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Also Arab NATO Partners Await the Release of the Alliance New Strategic Concept^(*)

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Not only the transatlantic allies that are awaiting the upcoming release of NATO's 2010 new strategic concept, but also do many of the alliance's partners especially in the Middle East and the Gulf. The wide array of eminent security threats, predominantly emanating from inside the region, and the evident convergence in threat perception between NATO and its Arab partners renders it increasingly important for the alliance to revise and reinvigorate its multilateral and bilateral security relations in the area.

Indeed, according to the recent affirmation of NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in order to accommodate security requirements the alliance needs to «**develop deeper, wider political and practical partnerships with countries around the globe**»¹. This affirmation is particularly relevant to the wide Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where the two NATO's partnership frameworks – The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) – have been recently undergoing a stagnation phase. In fact, low representation on the political multilateral level and weak engagement on the practical bilateral level are two major factors that evidently reveal the current absence of any tangible security cooperation between the two sides. Equally important to note is that, due to the increasing financial constraints the alliance has been experiencing, it could not and cannot still allocate but a very modest amount of fund necessary to cope with various cooperation activities with its Arab partners. This happens in the same time when individual NATO members, most important of all is the United States, is investing billions of dollars on an annual basis to maintain close security ties with its MENA informal allies. Therefore, this fund factor has its significance as a compelling indicator of the alliance's actual level of engagement in the security affairs of the region. NATO itself is pretty aware of this fund dilemma, which has been explicitly underlined by Rasmussen on the occasion of issuing the new strategic concept, cautioning that NATO members «have to avoid cutting (their defense budgets) so deep that we won't, in future, be able to defend the security on which our economic prosperity rests»².

Nonetheless, it would be rather illusionary to advocate that NATO can actually enhance this level of security cooperation on the short run depending only on its resources and political assets in the region. As a consequence, three main issues/facts should receive higher attention in the strategic thinking of NATO's decision makers:

¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (8 October 2010). "Active Engagement, Modern Defence", Secretary General Charts NATO's Future Direction, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_66725.htm, accessed 9 November, 2010.

² Ibid.

(*)The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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The first is the need to capitalize on existing political assets. This necessitates more openness and coordination across the transatlantic. In more specific terms, a more determined U.S.-European cooperation can significantly either bring in or boost NATO's role in a number of present security concerns, most important of which are: the political stabilization of Iraq, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from the still unstable country; the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, which is considered the root of all Middle East problems; and combating terrorism, an area where the alliance has been dedicating much effort since 9/11. It is important to note in this place that the multilateralism that NATO characterizes represents an underlying opportunity through which the Alliance can promote, mainly through public diplomacy channels, a more independent profile detaching it from U.S. flagrant unilateralism.

The second is the need to achieve a balanced combination of military and non-military means in coping with the variety of soft and hard security threats emanating from the wide MENA region with its various security sub-systems, from the Western Mediterranean to the Middle East and the Gulf. Without doubt, the *realpolitik* approach, resting on the traditional use of military tools, seems to be no longer functioning in an area where identity, culture, history, and nationalism ever more constitute the settings for communication with the West in general. In this regard, NATO should reconsider the two clusters through which it has approached MENA, i.e. the MD and the ICI. This imprudent division of the region incorrectly misplaces the "Middle East", which is the most important security subsystem in MENA, and makes it totally lost between the Western Mediterranean and the Gulf. A new formula to accommodate the Middle East would also create a new opportunity for the Alliance to bring in Saudi Arabia, which up till now remains out of the ICI. Likewise, the West Mediterranean, a security sub-region, noticeably distinguished by a wide assortment of soft security threats, should be handled with a more tailored security approach.

Finally, NATO should encourage and facilitate the involvement of its MENA partners to take a share in the provision of their own security. Actually, many key MENA partners were themselves reluctant to advance security cooperation with NATO due to the modest added value the alliance seems to be bringing in to the security theatre of the region. However, with a more elaboration on what the alliance is willing to do in the many security concerns it shares with its partners there – both in terms of concrete objectives and policy outcomes – it is expected to have a great potential to attract significant contributions of local Arab MENA partners in a balanced burden sharing formula. These partners, particularly in the Levant and the Gulf, who deem many of the hanging security issues in the region as relevant to their own national security, would be actually eager to contribute with their economic resources and/or human expertise in potential future NATO efforts to bring security and stability to the region. Again, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the stabilization of Iraq and combating terrorism are just examples.

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