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Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue in the wake of the Arab Spring: partnership for peace or succour for despots?

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Key Points:

NATO has been engaged in the Middle East and North Africa for over 16 years through a little known partnership programme known as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the more recent Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)

NATO recently 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.

The 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.

The 'complementary' ICI was created in 2004, at

the suggestion of the United States, to involve Middle Eastern states in future NATO missions, although both the MD and ICI have remained relatively marginal processes in internal NATO debates, as well as in terms of actual co-operative activity.

The new Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon in November 2010 acknowledged the importance of partnerships in general and indicated that a fresh impetus would be given to the MD/ICI.

Conclusions:

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. The human security concerns of the people in the region were of even

lower order of priority. Hence, the events taking place in the Middle East are happening not *because* of NATO policy but *despite* it.

Divisions within NATO continue to hamper a consensual and constructive response to the Arab Spring.

There is 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.

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.

(Egypt's star – photo credit: A W / V flickr)



¹ The views expressed in this briefing are personal and should not be taken to represent the policy or views of the British Government, Ministry of Defence, or the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

Introduction

Change is sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa as regimes long thought 'stable' face popular protests demanding greater political, social, and economic rights. The popular revolt in Tunisia initially spread to Egypt and the Arab Spring then erupted on the streets of Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain where the ruling authorities have shown less restraint in using lethal force. In Libya the unrest has turned into a civil war and may also do so in Syria and Yemen, although without any likely intervention from NATO. Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Morocco and Algeria have also witnessed recent unrest.

Egypt and Tunisia are the two success stories for 'people power' in the region to date – measured in terms of the predominantly peaceful removal of two long-standing autocratic leaders – but in both countries the transition could still go wrong, since it is not yet certain that fundamental change in ruling elites or the nature of governance will prove sustainable. The high-profile role of the military in both countries (and throughout the region) underlines the importance of external pressure on the generals to maintain the momentum towards positive change. In Egypt in particular there are fears that matters could get out of hand once again if the military falls back to old ways of doing business. The military's continuing role in human rights abuses, for example, raises questions about its ability to midwife Egyptian democracy.² On the other hand, if a united, democratic and strong Egypt was to emerge, the country would be in a strong position to regain its long lost regional influence as an Arab leader. And one with real moral credibility and clout in the Middle East, akin to post-apartheid South Africa's influence on the African continent. The recently-reported agreement between Fatah and Hamas to form a Palestinian unity government, brokered under Egyptian auspices, could turn out to be an early indication of post-Mubarak Egypt striving to play this kind of role. All told, the stakes are high.

But reversing decades of stagnation, corruption and nepotism will not be easy.³ There have been

² See, for example, Liam Stack, 'Among Egypt's Missing, Tales of Torture and Prison', *New York Times*, 17 February 2011; and Pierre Razoux, 'What to expect of the Egyptian army?' NATO Defense College, *Research Report*, 14 February 2011.

³ See David Kirkpatrick, 'Egyptians Say Military Discourages an Open Economy', *New York Times*, 17 February 2011.

calls for those with leverage over the Egyptian and Tunisian military, such as the Obama administration and, to a lesser extent the EU, to keep the pressure on the generals to act as 'guardians of the revolution' and to oversee a peaceful transition to democracy. No one, however, seems to be suggesting a role for NATO, despite the Alliance having engaged with both countries and the region as a whole on security-related matters for over 16 years through a little known partnership program known as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD)⁴ and the more recent Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).⁵

The fact that the MD has been largely ignored by analysts and commentators is in itself an indication of the lack of substance which has been widely attributed to it. A general impression has been that this initiative has amounted to little more than political and diplomatic window dressing and that NATO's members have lacked serious interest in developing genuine mutual co-operation with their North African and Middle Eastern interlocutors. Nonetheless, the MD purports to provide a framework for confidence building, transparency and cooperation.

(Parting ways? – photo credit: [khalid Albaih/ flickr](#))

At a February 2011 security conference in Israel, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced an extension in "the range of activities that we can offer to all Mediterranean partners from around 700 to more than 1600. When it comes to cooperation

projects, there is no longer any distinction between the Mediterranean countries and the Euro-Atlantic partners".⁶ NATO officials describe this "toolbox" as being "non-controversial", and although the latest version is not yet publicly available, it is expected to be released in the future. (In order to enhance the visibility of the two programmes, NATO published the complete versions of the MD Work Programme and ICI Menu of Practical Activities for 2008 and 2009 on the NATO website in June 2010).⁷ However,

⁴ The MD currently involves seven non-NATO countries of the Mediterranean region: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

⁵ Six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council were initially invited to participate. To date, four of these -- Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates -- have joined. Saudi Arabia and Oman have also shown an interest in the Initiative.

⁶ Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the 11th Herzliya Conference in Herzliya, Israel, 9 February 2011.

⁷ Political and Partnerships Committee, Complete versions of the MDWP and ICIMPA 2008 and 2009 for



details of what each country takes from the toolbox and attendance records at the various events, seminars and training courses remain confidential.⁸

In a statement on 11 February 2011 Rasmussen also expressed his support for the transition process in Egypt, saying that:

I welcome President Mubarak's decision [to step down]. I have consistently called for a speedy, orderly and peaceful transition to democracy, respecting the legitimate aspirations of the people of Egypt.

In the long run, no society can neglect the will of the people. Democracy means much more than majority rule -- it also means respect for individual freedom, for minorities, human rights and the rule of law. These are the values on which our Alliance is based and the values we encourage our partners to respect. Egypt is a valued partner in our Mediterranean Dialogue and a pivotal country in the region. I am confident Egypt will continue to be a force for stability and security.⁹



A similar expression of support was made by NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NPA) President Dr. Karl Lamers on 21 February 2011:

Our Assembly places a high priority on its existing cooperation with the states of the Middle East and North Africa, and we stand willing to respond to requests for assistance in the development of representative governance in the region.

Twenty years ago, our Assembly helped the then fledgling parliaments of Central and

Eastern Europe to develop effective civilian oversight of the security sector and civil-military relations appropriate to democratic governance. The situation today in the Middle East and North Africa is clearly unique, but the scenes on the streets of Cairo, Tunis, and elsewhere evoke similar emotions and hopes for the future. Should our partners in the Middle East and North Africa request it, I am certain that my colleagues would be willing and eager to provide similar advice and assistance.¹⁰

(Concrete dialogue and him – photo credit: [Moti Krispil/ flickr](#))

It is reasonable to ask, therefore, what impact these security relationships and channels for regular dialogue with NATO militaries have had on the present crisis in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite being hampered by NATO's unwillingness to say what specific activities or training programmes in the MD 'toolbox' have been used to support or advise specific regimes and their security forces, this briefing seeks to address three key questions:

1. To what extent did a dialogue process that appeared to prioritise 'strategic patience'¹¹ and 'stability' above justice and reform help to reinforce and prolong the grip of autocratic regimes in the region?
2. To what extent did the dialogue process help to constrain the security forces' reactions to peoples' power in Tunisia and Egypt (if not in Bahrain)?
3. How might the MD contribute to the present democratic transition process, and especially security sector reforms and a changeover to civilian-led governance of the armed forces, not only in Tunisia and Egypt, but the region as a whole?

internet release, Notice PPC-N(2010)0026, 9 June 2010; The document runs to 257 pages and is available here:

http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_06/20100713_100609_PPC-N2010-0026.pdf

⁸ Ian Davis' discussions with NATO officials 17 February 2011.

⁹ 'Statement by the NATO Secretary General on events in Egypt', NATO News, 11 February 2011. Whether the Secretary General can be said to have "consistently called for a speedy, orderly and peaceful transition to democracy" is open to question, however. The unrest in Egypt started on 24 January 2011 and his first public comments were on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on 4 February 2011 (see 'NATO Secretary General 'shocked by violence in Egypt'', NATO News, 4 February 2011). And there appear to be no public references of support for democratic reforms in advance of the unrest.

It begins by discussing the origins of the Dialogue and its initial slow-burning institutional development. It then examines the impact of 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq War, which led to the creation of the ICI in 2004.

After ignoring the underlying issues for years, it is difficult for NATO's MD to appear reliable to the

¹⁰ Statement by NATO Parliamentary Assembly President Dr. Karl A. Lamers on events in the Middle East and North Africa, NATO PA Press Release, 21 February 2011.

¹¹ See, for example, NATO 2020: assured security; dynamic engagement - analysis and recommendations of the group of experts on a new strategic concept for NATO, 17 May 2010, p28.

'Arab street' unless its new policy of partnership is consistent, sustained and views reform as one of the key issues on the agenda. Many NATO member states – not least the US – long condoned authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and only fully backed the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings once the outcome had become clear.

The origins of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue

Scepticism was apparent from the start. The MD was officially launched in early 1995, in the wake of public comments from then NATO Secretary General Willy Claes suggesting that Islamic fundamentalism had replaced Soviet communism as the most significant threat to western security interests.¹² Other NATO officials made similar, though less public, remarks.¹³ This was hardly the most propitious backdrop for the launching of a 'dialogue' with a group of mainly Islamic states. The contrast with the Partnership for Peace (PfP) for Central and Eastern Europe was stark. Whereas this was based on an essentially *cooperative* premise, the comments by Claes and other NATO officials suggested that the new Mediterranean Dialogue was founded on an essentially *negative* basis. This was to try and manage perceived emerging threats to NATO members from the southern Mediterranean, rather than encouraging states there to become real partners.

Threat conditioned perceptions were not confined to the NATO side. Informed observers of attitudes in the Arab world (to which all the southern participants in the dialogue bar Israel belonged) argued that NATO's image there was poor, not least because it tended to be viewed as little more than a tool of its leading European members and the US. They in turn were judged according to their colonial histories and perceived pro-Israel bias respectively. Such attitudes evidently remained deeply engrained in the Arab world and were still being discussed ten years after the MD was first

established.¹⁴

Sceptics could also point out that NATO members seemed to have deliberately avoided difficult issues in selecting the southern states to invite as founder participants in their new initiative. The 1995 invitees were: Egypt, Israel, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania. Given the circumstances of the time, it was reasonable to expect that Iran, Iraq and Libya would not have been invited. They were three of the major 'states of concern' in the Clinton administration's foreign policy and none of them had supporters amongst NATO's European members who were prepared to stake political capital on arguing their case. The initial exclusion of Algeria – to the chagrin of the authorities there¹⁵ – was more controversial. It was certainly true that Algeria was at the time in the throes of a vicious internal conflict. There were also reports that the French government had declared it to be primarily 'French business' and had been reluctant to see it included in a multilateral engagement process.¹⁶ Nevertheless it could be argued that if NATO members were serious about their new engagement process contributing to security and stability in the Mediterranean region, then they should have sought to engage with a state whose security and stability was most obviously threatened.

(Arab children in Dubai – photo credit: Federico Ravassard/ flickr)



It can also be contended that the creation of the MD was less an effort to use NATO structures and processes to help address security

challenges in the Mediterranean region and more an attempt to ensure that NATO was not left behind in an emerging institutional competition. By the time the MD was launched in early 1995, both the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Western European Union (WEU) had established links and programmes of their own. European Union members had also agreed to convene a conference later in the year to launch their own initiative, which became

¹² See W. Drozdak, 'NATO Turns to the Threat from Islamic Extremists', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 February 1995 and P. Almond, 'Fears over Islam move', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 February 1995.

¹³ See the comments from a 'high-level NATO official' cited in M. Stenhouse & B. George, *NATO and Mediterranean Security: The New Central Region* (London: Brassey's/Centre for Defence Studies 1994), p. 55. See also A. Carlson, 'NATO and North Africa: Problems and Prospects', *Parameters* XXVIII 3 1998, pp. 43-4.

¹⁴ See *inter alia*, F. Ghilès, 'Bridging cultural divisions', *NATO Review* 4 2005. Web text found at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2005/issue4/english/art2.html>; M. Alani, 'Arab perspectives on NATO', *NATO Review* 4 2005. Web text found at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2005/issue4/english/art3.html> and *NATO and Persian Gulf Security (Document 177PCTR05E)* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2005), para. 11.

¹⁵ B. Clark, 'NATO Turns Attention to North Africa', *Financial Times*, 24 February 1995.

¹⁶ L. Barber & B. Gray, 'Nato seeks talks on security with Mideast nations', *Financial Times*, 9 February 1995.

known as the Barcelona process.¹⁷ A sense of urgency to get a comparable NATO initiative up and running might explain why the original list of invitees had the appearance of having been put together in something of a rush, with both friendly states such as Jordan and hard cases such as Algeria initially being excluded.¹⁸

During its first 18 months the MD proceeded in a generally desultory manner. A 1996 report from the WEU's Parliamentary Assembly argued that 'the endeavours NATO has been making....to establish a dialogue with six Southern Mediterranean countries has not achieved the objective of a partnership for peace in the Mediterranean'.¹⁹ In fairness NATO members had not agreed that the MD would or should evolve in ways comparable with the established PfP,²⁰ although it was predictable that outside observers were likely to compare the two and conclude that the MD was less significant and meaningful.

The relative lack of substance in the MD at this time was illustrated by the fact that national representatives from NATO member states had little to do with it. The dialogue itself consisted mainly of bilateral meetings at NATO headquarters between NATO officials and representatives from the Mediterranean states. The limited nature of these sessions was apparent from the beginning. The opening presentation at the first meetings reportedly consisted of an 'elementary lesson in modern history', with Secretary General Claes briefing his Mediterranean interlocutors on the origins and development of NATO.²¹ NATO



(25-28 January Match, People Vs. Police, Cairo – photo credit: [alhussainy/flickr](#))

In view of the considerable grounds for scepticism, it may appear somewhat surprising that NATO members at their 1997 Madrid summit managed

officials privately admitted that often neither side at the meetings had a clear idea as to what they were supposed to be talking about.²²

No clear or agreed ideas existed amongst NATO member governments either. There were at least four discernible strands of opinion within their number. The United States maintained its traditional emphasis on 'hard' security issues and a strategic focus mainly on the eastern Mediterranean as a vital gateway to the Middle East. Southern European states: chiefly France, Italy and Spain, had been the principal drivers behind the launch of the MD. They were concerned mainly about economic security issues and also migration from North Africa and their primary focus was therefore on the western Mediterranean. In this sense there has been an 'east-west' split within NATO's ranks over relative security priorities in the Mediterranean region.²³ In addition, 'Middle European' states – principally Germany – were relatively uninterested and remained more focused on NATO's burgeoning engagement with and putative enlargement to embrace former Warsaw Pact states. 'Northern' member states, finally, were even less interested and indeed were sometimes only barely supportive of the whole MD process.²⁴

to agree on an upgrade. The most important element of this was the creation of a 'Mediterranean Co-operation Group' (MCG) within the NATO headquarters structure to take 'overall responsibility' for the MD.²⁵ The significance of the creation of the MCG was that it provided for the first time an institutional mechanism for NATO member states to have a direct input into the

¹⁷ For details see *Security in the North African Region (Document AS139GSM(99)6 rev.2)* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 1999), pp. 20-3. In 2007, the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiative was folded into the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument.

¹⁸ Jordan was subsequently invited to join the Mediterranean Dialogue in November 1995 and Algeria in March 2000.

¹⁹ *Security in the Mediterranean Region* (Paris: Assembly of the Western European Union 1996). Web text found at <http://www.weu.int/assembly/eng/reports/1543e.html>.

²⁰ For a useful and insightful discussion of the intra-NATO debates about the nature and importance of the MD during its formative years see G. Winrow, *Dialogue with the Mediterranean: The Role of NATO's Mediterranean Initiative* (New York: Garland Publishing 2000), ch. 7. Winrow's is the best of the few book length treatments of the dialogue.

²¹ Quoted in Clark, 'NATO Turns Attention to North Africa'.

²² Martin Smith's interviews with NATO officials during 1995 and 1996. See also M. Sedge, 'Arc of Instability: NATO's New Focus along the Southern Flank', *Armed Forces Journal International* October 1996, pp. 70-5.

²³ On this see *inter alia*, Carlson, 'NATO and North Africa', p. 40; Sedge, 'Arc of Instability', p. 72 and R. Asmus, S. Larrabee *et al*, 'Mediterranean security: new challenges, new tasks', *NATO Review* 44 3 1996. Web text found at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/1996/9603-6.htm>.

²⁴ See Winrow, *Dialogue with the Mediterranean*, p. 154. For reported British scepticism see also Almond, 'Fears over Islam move'.

²⁵ See the text of the *Madrid Declaration*, reprinted as a special insert in *NATO Review* 45 4 1997, p. 2.

dialogue process.²⁶ It could therefore be taken as an indication that member states were finding greater interests in engaging with their Mediterranean interlocutors in the NATO context. The reason for this was most probably a desire, for both military and political reasons, to persuade at least some of the latter to make force contributions to the NATO led peacekeeping force which had been deployed to Bosnia from the beginning of 1996. This was seen within NATO as being highly desirable in view of the prominence – ethnically and politically – of the Muslim population in Bosnia and indeed elsewhere in the Balkans. NATO members and officials set considerable store by the fact that Egypt, Jordan and Morocco all made military contributions in Bosnia in the second half of the 1990s. It is likely that discussions within the MD played a role in facilitating these deployments and this made its upgrading seem desirable to NATO members in 1996-97.

A second significant institutional development occurred at this time with the adoption of annual 'Work Programmes' for the MD and its participants. This might again sound relatively unimportant and innocuous. Its significance in the NATO context in the 1990s should not be underestimated however. Work Programmes involving NATO and partner states had first been adopted by the North Atlantic Co-operation Council (NACC) in the early part of the decade. The NACC had progressively evolved into the PfP and the adoption of annual NACC 'Work Plans' from 1992 had been the first substantive step in this process. The Work Plans were designed to give substance and focus to the co-operation which was emerging under NACC auspices whilst also setting parameters on what NATO members were prepared to offer and thus attempting to contain 'unrealistic' expectations amongst partner states.

In the late 1990s there were indeed indications of a new level of sophistication and seriousness to co-operation within the Mediterranean Dialogue. Until the Madrid summit, the kind of co-operation on offer had been restricted to joint seminars, partner state attendance on courses and observation of NATO military exercises.²⁷ Following the creation of the MCG and under the impetus of the situation in Bosnia (and latterly Kosovo), a more practical operational focus was

developed. In autumn 1999 a major multinational naval exercise took place in the Mediterranean. This brought together a cross section of NATO members and also included Egypt and Jordan (plus Kuwait). It was the largest such exercise since the 1991 Gulf War and was appraised by 'senior US officials' as offering "a glimpse of how future alliance training efforts may increasingly be cross-regional in nature".²⁸

Having noted all this, important constraints remained. A report published by the NPA in September 1999 identified the existence of three related problems: lack of funding from the NATO side, lack of more substantial military input to the dialogue from both sides,²⁹ and a continuing sense that the process lacked overall direction and a clear sense of purpose. The report noted that funding in particular had been so tight that "Dialogue countries, and officials from various government offices, do not always have the ability to attend meetings where they are invited".³⁰

The absence of more significant military contact building and co-operation was potentially an even greater drawback. As a report from the NPA's Mediterranean Special Group pointed out, NATO was still largely viewed by non member states – not least to its south – as being a predominantly military institution. Suspicions about its purposes and intentions would not therefore "be removed by civilian co-operation only.....or diplomatic discussions, but by *transparency and military co-operation*" [emphasis in the original]. The report lamented that co-operation in these latter areas had remained "very modest".³¹

(Istanbul – photo credit: Adam Reeder/flickr)



²⁶ J. Nordam, 'The Mediterranean Dialogue: Dispelling Misconceptions and Building Confidence', *NATO Review* 45 4 1997, pp. 28-9.

²⁷ For details see A. Bin, 'Strengthening Cooperation in the Mediterranean: NATO's Contribution', *NATO Review* 46 4 1998, pp. 25-7.

²⁸ B. Bender, 'Exercise heralds cross-regional training for NATO', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 3 November 1999, p. 2.

²⁹ When Admiral Giuseppe Spinozzi, NATO commander for the southern Mediterranean, visited Egypt in July 1999 he was reportedly 'the first high-ranking NATO commander to visit any of the [then] six southern rim countries with which the alliance has conducted a dialogue' – nearly four-and-a-half years after the MD's inception. See E. Blanche, 'Egypt holds talks with NATO', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 July 1999, p. 12.

³⁰ 'Mediterranean Special Group: Meeting at NATO Headquarters Brussels, 17 September 1999'. Web text found at <http://www.naa.be/publications/special/as220gsm9910.html>.

³¹ *NATO's Role in the Mediterranean (Document AP245GSM(97)9)* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 1997), pp. 11-12.

9/11, Iraq and the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative

Although there had been a measure of institutional development in the Mediterranean Dialogue in the years before 9/11, its overall significance and achievements remained limited. Most pertinently it (and the other western-based engagement institutions and programmes) had made little apparent contribution to challenging or changing underlying cultural and historical perceptions. As Stephen Blank argued at the start of the new millennium: “whether one looks at the EU’s Barcelona initiative directed to the states on the Mediterranean’s southern coast or to NATO’s Mediterranean dialogue, one finds little progress but continuing suspicion and mistrust between North and South”.³² The ‘east-west’ divisions amongst NATO’s own members over security priorities in the Mediterranean region were also still apparent.

The events of 9/11 initially appeared to have had little impact on the MD. The incremental development of its Work Programmes continued, but in a relatively limited way and there were no significant political enhancements or new participants invited. In spring 2004 as the Mediterranean Dialogue approached its tenth anniversary, Chris Donnelly who had served as a special adviser to successive NATO Secretary Generals between 1989 and 2003, wrote in *NATO Review* that:

*Unlike the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue has not been a great success. It has played no significant role in stabilising the region or in helping and promoting the evolution of participating countries. There are several reasons for this. They include a lack of investment of time, people and money; a profound suspicion and ignorance of NATO on the part of many countries in the region; the lack of those mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation on which the success of NATO and the Partnership for Peace is based, and, the inability to decouple wider regional security issues from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*³³

A subsequent WEU Assembly report assessed the MD’s first decade more succinctly: “10 years of Dialogue had yielded no more results than friendly consultations and exchanges of view

between the partners”.³⁴

It was against this backdrop and more particularly the mounting chaos in post-invasion Iraq from late 2003 that NATO members agreed in June 2004 to create a new co-operation programme for states in the Middle East. This was called the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative (ICI) as it was agreed at that month’s NATO summit meeting in the Turkish city. The declaratory thrust of the ICI was to create an operational relationship with Middle Eastern states so that the latter might become increasingly able and willing to contribute to future NATO missions.³⁵



(ICI Ambassadorial Conference: Deepening NATO-ICI Partnership, Qatar, February 2011 – photo credit: NATO)

There was little doubt that the ICI was primarily an American idea. Nor was there much doubt that its main motivation was less to qualitatively enhance NATO’s relations with Middle Eastern countries *per se* than an increasingly urgent need to secure regional support for efforts to stabilise Iraq. Given the divisiveness of the Iraq issue amongst NATO members, the Bush administration was struggling to persuade even many of its established European allies to make more than token contributions to stabilisation efforts.³⁶ The US was doubtless also interested in securing regional support for its wider ‘war on terror’. Counter terrorism and counter proliferation operations were both specifically mentioned in the ICI as particular foci for future co-operation.

Although the agreed NATO statement establishing the ICI referred to the new initiative being ‘complementary’ to the established Mediterranean Dialogue, there was no indication of how the relationship would work in practice. In fact it is possible to see the creation of the ICI as recognition that under the Bush administration the ‘east-west divide’ amongst NATO members had effectively become unbridgeable. The first Middle Eastern states to sign up were all, as noted, members of the US sponsored Gulf Co-operation Council – and none of them were also members of the MD.

³⁴ *Security and stability in the Mediterranean Region* (Paris: Assembly of the Western European Union 2006), para. 161.

³⁵ *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*. Web text found at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_21017.htm.

³⁶ A 2005 report from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly described NATO’s limited contribution to training Iraqi security forces as being ‘only the least common denominator among Allies who previously disagreed over the Iraq war’. See *Securing NATO’s Role and Relevance (Document 175PC06E)* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2005), para. 35.

³² S. Blank, ‘The Mediterranean and Its Security Agenda’, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11 1 2000, p. 30.

³³ C. Donnelly, ‘Building a NATO partnership for the Greater Middle East’, *NATO Review* 1 2004. Web text found at http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue1/english/art_3_pr.html.

Whatever the rhetoric to the contrary therefore, it seems evident that since 2004 NATO has maintained two essentially separate southern co-operation initiatives. The creation of the ICI, far from marking a *rapprochement* amongst NATO members on the terms and basis of their future engagement with states in the Mediterranean and Middle East, in fact institutionalised fissures between the US and leading European states. These had, as noted, been evident since the creation of the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995. They came to a head in 2003-04 however, as a result of the divisiveness caused by the Bush administration's approach to prosecuting its war on terror in general and the invasion of Iraq in particular.

The fact that the divisions do not appear to have had a wider debilitating effect on NATO can be ascribed to the extent to which both the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Co-operation Initiative continued to be relatively marginal factors in internal NATO debates, as well as in terms of actual co-operative activity. The failure of both the MD and the ICI in this respect can probably best be illustrated by the extent to which participants have failed to contribute to NATO-led operations, with the exception of small and periodic contributions to the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), by Egypt, Jordan and the UAE. Morocco has also contributed to the KFOR mission in the Balkans. There was a particular expectation that ICI and MD participants would contribute to *Operation Active Endeavour*: the naval counter-terrorism patrols in the Mediterranean.³⁷ To date, however and notwithstanding periodic hints from NATO officials and supporters that such participation is impending or indeed happening already in some oblique way,³⁸ no MD or ICI state has contributed to this operation. According to the NATO website, however, both Morocco and Israel have "offered physical assets for 2011".

Nor have prospective joint military training

programmes fared any better thus far. The possibility of these being organised was flagged up in the statement which launched the ICI and reiterated at NATO's Riga summit in November 2006.³⁹ In February 2009 however, a report issued by a coalition of American think tanks in the run up to NATO's 60th anniversary summit laconically noted that "not much has come from this initiative".⁴⁰

On the other hand, dialogue within the MD in particular has deepened over the years. The number of joint activities rose from 60 in 1997 to over 600 in 2007, and as mentioned earlier, Anders Fogh Rasmussen expects these to increase to over 1,600 and thereby place the relationships on a par with those within the PfP. 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.⁴¹



HMCS Iroquois on Patrol, as part of 'Operation Active Endeavour' 2006 – photo credit: lafrancevi/ flickr)

In addition, all but two of the MD partners (Algeria and Jordan) have established individual cooperation plans with NATO. Egypt, Jordan and Israel have also created "regional centres of excellence" open to both Alliance members and other countries in the region.⁴² Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia have also signed agreements with NATO on the protection of classified information, making it possible for them to have access to a more ambitious level of cooperation.⁴³

The Lisbon Summit and new Strategic Concept: greater emphasis on partnerships

The new Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon in

³⁷ R. de Nevers, 'NATO's International Security Role in the Terrorist Era', *International Security* 31 4 2007, p. 41.

³⁸ See *inter alia*, Vice Adm. R. Cesaretti, 'Combating terrorism in the Mediterranean', *NATO Review* 3 2005. Web text found at http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2005/issue3/english/art4_pr.html and *NATO Operations: Current Priorities and Lessons Learned (Document 158DSC08E bis)* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2008), pp. 15-16.

³⁹ *Riga Summit Declaration*. Web text found at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_37920.htm.

⁴⁰ Daniel Hamilton *et al*, *Alliance Reborn: An Atlantic Compact for the 21st Century* (Washington DC: The Washington NATO Project 2009), p. 41.

⁴¹ Pierre Razoux, 'The NATO Mediterranean Dialogue at a crossroads', *Research Paper*, NATO Defense College, April 2008, p2.

⁴² In Egypt it is the Cairo Center for Training on Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa, while in Jordan it is the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center.

⁴³ Pierre Razoux, 'How to revitalize the dialogue between NATO and the Maghreb countries', *Research Paper*, NATO Defense College, December 2010, p1.

November 2010 acknowledged the importance of partnerships in general and indicated that a fresh impetus would be given to the MD.⁴⁴

A roundtable organised by the NATO Defense College in Rome a few months earlier set out to brainstorm a number of suggestions in this direction, including the possible division of the MD into two sub-regional groups based around the Maghreb (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria and Tunisia) and Mashreq (Egypt, Israel and Jordan).⁴⁵ This proposed division of the MD was seen by some analysts as a way of getting around the Israel-Palestinian question, which has hampered multilateral consultations within the Dialogue process, and of extending the discussions to include 'soft security' issues, such as food, water and energy security.

Other North African specialists argued that the main concerns were not necessarily security-related (in the traditional sense) but the lack of democratic political and economic governance. And while these appear to be the root causes of the current upheavals and insecurity in the region, none of the ideas discussed at the roundtable sought to address them directly⁴⁶ - although a number of the proposals did so indirectly, and have intrinsic merit in terms of building inter-state transparency, security and confidence in the region. For example, the proposal to reorganise armed forces in order to reduce their numbers and to free up



(NATO Secretary General meets

with journalists from Morocco, Brussels, 2 February 2011 – photo credit: NATO)

⁴⁴ Paragraph 25 of the Lisbon Summit communiqué (20 November 2010) states that "Peace and stability in the Mediterranean region are essential for Euro-Atlantic security. We intend to further develop the Mediterranean Dialogue by raising its political and practical dimensions, in order to build mutual confidence and to deal together with the common security challenges in this region".

⁴⁵ Pierre Razoux, 'How to revitalize the dialogue between NATO and the Maghreb countries', *Research Paper*, NATO Defense College, December 2010.

⁴⁶ The ideas discussed for revitalising the Dialogue, were: 1. Maintain the present MD format while encouraging maximum flexibility; 2. Pursue the open door policy towards Libya; 3. Pursue the commitment to interoperability of the armed forces of the Maghreb countries; 4. Enlarge the sphere of military cooperation to include maritime security and energy security; 5. Enhance the multilateral and political dimension of the MD in order to promote South-South dialogue; 6. Promote the implementation of confidence-building and security measures in the Maghreb; and 7. Contribute to the reinforcement of security in the Sahel region. Pierre Razoux, 'How to revitalize the dialogue between NATO and the Maghreb countries'.

resources for economic and social development, might over time help ease frustrations and prevent the radicalisation of society, if it is seen as one part of a wider reform process.

Conclusions

Having traced the evolution of the MD and sought to evaluate the strengths and limitations evident in its development to date, what can be said in response to the three questions outlined at the start of this briefing?

To what extent has the MD reinforced and prolonged the grip of autocratic regimes in the region?

The MD throughout its relatively short history has predominantly focused on the interests and security agendas of the Alliance member states, with some exchanges of technical military cooperation and information, mainly in combating terrorism, thrown in for good measure. According to several leading NATO thinkers, the uprising against the regimes "came as a surprise even for an institution like NATO, which is deeply involved in the area through its various partnership programmes".⁴⁷ This may well be because the events taking place in the Middle East are happening not *because* of NATO policy but *despite* it. NATO favours stability and predictability above all else, because the *status quo* has been favourable to the Alliance, and especially several of its key member states.

This explains the double standard of some allies supporting intervention in Libya but not Bahrain or Syria. It also explains why many Western leaders and the NATO Secretary General held back from supporting the uprisings until it became clear that the *status quo* was no longer plausible. And if the Egyptian army implements some cosmetic reforms but still tries to maintain much of the status quo, what will NATO do? Probably nothing – it would be a return to business as usual.

Another factor which militates against NATO playing an assertive and dynamic wider role is the enduring absence of fundamental consensus amongst its member states about just what their collective interests in the Middle East actually are.

⁴⁷ Florence Gaub, Sandy Guptill, Karl-Heinz Kamp, Pierre Razoux and Rolf Schwarz, 'The Arab Explosion: Questions and Options for NATO', NATO Defense College Research Report, 23 February 2011, p1.

As was noted above, following the establishment of the MD, it quickly became apparent that at least four distinct outlooks existed amongst the NATO membership as a whole. Since the 1990s, the progressive eastward enlargement of NATO has increased the numbers of members with doubts as to whether NATO should be actively getting involved in the affairs of the region in any way. In this context, the absence of any contribution from newer members to NATO air operations over Libya from March 2011 is striking, as is the failure of the German government to even support the passing of authorising resolution 1973 in the UN Security Council. It is apparent that there is still no settled 'NATO view' on key security issues and challenges in the Middle East. When feeling pressured, as by the need to formulate a response to the 'Arab spring', individual member states continue to act first and foremost on the basis of their own perceived national interests or – at best – as part of a loose coalition of the willing, as in the Libya case.

To what extent did the dialogue process help to constrain the security forces' reactions to peoples' power in Tunisia and Egypt (if not in Bahrain)?

This is difficult to assess. Despite the NATO Defense College's blithe assertion that we live "in an era where modern tools of communication assure transparency within NATO as well as in the region concerned",⁴⁸ the fact is that there is very little information in the public domain on the extent of NATO's cooperation with individual countries under the MD and ICI initiatives. We know next to nothing about which items from the MD "toolbox" have been applied in specific exchanges, official visits and cooperation projects. Some information on bilateral military-to-military exchanges between Alliance member states and countries in the region is available through national Freedom of Information requests and other oversight mechanisms, but nothing similar exists to cast light on NATO-level engagement.

Instead, it is almost a given within NATO circles that exposing military or police officers to Alliance structures, standards and habits will help to create responsible forces that work to support the state and society rather than any particular faction or group. The evidence in practice is somewhat mixed. NATO partnerships in the Balkans over the past decades have generally resulted in positive security sector reforms in that part of the world.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p2

Thus in Bosnia, for example, NATO members felt able to hand over ongoing stabilisation operations to the EU in December 2004, with a significantly reduced continuing military 'footprint' on the ground there. In Afghanistan on the other hand, the recently increased emphasis on training the national army and police is having decidedly mixed results. Overall, it can be said that any similar education and modernization programmes in North Africa and the Middle East should be subject to proper scrutiny, oversight and independent evaluation. That is demonstrably not the case there at present.

How might the MD contribute to the present democratic transition process, and especially security sector reforms and a changeover to civilian-led governance of the armed forces, not only in Tunisia and Egypt, but the region as a whole?

Reflecting their relative institutional weakness and the lack of underlying consensus among NATO member states, to date the relationships within the MD and ICI have predominantly been shaped, manipulated and buffeted by external events. Most notable have been the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the unresolved Israel-Palestinian dispute, both of which prevented more significant reconciliation amongst NATO members and their southern interlocutors.⁴⁹ Despite an accelerated process of institutionalisation of relations after the launch of the ICI in 2004,⁵⁰ this has not yet produced any appreciable sign of ideational or normative confluence.

(Libya-protests_054 - photo credit: Crethi

Plethi/ flickr)

On the contrary, in the post-Iraq context and with the Israel-Palestinian dispute still unresolved and the insurgency in Afghanistan ongoing, as the Arab uprising began there seemed little need to amend Chris Donnelly's conclusion in 2004 that "the cultural gap between Europe and North America on the one hand and North Africa and the Greater Middle East on the other is greater today than that between East and West at the end of the Cold War".⁵¹

⁴⁹ See *inter alia*, Winrow, *Dialogue with the Mediterranean*, p. 13; Blank, 'The Mediterranean and Its Security Agenda', pp. 30-1 and *Developments in the Broader Middle East* (Paris: Assembly of the Western European Union 2005), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁰ R. Moore, *NATO's New Mission: Projecting Stability in a Post-Cold War World* (Westport CT: Praeger 2007), pp. 138-40.

⁵¹ Donnelly, 'Building a NATO partnership for the Greater Middle East'.



Having said this, the MD has the *potential* to become one of NATO's flagship cooperation programmes, but the Alliance collectively will need to overcome a negative image in the Arab world and adopt a new mindset. This partly requires the Alliance to think of its Arab partners as *actual partners*.⁵² What the security forces of the MD and ICI partner states most require are effective implementation of confidence and security building measures and norms aimed at increasing their democratization and transparency. However, this is an area in which the OSCE rather than NATO has real expertise and experience.



Moreover, many Alliance thinkers appear constrained by their own strategic straight-jackets and myopia. The strategic interests of NATO, and especially those members with strong vested interests in the region, namely the US, France, Britain and Italy, can appear to be in stark contrast to the values they uphold as universal rights.

One of the "pertinent questions" raised by the NATO Defense College (which does not speak for NATO, but is illustrative of the dominant thinking that shapes the Alliance), for example, is "how to react if, as a result of the upheavals, one of the MD/ICI countries is ruled by an Islamic government and which subsequently acts maliciously against its own population? Is NATO ready to accept the results of free elections if the outcomes are undemocratic regimes?" NATO members were clearly content to accept autocratic regimes acting maliciously against their own populations for the best part of two decades in the name of 'stability'. Now, rather than embrace the opportunity for democratic reform, the spectre is raised of the rise of Islamic extremism through the ballot box, the so-called 'Iranian Revolution' dilemma.

To date, none of the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain or Syria have been particularly Islamic or ideological in nature. The protestors' main demand is for basic political rights and an end to tyranny and corruption. NATO members' collective interest lies in supporting serious reforms and social justice. That should be the overriding principle that shapes any upgraded Mediterranean Dialogue.

The NATO Secretary General's most recent speeches⁵³ on the Arab Spring do show signs that he now 'gets it' by explicitly recognising that it is as much about justice and equity as it is about democracy. He also reiterated that NATO stands "ready to engage in an enhanced dialogue on security matters" and to provide "tailor-made"

security sector reform assistance. However, his claim that the Alliance already has "a successful track-record of political engagement with countries in North Africa and the broader Middle East" through the MD and ICI is not borne out by the evidence in the public domain.

(NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Forum for New Diplomacy hosted by Carnegie Europe, Brussels, 1 June – photo credit: NATO)

Before NATO can, in the words of Secretary General Rasmussen, help unlock the tremendous potential in the region, it needs to be ready and willing to learn and share the lessons of its past engagement in the Middle East and North Africa, and do so in an open and transparent manner, however uncomfortable that might be for the Alliance and some of its member states.

⁵² Sally Khalifa Isaac, NATO and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Security: Prospects for Burden Sharing, NATO Defense College *Forum Paper* No.16 - April 2011, p.5

⁵³ 'NATO and the Arab Spring', Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Forum for New Diplomacy hosted by Carnegie Europe, Brussels, 1 June 2011; and "NATO and the Mediterranean: the changes ahead", Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Spanish Senate, 16 June 2011