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**VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES OF  
THE DIALOGUE COUNTRIES**

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The sources of southern ambivalence identified in our 1998 report continue to influence the shape and outlook for the Mediterranean Initiative. The Dialogue countries still have considerable interest in building a more constructive relationship with NATO and in exploring opportunities offered within the framework of the Initiative. But attitudes remain mixed, especially among the Arab members of the Dialogue. The perceptions of the Dialogue countries are shaped by two long-standing concerns: the Arab-Israeli dispute, and frictions in the broader north-south relationship. These concerns are reinforced by uncertainties surrounding the future role and missions of the Alliance as seen from across the Mediterranean. This last consideration is set to grow in significance, and could ultimately give the Dialogue countries a stronger stake in the Initiative.

**CHANGING INTERESTS, DIFFERING ENGAGEMENT**

As the Initiative has evolved, there has arguably been a subtle eastward shift in its center of gravity. Concerns over Algeria and a period of optimism in the Middle East peace process in the early mid-1990s allowed the North African participants in the Initiative, especially Morocco and Tunisia, to figure prominently in the earlier stages of the Dialogue. Engagement with these countries was also a prominent issue in Alliance discussions of Mediterranean security. The Casablanca Summit, similarly, focused attention on the role of the Maghreb in the mid-1990s. In the late 1990s, a noticeable gap has opened in the character of interest and engagement among the Dialogue members. Egypt, Israel, and Jordan have emerged as the most

active participants in Initiative activities. These are also the countries where interest and debate related to the Initiative are most animated, if not always positive. By contrast, the approach in Morocco and Tunisia is, for the moment, more cautious. So, too, in the western Mediterranean, security issues are less prominent on regional as well as north-south agendas. In the eastern Mediterranean, security issues—many of a hard, military nature—are an accepted part of the landscape.

Attitudes toward the Initiative are becoming more highly differentiated, and in some quarters this has produced a desire for “variable geometry” or variable speeds in Initiative activities. Those countries with a desire for closer engagement (e.g., Israel, Jordan, and Mauritania) will seek opportunities to do so, with or without their Dialogue partners. Resource limitations are another factor separating active from less active participants although, in some cases, reluctance to fund activities such as attendance at NATO courses may go hand-in-hand with reluctance to participate on political grounds. In other cases, cost constraints may be perfectly genuine, and a significant limitation as long as Dialogue activities continue to be conducted on a self-funding basis.

## **POLITICAL IMPEDIMENTS**

The political impediments to a more active and effective dialogue are well known, and continue to emerge in official and unofficial discussions. The troubled status of the Middle East peace process has clearly been obstacle number one. It has made participation in the Dialogue difficult—although not impossible—for Arab members in fora with Israeli counterparts.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the confidence-building aspect of the Initiative is not fully developed, and lacks a multilateral dimension—a key drawback, given the predominance of south-south risks in the Mediterranean security environment. The results of the 1999 Israeli elections, and promising indications on the Israeli-

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<sup>1</sup>In the NATO context, notable exceptions have included the Civil Emergency Planning seminar on seismic risks held in Athens during 1998, scientific affairs colloquia, and the Rome and Valencia conferences to discuss the future of the Initiative.

Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks, hold the potential for change in the climate for all Mediterranean initiatives.

Lack of progress in the peace process also complicated north-south relations in a broader sense. Critics in the south often ascribed the stalemate in the peace process, especially on the Palestinian track, to lack of European and American pressure on Israel. NATO, in this context, can be portrayed, however incorrectly, as a club of Western countries who have not done enough to foster resolution of the dispute. In more specific terms, Arab-Israeli tensions also constrain the agenda for north-south security dialogue. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles should, by any measure, be among the central issues for discussion in a Mediterranean setting. But WMD issues, for Egypt and other Arab Dialogue states, are seen first and foremost through the lens of the strategic competition with Israel. European and American WMD concerns, by contrast, rarely focus on Israeli programs, concentrating instead on the risky combination of proliferation and unstable or aggressive regimes. Israel's unconventional capabilities are no more of a concern to most Western observers and policymakers than the nuclear arsenals of Britain or France. Many in the Dialogue states view this as evidence of a double standard. The result continues to be a difficult dialogue on this important issue.

The possible re-opening of Israeli-Syrian negotiations could change the landscape in the peace process. Movement toward a comprehensive peace would transform the outlook for the Initiative. Under these conditions, the Dialogue could even come to play a useful role as part of the peace process (although in this case, there may be issues of coordination and possible overlap with the "multilateral track," above all with the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS)).<sup>2</sup> Conditions that would allow for a full resumption of the peace process, including negotiations with Syria and Lebanon, might also allow for consideration of their membership in the NATO Dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup>ACRS negotiations among Israel and Arab countries across the Middle East have been stalled for several years, as much a victim of the Nonproliferation Treaty review and its aftermath as of the state of the peace process.

Apart from criticism arising from the peace process, NATO remains a controversial topic in most Dialogue countries. Suspicion of an organization composed, as Middle Eastern critics might say, of former colonial powers and a leading actor in the Cold War, is not limited to uninformed public opinion. Many knowledgeable observers, including some political elites in the southern Mediterranean, remain skeptical of NATO as an institution. The Alliance role in defense of Muslim communities in Bosnia and Kosovo has not gone unnoticed. But many regret the delay in Western action in the former Yugoslavia. The active Western debate on international security sometimes produces analyses that overstate risks emanating from the Mediterranean, and may seem to imply the rise of a new Cold War along north-south lines.<sup>3</sup> Thoughtful analysts and leaderships reject these notions, but there can be little doubt that Samuel Huntington and others have had an effect on the atmosphere for dialogue with NATO.

As the earlier discussion emphasizes, the question of how NATO is perceived is becoming more troubling as the Alliance evolves and takes on new functional missions. Differences within the Alliance may exist over such issues as the proper geographical extent of NATO responsibilities and international mandates, but to observers on the geographic periphery of the Alliance there appears little doubt that one way or another NATO will be playing a more active role outside the treaty area. Dialogue-country perceptions in this context are characterized by considerable interest and suspicion; they are not entirely negative. Europe has an elaborate security architecture and few threats. The southern Mediterranean has many security challenges and no functioning security architecture. For countries such as Israel, at one extreme, cooperation within a transatlantic security framework may be more attractive than participation in regionally based arrangements. For others—Egypt seems the exemplar—regional arrangements are attractive and a natural outlet for a very capable multilateral diplomacy. Smaller states in North Africa may wish to balance the public acceptance problems of ties to NATO with the desire for closer relations as a hedge against regional instability.

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<sup>3</sup>Or rather a return to the very first cold war—the “*guerra fria*” between Spain and the Ottoman Empire, between Islam and the West.

Southern attitudes toward membership in the Dialogue are evolving. With the exception of Israel, there is a general sense that a more inclusive approach would be more natural in terms of Mediterranean geopolitics, and might also give additional weight to the southern side of the Dialogue. As it stands, the Initiative is of necessity a multi-bilateral discussion between a highly organized and capable Western institution and a group of states—some regionally powerful, others not—on the other side of the Mediterranean. The lack of a concerted approach, and the absence of some key regional states, is a source of reservation for some Dialogue participants. Under current conditions, the inclusion of Libya, Syria, and Lebanon is probably impossible and unwarranted. But Algeria is a less straightforward case; there is a mounting sense that Algeria is worth considering as a participant. It remains to be seen whether Dialogue countries with a key stake in this issue, including Morocco, would be supportive (we discuss the pros and cons of Algerian participation in more detail in the final chapter). Tunisia and Egypt seem favorably disposed to the early inclusion of Algeria. As political circumstances evolve, and with movement in the peace process, the question of some form of participation for the Palestinians is almost certain to arise.

## **PRACTICAL IMPEDIMENTS**

Comments from Dialogue states reveal some further practical concerns. First, as often noted, there has been no shortage of Mediterranean initiatives, including several with a security component. When unofficial, “second track” meetings are included, the variety of north-south fora in the Mediterranean is impressive. As most observers on both sides of the Mediterranean would agree, this level of activity is preferable to the strategic neglect of previous decades. But it does give rise to mounting confusion about roles and agendas, and as some frequent participants describe it, “dialogue fatigue.” Moreover, disenchantment with aspects of cooperation in one fora (e.g., the Euro-Mediterranean partnership) can easily affect the climate in other settings, including the NATO Initiative. Thus, discussions about regional peacekeeping may be influenced by the state of trade negotiations: both are part of the complex of north-south relations in the Mediterranean, and both have consequences for security, broadly defined. Greater emphasis on practical cooperation in

the defense area—a core competence for the Alliance—can help to differentiate the NATO Initiative from other activities.<sup>4</sup>

Second, there is a perception, especially among the smaller Dialogue states, that some exceptions to the self-funding principle must be made if the Alliance is serious about promoting the Initiative. Participation by Dialogue countries in programs at the NATO Defense College and Oberammergau has been good.<sup>5</sup> But not all available places have been filled. Jordan, Egypt, and Israel were the only Dialogue countries participating in courses at Oberammergau.

Third, there is some concern that Dialogue countries have not been involved early or actively enough in the development of the Initiative's work plan by the Mediterranean Cooperation Group (MCG). For example, some Dialogue members were apparently unaware of details surrounding the establishment of NATO contact embassies in their countries. Greater Dialogue-country involvement in the design of Initiative activities would be welcomed and could generate additional interest in participation.

Fourth, some participants have raised the question of the appropriate level for the Dialogue. Several among the Dialogue countries feel that the symbolism of meetings at the Council level, at least on occasion, would make a difference in how the Dialogue with NATO is received. At the same time, they are aware that an upgraded dialogue along these lines may only make sense in a true multilateral context (i.e., with both Arab and Israeli participation). Multi-bilateral meetings at this level are likely to prove impractical, given competing demands at NATO.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND PREFERENCES

A discussion of Dialogue-country attitudes toward the Initiative can easily give a negative impression of its status and prospects that would be misleading. Given the limitations imposed by the political environment, significant progress has been made in fostering

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<sup>4</sup>See the excellent discussion in Alberto Bin, "Strengthening Cooperation in the Mediterranean: NATO's Contribution," *NATO Review*, Winter 1998.

<sup>5</sup>All six countries participated in NATO Defense College courses in the spring of 1998.

information-sharing and dialogue. Moreover, Dialogue countries do have distinct views on how they would like to see the Initiative evolve, beyond the practical issues noted above.

All the active participants prefer that the Dialogue evolve toward more region-specific activities. In essence, this means an agenda focusing on security issues in the Mediterranean, as well as practical steps in such areas as crisis management with application to the region. To the extent that NATO, as a whole, pays greater attention to security issues in the south, this evolution may be a more natural endeavor for the Alliance. Specific issues that could be addressed in this regard include WMD proliferation—controversial, but central—energy security, terrorism and counter-terrorism, civil emergency planning, peacekeeping, and air and maritime search and rescue.

Southern participants, especially Egypt, Israel, and Jordan, would also like to see the information and dialogue aspects of the Initiative augmented by practical forms of cooperation. A PFP for the Mediterranean is not necessarily the goal, but more PFP-like activity would be welcomed and could demonstrate the tangible benefits of links with NATO. An evolution in this direction will also require a degree of variable geometry or a multi-speed approach. Sufficient interest now exists among certain members of the Dialogue that a lowest common denominator approach may be unduly limiting. There should be greater scope to pursue more intensive cooperation, and a greater degree of differentiation where appropriate.