

EuroArab Forum

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE AND INVENTIVE IDEAS

Event Report

“NATO & the Arab World: Why and how to cooperate?”

Date: Wednesday, May 5th, 2010, 20:00-21:30h

Location: Le Cercle des Voyageurs (18, rue des Grands Carmes) – Brussels

Speaker:

Gabriele Cascone, NATO Desk Officer for the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

Chair:

Rouba Al-Fattal, Co-Founder of the Euro-Arab Forum



I. Prologue

NATO, its transformation from the 1950s to today and its cooperation with central and Eastern Europe are well known. But what are NATO's relations with the Arab World? To find out more the Euro-Arab Forum decided to dedicate one of its debates to this topic. Why does NATO engage with Arab countries? How is NATO perceived in the Arab world? What instruments and projects are in place for relations with the Arab world? To get some understanding of the logic and reasoning behind NATO's involvement with the Arab world, we had the honour to welcome Gabriele Cascone to speak on the topic.

Gabriele Cascone was born in Italy. After completing his secondary education, he entered the Italian Military Academy in 1984, being commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Carabinieri Corps. He also studied law at the University of Parma (Italy), graduating "summa cum laude" in 1990. Subsequent education include a M.A. in International Relations at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and ongoing Ph.D. research at the University of Leuven, focused on post-conflict state-building in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1998, he joined the NATO International Staff as Security and Inspections Co-ordinator, for non-NATO countries in the NATO Office of Security. In this role, he was the action officer on security matters concerning NATO's relations with non-NATO countries. Since summer 2005, he was the country officer for Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. As a recognition of his work, he has been awarded several prestigious awards and medals, including the NATO Medal for his participation in the NATO operations in former Yugoslavia, and the Italian service medal for peacekeeping operations, to name a few. In February 2009, following the successful completion of his previous assignment he became the desk officer at the Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and Contact Countries Section within the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division (PASP) at NATO-HQ, where he is now responsible for the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative programme, NATO's cooperative initiative addressed especially to the Gulf states.

II. Keynote speech

The interest: how the NATO started to be interested by the Arab world?

The entire process is linked to the history and reality of NATO after the end of the Cold War, especially in the mid-90's. NATO, from 1949 to 1991 was an organization focused on the territorial defense of Western Europe towards the Soviet threat. It was the reality of the Alliance for the first 40 years of its existence. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, NATO started to look at itself and started to think about its role and the way it had to prosecute its missions, taking into account that the cornerstone of the Alliance, to protect the security and the sovereignty of its members, did not change and is still at the heart of the organization.

In the 90's, NATO realized that the best way to prevent threats to its own members was to try to project security and stability outside its borders. This way of thinking is at the basis of a first initiative which addressed the Central and Eastern Europe countries in 1994, called the Partnership for peace.

Then, another initiative, the Mediterranean Dialogue was launched in December 1994. It concerns the southern shore of the Mediterranean. The first interest for the Alliance was to extend security, stability, engagement and dialogue to countries with which the Alliance had had no contact with during its first 40 years of existence. This lack of dialogue may have been due to the fact that some NATO members were former colonial powers or to the fact that some southern Mediterranean countries were closer to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. There were therefore a number of elements and prejudices to correct.

The Mediterranean Dialogue

The Mediterranean Dialogue was born at the end of 1994 and was launched as a confidence building exercise. The objective was to put the countries together and to address a number of questions to establish a common basis. Who are we? What do we want to do? Do we have common interests or common threats? How can we work together?

The Mediterranean Dialogue got developed through a number of steps. First of all, it started at the end of 1994 with five countries: Morocco,

Mauritania, Tunisia, Egypt and Israel. At the end of 1995 it extended to Jordan and then to Algeria in March 2000.

It's important to consider that the Mediterranean Dialogue does not demand any formal prerequisite to join it. Even a Mediterranean coastline is not really necessary (look at Jordan or Mauritania which do not have access to the Mediterranean Sea). In fact, the main idea is to create a dialogue with a region globally defined but without any strict criteria for membership. The only criteria are political: on the one hand, the interest of the Alliance to launch a dialogue with these countries; on the other hand, the interest of this region's countries to engage in a dialogue with NATO.

In 1997, at the Madrid Summit, the Alliance decided to enhance the practical dimension of the Mediterranean Dialogue. This meant giving access to the Mediterranean countries to a number of activities, such as training, conferences, seminars where NATO can give its expertise. Of course NATO is a military and security alliance; it cannot launch a program on development or culture and its programs most often deal with foreign policy and military issues.

In 2004, and this is the final move further into the practical dimension, the Alliance decided to develop individual cooperation programs with each of the Mediterranean Dialogue countries. This means that up to that point, the practical cooperation was mostly a menu of activities that was offered to the Mediterranean Dialogue countries but without any obligation of internal coherence or definition of the goals or the motivation to work with NATO. If they liked a certain event, they could just choose to attend, send their officers, diplomats.

From 2004, the Alliance offered to transform this ad hoc participation into a binding annual program of cooperation. Topics are defined as peace keeping training or civil emergency and countries can choose activities to put in their program. From 2004, NATO and the Mediterranean countries have a fully structured partnership which still has a political dimension at the ambassadorial level, and a practical cooperation, represented in these individual cooperation programs. The idea is to offer opportunities to Mediterranean countries to choose what they are interested in. Different forms exist: conferences, seminars, exercises,

workshops. A menu is offered and it contains several activities and events. For example, the Mediterranean Dialogue Work Program currently includes around 700 events, which are mostly training courses offered either in NATO structures or by NATO member states.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative

In 2004 NATO also decided to move one further step forward. In the 1990's, the Alliance was concerned by its closer neighborhood: Central and Eastern Europe and Mediterranean. In 2004, it decided to extend its engagement to the Arab states of the broader Middle East region. In practice, at the beginning, this initiative is opened to the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is called the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative because it was launched at the NATO summit in the Turkish city in June 2004. It aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the Gulf region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO.

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative's structure is almost the same as the Mediterranean Dialogue. There is a forum for political consultation where it is possible to discuss common threats, common challenges, common perceptions, but also to discuss differences and compare viewpoints. Furthermore, there is a Work Program for the practical cooperation and the possibility of individual cooperation program, where the menu is very similar to the Mediterranean Dialogue's one. As a matter of fact, in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and the Mediterranean Dialogue, the tools are the same.

The key principles of the two partnerships:

Both initiatives are founded on similar principles which are three: self differentiation, non discrimination and joint ownership.

- Joint ownership:

These two initiatives were launched by NATO but there are shaped jointly by NATO and by the partner countries. So, it is not a unilateral process. It is offered by NATO but it is based on the interest expressed by the partner countries. Moreover, the tools and the instruments can be changed and adjusted.

- Self differentiation:

There is a group of countries but every country will not proceed the same way. Each country is interested by different topics and they all have their own priorities. For example, some may be more interested in military aspects, while others in the expertise that NATO can share on an issue such as border control. So within the menu, every country is free to pick up what it wants.

- *Non discrimination:*

NATO cannot offer an event only to one or some countries in the partnership. The initiatives are the same for everybody and these are the three keys principles of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Participation to operations:

Furthermore, after the political consultation and the practical cooperation, there is a final element which is very much connected to the nature of NATO: it is the issue of participation to operations. Indeed, NATO is a security and military alliance which deploys operations. Since the mid 1990's NATO has been present in Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo and now Afghanistan. These are the main operations but there were other smaller NATO operations. NATO partner countries are invited to participate to these operations on a free will basis. It is a decision which entirely belongs to each country. For example, for the Bosnia Herzegovina operation, Morocco and Jordan participated. In Kosovo and now in Afghanistan, Jordan and United Arab Emirates participated to NATO's operations.

The participation to operations does not only mean sending troops. There are other ways to participate by helping the training or the civilian reconstruction for instance.

The impediments:

The impediments are quite evident. *In the Mediterranean Dialogue*, there are six Arab countries and Israel. The reality is that the intensity of the cooperation, or its ease or progress is unavoidably affected by the Middle East peace process. When there are positive perspectives, cooperation moves much faster. It is then easier for the seven countries to work together on common projects with the twenty-eight countries of the Alliance. By contrast, when the situation is more controversial there is a

reduction of the intensity of the contacts. Some countries may feel uneasy about moving forward too fast with some partners which they may have a problem or whose actions they do not agree with. This political issue has an important impact on the cooperation and on the achievements.

For example, so far in the Mediterranean Dialogue, we had four ministerial level meetings between 2004 and 2008: three meetings of Foreign Ministers and one meeting of Defense Ministers. But in 2008, Cast Lead operation was waged by the Israeli army in Gaza. Since then, the Mediterranean Dialogue's countries had no other ministerial meetings, because it would be difficult for the seven countries to meet at such a level under these circumstances.

In the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, there is no such controversial issue. First, they are part of the same regional group, the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is a more homogenous group and there is no major impediment in that initiative.

Therefore, the real challenge is the level of ambition and the strategic goals of both sides, especially the Alliance's level of ambition and strategic goals. NATO decided to start a cooperation process with the Gulf to continue its policy of engaging in partnership with countries considered as strategic for the security of the Alliance. However, NATO is a terrible organization when it comes to theorizing why it acts as such. Indeed, things are done, but NATO does not always define in advance what it really wants to achieve and what the ultimate goal of these initiatives really is.

Moreover, about the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, only four countries members of the Gulf Cooperation Council joined the Alliance's initiative. Saudi Arabia and Oman are not yet members of this initiative although they have been invited to join. Thus, this is also a challenge for the future: to keep countries – called the “*ICI invited countries*” – engaged even if they are not ready yet to accept a formal cooperation, but already showed an interest in it.

III. Discussion and Q&A

NATO and the Middle East peace process

NATO is not in itself part of the process because there are other initiatives. NATO cannot take initiatives apart from its members. They decide

jointly. NATO cannot be an element in the solution of the process. But what NATO can do depends of the “3 if” : if there is an agreement, if there is a request from all the parties and if there is a UN mandate, then NATO would be willing to consider its position in a possible implementation phase, not at all in the solution phase. That is the common line adopted by the NATO allies.

What about the presence of Morocco and Algeria in the Mediterranean Dialogue considering their disagreement about Western Sahara?

We know that there are different positions, but it has never been a stumbling block. When two countries disagree on an issue but you keep them in the same forum sitting together, it is easier for them to “jaw jaw” than to “war war” (*Churchill’s famous sentence*). The use of these initiatives is to bring countries together and to use the multilateral forum to reduce their bilateral tensions.

Arab States objectives in cooperating with NATO

The answer is different from country to country. For example, we have now launched a very successful trust fund with Mauritania on the training on civil emergency. Trust fund is the only mechanism for NATO to launch a project as it does not have common funds for this purpose. With a trust fund, a group of Allies (with the possible contribution of other, non-member States) accepts to finance a project on a voluntary basis that will then be managed by NATO. For Mauritania, this program is very beneficial.

The advantage to cooperate with an organization like NATO is that it offers an expertise for free. It is not connected to any bilateral arrangements or additional links. Dealing with an organization may thus seem less threatening. What we offer can serve certain purposes in the long run but is not putting any extra burden on the country that receives it. Also, for some countries, to address certain issues with NATO means to be able to rely by a single entry point on all the expertise of its members. For example, if a support on a establishing a crisis operation center is needed, NATO can put together US, German, French, English, Spanish, Norwegian experts. So there are a number of very practical incentives.

At the strategic level, it is a choice of the interested country to see where is its advantage, where is the added value of the Alliance. In some areas the partner countries see very well the added value of NATO but the Alliance itself has a lower level of ambition. Many countries in the world would like to have an “article 5” to protect them if some county invades them, but the “article 5” is only for the members.

EU and NATO in the MENA region

The relations between EU and NATO is for many people one of the more difficult subjects to talk about. The complementarities of the two structures and the economy of scale and forces they could get if they were working together are obvious. But some issues as the members, the participation are different, so they cannot collaborate more. But their relation works extremely well at staff level, even with the delegations on the ground. However, when you raise any political issue between the two structures, you open the Pandora box. We thus try to increase cooperation at staff, practical level.

NATO’s image and reputation in the Arab World and among its members

In the Arab world

Since the beginning, the public diplomacy of the Alliance is a big issue, and especially with the Arab World. Two reasons explain this special importance: first, NATO’s countries and the Arab world have at the basis little understanding of each other; second, NATO is not seen there as an organization but through its members’ presence in the region. There is a genuine difficulty to understand what the organization is. And the organization is the combination of the allies’ different positions and not the strong arm of one of them. And the misperceptions are very strong.

Now, at governmental level, trough both initiative’s work, these misunderstandings disappeared. The problem lies now in the civil society level. It might make sense to explain NATO’s work to the civil society. Some, however may argue that in every country of the World, the people interested in foreign policy issues are 1% of the population, so it does not matter to explain NATO’s role to the remaining 99%.

others because they do not care anyway. But at government, journalist, academics, opinion makers level the understanding of the Alliance has greatly increased.

Among its members

At the public opinion level, it is not sure that there is much more understanding of NATO in Italy than for instance in Morocco, because there is a lack of interest.

At the scholar level, an important question raised is NATO's relevance in 2010. The Alliance is doing a huge exercise to clarify this for the moment. NATO is reviewing its strategic concept. A group of experts is gathering under the leadership of the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. They will try to get from people who follow NATO issues what they think NATO should become. Their report will then be used by the nations to develop a new strategic concept. This process should end by the end of this year, at the NATO summit in Lisbon in November. At that point, there will be a public document telling what the Alliance's purpose is and what it will intend to do for the next 10-15 years. After that, the strategy will be again reassessed.

Cooperation between civilian and military aspects

NATO is trying to implement a comprehensive approach. For the moment this approach is focused on operations because some realities are undeniable. When NATO entered Kosovo in 1999, the State's structures that existed until that point disappeared overnight. With the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army, most authorities (such as the police, border police, armed forces, judicial system) simply disappeared. This is a problem on which a military organization as NATO has to focus on. There are tasks beyond the military operations that have to be completed. Otherwise there is no point to have a soldier at every corner of the streets.

There are thus some specific moments where the military elements have to be supported, complemented by a civilian dimension. And this is what NATO is trying to work on: not to work on civilian tasks for the sake of it, but only in the context where the civilian support is necessary to avoid the failure of the military operation. Also, NATO is trying to develop means and

mechanisms to improve and enhance its ability to cooperate with civilian organizations (including NGOs) which are deployed on the ground.

NATO's utilization of the Arab world for political purpose

The question should be addressed to the countries. NATO is extremely soft in its approach. The perspective of the Alliance is to offer a possibility to cooperate and to engage. If a country thinks this could be dangerous or threatening for its own future, it is free to refuse and to stay outside the game. Nobody will press it every day to accept. It is a free choice.

At the end, in this sense, there is no utilization because there is no intent to force countries into something that they do not want. Of course if they choose the path of engagement and cooperation, working together or even sending troops in operations, it is a good thing for NATO and the organization evaluate then what can be the implications of this choice.

The war in Afghanistan and NATO's image

The reactions of the world towards the war in Afghanistan show that this war is unpopular. Two governments felt just because of Afghanistan, the British one and the Dutch one. What are the consequences on NATO's image?

The question is tricky. NATO's image is a big issue in the Arab world because NATO as such is often not understood. Inside an international organization, we have different dynamics, depending on each member's goals and objectives. There is also a dynamic between member states and international organization, with international organizations sometimes becoming a kind of scapegoat for unpopular decisions. Then the reactions target the organization and not the countries. Criticism of NATO is not only due to the Alliance's actions or lacks in communication but it is also because of the way relations between member states and the organization are created in the domestic public opinion.

There is also a problem of packaging. Sometimes, things are packaged in a softer way to a domestic public opinion to win its approval, but sometimes reality breaks the packaging. There are many factors which may affect

NATO's image and the issue of communication is very important.

NATO's Mediterranean countries and the Mediterranean Dialogue

In the Euro-Mediterranean process, the Mediterranean members of the EU are pushing the cooperation further. Is it the same with Mediterranean member states of NATO and the Mediterranean Dialogue?

NATO's members such as France, Spain or Italy are indeed more concerned by what is happening in Southern Mediterranean region. They have more interest in this area. The Alliance is a combination of interests. So, the degree of participation depends on the combination of interests. Some initiatives or areas are not the priority of all NATO's member states. There will always be a shift. The role of the southern European countries is quite strong in the Mediterranean Dialogue process.

Competitors of NATO:

Is there a competitor or alternatives to what NATO is offering?

If by "competitors", we mean other countries and organizations offering the same kind of expertise as NATO, then the member nations are the most important "competitors" of the Alliance because most of the south and east Mediterranean countries have a number of bilateral agreements with a number of NATO member states. There also parallel (although I would not say competing) initiatives in the Mediterranean from NATO and the European Union, although, in the Gulf, as far as I know, there is no corresponding EU initiative

How can NATO make sure that the training and expertise it offers is not used to reinforce non-democratic regimes?

NATO is a value-based organization but full adherence to this values is only required from NATO members (and, for example, it becomes of paramount importance in assessing the suitability of aspiring members). With partners, NATO is not a perfect organization but at least it is very pragmatic. The goal is not to start a discussion about democracy. The most important thing is engagement. And when a country wants to cooperate with NATO, it

unavoidably gets closer to it also in terms of values, viewpoints and long term aspirations. Through the training it offers, NATO is passing down its own values, standards, parameters to its partners.

Bilateral and multilateral approach

Sometimes, a bilateral approach is better because all the countries do not have the same strategy and the same interests. There is also a new concept, a "bi-multilateral" approach, which competes with the two classic ones. Sometimes it is necessary to engage bilaterally because interests, priorities and level of development are not the same. But at the same time, we should not lose the multilateral dimension. Actually, if NATO wants to keep the overall goal of extending an area of security and stability, it cannot be done in a fragmented way, country by country.

NATO is trying to do both: to keep a multilateral and a bilateral dimension. Besides, multilateral dimension push countries to compare views and to express their assessments. Then if bilaterally, a Mediterranean Dialogue country wants to participate to NATO operations, the Alliance will accept without waiting for all the Mediterranean Dialogue's countries to join. But the discussion about the participation to this NATO operation would also take place in a multilateral dimension.

Nuclear strategy:

Nuclear strategy is a very important issue in NATO's work. A nuclear reaction is possible if a member state is attacked. The Alliance is trying to keep the balance on nuclear issue because there is a fear of the domino's effect.

On this subject, it is interesting to remember the words of NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen during the closing press conference of the Informal meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers past April in Tallinn (Estonia).

On nuclear issues, "*Ministers agreed:*

- *that the nuclear issue is important in our work on the new Strategic Concept;*
- *that the Alliance remains, as always, firmly committed to maintaining the security of its members, but at the lowest possible level of nuclear forces;*

- *that a broad sharing of the burden for NATO's nuclear policy remains essential;*
- *that decisions on our nuclear policy will be made by the Alliance together."*

(Source: NATO website

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_62896.htm)

It means that the nuclear issue is one of the cornerstones of the Article 5. Everybody who wants to attack a NATO country knows that there might be the risk of a nuclear reaction.

The issue of where the weapons are and who has them has always a lot to do with political solidarity in the Alliance. What is the difference between an Alliance and a coalition of the willing? A coalition of the willing can be joined just for one moment, even if it's for a short period. In an Alliance, countries stand together and fall together. Moreover, decisions have to be taken by consensus.

In fact, NATO is trying to keep a balanced approach. The entire concept is that NATO tries to reduce as much as possible its own arsenal and contextually tries to avoid the development of other nuclear arsenals. With Iran, it is not just Iran's nuclear which is a threat but the domino effect because if Tehran develops its nuclear, neighbouring Arab countries might also like to develop their own nuclear program.

IV. Conclusion by the Euro-Arab Forum

NATO's outreach efforts towards the Mediterranean and the Gulf region have expanded since the end of the Cold War, in accordance with NATO's new image and role. However, like other international actors in the Arab world (e.g. the EU or the UN), NATO cannot be successful or credible unless the Alliance devotes time and resources both to building a long-term strategy and assessing its existing image in the Arab world.

Overcoming the difficulties that NATO is likely to face in its public-diplomacy efforts in the coming years requires some understanding of the Arab political and strategic culture. The existing frameworks that have been established for steering NATO-Arab relation, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiatives, are excellent starting blocks, but alone they cannot produce optimal

results. NATO will also need to find ways to engage Arab civil society along their governments. Moreover, NATO needs to step-up its public diplomacy in the region especially to explain its role in the Middle East Conflicts (e.g. Israel-Palestine and Iraq).

In order to reach the hearts and minds of Arab government and societies, NATO will need to develop innovative policies that would help get rid of unsubstantiated stereotypes and negative images. But that is not an easy task. Therefore, the Alliance has to be patient and determined, showing commitment to bridging the gap via different routes.

This is precisely why the Euro-Arab Forum believes it is important to invite experts on the topic to explain to our team and members the scope of NATO-Arab relations. We are very glad to have been part of this open dialogue on the relations between the two and we look forward to more opportunities in Brussels and abroad to participate in such vital debate.

Report by MEDEA

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