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NATO Summit 2021: U.S. Must Lead Focus on Middle East and North Africa

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Regional terrorism and Iranian aggression raise serious security concerns for NATO members and neighbors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

NATO's Brussels Summit on June 14, 2021, is the perfect time to renew focus on the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

The U.S. should use this opportunity to call for the appointment of a NATO Special Representative for the MENA region.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels on June 14, 2021, offers an opportunity for the Alliance to focus on southern partners in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While not entirely part of NATO's area of responsibility as defined by Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Alliance cannot ignore the MENA region.

History and recent events show that what happens in the region can quickly spill over into Europe. The U.S. should mobilize NATO to focus on the MENA region in a realistic way that is in line with the interests of the Alliance. To do so, the U.S. should call for the appointment of a NATO Special Representative for the MENA region, the establishment of a Mediterranean Dialogue Regional Center, and when appropriate, include more participants in the existing Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6089>

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To the South of Europe

The region from the eastern Atlantic Ocean through North Africa and to the Middle East is an arc of instability. This region is experiencing increasing instability from demographic pressures, increased commodity prices, interstate and intrastate conflict, tribal politics, competition over water and other natural resources, religious tension, revolutionary tendencies, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and proxy wars involving regional and global actors.

This region also has some of the world's most vital shipping lanes, energy resources, and trade choke points. The fallout and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in this region remains to be seen. Overall, it is a recipe for more, and indefinite, instability.

Almost a decade after the start of the so-called Arab Spring, the region remains full of geopolitical challenges. From the rise of transnational terrorism to the nuclear threat and state-sponsored terrorism from Iran, many NATO members have rightly decided to place a renewed focus on working with regional partners on Europe's southern periphery. NATO already has structures in place to improve cooperation with partners in this part of the world, but it has done little to enhance these relationships in recent years.

Cooperative Security

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—Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. Although the talks of the dialogue generally take place on a bilateral basis between NATO and one Mediterranean partner (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.

Shared Interests

Many of the countries in the MENA region have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with NATO and have even contributed troops to NATO-led missions. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) at one time had 100 Moroccans and 1,200 soldiers from the UAE serving in the ongoing peace support operation in Kosovo.

The NATO mission in Afghanistan has included troops from Jordan, the UAE (including Emirati special forces) and Bahrain. Jordan, Qatar, and the UAE provided aircraft and resources for the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011.

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; Bahrain has also managed the regional maritime task force responsible for conducting security operations in the central and southern Gulf.

NATO's Regional Partnerships

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).¹ For many MENA countries, 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 cooperating with NATO than others. A little cooperation is better than no cooperation.

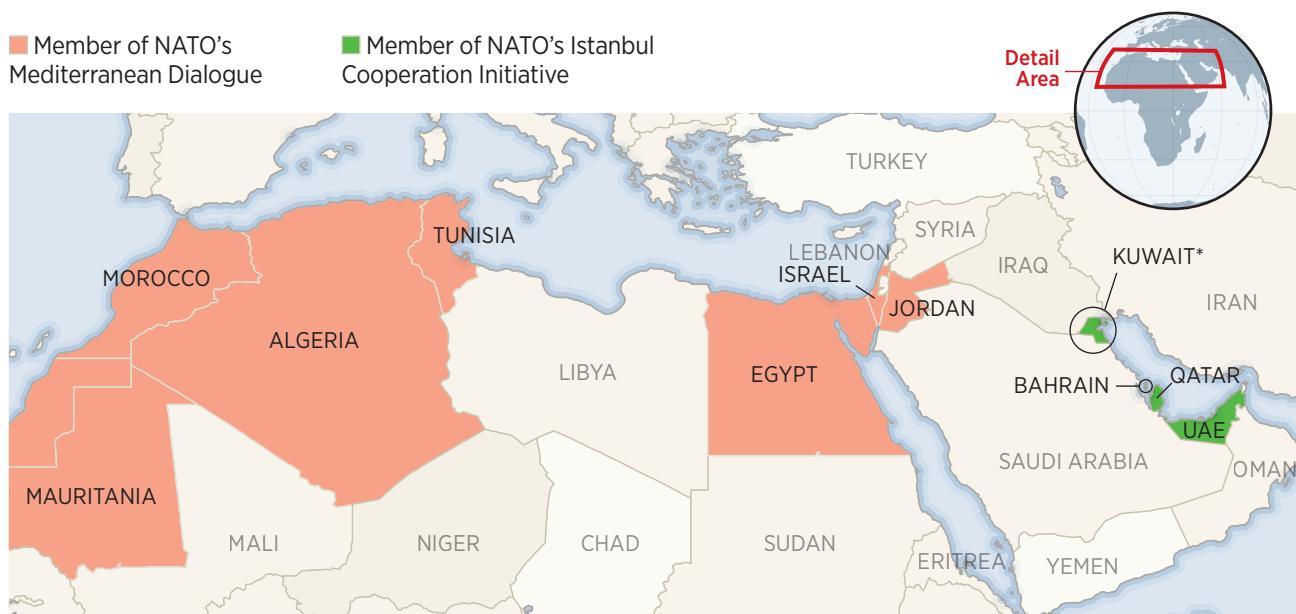
In the Mediterranean Dialogue, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia have IPCPs with NATO. However, there is still a

MAP 1

Overview of the Middle East and North Africa

■ Member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue

■ Member of NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative



* The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative-Regional Center is located in Kuwait City.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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reluctance by some in the region to work more closely with NATO. For example, at the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO announced that it was opening an intelligence fusion center in Tunisia. Four years later, this proposal remains on ice due to domestic political disagreement in Tunis on cooperation with NATO.² In 2017, NATO opened a Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S) as part of Joint Forces Command–Naples. The main focus of the NSD-S is to serve as a hub for closer NATO cooperation with its partners in North Africa.

Enthusiasm for NATO cooperation in the Middle East is also mixed. Important member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, such as Saudi Arabia and Oman, do not participate in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Although NATO and Iraq have an IPCP, Iraq remains outside the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. However, Kuwait is home to the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre (ICI-RC). The goal of the ICI-RC is to improve the shared understanding of security challenges between NATO and its partners in the region through high-level meetings, working groups, and educational courses.

Cooperation Is Important

Partnership leads to interoperability, which helps to promote understanding and security. This is why cooperation between NATO and the countries of the MENA region is so important. As Iran becomes more of a destabilizing player in the region and transnational terrorism continues to plague the region, NATO and the U.S. should build solid and enduring relations with the friendly countries in the MENA region by:

- **Pushing to enlarge the membership of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.** In particular, NATO and the U.S. should push to include countries where the U.S. and Europe have invested blood and treasure, such as Iraq and Libya, as members. The more cooperation, the better.
- **Appointing a Special Representative for the MENA region.** In the MENA region, personal relationships are paramount. NATO should appoint a highly respected statesman with knowledge of the region as an enduring point of contact.
- **Establishing a Mediterranean Dialogue Regional Center.** This regional center should be modeled on the ICI-RC in Kuwait. This will help NATO and the countries of the Mediterranean Dialogue to improve interoperability and deepen relations. Perhaps Morocco would be a suitable location.
- **Emphasizing the MENA region at the next Brussels Summit on June 14.** Neither the Mediterranean Dialogue nor the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative has formally met during a NATO summit at the head-of-government level. The Brussels Summit should include these high-level meetings for both groupings.
- **Focusing solely on the ICPC format if countries feel uncomfortable 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.
- **Not ignoring Malta.** Malta is a small European island country in the Mediterranean Sea just 215 miles off the coast of North Africa. It is a

declared neutral country—meaning it will not join security alliances or take direct part in military operations. However, during the 2011 NATO-led military operation in Libya, Malta was important for NATO for three reasons even though it would not allow operations to launch from Maltese territory: (1) Malta opened its airspace to NATO aircraft; (2) Malta allowed its territory to be a staging point for NATO countries to evacuate their citizens from Libya; and (3) Malta allowed NATO aircraft conducting strike operations to land in times of distress. Should NATO need to get involved in North Africa again, Malta will be an important player. NATO should pursue closer political relations with Malta at a speed and style decided by Valletta.

Conclusion

Whether it is regional terrorism emanating from al-Qaeda, or the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran, NATO member states have many of the same security concerns as the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. It is time that NATO blow the cobwebs off the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and inject new life and focus into these initiatives. There is no better time for the Alliance to start than at the upcoming NATO Summit. The U.S. should be leading the way within the Alliance on this matter.

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Endnotes

1. According to NATO: “The Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) is the standard document, developed usually every two years by the partner in close consultation with NATO staffs, and then approved by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the partner. It is open to all partners, and is modular in structure, adaptable to the interests and objectives of the partner and NATO.” See North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Partnership Tools,” last updated June 24, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_80925.htm (accessed May 20, 2021).
2. Umberto Profazio, “Tunisia’s Reluctant Partnership with NATO,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 6, 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/04/tunisia-reluctant-partnership-nato> (accessed May 20, 2021).