

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## NATO Should Improve Relations with Its Southern Neighbors

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In light of the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, the continued threat in the region from al-Qaeda, and the nuclear threat and state-sponsored terrorism from Iran, many in NATO have rightly decided to place a renewed focus on working with regional partners on its periphery. NATO already has structures in place to better cooperate with partners in this part of the world, but little has been done to enhance these relationships.

**NATO and Its Southern Periphery.** NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept states that cooperative security is one of the alliance's three essential core tasks. NATO carries out its cooperative security task with its southern partners through two mechanisms: the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

*The Mediterranean Dialogue.* Launched in 1994, the Mediterranean Dialogue forms the basis of NATO's relations with its Mediterranean partners, which include Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. Although these talks are normally done on a bilateral basis ("NATO+1"), on occasion this forum meets as "NATO+7," placing Israel at the same table as some of its regional neighbors, where it would not otherwise be.

*Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.* Launched in 2004, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative currently forms the basis of NATO relations with the Gulf states. Although all six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council were invited to join, only Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have become participants so far. Saudi Arabia and Oman have expressed minor interest in joining but have yet to do so.

With its focus on the Gulf, the initiative could become increasingly important as Iran continues to develop its nuclear weapons program. In addition, the initiative's focus is expanding beyond just the Gulf and is now open to all countries in the

Middle East that share NATO's security concerns.

**Increasing Importance of the Middle East and North Africa.** To the south of Europe, from the eastern Atlantic Ocean to the Middle East, is a region experiencing increasing instability from demographic pressures, increased commodity prices, interstate and intrastate conflict, piracy, tribal politics, competition over water and other natural resources, religious tension, revolutionary tendencies, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. This region also has some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources, and trade choke points. Obviously, instability in this region can directly impact NATO's security interests.

However, whether it is regional terrorism emanating from al-Qaeda or the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran, NATO member states share many of the same security concerns as the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Furthermore, many of the countries in this region have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with NATO and have even contributed troops to NATO-led missions. NATO's Kosovo Force currently has 100 Moroccans and, until

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a few years ago, had 1,200 soldiers from the UAE.

The alliance's mission in Afghanistan includes troops from Jordan, the UAE (including Emirati Special Forces) and Bahrain. Jordan, Qatar, and the UAE provided aircrafts and resources for the NATO-led intervention in Libya. If media reports are true, the Qataris even deployed special forces to help support the Libyan opposition forces.

Many countries in the region, especially in the Gulf, have been staunch U.S. allies and have worked closely with NATO member states on regional security initiatives—albeit outside NATO's framework. For example, Bahrain is home to both the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and the U.K.'s Maritime Component Command and has also managed the regional maritime task force responsible for conducting security operations in the central and southern Gulf.

**Building NATO's Relations One Country at a Time.** The Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative remain two complementary yet distinct partnership frameworks. Inside each are varying degrees of cooperation between NATO and the participating countries.

Any nation participating in these groupings can also increase political and security cooperation with NATO through an Individual and Partnership Cooperation Program (IPCP). For many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, cooperation with NATO can be politically difficult. Allowing a bilateral "NATO+1" relationship based on the IPCP format allows these countries to choose the degree of cooperation they wish to have with NATO. This built-in flexibility is important when forging relations, because some countries

feel more comfortable about partnering with NATO than others. A little cooperation is better than no cooperation.

In the Mediterranean Dialogue, only Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia have IPCPs with NATO. None of the participants in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative has an IPCP. NATO should encourage credible partners in the Gulf, such as Qatar and the UAE, to agree to IPCPs with the alliance.

**The Chicago Summit: A Step in the Right Direction.** One of the top three agenda items at NATO's Chicago summit this past May was NATO's partnerships. Consequently, both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative received more attention than usual in the summit's declaration, although the two entities did not meet formally.

Some of the more notable conclusions in the declaration regarding the two bodies included:

- A Moroccan-led initiative to develop a new political framework document for the Mediterranean Dialogue,
- An invitation for Libya to join the Dialogue,
- The announcement that Kuwait will host an Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre,
- An open invitation for Middle East countries that share NATO's security concerns to join the Initiative, and
- The establishment of a NATO Transition Cell in Iraq to help develop the NATO–Iraqi partnership.

**After the Chicago Summit: The Way Ahead.** The hardest part of any summit is not agreeing on a common language for the declaration but implementing the declaration into practice.

To help NATO improve its relations with its southern neighbors, the U.S. should:

- **Call on NATO to appoint a Special Representative for the Middle East.** In the Middle East, personal relationships are paramount. NATO should appoint a highly respected statesman with knowledge of the region to be an enduring point of contact.
- **Provide leadership inside NATO to expand the membership of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.** In particular, NATO should expand to include countries where U.S. and European blood and treasure have been invested, such as Iraq and Libya. The more cooperation, the better.
- **Show that the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are important.** Neither the Mediterranean Dialogue nor the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative has formally met during a NATO summit at the heads-of-government level. The next NATO summit should include meetings of both groupings.
- **Focus on the ICPC format until countries feel comfortable joining the Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.** Many important allies will find it politically difficult domestically to join

a grouping inside NATO. This should not prevent the alliance from cooperating with these allies.

**Promoting Partnership.**

Partnership leads to interoperability, which helps promote understanding and security. This is why cooperation between NATO and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa is so important. As Iran becomes more of a destabilizing player in the region

and al-Qaeda continues to operate in North Africa, NATO should build solid and enduring relations with the friendly countries of the region.

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