



NATO Foundation
Defense College



FINAL REPORT

ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2020

Working meeting

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The following report highlights the key messages emerged during the *Working Meeting* held on the 12th of November at The Westing Excelsior in Rome and organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation in co-operation with the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division and the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC).

Sixteen experts, representing international organization and well-known think-tanks, took part and gave their contribution to the comprehensive discussion moderated by the President of the NATO Defense College Foundation, Ambassador Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo.

The discussion has deeply examined four relevant topics such as:

- The role and possible potential improvement of NATO partnerships in the area, notably the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI);
- The security interests in the Middle East and North African region;
- The role of major Allies and EU members in shaping adapted security policies also considering the renewed Russian presence in the Mediterranean;
- Short-medium term future scenarios requiring a NATO and EU response.

This year the Middle East and North African (MENA) region has been shaken by significant events creating new challenges and threats that will redefine the geopolitical asset. Two major gamechangers have significantly impacted the region: the Coronavirus pandemic and the withdrawal of the United States, starting from its retreat from the Syrian civil war.

As a matter of fact, the global pandemic has exacerbated an underestimated economic, social and political protracted crisis, affecting the region since 2019, if not before. Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria and partially Egypt have witnessed new social uprisings bringing us back to 2011, when the entire region was hit by the so-called Arab Spring. However, as highlighted during the discussion, people's demands seemed to be very different from 2011. Back then, "the square" requested, in different forms, more representative governments and a radical change in the leadership, while today people are asking for a more effective government capable to ensure basic services such as food, water and electricity.

Furthermore, since the beginning of the COVID 19 pandemic, governments were obliged to adopt health restrictions and measures in order to stop the widespread of the virus. Tight restrictions on movements had significantly impacted the oil market, challenging, even further, the already wavering status quo. Due to the drastically diminished demand, the oil price plunged to unforeseen levels (40 dollars per barrel), pushing the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its members to reduce the production quotas. In the Gulf, the oil price slump has severely undermined the social contract between the leaderships and the citizens. Gulf Petro-Monarchies accumulated an important debt and, due to the lack of oil revenues, were obliged to cut their public spending.

Nonetheless, the retreat of the United States from the MENA region created a significant vacuum soon filled by non-Arab regional actors: Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel and, as far as Libya and Lebanon are concerned, many would also add France to the list.

As pointed out by the Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation, Mr Alessandro Politi, it is very pretentious to refer to the Middle East as a homogeneous geographic area. We should rather refer to three different macro-regions - notably the Levant, the Gulf and the North Africa – that are connected but widely separated at the same time. Unfortunately, Arabs are not a player in the region and, consequently, a structured Arab geo-politic is almost absent. The vacuum left by the US encouraged other old and new power brokers to fill the void and to influence the region prioritizing perceived national interests rather than international stability. As pointed out during the debate, the region is characterised by conflicting spheres of influence controlled by the new power brokers acting in the region: 1) the Turkish sphere of influence, located in the north of the Levant affecting Syria and Iraq, with significant ambitions also in Libya and eastern Mediterranean; 2) the Iranian influence with the so-called Shia crescent region stretching from Teheran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus; 3) the Arab region which includes the GCC countries and Egypt. Meantime, the alarming confrontation on the political leadership of Sunni Islam - historically detained by Saudi Arabia but also claimed by Turkey and Qatar, notably Muslim Brotherhood's supporters - must be taken carefully into account.

On the other hand, these external actors, however, do not seem interested in achieving a sort of stability in the region. It is quite clear that Russia will have a role as far as the region is in turmoil. Conflicting-multi-level oppositions and fractures have indeed empowered these external actors. As pointed out, in the past, western countries were used to a major dominant opposition represented by the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict. Today the never-ending war seems to be forgotten in light of new more relevant oppositions that are reshaping the region, undermining its stability and security: 1) the battle between Sunnism and Shiism; 2) the battle within Sunnism; 3) the growing divide between Arabs and non-Arabs, as perceived in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

Lest we forget, the ambition of democracy in the MENA region remains a major matter, although many power brokers have absolutely no interest to enhance a democratic transition that will surely deprive them of control. It seems arduous to find a balance between democracy, security and stability.

A further aspect emerged during the Working Meeting has been the new US presidency. As underlined by the panellists, the next US administration might impact positively the region.

Although the MENA region is not at the moment a US priority, given the urgency represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the recent wave of racism, the area remains central for the foreign affairs agenda. The incoming President-elect of the United States, Joe Biden, is in fact expected to address and tackle many important geopolitical aspects involving the region. According to his latest statements we will see a very different approach toward the Middle East. The incoming President is expected to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally and to reassess the country's diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia with the aim of ending the country's support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

During the next mandate, the Abraham accords between Israel, Bahrein and the United Arab Emirates will most likely stay in place. On the other hand, the incoming President will not agree with any unilateral step that could potentially undermine a future two-states solution and will not admit any further Israeli annexation of the Palestinian territories.

Last but not least, Biden is expected to end the “maximum pressure” campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran and will seek to re-enter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Washington’s return to the nuclear deal with Teheran will make again the United States a player and a peace driver in the region, affecting also NATO’s role and image.

We are looking at a very challenging scenario that can be changed with the support of NATO and NATO’s partnerships in the region. Thus, how can NATO change the complexity of the area? After the Trump era, could NATO revamp its role in the MENA eventually through the support of the European Union?

NATO’s activities focus mostly on its partnerships in the region, aiming to expand its engagement with partners and Allies, not solely through military cooperation but also through enhancing a political dialogue. For instance, the Alliance has been successfully supporting the United Nations in setting up a crisis management center in Jordan. The center has been crucial to handle the COVID 19 pandemic. Given the positive result, a similar project has been established by NATO in Mauritania.

Worth to mention is that the Alliance is also working to enhance its role in the MENA region and, at the same time, is considering new areas, among them, the Sahel, that represents a threat for the Allies, the Mediterranean Dialogue’s partners and for the European Union.

The involvement of NATO and NATO’s partnerships are potentially meaningful in terms of practical cooperation but currently insufficient. Within the last decade they had difficulties in keeping a geopolitical development, while the image of NATO remains so far related to the US and the West.

The middle east needs peace, prosperity and stability and, in order to achieve it, it is imperative to address the root-cause of the conflicts across the region, the on-going stagnation and the persistent instability. Local governments need to be reformed and restructured however not exclusively from the security sector as recently highlighted from the severe health crises.

NATO seems to be working only with the leads across the region while the Allies seem to be working following geopolitical interest and strategic economic.

During the discussion, panellists agreed on NATO’s insufficient presence in the MENA. The only center established in the region is the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in Kuwait, an important training center and hub in the Gulf, but still insufficient. Further centers for a more impacting engagement need to be created in the region. With the 2030 reflection process NATO is trying to identify the main drivers of instability in order to find impacting solutions in the

region. However, in order to achieve stability, it is mandatory to have a good understanding on what is stability and which are the root causes of instability.

Amb. Minuto-Rizzo concluded the Working Meeting by saying that NATO should enhance its role in the region also by cooperating with multilateral institutions and most importantly by involving the European Union. He commented positively the change of NATO's image. As pointed out, NATO was perceived only as a military intervention while now its image has largely changed. The Alliance, however should invest much more in the Arab region in terms of resources devoted to its partnerships. Those partnerships remain the most important legacy of a policy launched since the Istanbul Summit held in June 2004.