



Research Division

NATO Defense College

NDC POLICY BRIEF

No. 09 – May 2020

Projecting Stability to the South: NATO's other challenge

Chloé Berger *

In the spring of 2020, the Atlantic Alliance's "large periphery" to the South, which extends from the Sahel to the Asian borders of the Arabian Gulf, remains in a state of dangerous instability. The health and containment measures taken by the authorities against the COVID-19 crisis have put popular claims to rest. The case of Lebanon shows, however, that the urgency of the pandemic has not made the demands of the population disappear. Beyond managing the health crisis, there is no doubt that the future of the region's leaderships¹ will largely depend on their ability to mitigate both the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the political ones.

In this "broader MENA" region, whose confines and internal cohesion are unstable, the challenges are ever more complex. Despite the relative consensus between NATO and its Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) partners on the deep-rooted causes of the structural instability, the potential solutions are much debated. NATO's "Projecting Stability" concept raises as many questions with the partners, as it does within the Alliance, since a desired end-state has yet to be defined. While all efforts contributing to an increase in stability are *a priori* welcome, the Alliance and its partners must agree on the con-

ditions of stability in order to identify and implement effective means suited to the local context.

Multiple challenges, increasing complexity

The "broader MENA" region has likely never known such instability since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948; all the states in the region are, to a greater or lesser extent, involved in a conflict, or challenged by grave domestic difficulties. From Sudan to Iraq, via Algeria, Lebanon or Iran, popular uprisings have sprung up, placing the very future of the states in the region into question.

Structural instability: a symptom of a state in crisis

The regimes which survived the first wave of the Arab spring seem not to have learned the lessons arising from the chaos in neighbouring Syria or Libya, and continue to use force to contain social tensions. Ageing, they no longer have the ability to respond to the basic socio-economic demands of their populations, and even less so to the aspirations of their people. In a region where half of the population is under the age of 25, demographic growth has acted as a catalyst and exacerbates the pressure put on systems which are already broken, further weakening the infrastructure and resources of the state. Whether inspired by socialism or liberal capitalism, the economies of the region are all struggling to create jobs for young people whose level of education has greatly increased since the 1970s. The State remains a major economic player, relying on revenue from hydrocarbons and tourism to support national industrial and/or agricultural production. The scale of imports combined with the weakness of domestic production – not

The "broader MENA" region has likely never known such instability since [...] 1948

* Researcher and Faculty Adviser at the NATO Defense College. The original version of this *Policy Brief* was written in French; it was translated into English by Caroline Curta.

1 See M. Kamel, "Amirah-Fernández: cette crise est un moment de vérité pour les gouvernements arabes", *Jeune Afrique*, 20 April 2020.

to mention the corruption and nepotism which undermine most of the states in the region – hamper the development of private enterprise and discourage foreign investment. And yet the region, as a whole, is in dire need of investment, particularly in the areas of health, education, transport and energy. The credibility and legitimacy of the States' ability to meet the basic needs of the people directly depend on it, as witnessed by the slogans branded in the demonstrations in Baghdad, Tehran and Beirut, which clamour for greater integrity from their leaders, and decent living conditions.

Disengaging is clearly not an option and NATO must continue to [...] follow what is happening on the other side of the Mediterranean

How the regimes of these countries might reform their economies to provide a future for their youth, who have gained in self-awareness as a political class, remains a central issue.

Since the mid-2000s, the region as a whole has entered into a multidimensional process of transition. The regional system, in which the first cracks appeared after the Camp David agreements (1973), no longer exists and a new order is struggling to emerge. The escalation of tensions in the Gulf at the beginning of 2020 seems to signal that red lines could easily be crossed, thereby casting doubt on the reliability of the guarantees afforded by the great powers to their allies in the region.

In addition, the construct of the nation state, resulting from decolonization, is at stake. Preserving their political and ideological heritage has been the main source of legitimacy for the regimes in place, as brought sharply into focus by the political events shaking the region since the beginning of 2019. In Algiers, Beirut, Tehran, and Baghdad, we have seen the extent to which the renewal of the political class, and a gradual opening-up to pluralism, or political change, became an existential issue for these regimes. In this context, secular forces remain largely divided when faced by a well-organized opposition able to mobilize its grass roots with the use of religious ideology. A situation characterized by disunity and violence – where states are seen as shackling individual aspirations, when they are not simply perceived as a force of oppression – is fertile ground for the development of behaviour which goes against the system, as well as for forms of political, religious, and/or sectarian radicalism, which can easily morph into violence.

Renegotiating the social contract: a costly challenge

All the states in the region must now question the fundamental issues on which their social contracts rest.

Who is re-defining the forces that shape the political arena and make up the State apparatus? Who are the players powerful enough and/or legitimate enough to redefine what the national interests are, which do not always coincide with the interests of the State? The same holds true for national borders, which often leave some of their constituent communities outside their national perimeter. Implicitly, these questions relate to non-state actors in these societies and to the capacity of states to integrate them and to allow them to play a positive role. Civil society in the MENA region has been relatively resilient and has demonstrated an ability to occupy the public space by creating new forms of political expression which continue to confuse the authorities in place.

All of these examples highlight the challenges faced in (re-)defining social contracts; with the repercussions on governance, and in particular on the distribution of power between civilians and the military within government institutions. The “strong” states which had the upper hand in the 1960s and 70s continue to prioritize security over socio-economic development and individual freedoms. In states which are fragmented, the steady erosion of the state's ability to govern hints to a redefining of governance, even to the risk of “cantonization” around large urban centres, or “city-provinces” like Cairo. What consequences will the “re-localization” of power have on traditional state responsibilities? One can easily imagine the disastrous results of a general privatization of state responsibilities – already visible in some states – and its impact on social redistribution, border control or the flows of illegal migration and organized crime. Finally, the exponential growth of demographics in the countries of the South, exacerbated by the consequences of climate change and unrestrained urban drift, inform as to the longer-term stability of these countries. The COVID-19 crisis, of which we are witnessing only the preliminary effects, demonstrates the magnitude of the challenges facing these countries in terms of human security². Sooner or later, the region will be forced to start transitioning its energy policies, with obvious consequences on energy security in the West. What impact will the diversification of MENA's oil-based economies then have on their economic partners?

NATO in the South: a clearer vision and revisited approaches

While many of these issues are not new, their accumulation and entanglement constitute a challenge of

2 For an overview of the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region in terms of health, socio-economics, and the political and security dimension, see E. Dacrema, V. Talbot (eds.), “The MENA region vs. COVID-19: one challenge, common strategies?”, *ISPI Paper*, 7 April 2020.

unprecedented magnitude that cannot be ignored by the Alliance, given the direct and indirect repercussions on the stability of NATO members. Together with the more obvious deterrence and defence mandate, Projecting Stability has therefore become the other priority for NATO. The consequences of the conflicts in Syria and Libya in terms of migration have shown the direct impact that these forces of violence could have on maritime security in the Mediterranean, and on the capacity of European countries to host migrants. Moreover, the weakening of some states on the southern periphery of the Alliance has provided fertile ground for the rise in violent non-state actors who have demonstrated their ability to benefit from new technology. So far, we are witnessing only the first signs; in the longer term, there will undoubtedly be major health and social repercussions for which Alliance countries must be prepared.

What kind of stability for what kind of South?

Disengaging is clearly not an option and NATO must continue to closely monitor what is happening with its neighbours on the other side of the Mediterranean, in order to better anticipate developments and try as much as possible to support the processes of transition in MENA states. Denial strategies to protect our borders or delegating our security responsibilities to our partners cannot be a sustainable strategy. The complexity of the task requires a partial rethinking of our instruments, or at the very least, a questioning of NATO's ability to tackle the issues previously described. Developing and intensifying our partnerships with other international organizations is certainly one of the best options available.

NATO's approach to the South is the result of a collection of missions and instruments developed over the past three decades but is no longer sufficiently well structured. A more coherent vision would be useful to deconstruct a number of myths about the Alliance's "hidden" agenda in the South, and could prove instrumental in building trust between NATO and its partners. A sense of trust which will be critical if we want to see partners taking real ownership of cooperation activities on the ground. To achieve this, and in view of the lack of consensus on the desired end-state of the projecting stability agenda, a clearer vision backed by pragmatic action and well-defined priorities would improve communication between the Alliance and its partners. Providing some public diplomacy in Arabic and engaging our partners in 1.5 track-type discussions would broaden the visibility of the Alliance among influential civil society players in the MENA region. Credibility and legitimacy remain fundamental concerns here, given the growing aspirations of the local population to take part in the decision-making process

at both national and regional levels.

In addition to the issue of partners' ownership of co-operation activities, also at stake are the legitimacy that our partner institutions enjoy in their own countries, as well as our ability to sustain these cooperative activities over time. Recent developments in Iraq should encourage us to reflect on this and question our understanding of military cooperation, especially in terms of *Defence Capacity Building*, and to ask whether these activities really contribute to the stability and strengthening of local institutions. Is there not a risk – through these programmes – of encouraging political authoritarianism

or skewing the balance between civilians and the military? In this context, counter-terrorism operations can often be likened to counter-insurgency missions. This underscores the fact that violent extremist movements such as the Libyan and ISIS militias, and the number of Al Qaida affiliates in the Sahel, or even Hezbollah and other groups connected to Iran, are the product of a specific social context from which they draw support and can find the necessary recruits for their operations.

Interoperability is the key to any effort to stabilize the MENA region

Interoperability as a lever of stability

These remarks underline the importance of using the appropriate terms and concepts, and more importantly, the need to agree on them. The development of a common culture of defence and security is one of the Alliance's major achievements in terms of cooperative security with southern partners. Given the complexity of the problems plaguing the South, solutions can only be found collectively. For this reason, interoperability is the key to any effort to stabilize the MENA region. The Alliance must, therefore, continue to invest in professional military education to help partners improve the standardization of equipment and procedures, particularly in the areas of anti-missile defence, maritime security and border control. Conversely, in other areas such as drones, cyber security, energy infrastructure protection or counter-insurrection, the experience and expertise of certain partners, such as Israel, Algeria, and Mauritania, would be valued assets for the Alliance. Engaging with partners who have an intimate knowledge of the territories and local populations is fundamental to better understanding the dynamics of the underlying structural instability we face. In the mid-term, these efforts should benefit from increased activity in the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait and from the Hub for the South in Naples.

Beyond, the Alliance would be well advised to support the development of cooperation between partners, by identifying expertise to encourage a South-South trans-

fer of good practices. Sharing feedback and expertise would be a first step to building trust between southern partners, and thus help them to settle a number of political disputes that currently block the construction of any kind of regional security architecture. The blockages that undermine the proper functioning of the G5 Sahel or the African Union (AU) are well known. In-

The solution requires [...] cooperative actions in areas which can produce a multiplier effect

deed, revising the partnership formats (MD and ICI) on a more “domain-based approach”, rather than its present geographic footing, would help to improve dialogue between partners. These initiatives could be accompanied by the opening of training and edu-

cation opportunities for military officers and civilians from the Sahel and/or sub-Saharan nations. Instead of enlarging its efforts further to the South, the Alliance could contribute to developing local human interoperability, promoting expertise and a culture of defence common to the whole region. These opportunities should of course be coordinated with NATO members already present in these regions: formats of preferred cooperation involving nations volunteering for *Mobile Training Teams* (MTT) deployment there could be envisaged and could respond, in part, to the recurrent problem of resources experienced by these countries.

Normative work and cooperation with partners

A large part of the woes suffered by the South are political, socio-economic, connected to health or the environment; they are all issues for which the Alliance has only very limited answers. However, constraints linked to the nature of the responses do not condemn the Alliance to powerlessness. On the contrary, by way of example, with regard to climate change, NATO could usefully engage in some collective reflection, involving members but also partners in defining standards for equipment and procedures for the deployment of forces in hot and humid areas, or areas at high risk of natural disasters. Responses to natural disasters or pan-

demics³ should also be the subject of collective reflection and normative work at Alliance level.

Deepening cooperation with the European Union (EU), the United Nations, the African Union, and even with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is also a priority. Coordinating NATO and EU Trust Funds would improve the desired end effects on the ground. More generally, in post-conflict environments, security constraints represent one of the first obstacles to the deployment of personnel from civilian agencies responsible for development and reconstruction. NATO could play a useful role by providing the security conditions necessary for the deployment of these personnel or, at least, by providing them with some pre-deployment training. Deploying *gendarmarie/carabinieri* forces and switching progressively from a NATO to an EU format, could also enable better coordination between the various actors on the ground, allowing for a quicker restart of civilian institutions and the implementation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes. If deploying the necessary personnel proves impossible, at least *gendarmarie*-type training missions for local security forces could enable defence as well as policing missions to take place.

Projecting Stability, an essential vector of influence

Projecting stability to the South must remain one of the priorities of the Alliance. The challenges there are becoming increasingly complex and require collective responses, involving NATO members as well as partners in the MENA region. In a constrained budgetary period and politically sensitive context, disengagement is tempting. However, looking away would only increase the vulnerability of Alliance countries to the direct and indirect consequences of instability. Beyond the political will, the solution requires a renewed, more structured and detailed approach, focusing on cooperative actions in areas which can produce a multiplier effect and where the expertise of the Alliance can truly make a difference.

3 About the COVID-19 crisis implications for NATO, see T. Tardy (ed.), “COVID-19: NATO in the age of pandemics”, *NDC Research Paper*, No.9, NATO Defense College, May 2020.



The views expressed in this *NDC Policy Brief* are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NATO Defense College, NATO, or any government or institution represented by the contributors.

Research Division

Thierry Tardy, PhD, Series Editor
@thierrytardy
NATO Defense College
Via Giorgio Pelosi 1, 00143 Rome – Italy
www.ndc.nato.int

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook
at https://twitter.com/NDC_Research
at https://facebook.com/NDC_Research
NDC Policy Brief
ISSN 2617-6009



The NATO Defense College applies the Creative Common Licence “Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivs” (CC BY-NC-ND)