



Promoting a more
transparent and
accountable NATO

www.natowatch.org



The elephant
in the room:

NATO
governments
were partly
responsible
for propping
up some of
the
authoritarian
regimes
toppled by
the Arab
uprisings and
continue to
support
others (most
notably in
Bahrain) in
the face of
growing
domestic
unrest

NATO Watch Chicago Summit Media Briefings Series

No.4 NATO partnerships and the Arab Spring

Anticipated outcomes

The discussions in advance of the summit have been about highlighting NATO's post-Lisbon role as a global hub for security partnerships. There will be little that is new: instead the allies will be looking to showcase the value of its partners, especially those who provide significant political, financial, or operational support. In light of the remarkable events of the Arab Spring a particular focus will be on further engagement with partners in the wider Middle East and North Africa region. NATO will also trumpet success in Libya. No further decisions will be taken on NATO enlargement, but positive signals will (again) be given to aspirant countries (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Georgia) that NATO's door remains open to them.

The back story

Over the past two decades, NATO has developed a network of structured partnerships with countries from the Euro-Atlantic area, the Mediterranean and the Gulf region, as well as individual relationships with other partners across the globe. In the Middle East and North Africa these partnerships have largely operated through a little known programme known as the [Mediterranean Dialogue](#) (MD) and the more recent [Istanbul Cooperation Initiative](#) (ICI).

Initiated in 1994 by the North Atlantic Council the MD currently involves seven non-NATO countries of the Mediterranean region: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. The 'complementary' ICI was created in 2004 at the suggestion of the United States and includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Both partnership programmes were intended to involve Middle Eastern states in future NATO missions, although both have remained relatively marginal processes in internal NATO debates, as well as in terms of actual co-operative activity.

A new partnership policy

A focused effort to reform NATO's partnerships policy was launched at the Lisbon Summit, with a view to making dialogue and cooperation more inclusive, flexible, meaningful and strategically oriented. NATO's new Strategic Concept also indicated that a fresh impetus would be given to the MD/ICI. Following up on the Lisbon decisions, a new [partnership policy](#) was endorsed by NATO foreign ministers at their meeting in Berlin in April 2011. "The newly approved 'Berlin partnership package' will allow us to work on more issues, with more partners, in more ways", stated NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. According to the NATO website, this will entail greater consultation and, as appropriate, cooperation in flexible formats, which will bring NATO and partners together, across and beyond existing frameworks.

As part of this new policy NATO announced an extension in its MD/ICI cooperation "toolbox" from around 700 to more than 1600 "activities". These activities range from ordinary military contact to exchanges of information on maritime security and counter-terrorism, access to educational programmes provided by alliance institutions, and joint crisis management exercises. However, while 2008-09 versions of the toolbox were published for the first time in June 2010, what each country takes from it remains secret.

This past and ongoing lack of transparency makes it very difficult to evaluate the impact of these security relationships on the Arab Spring.

In the early years, the dialogue consisted mainly of low-key bilateral meetings at NATO headquarters between officials and representatives from Mediterranean states. A lack of funding from the NATO side, lack of more substantial military input to the dialogue from both sides, and a continuing sense that the process lacked overall direction and a clear sense of purpose were key constraints.

Will this change under the new policy? In a [speech in June 2011](#) on NATO and the Arab Spring, Rasmussen said:

the reform of the military and the security sector are key milestones on the road to democracy. Modern, effective and accountable defence and security institutions will be a vital priority for many of the countries in the region. And NATO is well suited to help achieve this..... Of course, any assistance from NATO would be tailor-made. It would complement other support, particularly from the European Union and the United Nations. And it would be developed at the request of each country, and in close cooperation with them.

The fundamental challenge for NATO is to avoid making the same mistakes which led many of its member governments to find themselves on the wrong side of history



Any future NATO security sector reform assistance in the region should be subject to proper scrutiny, oversight and independent evaluation

In addition to a number of cooperation tools being progressively opened to MD countries, individual Partnership Cooperation Programmes are also being developed to enhance bilateral political dialogue as well as “tailoring the cooperation with NATO according to key national security needs”. Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia have all agreed tailored Individual Cooperation Programmes with NATO.

NATO permanent representatives met senior officials from the four ICI countries at a [seminar at NATO HQ in February](#) to discuss ways to deepen their partnership ahead of NATO's Chicago Summit. The NATO press release indicates that the discussions focused on “the situation in North Africa and the Middle East and security challenges in the region, including issues related to maritime security, energy security, and cyber security”.

The experience of the NATO-led operation against the regime of Tripoli also provides NATO with an opportunity to further the dialogue and cooperation with its Mediterranean partners. During the Libyan conflict, NATO was able to consult with and enjoyed firm support from some Arab countries. Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar contributed militarily to Operation Unified Protector, while other Arab states provided political support.

NATO Watch conclusion

The fundamental challenge for NATO is to avoid making the same mistakes which led many of its member governments to find themselves on the wrong side of history (as they continue to be most noticeably in Bahrain). The MD/ICI throughout its relatively short history has predominantly focused on the interests and security agendas of the alliance, rather than those of the partner states. Fostering those countries' transitions toward more open political systems appear to have been of a much lower order of priority. Hence, the events taking place in the Mediterranean and North Africa are happening not because of NATO policy but despite it.

NATO's involvement in Libya, despite its sound legal and political basis, has also resulted in mixed consequences. Continuing instability in Libya, the spill over of the conflict into Mali and failure to address concerns on [civilian casualties](#) remain major blots on an otherwise relatively successful mission. Cooperation with other regional political institutions, such as the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council and the African Union, while providing potential opportunities for the allies to engage in broad political dialogue, also carry risks of being associated with institutions of equally low standing in the eyes of much of the Arab public.

How these indecisive and fluid post-uprising environments are dealt with will affect whether “instability” leads to democratic transition, or descends into the apocalyptic scenarios that some analysts have been predicting. NATO governments were partly responsible for propping up the authoritarian regimes toppled by the uprisings and must therefore examine those policies which helped produce those effects. A critical re-examination of past policies is crucial to both post-uprising transition processes and to future Mediterranean relations. However, divisions within NATO about how to do this continue to hamper a consensual and constructive response to the Arab Spring.

There is also very little information in the public domain on the extent of NATO's cooperation with individual countries under the MD and ICI initiatives. Any future NATO security sector reform assistance in the region should be subject to proper scrutiny, oversight and independent evaluation. In sum, NATO's renewed policy of partnership will only appear reliable to the ‘Arab street’ if it is consistent, sustained and views reform as the key issue on the agenda. As [Andrea Teti](#) argues:

Popular demands in the uprisings can best be summarised in their two best-known slogans: ash-sha'b yurid isqaat an-nizaam (the people want the downfall of the regime) and ‘aish, horreya, adala igtema'eya (bread, freedom, social justice). This is nothing short of a critique of the oligarchic, authoritarian kleptocracies which largely still dominate the Middle East, and the demand for a more inclusive society, economy and politics. The challenge is for western governments to recognize these demands and adapt their foreign policies accordingly.

Whether NATO is the most suitable vehicle for facilitating more incentivized and effective partnerships and consultations in the Mediterranean and North Africa remains an open question that is unlikely to be satisfactorily answered in Chicago.

(photo credits: flickr)

