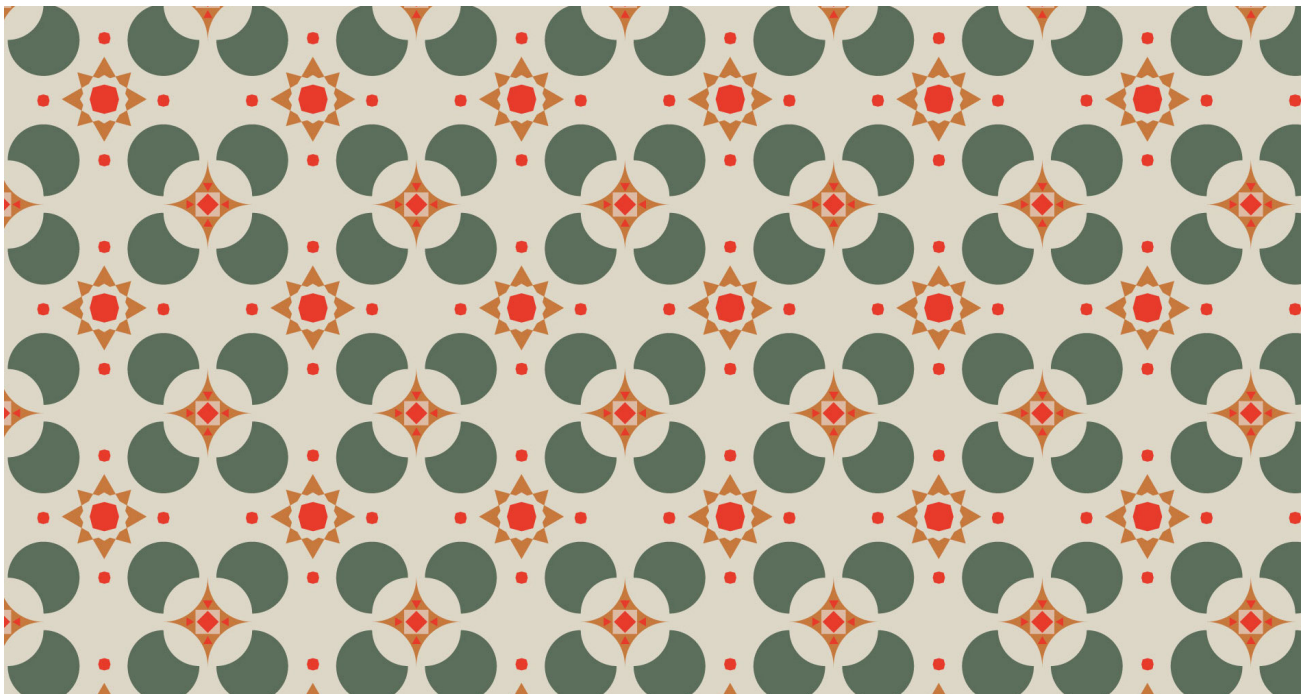




NATO Foundation
Defense College



ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2020
The Middle East: What kind of future?

Working Meeting

Policy Background Paper

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A year of change, 2020 is having a deep impact on the Middle East and North Africa, questioning decade-old assumptions and presenting emerging realities that will shape the region for years to come. The normalisation process between Israel and the UAE will certainly represent the major legacy of US President Donald Trump, who made the reinforcement of Israel's position a priority for its administration. On the other hand, it is fair to say that the normalisation agreements only made public the converging interests between Tel Aviv and several Arab capitals, which were already aligned on many pressing issues. The containment of Iran is a case in point, with Teheran able to navigate a challenging regional landscape, but whose perceived expansionism is seen with concern by regional powerhouses.

Despite the hype that surrounded the Abraham Accords, which inevitably relegated the Palestinian question to the list of non-priority issues, the normalisation process has only certified a *fait accompli* that has been carefully nurtured by Washington. In this perspective, a complete overhaul of outgoing administration's policies in the region is certainly far-fetched. Despite some changes on the most controversial decision are most likely, including the end of the campaign of 'maximum pressure' against Teheran and the US return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a degree of continuity to preserve historic gains that go well beyond the political divide in the US, must be expected. In this context, a further reduction of the US military footprint in the region is not inconceivable. Having served in the Obama administration, President-elect Joe Biden is already accustomed to the pivot to Asia, a rebalancing doctrine that can be resumed in times of escalating tensions with China.

On the other hand, the wider Mediterranean region has still a paramount strategic value for the US and the EU, especially in the context of a renewed great power competition. Tectonic shifts produced by the most recent developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the plunge in oil prices, are challenging an out-of-date status quo in which Russia's inroads in the region require a multifaceted response. Indeed, resorting to a hybrid warfare playbook, including the use of local proxies, the deployment of private military companies (PMCs), the supply of weapons, military equipment, aircraft and election interference, Russia has been able to establish a foothold in Libya, following the successful precedent set in the Syrian civil war. At the same time, economic difficulties

resulting from the COVID-19 have made the role of China as lender of last resort more attractive, raising concerns about the future ownership of national strategic assets vulnerable to the debt-trap diplomacy.

It could be particularly interesting to see if the incoming Biden administration would adopt an ideological standpoint or a pragmatic approach to deal with authoritarian rulers in the region. This will have immediate repercussions on the relations with some of Washington's strict allies, including Turkey. Despite considerations of national security (Syria) or reactions to unfavourable developments (Libya) are often driving decisions-making in Ankara, it is also true that doctrines such as the Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan) enlist Turkey into the category of revisionist powers, which have often taken advantage from a sympathetic US administration.

Building upon a likely change of approach in Washington towards international organisations, NATO needs to revamp its partnerships in the MENA to face an ever-changing and unpredictable regional landscape. Progress made by the outgoing US administration in cultivating relations with Non-NATO Major Allies (NNMAs) such as Morocco and Tunisia must be preserved and translated from a bilateral to a multilateral format, in which reviving the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) must represent a priority. Furthermore, harmonising NATO's Operation Sea Guardian with the Operation Irini of the EUNAVFOR MED would make the arms embargo in Libya more effective, despite needing a buy-in from France and Turkey, whose unyielding stances have created a predictable rift in the organisation and beyond.

NATO is in a privileged position to take advantage from the reset of transatlantic partnership after the Trump era and its multilateral format is particularly suitable to face the challenges coming from the Mediterranean region. In this context, a possible option to make NATO central is assisting the security sector reform (SSR) in Libya. The reunification of the Libyan military and the rebuilding of security institutions could help revert the fragmentation process that has created the perfect breeding ground for the proliferation of militias and armed groups, an environment which favoured Russia's hybrid approach. In addition, integrating the Turkish training of GNA military officers into

a NATO framework would also remove a predictable obstacle in the peace process, reassuring international partners and laying down the premises for the successful outcome of the ongoing negotiations.



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