third type of activity – is the least developed of the Dialogue. It consists of courses at NATO's Schools in Germany and Italy, and meetings between military representatives in the NATO + 7 format. The dialogue countries can also participate as observers in NATO/PfP military exercises on invitation. The most significant form of military cooperation between the Alliance and the Mediterranean states has, however, occurred outside of the framework of the Dialogue. Egypt, Morocco and Jordan have contributed peacekeepers to SFOR/IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the latter two to KFOR in Kosovo. Currently Moroccan forces are still present in Kosovo.

Reluctant partners: the modest success of the Dialogue

How successful has the Dialogue been so far? Optimists see the Dialogue as an important North-South confidence building measure (CBM), which might evolve into a genuine partnership, while critics view the Dialogue as little more than a diplomatic talking shop that lacks substance and a well-defined goal. Most agree, however, that the Dialogue is a very modest success, and that it is far behind in comparison to NATO's Partnership for Peace programme (PfP).

This lack of success can primarily be explained by the fact that both NATO and the dialogue countries have been reluctant to intensify military and political cooperation. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has focussed on the Balkans, on Eastern enlargement and its relationship with Russia. As a consequence of this strategic focus, the Southern periphery (the Mediterranean/Middle East) has received little attention. Stability and security on the southern shores of the Mediterranean has mainly been perceived as a South European problem, involving soft security issues such as illegal immigration, organised crime and drugs. Thus, when the Dialogue was initially launched, the North Europeans Allies, Canada and the US were only willing to support the initiative, if it did not divert resources and attention from Eastern and Central Europe. The Dialogue was to be cost-free and mainly a diplomatic arrangement.

This hesitance has been even more outspoken on part of the Mediterranean states. The Dialogue has primarily been a one-way street, where NATO has distributed information on security issues and strategic goals to the dialogue countries, and where little information has disseminated from the dialogue countries to NATO. This one-sidedness has also prevailed in terms of the practical and

military activities of the Dialogue, since the Mediterranean states only have shown a limited interest in the courses and seminars supplied by NATO.

Differences in interest do exist between the seven dialogue countries. Especially Israel and Algeria have been keen on intensifying military cooperation, whereas Egypt and Morocco have been the most sceptical. But as a whole, the Arab member states are suspicious of NATO's aims in the region, and they are reluctant to deepen their cooperation and exchange with a Western defence alliance. Moreover, Israel's membership of the Dialogue and the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict have equally made multilateral cooperation and meetings difficult.

Proposals for an upgrade: Moving from dialogue to cooperation

Among NATO Allies there is, now, a growing drive in favour of revitalizing the stalled Mediterranean Dialogue. NATO's second round of enlargement has just been completed, and the terror attacks on September 11 and the recent attack in Madrid have once again demonstrated the importance of the Mediterranean and the Middle East for Western security. Already in 2002, it was agreed that an upgrade of the Dialogue is a top priority of the Alliance. At the upcoming summit in Istanbul it is expected that NATO will put 'flesh on the bones.'³ NATO is to present a package of concrete proposals, which can move the Dialogue towards Partnership.

These proposals will be inspired by the PfP model, but it is unlikely that all of the PfP measures will be transferred to the Mediterranean. In terms of the political activities, NATO plans to increase the frequency of meetings and consultations, and to promote a more flexible format of cooperation (NATO + n), where those partners that are interested in deepening cooperation can do so on a case-by-case basis.

In terms of the practical partnership activities, NATO will in particular focus on areas where NATO has a comparative advantage vis-à-vis the EU's Mediterranean Partnership programme (EMP), and on issues where it is believed that NATO and the Dialogue countries have common security interests and concerns. These are:

- Cooperation on countering *terrorism*, especially on information sharing and border control.
- Military to military cooperation and training, increasing the *interoperability* of the forces of the Dialogue countries with those of NATO's, hereby allowing for greater participation in NATO/PfP military exercises and peacekeeping operations.

³ NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, 17.02.2004

- *Defence reform*, providing training on how to (re)structure, size and fund the military forces in the Dialogue countries.
- *Civilian and democratic control of armed forces*, e.g. courses on accountability, transparency, and good governance.

It has also been suggested that the Mediterranean Dialogue should be enhanced by expanding its group of members. The current seven members only make up a small part of Mediterranean/Middle Eastern region, and NATO has often been accused of only granting membership to states which are pro-Western and which have normalised their relations with Israel. Some European governments have suggested that Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority should be included in order to achieve a greater convergence with EU's Mediterranean Partnership, whereas the United States has shown a greater interest in inviting the Gulf States to the Dialogue. At present disagreements on criteria for membership between the Allies have, thus, halted talks of expansion and the emphasis is now on a deepening of the Dialogue.

Dilemmas and Barriers

*You cannot say that there is a big drive for NATO at the moment in the Arab world.*⁴

Can NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue evolve into a genuine Partnership programme and will an enhanced Dialogue contribute to democratisation and reform in the Middle East? There are at least four obstacles which make the movement from dialogue to partnership very difficult to achieve. These concern 1) the Arab mistrust of NATO's strategic agenda in the Middle East, 2) the sensitive issue of civilian control over the military 3) NATO's lack of tools in terms of the specific security problems of the region, 4) the dilemma between democratisation and security cooperation.

The general mistrust of NATO in the Arab world is one of the main barriers to intensified cooperation. NATO is widely seen as an instrument of the United States and a symbol of Western military power. When the former Secretary General Willy Claes infamously remarked that Islamic fundamentalism was a major threat to the Alliance and as dangerous as communism had been, this was interpreted as a proof that NATO is looking for a new *raison d'être* in the Middle East. The current war in Iraq and the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict have in many ways sustained the Arab suspicions of the intentions and policies of the West, and as a result, talk of partnership and cooperation is easily perceived as hypocrisy and mere rhetoric by the Arab member states.

⁴ NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

Given this negative perception of NATO, deepened cooperation and partnership with the Mediterranean countries are much more difficult to achieve than with the East European and newly independent states. NATO's PfP programme is primarily successful because it serves as an anteroom to membership of the Alliance. The PfP member states wish to become closer associated with NATO. They identify themselves as part of Europe and view the Alliance as a form of security guarantee against any remaining threat from Russia. These incentives for cooperation and integration with NATO do, however, not apply to the Mediterranean states. They do not foresee a membership of the Alliance nor do they perceive themselves as part of Europe/The West. NATO does not function as a "magnet" in the South, as it does in the East.

The lack of incentives for integration with NATO will also make it extremely difficult to encourage the Mediterranean states to discuss issues of democratic control of the armed forces within the forum of the Mediterranean Dialogue. Training on democratic/civilian control of the forces is clearly an area which falls within the larger Western agenda of promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East. It is also an area where NATO has substantial experience from the enlargement process and the PfP programme. Yet, the role and power of the military is one of the most sensitive issues in the Middle East. The very survival of the regimes in the region is heavily dependent on the support from the military, and the military is much involved in the political and civilian life. In Algeria it was, for instance, the army which in effect annulled the second round of parliamentary elections in 1992, and in Egypt military courts have been widely used to try civilians suspected of plotting against the state, in particular Islamic fundamentalist. The military is also deeply involved in the economy and production – for instance in the food sector - and military officers receive a range of special privileges. Therefore it seems unlikely that NATO will be able to promote civilian and democratic control over the influential and highly politicised military in the Mediterranean.

The nature of the security problems in the dialogue countries also makes increased cooperation difficult. The security problems of the dialogue countries are mainly internal in the form of political instability, lack of economic growth, and radical Islamism. To tackle the sources of these threats demands long term economic progress and political reforms. Within these areas NATO only possess a limited range of tools, in comparison with the EU. EU's comprehensive partnership programme (EMP) covers economic, political, cultural and social issues, and the Union can for

instance support civil society organisations and offer economic aid and trade agreements.⁵ NATO has, from the beginning, been aware of EU's leading role when it comes to development in the Mediterranean, and frequently stressed the need for cooperation and coordination between the two organisations. However, the EU has guarded its own initiative and influence in the region, and EU-NATO coordination has until now been very sparse.

The movement from dialogue to partnership will also be difficult to achieve, if NATO does not clearly define and prioritize its goals for a future partnership. Currently it is not clear to what extent the illegitimacy and repressive character of the incumbent regimes is a leading concern for NATO. It appears as if the aim of an enhanced partnership is *both* to increase military cooperation in areas where NATO and the Mediterranean states have common security interests, *and* to contribute to the overall efforts of promoting human rights, political change and democratic reforms in the region. Countering terrorism is obviously perceived as an important area of cooperation on both sides of the Mediterranean, and this has also been reflected in recent documents and speeches by NATO officials.⁶ Similarly, the area of defence reform – helping the Mediterranean states to restructure and further professionalize their armed forces – is highlighted as a field in which the Mediterranean states have an interest in cooperation and where NATO has a comparative advantage vis-à-vis the EU.

Yet, if cooperation on terrorism and defence reform is intensified, NATO will risk undermining the goal of democratisation and political change. Democratic principles and the rule of law are often set aside in the Middle East, and much of the power of the governments in the region depends on their military forces and security apparatuses. Since September 11, government repression has increased and the fight against terrorism has been widely used as a means to crush internal opposition. By increasing cooperation on counter-terrorism and helping to restructure the armed forces, NATO, hence, runs the risk of enhancing the repressive power of the existing regimes.

Conclusion

The fight against terrorism and the quest for democratisation and reform in the Middle East have made the hitherto neglected Mediterranean Dialogue a top priority of NATO. Yet due to the many

⁵ On EU's partnership programme with the Mediterranean states see also Helle, Malmvig *Fra urolig periferi til venlige naboer? EU's naboskabspolitik for Middelhavslandene i Syd*, *DIIS Brief*, no. 35, 2004

⁶ See e.g. former Secretary General George Robertson, *NATO & Mediterranean Security: Practical Steps Towards Partnership*, *RUSI Journal*, Aug. 2003, Alberto Bin, Deputy Head of the Multilateral and Regional Affairs section, NATO HQ, in *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 7, no.2, 2002.

barriers and dilemmas outlined above, moving the Dialogue toward a real partnership will be a very demanding task.

When it comes to tackling the root causes of the security challenges in the Middle East, NATO can only play a limited role. Here the EU must take the lead. The EU can address the deep economic and social problems of the region and is able to push the agenda of human rights and political liberalisation. It is therefore vital that EU's and NATO's initiatives in the Mediterranean are more thoroughly coordinated than has previously been the case.

The fight against terrorism, peacekeeping and defence reform are obvious areas for cooperation, and here NATO has something to offer to the Mediterranean states. Yet, further cooperation within these fields demand that NATO clarify its role in terms of the larger strategic goal of democratisation and change in the Middle East: should the promotion of democracy and human rights – in particular within the military – be an explicit purpose of the Mediterranean Dialogue, as it is within the Partnership for Peace programme? And if democratic reform is not to be a prime goal, how can NATO hinder that cooperation on terrorism and defence reform shore up the suppressive powers of the Mediterranean governments?

For the foreseeable future the main value of the Dialogue should be found in its ability to further consultations, information and confidence between NATO and the Mediterranean countries. Confidence building is a prerequisite for a more cooperative partnership and should not be underestimated. Given the often conflictual relationship between North and South, as well as among the Mediterranean member states themselves, it is an important achievement to increase levels of trust and to gain an understanding of each others' security perceptions. A powerful partnership, however, still has a long time in the waiting.

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