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The Transformation of the Middle East and the Future of NATO's Partnerships

Pia Niedermeier

On October 31, 2011, NATO terminated its first mission in the Arab world: Operation Unified Protector in Libya. Although the mission revealed diplomatic disunity within the Alliance as well as a tremendous lack of military capabilities in Europe, NATO is widely credited with having successfully saved lives and for protecting civilians. Beyond the immediate challenges in Libya, NATO allies will have to re-evaluate their relationships with countries in the region in light of the Arab Spring. One tool to do so is the adaptation of NATO's long-standing partnerships in the region: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). While allies have agreed on some principles of such adaptation at their summit in Berlin in April 2011, most measures are still awaiting implementation. Certainly, NATO can contribute toward stabilization in the region and toward supporting the democratic movements in the region. However, its role will likely be a limited and complementary one, as suggested by an examination of NATO's self-proclaimed goals – democratic transformation of the armed forces, regional security, and interoperability.

Many have already elevated the Arab Spring to a historic watershed. Still, the popular uprisings, which were in large part motivated by economic and social grievances and fueled by the corruption of Arab governments and the lack of political participation, have yielded rather diverse results. Hence, the size of the changes that they will bring for NATO is still unclear. The present situation may well hold new opportunities for the Alliance: The militaries have played an important role within the individual countries in the region, especially in those that have witnessed transition. In these military elites, NATO might find new partners that it has previously lacked to share values and tackle common challenges. In the long term, it is hoped that with a political opening of the region, many of its security problems will be mitigated, such as the likelihood of regional conflict or the spread of transnational terrorism. However, the domestic changes in the Arab world may harbor challenges, too. Because the process of political transformation can be long and turbulent, there is the risk of renewed instability or even state-failure, potentially

spilling over into other parts of the region or creating safe havens for terrorists. So far, the main geopolitical conflicts – the Arab-Israeli conflict or the nuclear standoff with Iran – appear not to be positively affected by the partial turnover of the region.

Either way, NATO's security interests are intimately linked with the region. Already, the Arab Spring has brought some fundamental changes to NATO's engagement: Libya was the first NATO intervention in the region. The imposition of the no-fly zone had been supported by the Arab League and partners from the region actively supported the mission militarily. Yet, beyond Operation Unified Protector, allies will have to ponder how the Arab Spring impacts on their long-term engagement with the region.

NATO's reaction: Less leverage, more supply, what purpose?

Partnership programs are the most prominent tool the Alliance has at its disposal in this regard. Allies have acknowledged that, for a number of reasons, their leverage over the region will be rather limited. As part of a general effort to streamline and harmonize its partnership programs, NATO has also adapted its approach to the region: Traditional formats of cooperation – the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative – will continue to exist and shall be complemented by flexible institutional formats that bring together the 28 member states of NATO and any number of partners interested in specific topics (referred to as the "28+n" formula). The Alliance remains ready to accept new partners into its partnership programs. In the future, countries of the region will have access to a much wider range of activities previously reserved for partners of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. In short, NATO has opted for an approach to cooperation with countries in the region that is demand-driven, more flexible and, most importantly, more extensive. Still, NATO will need to more clearly define the purpose of

its partnerships and establish whether the geopolitical changes of the Arab Spring make a revision of existing programs necessary. In this regard, three prominent goals of MD and ICI – promotion of democratic civil-military relations, regional security and interoperability – need to be critically examined in light of present changes.

Promotion of democratic civil-military relations

The most obvious adaptation to changes in the region is NATO's renewed commitment to promoting the democratic transformation of the armed forces. In principle, the Alliance has much to offer in this regard. Institutionally, NATO can rely on the contacts it has already established with military leaders in the region, in particular. As regards content, NATO has – through enlargement and PfP – established unique expertise: advice on the constitutional and civilian political control over all aspects of defense policy; human rights training within the armed forces; assistance in efforts on downsizing of the military; assistance in safe destruction of weapons stockpiles, etc. However, the success of NATO's involvement in such processes of transformation is highly context-dependent. Current developments in the region suggest only a limited and complementary role for NATO for three reasons.

First, only a limited number of countries are likely to embark on a far-reaching reform process. A large group of countries have either tried to appease popular unrest with reforms and donations from above (Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia) or have met the expectations with violent repression (Syria, Yemen). As the case of Bahrain makes evidently clear, partner countries within ICI are unwilling to engage in anything but token reforms of their political systems.

Second, even in those countries that have started a process of transformation, such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (a potential new member of MD), the outcome is far

from clear and the prospects for NATO's engagement in reform are limited. Economic, social and political grievances have driven the popular uprisings, and these issues will be the priority to any future representative government. In short, most countries in the region are mainly interested in issues of soft security, whereas NATO's comparative advantage lies in the realm of traditional military security. Moreover, civilian control over the armed forces – while tremendously important – will remain a highly disagreeable topic. While military elites have so far supported political transitions, establishing democratic control may deprive them of many privileges. NATO is neither able nor willing to impose its principles, and it will encounter obstacles in partnering with reformist groups. In contrast to East European countries in the 1990s, the incentive of NATO membership is not a factor. Countries of the region are still wary of associating themselves too closely with NATO, as its public acceptance remains low and the Alliance will have to deal with new, more self-assured political elites.

Third, NATO's rather low standing in the region points to the role other international organizations can play in the field of security sector reform. Both the EU and the UN have considerable expertise and their engagement is generally viewed much more positively. So far, the Alliance has not made it clear how cooperation and coordination with these actors is going to work in practice.

Regional security

Promoting regional security has been a long-standing aim of NATO's partnerships with countries in the region. With regard to the two most pertinent regional challenges – the Arab-Israeli conflict and the challenge of a nuclear-armed Iran – the Arab Spring has so far rather heightened tensions. Of course, political dialogue and confidence-building between countries in the region and NATO remain of utmost importance.

NATO should aim to strengthen the multi-lateral consultation formats and should try to bind on a case-by-case basis countries that, so far, have been unwilling to engage in full partnerships, for example Saudi Arabia.

Still, with regard to the effects of these major crises, the direct influence of NATO's partnerships appears to be rather low. In both cases, other diplomatic tools – be it the UN, the Middle East Quartet or the "P5+1" (the permanent five members of the UN Security Council + Germany) – will remain the main formats in which allies engage in these issues.

Furthermore, the role NATO as an organization can play will be limited by the important role of bilateral relations of individual allies. With regard to MD, Turkey is going to play a crucial role. For some time now, MD has been the only format in which Israeli and Arab representatives have been able to meet and consult. With Israel more isolated than ever internationally, NATO's partnership could well play a constructive role in confidence-building and ensure contacts on a working level. Given the current state of play in Turkish-Israeli relations, such a scenario seems unlikely in the short-term. The Turkish resistance to Israel's formal establishment of a NATO liaison is a harbinger of the challenges to come for MD.

A similar observation can be made with regard to the Persian Gulf countries. There is no indication that Saudi Arabia or Oman want to join the ICI. With Gulf countries being tied closely to the United States, it remains unclear what NATO could do to promote regional security in the Gulf. In the eventuality of a conflict with Iran, these countries would likely look to the United States, and consultations on the NATO level would be of secondary importance.

Tackling common security challenges

Clearly, the Arab Spring has not changed most of those joint security challenges identified by NATO and its partners in the

Middle East in an effort to expand the partnership programs in the past years. The fight against terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as well as maritime and energy security will remain issues of common concern. Also, NATO and its partners in the Middle East and North Africa will have an interest in increasing their effectiveness and interoperability in crisis management. Cooperation in some of the priority issues for the countries of the region, such as energy security or organized crime, will be limited by the fact that they are not core issues of the Alliance.

Still, driving partnership programs in this direction will bring results in those areas where NATO has a clear and comparative advantage, such as maritime security and crisis management, in particular in Africa. The Alliance's unique feature – its experience in creating, maintaining and deploying interoperable forces – should then be the focus of its cooperation with countries in the region. This would imply not only aiming at the way in which these countries work with NATO, but also how they can potentially work with each other. It is in this regard that cross-cutting formats of cooperation may gain relevance. In practice, NATO partnerships would then focus on military cooperation and offer interested countries training, joint exercises, information exchange, and potentially equipment.

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