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NATO AND THE GULF: THE NEW REGIONAL CENTRE IN KUWAIT

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NATO has just opened a Regional Centre in Kuwait: it is the first such presence in the region. This step can support and enhance the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), the practical cooperation framework launched in 2004 between NATO and the Gulf states (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain). But the partnership road is still ahead.

On January 24, 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg talked about NATO-ICI as a “blossoming partnership”, during the NAC-ICI Meeting held in Kuwait City to celebrate the opening of the Regional Centre. Without any doubt, the cooperation between the Atlantic Alliance and the Gulf states has slowly advanced so far: as a blossom, it needs time, patience and a suitable context to grow. The NATO-ICI Regional Centre has an ambitious mandate: it will focus on strategic analysis, military-to-military cooperation and interoperability, civil emergency planning, training, public diplomacy and cultural awareness.

NATO can contribute to Gulf security providing mil-

itary expertise to Gulf partners, so strengthening local capabilities and resilience in the management of crisis. More than yesterday, NATO and the Gulf states share convergent security interests: the fight against international terrorism, weapons proliferation, cyber security, states weakening and freedom of navigation in choke-points, as the Bab el-Mandeb. With regard to Gulf security, NATO has trained Iraqi officers in Jordan (and now has been doing the same in Baghdad) to improve their counterterrorism skills. Among the Gulf states involved, the UAE are active military partners in the Global Coalition against Daesh.

In 2004, Saudi Arabia and Oman decided not to take part to ICI. Surely, a real upgrading in NATO-Gulf monarchies military partnership will be possible only when Saudi Arabia will join the initiative, so paving the way for an effective NATO-GCC strategic dialogue. However, the opening of the Regional Centre marks a significant step in this path.

The time-frame is positive to develop a NATO-ICI teamwork. We have been living in a post-American

Gulf, where the United States are still present but aim to reduce their political involvement in the region. Looking at the current scenario, uncertainty is the key-word. The Trump administration has not designed a coherent Middle Eastern policy yet. Iran's president Hassan Rouhani is engaged in diplomatic outreach efforts towards the Gulf states: on February 15, he travelled to Oman and Kuwait on the invitation of their rulers. However, waiting for presidential elections, hard-liners voices have raised in Teheran, as verbal tensions between the US and Iran escalate. Since few years, Gulf states are more committed to regional security than it was in the past: a clear, long-term trend able to reshape traditional defense patterns. Moreover, such a development happens in times of demanding economic changes for oil-based societies. With this purpose, Arab Gulf states seek for enhanced bilateral security arrangements (as the defense partnership with the UK reaffirmed in December 2016) and closer defense cooperation (as with NATO), to better cope with this volatile scenario.

On the other hand, NATO wants to promote burden sharing, engaging partners in cooperative security, as affirmed by the Lisbon Strategic Concept (2010). But the only way towards interoperability passes through enhanced local military capabilities: this is the main objective of ICI. Practical cooperation and shared expertise are precious tools to circumvent political differences and misunderstandings, so avoiding "high politics" deadlocks: this is why NATO partnership with the Gulf follows a bottom-up approach.

For the Gulf countries, the military capabilities issue is fundamental. In an age of multidimensional threats, Gulf states' Armed Forces have been working to strengthen technical know-how adapting to changing external and internal threats. The UAE, Qatar and Kuwait have recently introduced compulsory military

service: the challenge is find an effective balance between tradition and incremental professionalization. NATO can provide experience and best practices in order to support ongoing national defense reforms and GCC defense integration efforts: all Gulf partners have developed individual cooperation programs with NATO.

In such a framework, Saudi-led military operation in Yemen has already marked a watershed in the history of Gulf states' military projection. As a matter of fact, it involves Gulf's soldiers out of the boundaries of the GCC, encompassing also a counter-terrorism dimension: the fight against Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Training and human resources are the priorities. As testified by the Yemeni campaign, Gulf states' armies need not only to improve ground capabilities, but also to harmonize their land skills: with regard to this point, the UAE appear more effective than Saudi Arabia. The Abu Dhabi-led federation has often operated alongside NATO peace support operations, as occurred in Afghanistan.

Kuwait, who asked to host the Regional Centre, was a natural choice in the region. ICI member since 2004, Kuwait signed a Transit Agreement with NATO in 2016 and in the same year opened a diplomatic mission at NATO HQ in Brussels (as the other ICI countries), so upgrading its political status with the Atlantic Alliance. From a geopolitical point of view, Kuwait has always been a bridge of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, its geographical proximity with Iraq makes Kuwait particularly interested in regional security-building, even though bilateral ties, rather than a multilateral format, remain -at Gulf states' eyes- the preferred choice to address defense issues.

Therefore, NATO-ICI Regional Centre marks a tangible, and ambitious, step in Arab-NATO relations, the

first after 2009, when the NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC) was established at the NATO Defense College in Rome: a ten-week academic program bringing together officers and diplomats from NATO countries with their counterparts from ICI and the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD, included Israel). An education venue of lectures and seminars sometimes attended even by Saudis.

But work has just begun: the Regional Centre in Kuwait must not remain a “bright packaging” without concrete contents. For this reason, political commitment, translated into proper resources and organized implementation, will be the key to turn intents into reality. A new challenge for NATO partnerships in the Arab region.