# SUSTAINABLE SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NATO'S ROLE?

*The emergence of new concerns at national, regional and global levels on the sustainability of security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been followed by development of new paradigms for tackling instability and insecurity at home, as well as, at our immediate neighborhood and at international arena. As for the Middle East, it seems that NATO has joined the regional countries to address pressing issues such as home security, human security, marine security, energy security, environmental security, terrorism; WMDs, missile defense, etc. as issues of common concern. However, despite its enterprises for the Mediterranean, the 'İstanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)', and its substantive reliance on its public diplomacy apparatus to convince the regional countries to accept this approach and facilitate NATO's incursion in management of regional security, there are hard evidences and certain facts indicating that as far as this approach is not inclusive and grass-root, it will be doomed to failure.*

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I n the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.

The recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have created new concerns at national, regional and global levels on the sustainability of security. These developments have led to the formation of new paradigms and concepts on ways of tackling instability and insecurity at home as well as at our immediate neighborhood (region) and at the international arena.

Taking into account the geo-strategic, geo-economic, and geo-cultural importance of the MENA region, regional and international organizations have joined countries of the region to address pressing issues such as homeland security (i.e. its social, political, and economic aspects), human security, marine security, energy security, environmental security, terrorism; WMDs, missile defense, etc. as issues of common concern.

In such a situation, security relations among regional countries and their views and approaches to these issues of seemingly "common interest" and "common concern" are key factors for engineering a sustainable security mechanism, which could serve the interests of both regional countries and the international community.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as a player in international security club, has broadened its theater of action far beyond its traditional milieu – i.e. from Afghanistan to Libya. It has also shown great interest in intensifying and solidifying its presence in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. By adopting the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)", NATO provided the ground for such a presence. Relying on an active public diplomacy apparatus, NATO is trying to convince regional countries to accept this approach and facilitate NATO's direct engagement in engineering a regional security mechanism. However, since this approach is not a all-inclusive grass-root one, it will be doomed to failure.

### İstanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)

The NATO Summit of June 2004, which was held in İstanbul, led to the initiation of the ICI. The initiative was given the purpose to "contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering countries of the broader Middle East region practical bilateral security cooperation with NATO."[1] ICI, moreover, was "a response to rapidly changing strategic environment in the Euro-Atlantic area, the Middle East and beyond which has changed almost beyond recognition." The Alliance would like "to play a much greater role on the international stage and the wider Mediterranean region and the Greater Middle East which are increasingly areas for future focus."[2]

[1] Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI),  *NATO,*  September 2011, http://www.nato.int/ici

[2] "Asserting NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue," *NATO,* http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue1/english/art4.html

When we look at NATO's documents and officials statements and remarks, we see that "ICI is based on some key principles including non discrimination, self-differentiation, inclusiveness, two-way engagement, non imposition, complementarity, and, diversity".[3] However, in practice, this is not really the case. As for "non discrimination", the fact that just six of the Persian Gulf countries were initially invited to participate in ICI is problematic. If NATO, or any other organization, is looking for enhancing its meaningful engagement in this part of the world, it must seek to develop a more balanced relationship with all regional countries as well as stakeholders, which have legitimate interests in the region. It is a grave consequential mistake to follow a pick-and-choose security policy in the region or to formulate a road map in a zero-sum context.

In terms of "self-differentiation", NATO is expected to follow a so-called "tailored approach to the specific needs of each of the ICI partner countries." Its practice, however, is yet another manifestation of the old policy of divide-and-rule, considering how this partnership will "enable interested countries to outline the main short and long-term objectives of their cooperation with the Alliance, in accordance with NATO's objectives and policies." It is evident that the spirit of this policy is neither in accordance with the fact that security is an "indivisible common good" and necessitates a holistic approach to be maintained for all, nor compatible with the notions of inclusiveness, or non imposition.

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NATO's practical failure to sustain inclusiveness is clear from the outset, since some key countries in the region have been left out of this process from the start. It is evident that such a practice is rather *selective* and in sharp contrast with the stated policy. For non imposition, it has been said that "ICI partners are free to choose the pace and extent of their cooperation with NATO." Nonetheless, there is no doubt that this kind of relationship is not a balanced one and "the interested partners" –which are obviously in a weaker position– have no choice but "to outline the main short and long-term objectives of their cooperation with the Alliance, in accordance with NATO's objectives and policies."[3]

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[3] Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), *NATO,* http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-977BA758-04456B56/natolive/topics_58787.htm?.

Taking into account Hobbesian ideas prevailing in NATO and its self-centric legacy (which was clearly manifested in the remarks of the U.S. President George W. Bush at the United Nations General Assembly after 9/11[4], and in remarks by NATO officials[5]), it is evident that there is really no ground or space either for two-way engagement, complementarity, or diversity.[6] The NATO practice in the region and its ramifications so far illustrates that it has failed to provide a platform for sustainable security – i.e. a mechanism by which all the regional countries and stakeholders in this highly strategic region could feel safe and secure. If NATO would like to continue this approach in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, it will certainly face many more challenges and surprises such as those in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen.

### *The Regional Countries*

The ruling governments in the region which have always suffered from a lack of popularity and legitimacy at home and/or abroad, such as in their ways of dealing with territorial disputes with their neighbors, or in terms of their geopolitical weaknesses (size, population, identity, lack of development, defense incapability,), have looked for support from outside the region. Such was the case during the Cold War, and it also is the case today. The recent developments in the region have exacerbated this situation and reinforced insecurity and instability both within ruling elites and among their traditional overseas supporters.

When small size countries in the region compare themselves with big ones, they inherently feel vulnerable and insecure. Unfortunately, the colonial legacy in the region has left as a heritage contentious issues such as territorial disputes, ethnic fault lines, or political rivalries which have been always a matter of concern for ruling elites.

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[4] In his address to the international community, Bush argued: "you are either with us or against."

[5] Particularly visible in the ways they address developments in the regional countries.

[6] See for instance the following:

http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2005/12-december/e1201a.htm.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_22085.htm.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_22060.htm.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_7330.htm.

http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0424a.html.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/events_58545.htm.

http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s061212a.htm

http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s061212a.htm.

http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2006/p06-150e.htm.

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_21466.htm.

http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue3/english/art4.html

http://www.nato-pa.int/default.asp?SHORTCUT=676

A review on remarks and statements of the ruling elites and the analyses and assertions in the media in the region indicates that several events and elements have pushed the small size or geopolitically-weak countries to resort to overseas powers' and NATO's security umbrella. The first and most important element is the five destructive wars which has raged the region in the last few decades – i.e. USSR invasion of Afghanistan (1979), Saddam's invasion of Iran (1980) and his eight-year-proxy-war against this newly freed country from local despotism and foreign hegemony, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait (1990), and American-led invasions against Afghanistan and Iraq at the beginning of the new millennium.

These wars have had devastating ramifications for the region and the world. First, they have provided a breeding ground for extremism, international organized crimes, and terrorism. Second, terrorism and organized crimes has led to new concerns on home security, marine security, and energy security. Third, this situation has led to a sort of cultural and identity crisis which provide the ground for socio-political uprising in the countries of the region. If the ruling elites and their foreign supporters stand against the wish of the people or try to deceive them, it will lead to proliferation of *failed states*. The recent experiences in the region prove that a failed state is a dreamland for organized criminal gangs, extremism, terrorism, the dirty but lucrative business of drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering and all sorts of crimes and corruption which will reinforce each other in a vicious circle which will have far reaching global consequences!

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In short, as the new developments in the MENA region loom on the horizon, it is necessary to ponder if NATO's role, taking into account its practices in the regions, has been beneficial to engineer a viable security structure or to create a sense of security or stability within the region. Since the answer is quite negative, this would be a key question for the regional countries to explore answers for if NATO or overseas powers' interference into security management of the region is ever in their national interests for the long run.

### *The Alternative?*

The indispensable alternative is to get out of the box both mentally and practically. Neither the Hobbesian political mindset, nor the traditional Cold-war style of security management is applicable to issues and challenges of such a fast developing globalized world. Instead of the traditional reliance on endless *'arms race'* and resort to *'overseas security umbrella'* in a *zero-sum* context, which has proved to be futile, the regional countries should take a new approach to address their security dilemma. This new approach needs to be supported by a new paradigm.

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A paradigm that considers security as a common good which should be available to all, poor and rich, small and big, north and south, in a fair and equitable manner and in a win-win context. This paradigm will facilitate cooperation at national, regional, and global levels, because, in this framework, cultural values and diversity of nations will be appreciated and respected. In such a context strategic behavior of States will be different as every player tries to comprehend the legitimate concerns and interests of others, as they would do so.

This will enable the regional countries to initiate grass-root, indigenous, effective mechanisms for addressing the security challenges of today and tomorrow. To guarantee a successful outcome, there would be some criteria to observe:

1- Our approach to security should be a holistic one;
2- Our emphasis should be on home-grown regional mechanisms;
3- Our policy should be all-inclusive, non-discriminatory, fair and balanced, pursuing collective participation in decision-making.

It might be much easier to say than to do, as it has been the case for NATO. However, the changing perspective in the region – in the streets as well as among the new generation of elites – illuminates that this is happening. The pace and the course of change might be different from one country to another, and their up-and-downs surely will be different, as their social, historical, economic, cultural, and political backgrounds are diverse. That is not really a matter of concern. The key point is that the people are on the right side of the history and their peaceful approach, despite brutality of old-style ruling elites and their traditional foreign

supporters' interventions, shows that a new rising political paradigm is on the horizon of the region. In spite of al the rejections and denials coming from those who still would like to remain in the old Hobbesian box and continue to play a zero-sum game, the good news is that the change is inevitable!

We do not need to wait too much to test this assertion.