



NATO Foundation
Defense College

ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2022

A REGION BETWEEN
CONFLICT AND
NORMALISATION

ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2022

A REGION BETWEEN CONFLICT AND NORMALISATION

High-Level Conference organised by
the NATO Defense College Foundation

in co-operation with
the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division,
Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo
and the NATO Defense College

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Arab Geopolitics 2022. A region between conflict and normalisation

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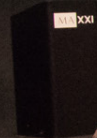
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Arab Geopolitics 2022. A region between conflict and normalisation, Rome, 11 October 2022.



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ALESSANDRO MINUTO-RIZZO
*President,
NATO Defense College Foundation*



FOREWORD

This is the annual edition of our project on the Arab Region. It is the eighth time that we organise such an event dedicated to the Middle East. For us, it is a priority since the beginning of the NATO Defense College Foundation in 2011: a real priority because the region is so important in every respect.

As I said on many occasions, we wish to help to accompany the MENA region to become “a real arc of opportunities”. We know that the potential is there. Security is at the centre of our attention and can be declined in various ways. Therefore, we wish to assess the current state of affairs with the best possible tools. Rome is an ideal place, at the centre of the Mediterranean, to engage in such a friendly discussion.

Given the richness of this region, going from the Atlantic to the Arabic Gulf, it is impossible to resume things in simple formulas or with a superficial judgement. What can we say with respect to the last conference? We are going to focus on the Levant and the Gulf. A fresh look is necessary because new factors are emerging and an interesting evolution is underway. We have the impression that it goes in the direction of stability and inclusion.

We also think that, while external influence continues to play a role, the region is walking on its own feet more than in the past. These movements cannot go unnoticed. Leaving behind fragmentation and a lack of regional cooperation, a central feature in recent years. We welcome new signs within the Gulf Cooperation Council. We see changes in Israel and an upcoming energy border demarcation agreement with Lebanon.

A pattern of reconciliation seems underway. The so-called Abraham Accords are a historic development and we hope that they are the beginning of a long journey. Looking from here, I have the impression of an overall more cooperative attitude.

Of course, the people in the region are the masters of their destiny. On our side we wish to extend a friendly hand in good faith, to offer support and advice, to provide a forum for discussion.

We are proud to have been able to convene so many distinguished speakers and moderators coming from such a large number of countries. I thank them all for having accepted the invitation. On a personal note, I am happy to cooperate with many old friends in the direction of peace and cooperation. I have fond memories of many conversations and interactions in order to build a common architecture.

NATO has tried to promote partnerships based on the principle of a “two-way street”, of joint ownership and prior consultation. A quiet strategy where I was personally much involved. I remain convinced that cooperative security remains to this day a relevant objective.

The first panel will exchange views on the overall situation aiming at relevant developments in the area.

The second panel will focus on the Abraham Accords. An emerging reality providing already good fruits. But there is a long journey ahead. The third panel will discuss the rule of law and illegal trafficking, within the potential developments of normalisation. This is a reality, a combination of all kinds of illicit trade, from cigarettes to narcotics and organised crime.

We keep the tradition to provide a framework for a high-level scientific conversation, coming from different perspectives in a spirit of mutual respect. Our objective is also to connect with a larger audience on strategic issues of general interest.

After having served at the Italian Embassy in Washington DC and as Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy of Italy in Prague, Ambassador **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo** worked as Head of the External Relations Office of the EEC from 1981 to 1986. In the following years, his career focused on Europe and Space Policy. In 1997 he was appointed Diplomatic Counsellor of the Minister of Defence Beniamino Andreatta, then of his successors Carlo Scognamiglio and Sergio Mattarella. In 2000, Minuto-Rizzo held the position of Italian Ambassador to the Western European Union and to the Political and Security Committee of the EU, of which he was among the founding members. He was Deputy Secretary General of the Atlantic Alliance between 2001 and 2007. His mandate was mostly carried out in the strategic-political industrial area and in the relations with sensitive countries such as those in the Gulf and the Southern Mediterranean. He is the author of the books: *The road to Kabul* (Il Mulino-Arel, 2009); *A political journey without maps. Diversity and future in the Greater Middle East* (Rubbettino, 2013); and *NATO and the Middle East: The Making of a Partnership* (New Academia Publishing, 2018).

CHRISTOPHER SCHNAUBELT
*Dean, NATO Defense College,
Rome*



WELCOME REMARKS

As the Dean of the NATO Defense College (NDC), I have seen first-hand how the Middle East and North Africa region continues to be a topic of great interest to both the College and to NATO.

Indeed, we regularly conduct academic exchanges and partnerships in the area.

Most recently, in the spring of 2022, we held a version of one of our most popular short courses, the “Generals, Flag Officers and Ambassadors Course”, at the G5 SAHEL Defense College in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

Also, at the end of October, we conducted a “Gulf Week” at the NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre (NIRC) in Kuwait City. The joint activity consists in an iteration of our one-week Modular Short Course, connected with our Senior Course, and was inaugurated by the Commandant.

Most notably, the NDC is currently conducting the 28th iteration of the ten-week long NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC). This course is the Alliance’s principal education activity for Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries as well as other NATO Partners, with the aim to help develop mutual understanding and professional networks among the course members. In fact, Partners make up more than one third of the roughly 850 graduates of the NRCC. In the current course, we have members from partner countries that include Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iraq, Mongolia, Pakistan as well as Saudi Arabia.

These are just a few examples to highlight the engagement the NDC continues to have with the area and why it is important to us to participate to debates like the one we are about to initiate with regional experts.

Dr **Christopher M. Schnaubelt** is Dean of the NATO Defense College. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Santa Barbara and a M.S.S. in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College. His publications include more than thirty articles and book chapters on security and defence-related topics. As a US Government civilian, he was assigned to US Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, as the Deputy Director for National Security Affairs with duties that included helping to write the joint campaign plan to implement “the surge” of coalition forces. During a later civilian posting, he served in Kabul as the Senior Advisor to the Afghan Deputy Minister of Interior for Strategy and Policy. His military service included tank battalion commander, command of a training regiment, and deployments as Chief of the Policy Division, Combined Joint Task Force-Seven in Iraq and as Director of Logistics for Area Support Team-Balkans at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, and Camp Butmir, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NICOLÒ RUSSO PEREZ
*Head, International Affairs,
Compagnia di San Paolo, Turin*



WELCOME REMARKS

I have the pleasure of representing the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo in this event. First of all, I would like to thank the organisers, the NATO Defense College Foundation, the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division and the NATO Defense College.

I would like to stress the importance of this cooperation between the Compagnia di San Paolo and the NATO Defense College Foundation since it is very timely: as we all know, NATO recently went through a phase of important “self-reflection”, with the *NATO 2030* process, and therefore the Organisation had a huge opportunity to hear and possibly embed contributions from think-tanks and from experts from the scientific/academic community, which were all engaged in the fascinating and at the same time challenging task of contributing to the design of the NATO of the future.

The *NATO 2030* exercise was of course the preparation for the crucial Strategic Concept of this year that replaced with the appropriate timing its predecessor of 2010. Evidently Russia looms large in this new text due to its aggressive behaviour and unacceptable annexations against Ukraine, followed by the longer-term concerns in the Indo-Pacific, but other areas are quite important for the security of Allies and Partners.

The so-called Southern Region, with Sahel and North Africa, represents an increasingly contested regional security complex, where the influence of external powers like Russia and China is growing. These regions are deeply connected with the greater Middle East, which remains plagued by rivalries among various States involved in ongoing conflicts and crisis - from Libya to Afghanistan through Syria, Iraq and Yemen. It may appear extraordinary that, even after the retreat of major actors, peace has not returned to some countries, but at a closer look, indeed, local and regional hostilities attracted further conflict from external actors and not vice versa.

Against this already complicated backdrop, the multiple linkages between local, national and regional actors are becoming more complex and multi-faceted. In the recent past, also given the new involvement of regional powers in proxy wars, escalation seemed always possible, given the fact that various terrorist groups and militias could access robust military capabilities, financial resources and logistical support that have enabled them to challenge the security forces of NATO Partners.

Easily accessible, relatively inexpensive technologies, had further amplified the possibilities of local and regional actors, from unmanned aerial systems to Information Communication Technologies used for training, intelligence, propaganda and also fundraising. Needless to say, international controls on illegal arms transfers are still less than effective in stifling regional conflicts.

Such situation continues to present numerous and serious implications for NATO and its partners in the region, particularly those belonging to the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).

Moreover, to simplify things, the Alliance had to deal not only with the geopolitical approaches of relevant external actors in the region, but also with different postures among NATO Allies. It is a matter of fact; some countries are so concentrated on some issues that they have difficulties in understanding the concreteness of a 360° security approach.

Today, the region is facing, perhaps for the first time, a sort of “recomposition dynamic”. And the new NATO Strategic Concept has highlighted not only the importance of projecting stability and security in the area, but also the importance of partnerships and cooperation with other major international organisations and players.

So, and here I conclude my remarks, I look very much forward to understanding more from the internationally renowned experts that are joining us here. This is an event that we, at the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, a private sector player, consider of strategic importance to fostering a better understanding of the geopolitical contexts in which our societies are embedded.

Nicolò Russo Perez is the Head of the International Affairs Programme at the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, based in Turin (Italy). In this capacity, he is in charge of several grant-making and operational activities promoted by the Foundation in the field of international relations, covering transatlantic and European studies, as well as Mediterranean and emerging countries affairs. Previously, he worked at the European Commission, at the International Labour Organization and was a Senior Associate Fellow at the EUISS in Paris. A council member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and Visiting Senior Fellow with The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Dr Russo Perez is currently also part of the Scientific Board of the NATO Foundation in Rome. He is a member of the Strategic Reflection Group on European affairs set up by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

MARIEM BEN HASSINE
*Deputy Head, Middle East and North Africa
Section, Political Affairs and Security Policy
Division, NATO HQ, Brussels*



OPENING REMARKS

Every year for a while now, NATO has been sponsoring this important conference: Arab Geopolitics. There is a reason for that: it is the only existing conference approaching the dynamics in the Arab world with a NATO outlook. And for NATO, particularly at this crucial moment in our history where peace in the Euro-Atlantic has been shattered by Russia's brutal, illegal and unjustified war against Ukraine, it is essential that we hear from all of you.

The consequences of the war on the region are profound: worsening food and energy security, an even more pervasive instability and fragility, emboldened misinformation and disinformation campaigns led by hostile actors. However, the war, and its consequences, should not overshadow the existing challenges and opportunities that existed and still exist through the Arab world.

Our last Strategic Concept dated back to 2010. At the time, Russia was described as a strategic partner and China did not appear anywhere in the document. Since then, these two elements have drastically changed: Russia is now considered a threat to the Euro-Atlantic area and China represents a challenge to our interests, values and security. And in the Arab world, things have drastically changed too.

Since 2011, attempts at addressing challenges in governance, in economy, in human security, have failed. In addition, a string of civil wars, for instance in Yemen or Syria, have taken their toll on the region, bringing more suffering, more violence, and more opportunities for radicalisation and the growth of violent radical groups.

Our complex, ever evolving security environment is made much worse by the war in Ukraine. But to be clear, the geopolitical pre-war landscape was already far from being ideal. From conflict spill-over from fragile and failing states to coups after coups and pervasive political instability. From Russian mercenaries continuing to create disruptive and highly volatile security conditions, to aggressive disinformation campaigns. From the multiplication of transnational terrorist cells

to the continuation of flows of dangerous illegal trafficking in weapons, humans and drugs. And at the edges of the Arab world, Iran continues to be a disruptive force for its neighbours.

All these challenges continue to threaten the security of the Arab world, and therefore the security of the Euro-Atlantic, as they are so profoundly interlinked. That is why this summer, in Madrid, NATO Heads of State and Government met for a historic Summit. They approved a new Strategic Concept, which reflects the fundamental security challenges of our time, and sets a strong agenda to tackle them in the years ahead.

They paved the road for two of our closest Partners, Sweden and Finland, to become full-fledged members of the Alliance. They agreed on the most significant change in our deterrence and defence posture to the East. And they reaffirmed NATO's key purpose and greatest responsibility: to ensure the collective defence of Allies, against all threats, from all directions.

To do this, the Alliance fulfils three core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; cooperative security. Cooperative security is the cornerstone of our approach to the South of the Alliance. When we talk about cooperative security, we mean our partnerships: working with other nations and organisations to strengthen international security. At the Madrid Summit¹, NATO Allies met with two of our Southern Partners, Mauritania and Jordan, testifying to the importance of MENA for Allies.

NATO's role in the region and the wider Southern Neighbourhood is critical and particularly through two partnership frameworks: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), launched in 1994, with seven Partners around the Mediterranean; and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), launched in 2004, with four Gulf Partners.

The recent decisions at the Madrid Summit reinforced the need for NATO and its Southern Partners to continue to develop these unique cooperation frameworks. On terrorism, for instance, which remains one of the most pressing security challenges of our times, we provide crucial support to our MENA Partners, by collaborating with them on counter-IED capabilities and on border security, only to name two domains of cooperation.

NATO is uniquely positioned to support our MENA Partners in tackling several of the challenges mentioned earlier, including in supporting roles to other international and regional organisations and initiatives. Our partnerships have been key in better understanding the security environment, in facing the challenges described earlier collectively, and in drawing up a more sensible approach to the region by our Alliance. By supporting the strengthening of our Partners' capacities to address security challenges, we automatically safeguard our own.

¹ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_196144.htm

NATO is committed to enhancing the support it offers its Partners in MD and ICI countries. We are currently improving on the quality of our Mobile Training Teams, doubling-down on the participation of Partners to NATO exercises, expanding countries that receive our Defence and Related Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) packages – with Jordan, Tunisia, and now Mauritania being beneficiaries.

We are also addressing the profound and real lack of awareness of what NATO does, why it does it, and how, that exists in the Arab world, with a lot of false or misleading information out there. That is why we are also reinforcing our public diplomacy activities. It is by better explaining, by better communicating, jointly with our Partners, about our partnership and its role in preserving security and safety of the region and of the Euro-Atlantic, that we will be able to change perceptions and do better and more in MENA region.

All is not bleak: our cooperation programmes have led to substantial improvements in defence and security matters, political dialogue and practical cooperation.

Russia's war against Ukraine is a priority for NATO. We know that the security of the MENA region is fully intertwined with ours. We also know that NATO needs to be able to look at challenges coming from all directions: from the East, the North, and of course the South.

That makes our practical cooperation and our political dialogue much critical. For instance, the MD was for a long time the only forum in which Arab countries would meet regularly with Israel to discuss issues of security and defence of mutual concern and exchange views on the topic. Now, there are the Abraham Accords: they will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the bilateral and multilateral relationship in the Arab world.

During this year's Arab Geopolitics, we will look at some of these improvements in the region and try to better understand how to capitalise on them and support these positive steps. From the Abraham Accords, reshaping relations in the Middle East, to a reinforced cooperation on defence matters and to confronting the challenges posed by the illegal trafficking of goods and persons.

Mariem Ben Hassine is Deputy Head of the Middle East and North Africa Section in the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division of the NATO Headquarters in Brussels. In this capacity, she is responsible for developing and promoting NATO policy, political relations, practical cooperation and better public understanding in Middle Eastern and North African countries, especially those participating in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). She also ensures coordination with all other Divisions of NATO's International Staff, International Military Staff and relevant NATO Military Authorities for all aspects of NATO's cooperation with countries in the Middle East and in North Africa. Before joining NATO, Ms Ben Hassine worked several years at the United Nations, including at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).

ALESSANDRO POLITI
Director,
NATO Defense College Foundation



POLITICAL SUMMARY

The debate centred on three major aspects: the evolution of the Abraham Accords, the usefulness of a realistic NATO presence in the area and the threat of illegal trafficking across the different countries.

The normalisation accords have quickly increased trade volumes among their signatories, with Israel benefiting most due to its supremacy in terms of technology and innovation. Nevertheless, this normalisation is tacitly, but strongly linked to a future Israeli-Palestinian agreement on a two-state solution and a peace. Moreover, they mark a new phase of regional diplomacy where political choices are increasingly made by local actors, instead of relying exclusively on outside organisations or states.

Parliaments outside the region should establish a group dedicated to the accords, namely a “Friends of Abraham Accords for Peace” caucus, helping the regional partners in widening the accords and in establishing a web of relations among like-minded parliaments.

After two years there are of course still challenges and critical aspects; ideally, for the time being, there should be no tension between deepening/implementing or expanding the accords. The main issue is their transformation into people-to-people agreements, marking a process where peace comes logically at the end. Evidently, their conflict resolution and peace-making potential has to be measured against the Palestinian long-standing issue.

Finally, the aspect of prioritizing the security threat from Iran could become ephemeral because Gulf countries (who do not share among them the same view about this “existential threat”) could prefer in the end a policy of peaceful coexistence [as it happened with the PRC-sponsored agreement on the 10th of March 2023, Ed.].

That said, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the nuclear programmes of Iran risks to be considered an intractable problem. If it will be signed, escalation in the region has to be avoided, because it may be very probable; if it will be not signed, tensions in the whole region could increase, as already happened in 2012. In

any case the Gulf region's real security interests are: maritime security, energy security, expansionism and terrorism. Suffice to consider that from maritime security depends the export and import of the area, the protection of the energy infrastructure (pipelines, oil platforms and refineries) and hence the whole energy security of these countries.

On a higher level, despite different initiatives (the US Middle East Strategic Alliance; the Russian one; the Iranian Hormuz initiative and the Chinese one with the GCC), the situation remains difficult because there is a string of conflicts from Libya to Yemen, going through Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, while again Palestine's concrete two-state solution is an indispensable condition for a real peace.

In this context, instead of renewed discussions on an "Arab NATO", that is in contradiction with the Arab League's common defence treaty, NATO can have some very useful roles, by assisting through public diplomacy (also via its ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait City) and by organising cooperative security meetings on cyber warfare, water desalination for water security, peaceful nuclear technology, shared antiterrorism intelligence and eventually on missile defence, drone exercises, confidence-building measures (like it was discussed in the Negev Forum).

NATO remains an important vehicle for a inclusive security and it has proven its validity since 2004 with the creation of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Apart from classic military to military cooperation (intelligence, training, etc.), NATO should concentrate on the capabilities of the militaries in assisting civil emergencies, because, more often than not, they are the most efficient structure in a country.

Finally, trafficking remains a scourge at varying levels in all countries where instability or war are present, like the Libyan case shows clearly. Institutional division breeds trafficking because rival administrations generate bad governance and this means that marginal areas become highly dependent on trafficking or criminal activities. At the same time, an inherent complicity develops between the central government and the traffickers, which means that state officials and bureaucrats frequently collaborate closely with traffickers in these different fields. A third factor in the rise of criminal activity may be diverging foreign interests: i.e., if one external actor is highly interested in combating illegal immigration, it may close an eye on the trafficking of oil and refined fuels, among other things. In theory better governance, a unified state, a united international community and bringing to justice profiteering government officials are parts of the solution, in practice, however, the political formulation of these requirement and their implementation are very difficult for a long time even after the end of the war.

Alessandro Politi is Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation. A specialist in political and strategic affairs, he has worked with different top decision makers in Italy and abroad both in public institutions and private companies. He teaches geopolitics, geo-economics and intelligence at the Italian MFA-affiliated SIOI School.

UMBERTO PROFAZIO
*Maghreb and Gulf Analyst,
NATO Defense College Foundation*



BACKGROUND PAPER

The global fallout of an ongoing major crisis and conflict had deep and lasting consequences on the Arab geopolitics, reinforcing existing trends that were already pushing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) towards a regional *détente*, but also showing multiple emerging challenges at the same time. In a context marked by a normalisation process, involving not only Israel and its Arab partners, but also regional foes up until now fighting each other in different conflict theatres, still active in the region, the neutral stance adopted by many Arab leaders during the current crisis is certainly not surprising.

With implications that go well beyond the Arab world and extend to many developing countries, the new version of the non-aligned movement has long been in the making, eased by what has been perceived in many Arab capitals as the unpredictable behaviour of Western partners. Only in part compensated by the legacy of the Abraham Accords, Washington's disengagement from the wider region (emphasised by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan) is accelerating under the Biden administration, increasing the disillusionment of the Arab leaders looking for reliable security providers while facing external threats.

The variability of the US foreign policy certainly helps explain the circumspection with which Arab partners are hedging their bets while facing difficult choices. Out from the cold, Riyadh's non-commitment to the normalisation of ties with Israel for the time being surely sets an example, as well as the UAE's decision to abstain from a vote on a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's attack against Ukraine in the early days of the war. These cases show all the limits of the recalibration promised by the Biden administration, a compelling argument for local stakeholders eager to find endogenous solutions to the multiple crises affecting the region.

And that is exactly where the 'other' normalisation between regional competitors engaged in various forms in the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen came into

play. Warming ties between Egypt, Qatar and Turkey, but also the rapprochement between Ankara and its main geopolitical rivals (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) are raising hopes of a new era for the Middle East, now ready to leave the chaotic post-Arab Spring transitions behind. Direct talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia could also push the normalisation wave to new heights, if and when a comprehensive settlement, addressing not only the different regional crises, but also the impending nuclear issue is reached.

The dangers of not seizing the moment offered by this window of opportunity are certainly huge and could reinforce pre-existing tendencies prone to widen the regional divide. In these uncharted waters, arms transfers risk giving a military dimension to the normalisation front, corroborating reports about the establishment of an Arab NATO that, however, still looks like a very distant prospect that could further antagonise emerging regional blocs. Not many in the region necessarily see the activities of Iran and its proxies as a threat and, if the opportunity presents itself, they could join forces, this time not in the name of a common Islamist ideology, but in order to share a mutual anti-normalisation stance.

In this challenging context, the return of popular politics in the MENA after a lull of two years due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 adds to the complexity. The recent wave of protests in Iran has highlighted the frail basis on which long-standing regimes have built their legitimacy, making the prospect of a change from within a real possibility once again. Growing pressure on local elites is also driven by the devastating consequences of the climate change, which has exposed the vulnerability of the region to rising temperatures, water scarcity, droughts and desertification, at a time when Egypt is expected to host the next UN Climate Change Conference (COP27).

On the other hand, violent attacks against parliaments in Iraq and Libya suggest a manifest democratic regression. Driven by populist tendencies that have found a breeding ground in times of economic crisis, exacerbated by the disruption of wheat supplies, a return to the authoritarian rule is increasingly seen as the only way out of the democratic quagmire considered as the main responsible for the decline of living standards. Tunisia, where the Parliament has been first suspended and then dissolved, is certainly a case in point, while the imbalance of power contained in its new hyper-presidential constitution represents the inevitable outcome.

In a context marked by an ongoing authoritarian turn, the US reset has evidently left Washington and its Western partners vulnerable to the pro-Russian propaganda in a region crucial for energy supplies. Nevertheless, the new neutralism 2.0 certainly works both ways and some oil and gas producers in the MENA would not mind nuancing their sympathies for Moscow to gain some financial breathing room. Algeria for example has been reinforcing ties with Italy, agreeing to expand its gas exports despite a bilateral military cooperation with Russia rooted in history.

Thanks to its proximity and an infrastructure system already in place, the Maghreb could soon become a new energy hub for Southern Europe, also considering long-term projects to build new pipelines from untapped reserves in sub-Saharan Africa. However, resuming tensions between Algeria and Morocco cast a long shadow over these ambitious plans and are already making energy supplies from the sub-region increasingly volatile, a collateral damage of the expanding ramifications of the Maghreb rift caused much more by the ongoing normalisation process rather than being a side-effect of the unsolved Western Sahara issue.

Umberto Profazio is Associate Fellow for the Conflict, Security and Development Programme at the IISS and Maghreb Analyst for the NATO Defense College Foundation, he regularly publishes on issues such as political developments, security and terrorism in the North Africa region.

How to foster
NATO's
partnerships?

What can be a
regional
architecture?



PANEL I
A REGION LOOKING
AT THE FUTURE?

Muslim women entering a doorway in Morocco.

ABDULAZIZ SAGER
*Chairman, Gulf Research Center,
Jeddah*



BETWEEN THE REGIONAL SITUATION AND IRAN: THE SAUDI WAY

Let me start by saying what is our current concern in the region. There is a negotiation in Vienna, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): we do not know what will happen. We think there are different scenarios: maybe there will be an agreement, but is that agreement going to be modified marginally or is that agreement going to be changed in depth according to the Congress wish list they have in the USA? Or will there be no agreement, or will there be a new agreement? So, we are still determining where we stand today.

However, the perception we have in the region is that whatever agreement they are going to reach, it will be our biggest concern. If they agree, this agreement could be interpreted by Iran as the possibility of expanding spheres of influence in the region, as they did post-2015 when they signed it the first time. If they sign an agreement, we want to avoid escalation in the region again because this is a problem we will have. Unfortunately, this agreement has never succeeded, neither in 2015 nor today. The region's interests are maritime security, energy security, expansionism and terrorism. Many of those issues have yet to be considered; we were promised they would have been taken into account, because we were not consulted in 2015 when the agreement was signed.

The second big concern is maritime security because our export and import depend a lot on the maritime issue, the energy security platform and energy infrastructure: pipelines, oil platforms and refineries. When we were attacked by the Iranians, it was told there was no real evidence being submitted to Saudi Arabia to show and prove that it was Iran: everybody wanted to keep quiet and accept reality on the ground. Even UN reports have only mentioned a tiny phrase saying "it looks like some parts have been manufactured in Iran", but no real evidence has been given to us on that at that time.

So maritime and energy security remained crucial issues for us. What are the future perspectives? We have four different initiatives. The first is the US Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA); yet, the Iranians always rejected MESA because they believed this American Middle East initiative was against them (Warsaw Meeting, February 2019). Then we have the European one, but it focusses on the maritime issue, and this is one security component, but not the only one. Then we have the Russian one, which we have rejected because Russia can only play the regional security role with the consensus of the USA and the rest of the countries there. And then we have the Iranian one, the Hormuz Initiative (November 2019), stressing the components of non-aggression, non-intervention and regional consultation. They evidently wanted to talk about something other than the past, but this happened during Hassan Rouhani's tenure, so it is not OK. The Chinese are coming to the region because on the 10th of December, the GCC Summit is scheduled, and the visit of the China President is foreseen and, consequently, a Gulf-China relation [The Summit took place and Mr Jinping's keynote speech was "*Building on Past Achievements and Jointly Creating a Brighter Future of China-GCC Relations*", Ed.].

China's actual economic relation with the region is about \$195 billion, while the whole EU is about \$140 billion, so China is the largest partner; 36% of China's energy imports come out of the Gulf. So, it is a significant and crucial relation but where does China stand today as far as the region is concerned? They used to say that they would like to keep an equal distance; they do not want to be involved, but we still have to see what will happen.

Do we have our initiative from the region? Yes, still. Is a Middle East NATO going to work? There are clear conditions that we will need to have a regional security architecture. First, we must resolve a current problem that we have from Libya to Yemen, going through Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. We need to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and during the UN Assembly, Saudi Arabia brought 27 different members, including the EU, to affirm the issue of the two-state solution as being the real practical solution: all participants wanted to have a viable working two-state solution and not just a symbolic one. We still believe, since 2002, that without having a two-state solution, a peace will not work.

Now some countries in the region, like Bahrain and UAE, have normalised with Israel, which is the suffering decision. They believe normalisation will lead to peace, but Saudi Arabia still believes that we must have peace first, and then we move to normalisation. There is a significant difference between the two, but we all need peace and security in the region.

In this context a US relationship is significant, and the last visit of President Biden to the region was quite crucial. He had four issues in his mind to talk about; he wanted: to have the condemnation of Russia; to make sure that the Gulf Countries

are not in support of Moscow; that these countries did not support the invasion of Ukraine and they are for the integrity of Ukraine. This is a very clear position and we were equally clear: we have suffered from the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, and it is excluded that we will go through again or support anything like this. But, nevertheless, we understand Russia's National Security concern because we have a similar situation in Yemen. In essence, Russia wants a friendly government, does not want a military presence next door and wants a safe border, so that is the same concern we have there.

The second issue revolved around Saudi Arabia leaving OPEC+, which we see as important to maintain control and balance of energy markets.

The third issue was that they wanted us to reduce our relationship with China. Still, we cannot because, albeit China is not a strategic partner, it surely is an essential economic partner.

Fourth, they wanted us to increase oil production, which, in principle, was fine, and so we did what we could, but that had a lot of unintended consequences.

I think NATO still has a significant role to play. I was the first one in 2002 to advocate the strong relation between NATO and the Gulf, and RAND organised the Doha Conference at that time. I was happy to attend the 2004 Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) agreement signed in Istanbul and glad to see that such a significant relation was taking place. We look forward to better collaboration. NATO has proven valid, and I agreed today with Ambassador Minuto-Rizzo to have a special conference focusing on the NATO-GCC. Where do we go from here? What sort of an essential vital role can NATO play in the region? Not only in building capacity and training but beyond that. Do we need a security umbrella? This is one of the issues to be pondered, but we need three things altogether: in addition, we need to have resolved a problem and we need to be inclusive. There is only security with the inclusiveness of everybody and this is very crucial for us.

Dr **Abdulaziz Sager** is the founder and Chairman of the Gulf Research Center, a global think tank based in Saudi Arabia with a well-established presence and worldwide network of partners and offices in both the Gulf region and Europe. Saudi expert on Gulf politics and strategic issues, Dr Sager is author and editor of numerous publications, and frequently contributes on major international media channels such as Al Arabiya, France 24, CNN and BBC. Dr Sager also chaired and moderated the Syrian opposition meetings in Riyadh in 2015 and 2017.



ODED ERAN

*Senior Research Fellow,
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MAKING BETTER REGIONAL COOPERATION THROUGH NATO AND THE EU

I would like to start by mentioning the fact that Mahmoud Karem and Ahmad Masa'deh, were ambassadors in Brussels along with Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo and me: the four of us were involved in the initiative creating the Middle East Mediterranean Dialogue within NATO which is still a very important tool nowadays. I have a somewhat bleak picture of the Middle East, including of its future.

We are now in the early stages of a bipolar world where economic competition becomes very fierce between the United States and its allies on one side and China and its allies on the other side and this may affect all of us, including in the region. We are also witnessing the strengthening of fundamentalist forces in the Middle East, including in my own country, which may affect the next government (we are going to elections on the 1st of November 2022) and we can also see the declining of the so-called “western powers” in the region. You can call it whatever you want, there is no doubt that the United States is shifting its interest to the Far East, to the Pacific, and this also combines with the relative weakening of Europe, the strengthening of China’s position in the Middle East and all of this is not necessarily a welcome situation.

Looking at the economic situation in the region I checked the recently issued report¹ by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) on the Middle East. They focused on a growth of less than 3% for next year, but I doubt about it, and they foresee inflation rising to 15% in some of the countries, the rise of food prices, the rise of energy prices for the consumers which is very good for the

¹ <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2022/ebrd-eib-and-world-bank-launch-new-report-on-me-nas-economy-.html>.

oil producers. But most of the region is a consumer not producer and I think that what we have seen in the recent three years is probably the new normal: that is, a combination of pandemics (one kind or another), we can see the impact of external wars, not in the region but outside the region, on food prices and on food security, above all we can see the coming problem of the transition from fossil energy to renewables. If you think that the region is ready, this is not the case: we are far from being ready; even with the modest plan, we are far away.

Moreover, there are serious existential problems with water supply to many parts of the region: Jordan is an example; this is already a crisis which is going to be even more serious than it is today, if no solution is found in the immediate future.

All this is relevant to our discussion today: there is a lot of hype about gas, about the dependency of Europe because not enough is done regionally in this context and the EU should do more than it does, there is a lot of hype about other organisations. I am not so sure whether armies in the region will fight together side by side; certainly against an external threat, and I believe that NATO should concentrate on the civilian side of the military. If a crisis happens tomorrow morning (and it could be the case), the armies will be key even to a passive solution, because they are the only organised tool of all regimes, including in Israel.

So rather than concentrate on the military aspects of cooperation (of course intelligence and all similar aspects are very important and have not to be cancelled), I would put more emphasis on the civilian side of what military organisations and security organisations can do in terms of meeting the challenges of the problem in front of them.

Ambassador **Oded Eran** is currently Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, and served as Director of INSS from July 2008 to November 2011, following a long career in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government positions. Before joining INSS, he served as Secretary General of the Israel branch of the World Jewish Congress. From 2002 to 2007, he was Israel's Ambassador to the European Union, covering NATO as well. Prior to that, Dr Eran was also Ambassador to Jordan, and Head of Israel's negotiations team with the Palestinians. Among his previous positions: Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Chief of the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC. Between 2007 and 2013, Ambassador Eran served as an advisor to the Knesset sub-committee on Foreign Affairs. He holds a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics.

RAFFAELLA A. DEL SARTO

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REFLECTIONS ON THE REGIONAL ORDER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

I would like to talk about the regional order in the Middle East and offer some reflections on this issue. I am an academic, so we always reflect about issues and criticise them, and we usually do not have solutions – but that is a different story.

When we are talking about regional order, it does not mean that a region is “orderly,” obviously. When we are talking about regional order, we are looking at the distribution of power and material capabilities, but we are also looking at specific norms, rules and practices that structure a region. We also look at the interdependence of the security policies of different actors in a region.

Obviously, rules and norms can change; they are contested and renegotiated. That is part of the world we are living in. Much has been written about the regional order and the changing regional order, particularly after the Arab uprisings, and undoubtedly some important changes have been taking place. Revolutions took place in some countries, civil wars in others; there has been a multiplication of non-state actors, a prominent role of sectarianism (or better the political use of it), heightened regime insecurity and shifting patterns of foreign intervention and meddling.

While we can say that the region is certainly in a phase of transition, I would not argue that we are seeing a *change of order*. Rather, there is a change *within* the order, because the main guiding principles, the main structuring principles, are still present: we still have states as the major actors, and the principles of territoriality and sovereignty are still governing the relationships among states, even if they are sometimes contested. The domestic features of the state have remained the same, and the level of foreign external meddling has remained high.

I think, however, that there are two developments that point to what could become a *change of order*: The first is certainly the normalisation deals between Israel and several Arab states. This is because the Arab-Israeli divide has been such

a key structuring principle of politics in the Middle East and North Africa over the last 70 years – no matter the contradictions in policies and the inconsistencies in practice. Of course, the normalisation deals did not come out of the blue. There had been developments before: some deals under the table, secret contacts, and so on. Incidentally, what we have seen in this context is that the main protagonists of solidarity with the Palestinians became non-Arab states and non-state actors. Think of Iran, Turkey (at least for a while), Hamas and Hezbollah.

The so-called Abraham Accords certainly started as a business and security transaction, but they evolved to also cover trade, energy, investments and so on. Certainly, Israel's strategic position has massively improved, and this is why, as I said before, this development potentially points to a real change in the regional order in the Middle East.

The second important development (and this has much to do with the theme of this conference) lies in the modalities of alliance formation, the way in which states ally with each other and then also dissolve alliances.

Obviously, the background here is the withdrawal of the United States from the region, which has prompted a sense of insecurity for some states in the region. We have also seen a stronger involvement of a number of other external actors. We have already talked about China and Russia. And there is certainly a stronger role of *regional* actors, such as Turkey, Qatar, the Emirates, and others. Importantly, in total, there is a greater number of external and regional actors that are involved in the security politics in the region, and this also means that local actors, that is, the states in the region, have a greater space of manoeuvre in their foreign policy choices.

What we have seen in the last years, actually since the Arab uprisings, are very rapidly shifting alliances. This makes it also very difficult to keep track of what is going on. Importantly, allies on one issue can be adversaries on another issue, and alliances are shifting all the time. A colleague of mine, Eduard Soler i Lecha, has termed this phenomenon *liquid alliances*,¹ in reference to Zigmund Bauman's idea of "liquid modernity." And so, alliance formation occurs at a different pace and intensity compared to the patterns of alliance formation of the 1950s and 1960s, or even after that. Regime security is key to understanding these rapidly shifting alliances. And so, what we are witnessing now (which has been termed normalisation in the context of this conference and rapprochement between former adversaries) is, in my view, just a continuation of these patterns of *liquid alliances*, of shifting patterns of alliance formation.

¹ Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Liquid Alliances in the Middle East", CIDOB, 2017 https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_169/liquid_alliances_in_the_middle_east.

I still believe that the main driving force here is regime insecurity. There are of course additional challenges that we have mentioned before: food insecurity, economic problems and hardships, climate change, soaring energy prices and so on.

Of course, there are two losers from this development: The first losers are the Palestinians, clearly. The Abraham Accords could have been, or can be, a vector for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but this has not been the case so far. And I think that here, it is important to keep in mind that the Palestinian issue has *not* lost its relevance among *Arab populations*. The second loser are accountability and human rights in the region. There has been a legitimisation of a non-accountable governments, which have also been strengthened through the Abraham Accords.

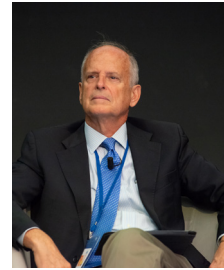
I believe that if we are thinking about security, we, the West and NATO, are (rightly) supporting Ukraine in defence of liberty, democracy, and human rights, but these issues are completely absent when we are talking about the Middle East, and about NATO's relations with the Middle East.

Finally, my question is: do we really want to have a very narrow conception of security? Do we really want to ignore human security? Because I believe that this will backfire.

Professor **Raffaella A. Del Sarto** is the Academic Director of the Master of Arts in International Affairs (MAIA) and Associate Professor of Middle East Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Europe campus in Bologna. Her areas of interest and expertise include the international relations of the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in relation to Europe, the domestic-foreign policy nexus, questions of borders and regional order in the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israel's foreign and domestic policies. Prior to joining SAIS Europe, Professor Del Sarto was a part-time professor at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where she directed the "BORDERLANDS" research project, funded by the European Research Council. She has published three books and edited several others, and her articles have appeared in major academic journals. Her latest book is *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

ROBERT WATKINS

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THE STATE OF CONFLICTS

One could be mistaken in thinking that the problems of the Middle East were on the way to be solved, as we hear so little about them these days, apart from the occasional mention of a Palestinian killed here or there, following an Israeli raid in the West Bank or Gaza. The region's problems, however, are far from being solved, in spite of the Abraham Accords. Secretary General of Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Jan Egeland, recently said that «I cannot, in these many years as a humanitarian worker or a diplomat, remember any time when the focus was so strongly on one conflict only (Ukraine), while the world was falling apart elsewhere». Below is a summary of some of the ongoing crises in the region.

Yemen

Following eight years of war, the ongoing truce in Yemen expired on the 2nd of October 2022, following its second renewal in August 2022. The Houthis have refused to make concessions regarding Taiz, and there are reports that they have increased their demands for securing an extension or expansion of the truce agreement. Emerging issues are the fighting and divisions among different groups that make up the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The UN is pushing for an expanded truce and a longer six-month extension, instead of its customary two-month renewal periods, to provide more space to negotiate a formal ceasefire, and to hold talks on broader economic, security and political issues. The UN says 19 million people in Yemen are estimated to be suffering from acute food insecurity. Of this total, 538.000 children are severely malnourished and 161.000 people face “catastroph[ic]” food insecurity, a reference to famine-like conditions. The most likely scenario in Yemen is the reduced aid from regional powers, contributing to an uneasy balance of power among Yemen's major warring parties. This could actually be seen as the positive side of the current problems in Iran.

Iraq

The continued political deadlock, following the 10th of October 2021 parliamentary election has deteriorated markedly in recent months. The current deadlock is widely considered to be the biggest crisis the country has faced since Iraq recaptured the last major strongholds of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) in 2017. Tensions between Iraq and Turkey have risen in recent months with the bombing of a tourist resort in Iraqi Kurdistan, killing at least nine people and wounding at least 23 more. Iraq blamed Turkey. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp also launched artillery and drone attacks against the bases of a Kurdish militant group in northern Iraq. ISIL also continues to pose a threat in Iraq.

Lebanon

Lebanon remains without a government since May, and will likely be without a President as of October 2022. The population continues to face the consequences of a severe socioeconomic crisis. Several incidents, many of them leading to fatalities, have occurred in recent weeks involving boats departing from Lebanon reportedly carrying Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian migrants.

Libya

There is an ongoing leadership struggle between the incumbent Prime Minister who heads the interim Government of National Unity (GNU), and former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, who was elected interim prime minister by the Libyan legislature based in Tobruk. The protracted political stalemate continues to generate security threats, including fighting in Tripoli at the end of August between forces loyal to Dbeibah and those supporting Bashagha, as the latter reportedly attempted to enter the capital. Deteriorating living conditions across the country remain a concern.

Syria

The political process is still at a standstill, and the country continues to be in a security, humanitarian and economic crisis. More than a decade of conflict, rising food prices, fuel shortages, water scarcity, and a recent cholera outbreak in the north of the country are among the factors exacerbating the living conditions of ordinary Syrians. OCHA estimates that some 14,6 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Palestine

Israeli settlement activities and demolitions of Palestinian civilian structures continue, with a background of a deteriorating security situation in the West Bank. Some positive news is that Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid voiced his support for the two-state solution, even though it is uncertain how much longer he will remain in power. The USA think that the current circumstances are not ripe for the restart of negotiations.

Dr **Robert Watkins** has more than thirty-five years of experience working in political, humanitarian, development and post-conflict recovery areas with international organisations, principally in the Middle East, Central and South Asia. He served as United Nations Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan (2009-2011) and in Lebanon (2011- 2014); at the level of Assistant Secretary-General, as well as UN Resident & Humanitarian Coordinator, and UNDP Representative in Georgia (2006-2009), Djibouti (2014), and Bangladesh (2015-17). Before the UN, Dr Watkins has worked for the European Commission as Head of the ECHO Regional Office for the Middle East, based in Amman, Jordan, focusing on activities in the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. After his retirement, he began working as a Research Associate at the Centre for Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

What are the
security
implications
of the Accords?

How should
the Istanbul
Cooperation
Initiative evolve?



PANEL II
THE ABRAHAM
ACCORDS

Flags of the United Arab Emirates, Israel
and the United States.

NASER M. Y. AL BELOOSHI
*Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to Italy,
Rome*



AFTER THESE ACCORDS: NEW OR OLD SECURITY?

Two years have elapsed since the official diplomatic relations have been established between the Kingdom of Bahrain and the State of Israel. Allow me to reflect on the success and accomplishments that have been made thus far.

The Kingdom of Bahrain's signing of the Abraham Accords Declaration on the 15th of September 2020, is an embodiment of the vision of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, which stresses the importance of promoting peace and stability towards further prosperity in the Middle East and the world as a whole. Bahrain's foreign and domestic policy emanates from three core values: peace, human rights, and sustainable socio- economic development.

Grand strides have been made bilaterally since the establishment of diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. So far Bahrain and Israel signed 42 Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding in the following fields: 1) bilateral cooperation; 2) exemption of visa requirements for holders of diplomatic, special and service passports; 3) trade, economic and financial cooperation; 4) cooperation between the two chambers of commerce; 5) civil aviation, air services; 6) the medical field; 7) agriculture; 8) sports; 9) telecommunications; 10) information technologies; 11) postal services; 12) technical cooperation; 13) research development; 14) technological innovation; 15) tourism; 16) the protection of classified information and materials in the field of defence; 17) enhancing cooperation in the ecosystems of small and medium enterprises; 18) cooperation in the field of studies; 19) design services; 20) management and supervision; 21) protection of the environment and wildlife; 22) innovation and development of water sources; 23) and the mutual recognition of COVID-19 vaccination certificates.

In addition to these agreements, more than 15 Agreements are also proposed which are under study for signature. Both countries have also begun negotiating a free

trade agreement. This free trade agreement will enhance the scope of investments, remove trade barriers and create wider opportunities for entrepreneurs and companies in both countries. In addition, the two nations are looking forward to many more upcoming initiatives in the near future. People of Bahrain and Israel are seizing the opportunities available in profitable sectors to make the relationship stronger and durable.

In this regard, it is important to note that trade between the two countries has increased to 17 million dollars during the first half of 2022. The number will increase in the future with an increasing number of agreements and Memoranda of Understanding.

At the end of October, a big business and trade delegation is due to visit Israel to enhance economic and cultural ties for the benefit of Bahrainis and Israelis. Moreover, the number of Israeli tourists has increased and vice versa because of direct flights between the two nations.

I am confident that with this rapid pace of relationships, trade and other strategic deals will increase. Israeli trade with all countries that signed Abraham Accords has reached around \$4,0 billion. It is anticipated that the number will increase with the increase of countries signing the Abraham Accords.

The Abraham Accords are far more beneficial economically for Israel than for Arab countries due to its supremacy in terms of technology and innovation. This clearly demonstrates the bilateral advantages and benefits of signing the Abraham Accords.

Therefore, in my position as Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain, I strongly believe that creating a group namely “Friends of Abraham Accords for Peace”, to be adopted by the newly elected Italian Parliament, is a good start in a country known for its long-standing participation in peace making and peacekeeping around the globe. This initiative would enhance the importance of the Abraham Accords and increase the number of countries signing peace with Israel. An indispensable step for ensuring socio-economic development, security and protection of human rights in the region, which are the pillars for continuous growth and prosperity. To do so, it would surely be good to see Italian parliamentary or senatorial friendship groups actively working to enhance relations with different Arab countries’ parliaments and consultative councils.

Nevertheless, it is important for Israel to start negotiating with the Palestinians for a two-State solution.

Mr Yair Lapid, the Israeli Prime Minister, indicated during his speech¹ at the UN General Assembly that it would be the right thing for Israel’s security, economy and the future of its children.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127551>.

Moreover, the interest of the international community and the willingness of the Arab countries to make peace with Israel provided that an agreement with the Palestinians for a two-state solution is adopted, was evident in a closed ministerial meeting that was recently held in the United Nations on September 20th on the side lines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, hosted by EU Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell, under the chairmanship of Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit in attendance by numerous foreign ministers and high-level officials, where they discussed to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

The realisation of a comprehensive peace agreement will definitely create a just and lasting stability in the region otherwise terrorists and states that sponsor terrorists will always use the Palestinian cause, in one way or another, as an excuse to move forward with their destructive agenda and support violence and terrorist activities.

In conclusion, Bahrain remains optimistic on the endless possibilities this relationship can witness as it has become increasingly clear, and we hope that more countries will be able to see that this mutually beneficial step can contribute enormously to advancing the cause of peace and stability in the region and can recognise that there is even greater potential ahead. The best way to resolve tension is through peace for peace rather than through war for peace.

H.E. **Naser M. Y. Al Belooshi** is the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to Italy. Ambassador Al Belooshi served at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the Advisor to H.E. the Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa for Political and Economic Affairs. From 1992 to 2003 he was also the former Executive Director of Management Services at the Central Bank of Bahrain. From 1995 to 2001, Ambassador Al Belooshi served as a non-resident Executive Director of the Arab Monetary Fund, Abu Dhabi, UAE. In August 2005, H.E. Al Belooshi was appointed Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United States, and a non-resident Ambassador to the Republic of Argentina and to Canada. Moreover, in 2008, he was appointed Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to France, and a non-resident Ambassador to the Holy See, Switzerland and Spain.

ALON BAR
*Ambassador of Israel to Italy,
Rome*



THE ACCORDS: KEEPING THE MOMENTUM BETWEEN WIDENING AND DEEPENING

First of all, I would say something personal, since my personal involvement in the negotiation of the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon. The latest news from this morning on the possibility, and even more than possibility, that an agreement has been achieved is crucial not only for the two countries involved, but also for the stability in our region. Stability is an important word also in the context of the Abraham Accords, which represent a significant change in the way we look at ourselves in our region and the way we deal with the different challenges we have to face. It is the first time that we have the opportunity to look upon ourselves as a region with a common challenge, and not as different countries, with different interests, different opinions and economic gaps.

In my opinion, the decision made by Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco that boycotting Israel is no longer relevant for their ability to handle different challenges and, perhaps, I dare say, that it does not actually contribute in any way to solve the Israeli-Palestinian issue or help the Palestinians, was the most crucial decision.

In two years, we were able to achieve many important agreements, as well as an increase in tourism, but probably the most important results are the Negev Summit and the Negev Forum, which is an agreement between Morocco, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Israel, Egypt and the United States to create a group framework of different five working groups that deal with the most important challenges that we have in our region and beyond. We discuss water and food security, climate and energy, tolerance and extremism, medical treatment and regional stability. It is past time for us to define our regional interests on our own, rather than relying solely on the mediation and projection of NATO, the European Union or even the United

States. We should and must demonstrate to those in our region the benefit of this, because this is part of the importance of having and building relationships.

Therefore, I do not perceive the tension between deepening and implementing, or expanding the Abraham Accords. From these working groups the beneficiaries will be all the people in the region, including those who still do not have a peaceful relationship with Israel, and definitely the Palestinians.

Positive incentives are extremely important but, let's be honest, negative incentives are even more powerful, namely the threats for our energy, for our standards of life and for our security. There is a very strong motivation for the effort that we have been trying to create in the region different frameworks and forms of cooperation that bring us closer.

I think it is also important for NATO and the West to understand the importance of cooperation with the Negev Forum for regional security, as well as for energy and food security. When Iranian drones were being used to attack Ukraine, we started seeing some concerns in the West, but Iranian drones have been a threat to our regional stability too, they have been sold and used by both terrorists and different terrorist organisations in our region and Iranian themselves attacking the United Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In this regard, to be honest, the support that we received to deal with that threat was limited. I think it is important for the West also to understand that we need to strengthen our cooperation, our own regional security, very closely related to the security of NATO in the region's countries, and I believe that in a very strong way it is also the key to understand us, to talk with us.

Alon Bar is the Ambassador of Israel to Italy and San Marino since September 2022. During the years 1989-2000, Ambassador Bar served in a variety of posts both in headquarters and in embassies of Israel abroad. Among those postings, he was assigned to Guatemala, in the bureau of the Deputy Foreign Minister, then served as Counsellor in the Embassy of Israel in Madrid, and also worked at the Egypt department in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). In the period 2000-2006, he was Director of the Arms Control department in the MFA: in this capacity, he was in charge of Israel's delegations to the UN General Assembly First Committee (Disarmament and International Security) and was a member of Israeli delegations to the IAEA General Conference as well as to other multilateral fora in the field of disarmament and arms control. In 2009 he was appointed Deputy Director General in charge for Strategic Affairs, and then, between 2011 and 2015, he served as Ambassador of Israel to Spain. During the years 2016-2020 he was Deputy Director General for the United Nations and International Organizations, then serving as Political Director of the MFA from 2020 to 2022.

MAHMOUD KAREM

*Professor, British University, and former Ambassador
to the EU and NATO, Cairo*



POSSIBLE OVERALL IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

As an Egyptian, I must begin by saying that it was Egypt on the 29th of March 1979, who signed peace with Israel, that started, for the first time ever; a new era of peace between an Arab state and Israel.

We are all in favour of peace, we are all in favour of the Abraham Accords, and we are all in favour of the expansion of new additional members but, moving on to an assessment, let me state some salient facts. I would say that, of course, the accords are a very important symbol of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. They also introduced a crucial economic calculus for economic trade cooperation, to briefly mention the case of Morocco or several working groups that have been established.

However, the states that signed these accords were not at war with Israel, and the accords would not have been made possible without the catalytic and diplomatic role of the United States, especially with the United Arab Emirates, agreeing the sale of F-35 advanced multirole fighters, and with Morocco's sovereignty recognition over Western Sahara, and other actions. History informs us that a similar move was accomplished during the Egyptian-Israeli peace talks at one point, when the United States successfully convinced Israel to withdraw from two military installations in the Sinai through a compensation of more than \$1,3 billion, which was paid due to Sadat's insistence to liberate every single inch of Egyptian territory.

However, as an academic let me offer a different point of view we keep reading in Arab editorials at this time. The main issue and challenge before these accords are how we can turn them around to withstand the test of time, become a people-to-people agreements rather than a government-to-government series of investment and trade agreements. We should remember what the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia said, that peace comes at the end of the process and not at the beginning.

The second main challenge in my view is how we make these accords a vehicle for conflict resolution and peace-making. Opponents argue that the accords should have expedited the establishment of a lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian problem, which did not happen. Instead, the accords diluted the Palestinian issue and sidestepped the Arab consensus on the 1982 Arab Initiative launched in Beirut, Lebanon, by Saudi Arabia.¹ A visiting Palestinian delegation I hosted in my office before coming here was, of course, very vocal about the accords. They claimed that the accords forced them to lose their in-depth Arab support, did not stop the daily killings nor did it convince Israel to move on the peace front for a two-state solution.

Another major dilemma for the accords comes from prioritizing the security threat from Iran, or the so-called “existential threat”. In the long run, Arab dynamics may eventually reveal that the Gulf States need a policy of coexistence with their own regional partner in Iran, in addition to the fact that not all Arabs share the same view towards Iran. Actually, there is an intra-Arab variable geometry or speed, such as in the case of Oman and Iraq. A few days ago, the Arab League held a vote in which the Iraqi delegation was the only one to vote against a resolution condemning the Iranian bombing of parts of Northern Iraq.

Therefore, these proponents have underscored that the accords may further escalate tension provoking Iran, and even instigating an unnecessary war in our part of the world. Therefore, if we follow this logic and carry it further, we may reach an unwanted conclusion, which is that an increased security relationship with Israel may become a burden for the Gulf states. Iran’s increasingly precise armed drones pose a security risk for the Gulf states in the future. The normalisation of relations between Israel, Bahrain and UAE may have instigated increased attacks by Iranian-made drones coming from Yemen. This is not my opinion; this is what I read from articles.

On the other hand, the normalisation benefits of the accords could prove to be lucrative for Israel’s defence industry, which develops some of the world’s most advanced military technologies.

However, there are three critical appraisals invoked against the accords.

One is that security was not the driver for normalising ties with Israel.

The second criticism comes from Mr. Amr Moussa himself, the former Secretary General of the League of Arab states, who spoke on the 9th of September 2022 in Doha, saying that he does not believe that these accords should lead to an Arab NATO which may invoke an article similar to NATO’s Article 5, since it will draw the region into extra-regional conflict and will contradict the League’s of Arab

¹ See <https://israeled.org/resources/documents/2002-arab-peace-initiative/>.

states common defence treaty. He argued that the security implications of such a step will be controversial, contravening to Arab non-aligned principles, and that the security implications of this will lead to a war by proxy where Arabs should not be involved in the first place.

The third criticism comes from the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Ahmed El-Tayeb) himself, who stated on the 14th of September 2022 at a big conference in Kazakhstan², in front of world religious leaders that dialogue between religions will lead to eternal peace among peoples and should be enunciated. However, he cautioned against merging all religions into one, which in his view would be disastrous. The implicit hint in this public remark to the Abrahams Accords was very clear.

Finally, there may be other potential areas of cooperation beyond trade and investment where NATO can help through its headquarters' divisions, allowing its public diplomacy to hold a series of events. Could the NATO-ICI Regional Centre based in Kuwait have a role? In such meetings that could be organised by NATO's Public Diplomacy Division (or other appropriate ones) a plethora of issues can be considered such as common cooperation in the field of cyber warfare, water desalination crucial for water security, where Israel has developed advanced technologies using a peaceful nuclear reactor, information sharing on terrorism by establishing shared databases, even on missile defence and drone exercises.

One additional area for future cooperation which is necessary to build confidence-building measures and common trust is the Negev Forum. Recently the Foreign Minister of Egypt praised the statement by the Prime Minister of Israel at the UN General Assembly³, when he emphasised the importance of this initiative and the possibility of realising the two-state solution.

I would like to conclude by saying that partnership is a peacebuilder and it makes less necessary to deploy force. Partnership and the Abraham Accords can offer our region an opportunity to build a just and lasting peace direly needed in our part of the world.

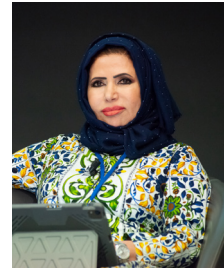
²The 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. See <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2161716/middle-east>.

³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-lapids-2022-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly/>.

Ambassador **Mahmoud Karem** currently teaches at the British University in Egypt. He also holds the title of Special Advisor to the President of the University for International Relations and leads the Egypt and Middle East Centre (CEMES) in Cairo. He served as Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to Belgium and Luxembourg, as Head of Mission of Egypt to the European Communities, and as Permanent Representative of Egypt to NATO, from 2005 till 2010. He was also a member of the Advisory Board of the Secretary General of the United Nations for Disarmament Matters. In July 2017, the Foreign Minister of Japan announced the establishment of a group of eminent persons for substantive advancement in nuclear disarmament and Ambassador Karem was chosen for the Middle East.

EBTESAM AL-KETBI

*President, Emirates Policy Center,
Abu Dhabi*



HOW SHOULD THE ISTANBUL COOPERATION INITIATIVE EVOLVE AND WHAT IS ITS POTENTIAL?

Two years on, the Abraham Accords have produced new dynamics in the Middle East under the banner of cooperation between Arab countries and Israel. It has contributed towards building a new understanding of regional partnerships. The strategic momentum built by the Abraham Accords has shaped the contours of new regional geopolitics. It occupies space in debates on regional security and integrated projects in sectors such as energy, technology, trade, security, defence, health, tourism and others.

It seems that empowering regional solutions and approaches will be part of the Middle East's new reality with more visible American support, even though this new reality has not yet taken its final shape.

On the new regional reality that the Abraham Accords have contributed to creating, we can talk about the following: they have created new partnerships in the region. Optimists believe that the Abraham Accords have changed the rules of the game in the region. Even those disagreeing with this conclusion, agree that the accords have created a new regional environment.

However, this environment has not succeeded, at least so far, in ending the stalemate in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. The impasse can be ended if regional and international actors push in a direction where Palestinians and Israelis benefit from the accords, not only the Israelis. This is a fundamental challenge. And that is why the United Arab Emirates (UAE) insist on the need to give the two-state solution a chance. Washington is also committed to the two-state solution and seeks to expand the Abraham Accords.

The Abraham Accords introduced a cooperation project with strategic dimensions in the Gulf, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Such cooperation

can reshape relations and forge new alliances and partnerships among countries in the region.

Moving Israel from the US European Command (EUCOM) responsibility to United States Central Command (CENTCOM) is closely related to the signing of the UAE-Israel peace treaty. This consolidates the Abraham Accords' "transformational" character and Israel's regional integration. The joint exercises, which included the US, Arab countries, and Israel in the Red Sea and the Gulf, point toward a new map of political relations in the Middle East.

The security and political impact of the Abraham Accords are in line with the quiet shifts the US Central Command is witnessing these days to enhance security cooperation with regional partners, which will eventually lead to military integration to advance collective security interests.

The Abraham Accords are not an axis directed against any country in the region. Instead, it is an opportunity to create new balances and build new dynamics making a collective and sustainable regional security structure possible. We should remove obstacles of mistrust that consolidate zero-sum formulas, obstruct regional development, and sustain conflict narratives.

Even though the UAE-Israeli treaty, signed in the White House on September 15, 2020, never claimed to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, it was described as a "historical moment" or a "historic breakthrough." And it really is. It is the first peace treaty between an Arab country and Israel in over 25 years. Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco followed the initiative.

Indeed, there is a lack of consensus on this step in the Middle East, which can be attributed to the region's longest conflict. The Palestinian leadership rejected the agreement, and varying viewpoints have been expressed on this issue. However, the accords can still provide transformational momentum as it is a strategic move, not a tactical one.

The Middle East region has been unable to manage its crises and conflicts, and the Abraham Accords can serve as a platform to de-escalate tensions and promote regional cooperation. Palestinians need to be part of such a platform, which remains a challenge. However, it does not substitute other existing international frameworks to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the two-state formula. A Washington Institute for Near East Policy study in July 2022 revealed that an overwhelming majority of the Arab population in Israel supports such a formula. However, only one-third of the surveyed Jewish people in Israel support this solution.

As a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the UAE calls for conflict de-escalation, restraint to avoid the loss of innocent civilian lives, and refraining from changing the religious *status quo* at the Al Aqsa Mosque. Abu Dhabi also supports international and regional efforts to achieve a comprehensive

and just peace and make a breakthrough in the Middle East peace process that can lead to the creation of an independent Palestinian state that lives next to the state of Israel in security and prosperity. The creation of a Palestinian state will be a critical step toward expanding the Abraham Accords and convincing those sceptical of the fruits of peace and regional cooperation.

Two years after the Abraham Accords signing, these agreements have emphasised that regional countries need to tackle disputes in the Middle East. They should not always look at foreign powers to help resolve regional conflicts. In this sense, the Abraham Accords partially reflected a “burden-sharing” strategy. The accords can help enhance security cooperation and harmonise security policies and plans between NATO and non-NATO countries in the Middle East and even NATO observer-members under the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Therefore, the Abraham Accords also provide an opportunity to build a new and more effective security cooperation model between NATO and its partners and friends in the Middle East to serve mutual interests.

And yet, part of the spirit of these accords is to admit that much work needs to be done to achieve other objectives, including ensuring equal rights for the Palestinians and Israelis in security and prosperity.

Dr **Ebtesam Al-Ketbi** is the founder and President of the Emirates Policy Center, as well as Professor of Political Science at the United Arab Emirates University. In recognition of her position as the leader of one of the Arab world’s most influential think tanks, in 2015 Dr Al-Ketbi was appointed Consultative Commission Member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In July 2018, the Arabian Business magazine featured her among the 50 Most Influential Women in the Arab world. In 2019, Dr Al-Ketbi received the Women Super Achiever Award during the World Women Leadership Congress. In 2021, she was named Advisor to the Global Commission for Post-Pandemic Policy. She is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington DC, the Global Advisory Board of Observer Research Foundation in India, and the Advisory Council of the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. Her two recent books are entitled *The UAE Power-Building Model and Foreign Policy Shifts* (2021) and *Iran and the Biden Administration: A Potential Return to Negotiations* (2021).

What are the new
opportunities of
normalisation?

How to tackle
trafficking
from Sahel to Asia?



PANEL III

NORMALISING THE FIGHT
AGAINST SMUGGLING

A truck driver smokes a cigarette into a traffic jam, Cairo, Egypt.

CLAUDIA GAZZINI

*Senior Libya Analyst, International Crisis Group,
Tripoli*



LIBYA: ADDRESSING A RELEVANT CASE IN TRAFFICKING

I would like to begin by explaining the reasons why Libya is the worst performer of the North African countries in terms of criminality and what type of criminal activity we observe there. Since we lack statistics, I will not list these activities according to market value, but rather according to what appears to me the significant economic activity related to this phenomenon.

We have human smuggling crossing Libya to its coasts (in the North, North West and North East). Additionally, there are migrants coming in from the Egyptian borders and seeking to venture into Europe. Over the past eight to ten years the numbers have fluctuated. I remember in the “Gaddafi era” there were about 20.000 to 30.000 migrants crossing the Mediterranean, while in the past eight to ten years members have reached peaks of 200.000 to 150.000. This numbers include those who actually came through the borders and stayed in Libya for some period of time.

Second, weapons trafficking originating from Libya. During the 2011 war, of course, Libya was a nightmare for many neighbouring states because huge quantities of weapons left Libya and diffused across the region. Now we are seeing weapons coming into Libya, in some cases aided by foreign states delivering those weapons, while other arms are simply bought from the international illicit market.

Another smuggling line regards oil and refined fuels. On a good day, Libya produces 1,2 million barrels of crude oil and exports most of it. But the irony of being an oil-rich country is that actually Libya imports its refined fuels. As a result, the gas and diesel that go in the tanks are imported mainly from Europe and partner states, since Libya has lost its refining capability. Whether it is wilful loss due to political or other reasons, or criminally instigated loss, is another question. Hence, Libya purchases diesel and fuel on the international market at commercial prices and imports them in the country. We can do some maths but a substantial portion of this imported subsidised fuel is taken over by criminal gangs, and either re-exported

in the Mediterranean through vessels or exported to neighbouring countries to the South and to the West. This is because diesel or fuel costs one dollar per litre and can be purchased subsidised in Libya at five cents per litre. You can imagine the huge profits generated.

Other sources of income include medications and drugs. For years it was very difficult to buy medicines that in Libya were supposed to be subsidised and people were just buying them on the black market. In truth, these were subsidised medications that criminal gangs with the complicity of the state or officials were able to seize and sell to the private market.

As for drugs, Tramadol [an opioid narcotic drug in the same category as drugs like morphine, codeine, and hydrocodone, Ed.] as far as I understand is the main one. When visiting some cities in Libya and seeing completely new neighbourhoods, malls, lights, shops, you may wonder where all this wealth is coming from. Somewhat embarrassed people would say that it is the drug market that has contributed to this inflow of capital, which has given rise to these new neighbourhoods. So, this is the reality that Libya is in, and it is by no way limited to one part of Libya or the other.

As is well known, Libya is divided into rival administrations: one based in Tripoli and one in the East. But if we break it down and we look at dynamics in the West and in the East, human smuggling originates predominantly from Western Libya, but actually, we are witnessing an increase in arrivals from Eastern Libya as well. Again, refined fuels and oil smuggling used to be more predominant in Western Libya via the border with Tunisia, but it is now increasingly occurring that it is both re-exported through Eastern Libya and exported South. We are seeing weapons coming in support of armed groups or military coalitions both in Western Libya and Eastern Libya as well.

So, what does this all mean, then in conclusion? Why Libya is such a crime-ridden country or trafficking hub today? First, I would assert that institutional division breeds trafficking. The fact that there are rival administrations that have been at war cyclically over the past years generates bad governance, because, essentially, they are so focused on self-maintaining themselves and their hold on power, that services very rarely are delivered to the periphery. As a result, there are on the one hand marginal areas highly dependent on trafficking or criminal activities and, simultaneously on the other hand power, centres that are accomplices and allied with criminal gangs to self-sustain themselves.

The second point is that there is an inherent complicity between the state and traffickers, which means that state officials and bureaucrats frequently collaborate closely with traffickers in these different fields.

Thirdly, I would say that diverging foreign interests, which in Libya have been playing out for a long time, have also contributed to the rise and consolidation of

criminal activity in the country. For example, one focus on stemming the flow of migrants towards one European country has led these authorities to close an eye on the trafficking of oil and refined fuels, among other things.

What potential solutions exist in the future? I do not think there are easy solutions since, in theory we need better governance, a unified state, a united international community and the ability to hold accountable those state officials who have been profiteering from the state of anarchy. Not all these requests are easy ones to formulate and they are also difficult to achieve.

Dr **Claudia Gazzini** is the International Crisis Group's Senior Analyst for Libya since 2012. Between October 2017 and March 2018, she also served as policy advisor to Ghassan Salamé, Special Representative and Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Dr Gazzini travels regularly throughout Libya, and researches and produces reports on security, politics and economic governance of the country, including its oil sector. Prior to joining the International Crisis Group, Dr Gazzini worked for the Associated Press in Rome and for Reuters in Jakarta. She was Max Weber fellow at the European University Institute in Fiesole (Florence) and Visiting Fellow at the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University (IL). Dr Gazzini did her post-graduate studies in Middle Eastern History at Princeton University and Oxford University.

MARK MICALLEF

*Director, North Africa and Sahel Observatory,
Global Initiative against Transnational
Organized Crime, Geneva*



THE GLOBAL RELEVANCE OF REGIONAL NETWORKS: STEMMING TRAFFICKING IN CONFLICT ZONES

Let's start directly with statistics, namely whether or not we have accurate statistics on smuggling and coherent measures to counterfeit illegal trafficking. I will mainly concentrate on North Africa and the Sahel, hoping to gather a few thoughts in order to provoke discussion.

Starting from statistics the net answer is no. The picture we have in a number of criminal markets in North Africa and the Sahel is extremely patchy and inconsistent. There are some states that are better than others at producing some relevant statistics, like those on seizures, for instance; but we do not have a complete picture, and I, personally, am very suspicious of quantitative methods applied to this region, precisely because of the large number of black holes that exist there. In these contexts, I find that applying a quantitative research method often gives you a false sense of security, because you produce something which can be purported as fact, when, actually, you are very far away from reality.

I run The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory¹ focused on North Africa and the Sahel. Our work is centred on criminal markets, human smuggling and drug trafficking, as well as subsidized goods. Although there are other pertinent markets obviously, I am going to concentrate on these three markets only.

We use a triangulation of methods, one of which relies heavily on a network of people on the ground, which enables us to penetrate difficult to access areas, coupled with fieldwork and open-source analysis. This does not provide us with a

¹ <https://globalinitiative.net/>.

complete picture, but a granular one yes. More importantly, we carry out this activity constantly, week after week, in order to have a moving picture of the situation. When a development makes it possible for you to conduct that type of research, you can place that development in a time and space, which is critical, especially when analysing organised crime.

One of our cornerstone approaches to organised crime is to look at crime in relation to two dynamics: one of them is the crime score which has to do with the number of criminal markets, the type of actors, and their penetration into the government, while the other one is resilience. This latter one is frequently downplayed. By resilience I mean the justice system, rule of law, and civil society, critically. If we look at the region the situation is not good at all. The best performers are Tunisia followed by Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. According to our Global Index², which considers a number of factors in these countries, they are more or less in the middle, scoring between four and five in terms of criminality score, and about four or less in terms of resilience factors.

To give you an example of a really bad country, I will consider Colombia, which would have a score of seven in criminality and three in resilience. So not very far off in that respect. Libya is clearly the worst performer in this context, for a variety of reasons.

What worrying changes have we noticed in these major criminal markets? First of all, a series of very fragile states basically, and over the past few years, we have frequently witnessed an expansion and dynamism in the markets. For instance, one of the most preoccupying events in the drug trafficking market is a flow of cocaine coming from South America, using North Africa as a transit zone to Europe, and a growing consumption of cocaine within the country.

Another factor again in drug trafficking markets which is, to the best of my knowledge, well below the radar of agencies that should have monitored it, is the explosion of consumption of prescription medication within the region. When I say that it has been below the radar for the past five years, I mean that we have discussed this issue to anyone who wanted to listen. Currently it is not internationally illegal to transport significant amounts of prescription medication, but this is a growing market internally and it fuels both internal markets within these different countries and criminal networks.

In essence, I believe the biggest problem we have is that there is a major asymmetrical relationship between the West and the different countries in the region, where the West is trying to pursue security priorities, typically in the field of irregular migration and terrorism. Everything is funnelled through this very narrow

² <https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/ocindex/>.

prism and, as a result, the outcome is warped. We have a situation where major mutual threats and opportunities are completely overlooked.

To conclude, what I would suggest is not some sappy vision of a relationship between states, where one state is constantly thinking about the interest of another state, but rather looking at the wider picture and identifying these mutual threats and opportunities to be tackled.

Dr **Mark Micallef** is Director of the North Africa and Sahel Observatory at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, where he leads research on organised crime, based on a field network of more than 160 Monitors, comprising local journalists, researchers and academics established in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, southern Algeria, Niger, Chad, Mali and Sudan. He carries out research in human smuggling and trafficking in Libya and bordering Sahelian states, and he has been engaged with irregular migration from Africa to Europe for more than 15 years. As a journalist, he reported extensively from Libya, both before and after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi as well as during the 2011 revolution.

AMER AL SABAILEH

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North Africa, Stimson Center, Washington DC*



THE FIGHT OF ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING IN THE MASHREQ-MAGHREB BELT

The drug industry is currently a trendy issue in our region, especially in the Levant. For the first time it is not drug imported; it is instead locally produced. This is the result of several factors, including a long crisis in Syria, sanctions imposed on Lebanon and Syria and, as a consequence, a new type of criminality. Not only we have turned a blind eye on tobacco trafficking in our region for years, but the same local networks are now working in this industry both as a shadow economy and a parallel economy. This, I believe, is the most dangerous part of it.

On the other hand, things have changed a little since the failure of the Declaration of the Caliphate of Daesh. First and foremost, we do not have terrorist groups operating, but we do have criminality operating. There is an “unholy marriage” between terrorist and criminal groups, which means that if the criminal groups are on the front lines, the terrorist groups are in the back lines working elsewhere. For instance, ISIS is gaining new power in Afghanistan, whereas in our region drugs are becoming the most dominant issue.

The lack of a joint regional cooperation is a critical issue, because we are not dealing with trafficking anymore, we are dealing with a sponsored industry instead. For example, Syria’s power vacuum resulted in the official sponsorship of this industry, which ended up not only invading the region as a source of income, but also as an infiltration tool for other countries. Therefore, if we want to reach the Gulf countries or Israel, we must seize the opportunity. What does it imply? In the post-Covid era the political and economic frustration is at its peak, and the use of this new drug [aka Captagon, i.e., fenethylamine, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant, Ed.] is evolving into a tool for system infiltration and its vulnerability exploitation. Such infiltration relates to security systems and social structure, which

implies an economic dependence on the narcotic industry, which eventually will be too difficult to deal with.

Since the phenomenon we are dealing with is supported by highly complex operations and networks, as well as political and terroristic goals, I believe we need to revise it. That is why I think the issue of chaos is becoming increasingly popular in our region. We do not find solutions to a lot of problems, and living with chaos is becoming very normal for us. In this sense, Syria is not an issue for us, but we are currently coping with the chaos and its repercussion. It is time to begin considering how to face criminality today through regional cooperation, just as we have successfully done with countering terrorism and Daesh. Hence, if we had an anti-terrorism coalition, we would need to have the same expertise and good experience to apply to the issue of drugs.

The second issue is the arrival of cocaine from South America as a hub, into Europe, via North Africa. While this is considered an expensive and long complicated process, the new drug phenomenon in the region can represent an alternative. It is a very cheap drug that has been produced in the region, and it appears that it can arrive everywhere because everyone can afford it; moreover, its effectiveness is high and there are no serious health consequences like the old traditional chemical issues. In other words, if the Mediterranean and global criminality are connected, I believe we will observe a reverse movement of drugs from our region to Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. This is why I believe the Gulf and Jordan should work together first.

We also must begin to understand that without resolving open problems, open crisis, such as the Syrian one, we will never find a solution. At the beginning, this industry was latent. It is rooted in the region and we need to admit and acknowledge that, as well as realise that if they succeed in establishing this efficient drug network today, it means that weapons are being smuggled as well, and that today's drug dealers may turn out to be terrorist groups tomorrow. To conclude, we need to cooperate at international level in order to face the coming waves of terrorism and organised crime.

Dr **Amer Al Sabaileh** is currently a Non-resident Fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Section at the Stimson Centre in Washington DC. He is a recognised Jordanian expert on terrorism, de-radicalisation and security studies. Dr Al Sabaileh is also a leading columnist in national, regional, and international media, he offers consultancies to think-tanks and speaks at international conferences on Middle East politics and developments. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pisa, Italy, in 2006 in intercultural conflict management, and holds a Master's degree from the University of Rome III in Education for Peace, Conflict Management, International Co-operation, Human Rights and Politics of the European Union.



ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2022

A region between conflict and normalisation

*High-Level Conference organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation
in co-operation with the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division,
Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo and the NATO Defense College*

Rome | Tuesday, the 11th of October 2022

Venue: *MAXXI - National Museum of 21st Century Arts, via Guido Reni 4a, 00196 Rome*

14,30 – 14,45 *Welcome Remarks*

- **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**, President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome
- **Christopher Schnaubelt**, Dean, NATO Defense College, Rome
- **Nicolò Russo Perez**, Head, International Affairs, Compagnia di San Paolo, Turin

14,30 – 14,45 *Opening Remarks*

- **Mariem Ben Hassine**, Deputy Head, Middle East and North Africa Section, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, NATO HQ, Brussels

Panel I

A region looking at the future?

The region is experiencing for the first time a recomposition dynamic after decades of general disintegration. What is the new path for regional arrangements? The Strategic Concept has confirmed its priority of projecting security in the area, proving the value of partnerships. How can be further developed the cooperation between NATO and major international organisations?

Chair: **Claire Spencer**, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, King's College, London

- **Abdulaziz Sager**, Chairman, Gulf Research Center, Jeddah
- **Oded Eran**, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv
- **Raffaella A. Del Sarto**, Associate Professor of Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins University, SAIS Europe, Bologna
- **Robert Watkins**, Research Fellow, Centre on Conflict, Development, and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva

Q&A Session

16,10 – 16,40 *Coffee Break*

16,40 – 17,50

Panel II

The Abraham Accords

These normalisation agreements have brought a remarkably constructive element in the regional environment by boosting economic, cultural and people-to-people relations. Two years after their inception, the economic development leverage is visible, while other aspects may be further developed. What are their security implications and practical cooperative potential in different areas including those within NATO's partnerships?

Chair: **Ian Lesser**, Vice President and Executive Director, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels

- **Naser M. Y. Al Belooshi**, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to Italy, Rome
- **Alon Bar**, Ambassador of Israel to Italy, Rome
- **Mahmoud Karem**, Professor, British University; former Ambassador to the EU and NATO, Cairo
- **Ebtesam Al-Ketbi**, President, Emirates Policy Center, Abu Dhabi

Q&A Session

17,50 – 18,10 *Coffee Break*

18,10 – 19,10

Panel III

Normalising the fight against smuggling

The geoeconomics of organised crime and trafficking in the region show that a combination of fragile states, embargoed governments and grey zones is at the centre of illegal flows of goods and persons (human trafficking, arms deals, money laundering, tobacco smuggling etc.). Can the normalisation process provide for new opportunities? How to tackle flows stretching from Sahel to Iran, also via third countries?

Chair: **Ahmad Masa'deh**, former Secretary General, Union for the Mediterranean, Amman

- **Claudia Gazzini**, Senior Libya Analyst, International Crisis Group, Tripoli
- **Mark Micallef**, Director, North Africa and Sahel Observatory, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva
- **Amer Al Sabaileh**, Nonresident Fellow, Middle East and North Africa, Stimson Center, Washington DC

Q&A Session

كُلُّ شَيْءٍ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ بِأَجَلٍ مُّدَدٍ
لَا يَمُرُّ بِكُمْ فَاتٌ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُّسَبِّحٍ
مُؤْتَمِرِينَ



Muslim architecture of the Dome of the Rock in the Temple Mount of Jerusalem.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
مِنْ مَوْلَانَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِهِ
وَعَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ حَكِيمٌ

