NATO-ISRAEL COOPERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Zsolt CSEPREGI*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shifted NATO's attention to its eastern flank and raised the importance of collective defence. However, the transatlantic alliance has spent long years to build up its reputation as a security provider in the Middle East as well, in the southern strategic direction. The current paper analyses the state of NATO's efforts on the southern flank, using its partnership with Israel as a case study. It argues that, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, robust NATO cooperation in the South, having Israel as a key pillar, is more important than ever, even though it is a low priority on NATO's agenda in 2023 because of the ongoing war.

Keywords: *NATO; Israel; Middle East; Russia-Ukraine war; security policy; security cooperation; alliance theory.*

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is undergoing a constant transformation to adapt to the current security environment and serve its members' interests. In the post-Cold War era, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a superpower adversary, the importance of the southern strategic direction has elevated compared to the eastern one. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has refocused NATO's attention to its eastern flank. However, this paper highlights that the eastern and southern threats are once again interlinked to a degree unprecedented since the early decades of the Cold War. NATO provides different answers on the differing challenges from the two main strategic directions, and, in those answers, the role

* Zsolt CSEPREGI is a PhD Student in the field of Military Sciences within the University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: csepregi.zsolt@uni-nke.hu

of partnerships is varying as well. While the eastern flank is under threat in terms of collective defence, in the south, cooperative security and crisis prevention and management present the main tasks. This paper analyses what role the southern strategic direction plays in the security environment which has developed after the start of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. The paper argues that, since the security threat presented by Russia will not dissipate even with an envisioned end of the war in Ukraine, NATO needs low-cost solutions to achieve its security goals in the south and partnerships are exactly the tools for that.

The study utilises the case of the NATO-Israel partnership to demonstrate the opportunities in southern security partnerships, while also highlighting the limitations of the partnerships' scope in the south. Israel aims at defending itself on its own as much as possible, maintaining its freedom of decision, while also reaping the benefits of being part of a wide and deep security partnership. The paper employs the alliance theory to explain Israel's approach *vis-à-vis* NATO. The theory explains the main factors that indicate whether a state is interested in forming treaty alliances or solely maintaining flexible partnerships. The paper demonstrates that it is the type of "threat" that motivates a particular state to choose one or the other, creating in effect a mid-tier security partnership scope, between formal alliances and ad-hoc cooperation. Beyond the theoretical approach, the study highlights the practical importance and the potential future of NATO's developing partnership with Israel in limiting threats coming from the southern direction by focusing on the last three decades of the NATO-Israel partnership. The paper demonstrates that NATO's best solution to guarantee its security is to support the self-interests of its southern partners, such as Israel, both on a bilateral and multilateral basis. This way, the partner states can themselves provide security in their region, and, by extension, stabilise and guard NATO's southern flank. This is true both in mitigating instability and the threat stemming from terrorism and lack of state control, while also balancing potential regional hegemons that could present an eventual threat to NATO members as well.

1. NATO's Southern Strategic Direction in the Context of the Russia-Ukraine War

NATO emerged in 1949 as the main security alliance to confront the Soviet Union and its allies and safeguard Western democracies from the threat of a Communist invasion. While this eastward-facing security perception might have dominated, NATO was never solely looking only in one direction. The Soviet Union was also threatening to directly attack the North American NATO allies through the North Pole and to expand its reach in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region, which could have led to a situation potentially enveloping the

European NATO allies. A hypothetical "grand alliance" of the Warsaw Pact states, and an Arab Socialist bloc never became a concrete fact, which does not mean that strategic planners in the West did not have to concern themselves with the possibility. As this paper highlights Israeli role in NATO's south, it is interesting to note that one reason that the threat of a unified Arab Socialist bloc never manifested on an existential level is the role Israel played as a bulwark against an emerging Egyptian-Syrian alliance during the first 25 years of the Cold War. As the bipolar world order came to an end, the existential threat from the east subsided for almost a generation. Soviet troops were withdrawn 1,500 kilometres and the borders of Russia, the core successor state of the Soviet Union, were also 1,000 kilometres further to the east than before. NATO became an alliance of like-minded states furthering the rules-based world order and membership expansion became a vehicle for democratising Central and Eastern European states. While the threat presented by Russia subsided, the southern strategic direction manifested worrying trends with the gradual dissolution of certain Arab states and persistent intercommunal fighting and radicalization in the MENA region. The civil war in Algeria and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all showed to NATO allies that, after the Soviet Union's collapse and the expansion of the Western democratic bloc, security threats emerging from the south gradually became more pressing priorities for NATO (Lesser 2019, 1). Iraq's invasion of Kuwait also demonstrated that, however unlikely, the emergence of a Middle Eastern regional hegemon, or at least the intent from some states, can never be considered impossible.

NATO is a political and military alliance in which its members are primarily sworn to provide collective defence guarantees to each other. However, the above security environment during and after the 1990s, on the one hand, enabled and, on the other, forced NATO to adopt two more core tasks; that is, cooperative security and crisis prevention and management in its neighbourhood (Keil 2022, 2). These are tailored to provide stability in regions plagued by insecurity, such as MENA, and do everything in their power to avoid a situation in which a collective defence threat might emerge from these areas. Collective defence is the strongest type of binding commitment that any country can have towards another, which is why it is the backbone of NATO as a political and military alliance. However, in terms of crisis prevention and cooperative security tasks jointly undertaken with states outside of NATO, these are flexible partnerships adjusted for the needs of the common security threat. NATO cannot have members beyond the North American and European areas, but it must have partners in the MENA region to fulfil the goals set in the post-Cold War era to stabilise or at least create a bulwark against the threats emerging from the region. In the east, in terms of strong states, Russia is posing a military threat to the alliance, but, from the south, non-traditional security challenges persist because of the lack of strong states. Therefore, state stability and the provision of security

is needed in strategic locations to counterbalance the instability encompassing the MENA region. In a second step of course, an instable region can be dominated by an emerging regional hegemon, may it be an existing anti-status quo state such as Iran or a non-state radical entity as the so-called Islamic State. This is why the two main strategic directions required different NATO approaches, one built on collective defence of its members with a secondary role to partners in the east, while in the south, collective defence is of secondary importance, but partnerships are vital.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made the security environment and NATO's strategic planning much more difficult, as the renewed existential threat from the east was coupled with the persistent instability in the south, aggravated by Russian military presence both in overt (as in Syria) or covert (various Wagner Group deployments) forms. The threat gradually expanded from Russia's invasion in Georgia in 2008, as well as the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and proxy warfare in the Donbass region.

NATO has steadily developed its defence and deterrence posture focusing on the eastern strategic direction and shifting back to collective defence as the main focus (Smura and Oleksiejuk 2021, 35). However, the launching of the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, was, without a doubt, the dawn of a new era in the global security architecture. There can be important arguments regarding the feasibility of a victorious Russia expanding its military conquest to Baltic States or beyond in the future. Regardless of feasibility, the possibility is undoubtable and military planning must take such possibilities into consideration, even while NATO members first of all support Ukraine to defend itself from the Russian aggression.

NATO had its *reason d'etre* renewed in 2022 and collective defence came again to the forefront in the agenda. How to align this core task with the persistent importance of crisis prevention and management and cooperative security in the south? NATO's answer is that these goals can be achieved through strong partnerships with regional states. This intention is clear from the 2022 Strategic Concept even if, for understandable reasons, the southern strategic direction receives much less attention in the document than the effects and response to Russia's invasion on Ukraine.

It is clear from the Strategic Concept that NATO still does regard the threats from the south a vital security interest and aims at countering them through crisis prevention and management jointly with regional partners (NATO 2022, 9-10.). It is also pointed out in the document that Russia's threat also manifests itself with various activities conducted in the Mediterranean, including military build-up. However, the document lacks a consolidation of the various partnership frameworks NATO has built over the previous three decades. Before the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war, this was one expectation from the 2022 Strategic Concept, naturally overshadowed by the war. The unsettled nature of parallel cooperation platforms makes it more difficult to align security interests and actions with the partners but

creating a "global blueprint" for aligning interests should be considered a key task for the alliance (NATO Reflection Group 2020, 58.). NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept did not make a step towards these goals, as much more urgent tasks needed action, but this does not mean that the southern strategic direction is not relevant, only that these tasks will need to be completed in the following years.

2. The Interests of Southern NATO Partners in the Current Security Environment

Firstly, it is important to address the question of why this study utilises alliance theory to explain NATO's partnerships in the MENA region in general and the NATO-Israel cooperation in particular. Alliance theory can be applied on the higher end of the spectrum to treaty alliances encompassing mutual security guarantees, when each country in an alliance commits itself to defending the partners in case of an armed aggression waged on any member. For NATO, this commitment is enshrined in its founding Treaty in Article 5, which extends to alliance members, but not to the organisation's partners. However, we argue that alliance theory can be utilised even without a security guarantee, as cooperation and support short of a security guarantee can be enough to fulfil the goals of a security partnership.

Nations build alliances and cooperate in the security domain in order to safeguard against a more powerful state or coalition of states and to deter the potential aggressors. The goal is security, and collective defence is a tool to achieve that, but not the only one available. Security partnership frameworks signify an intermediate level of commitment between *ad hoc* cooperation and formal alliances. Security partnerships also have the benefit of creating less tension and need to counterbalance than an extension of formal alliances. In addition, they are more flexible in their nature in terms of constraining the foreign and security policy of the participating actors (Snyder 1990, 108). This is a vital factor when it comes to Middle Eastern security environment. The study, therefore, analyses what level of security cooperation is suitable for the NATO-Israel partnership and whether such a framework can serve as a model for the broader southern partnerships.

The study explains the logic of the NATO-Israel partnership based on the Realist theories of alliance formation. A state has three options to answer a security threat; that is, it can balance the aggressor, pass the responsibility of balancing to another state or coalition (buck-passing), or it can join the potential aggressor utilising a bandwagoning strategy (Mearsheimer 2014). In the classic theory of Realism, the behaviour of states is defined by the relative distribution of power. Based on this pattern, the countries build corresponding alliances and develop their military power. The example of Israel, however, clearly demonstrates Stephen M. Walt's point that global or regional order is not defined by the allocation of raw power, but by the

threat that each country (or alliance) presents to another (Walt 1985, 9). This threat is constructed by multiple factors, including power, offensive intent, and capability and distance. These factors decide in the end how big a threat one country perceives another. Utilising this theory, the NATO-Israel partnership is decided from the Israeli side, by the perceived security threats, and what kind of support and guarantees they intend on getting from a partner like such as NATO. The complication arisen from those threats can originate directly from malign regional states or indirectly as well from the actions benign partners, meaning that the later could drag Israel into unwanted conflicts or limit freedom of decision through alliance/ partnership entrapment (Lanoszka 2015, 242).

The ultimate goal of all nations is guaranteeing the security of the state and its population, while maintaining a nationally accepted degree of sovereignty. No state is completely sovereign; as external constraints limit their freedom of decision. Some countries have greater freedom, such as the great powers, and some have less, such as small nations, or virtually none when they are under occupation by a foreign power or have disintegrated. Sovereignty, however, can be limited not only by external hostile forces, but, apparently, well-meaning foreign partners or allies as well. This is the reason for which a distinction must be made between alliances and partnerships. In general, alliances provide greater security guarantees than partnerships, but they also carry greater costs in constraints. Therefore, the decision has two variables that each country or coalition must answer: what degree of security support it requires and what level of freedom of decision it is willing to sacrifice in order to obtain and keep those guarantees. The highest level of commitment resides in the form of a mutual defence, which is the core task of collective defence in NATO. This also signifies the most serious obligation for a participating country. However, more flexible forms of cooperation exist, these partnerships cover cooperative security and aid in crisis management and prevention. The security support is lesser than in a formal alliance, however, the obligation is also much less constraining. The goal is the same; that is, balancing against a more powerful country; the question is whether a security partnership with NATO can be a sufficient solution for a Middle Eastern country. This paper's answer is a resounding yes.

The security environment of the Middle East in 2023 is a complex structure, dominated by five regional great powers (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) and a number of middle and small powers. Interconnected with the state level, persistent instability and extremism is affecting all actors, even the most powerful countries in the region. Countries waging overt and/or covert battles against competing states and sub-state actors in a constantly shifting balance of power. Unlike more traditional security threats that NATO can counter through defence and deterrence, Middle Eastern states require flexibility, because threats are flexible as well. While this paper does not aim to provide a detailed analysis of

the Middle Eastern regional power struggle, from a NATO perspective, the threats are twofold: a state level threat presented by an anti-status quo power, Iran, and a sub-state level by terrorist organisation, such as the so-called Islamic State. The Iranian threat is vital, as it has four different but interlinked aspects: the nuclear threat, conventional forces, sub-state proxies' activities, and the Russian efforts to undermine the rules-based world order and the security of Western states. NATO can employ tools connected to its cooperative security and crisis prevention and management core tasks to support Middle Eastern states to balance against these common threats. It does not require anything in return, only the logical outcome that the southern partners follow their own national interests. By demonstrating how the above logic works in the case of NATO-Israeli partnership, we argue that this is the prime model to secure NATO southern flank.

3. Israel's Case as a NATO Partner

During the Cold War, Israel played an important role in the competition between the two superpowers. Israel was firmly on the side of the transatlantic alliance while its enemies (Syria, Iraq and until the 1970s Egypt) were supported by the Soviets. Regardless, we cannot speak of intense NATO-Israel relations (unlike US-Israel cooperation) in this era, as the alliance was focusing on collective defence and the direct threat presented by the Warsaw Pact. With the end of the Cold War, NATO launched a more robust Middle East policy. In 1990, just as the threat from the Soviet Union was rapidly unravelling, Iraqi aggression on Kuwait signified an initial attempt to form a Middle Eastern regional hegemon. This development was alarming not only to regional states, but also to the members of the transatlantic alliance. During the war, the United States called on Israel not to react to Iraqi ballistic missile attacks in order not to alienate the US's Arab partners from cooperating on defeating the Saddam regime. The complex dynamics between the Western states and the uneasy Israeli-Arab relations still shape the NATO-MENA cooperation. In 1994, NATO established the Mediterranean Dialogue in order to facilitate security cooperation and political discourse in the region. The Oslo Process enabled Israeli participation in Middle Eastern multilateral initiatives, however, the need to accommodate the Arab states' misgivings to publicly associate with Israel always served as a cap on relations. NATO followed this rule by not advancing relations faster with Israel than with other regional states, effectively establishing a "greatest common denominator" policy in developing partnerships in the south (Steiner 2017). The Mediterranean Dialogue naturally had its achievements in the field of practical cooperation, however, after two and a half decades, the level of political consultation is low and was reduced to ambassadorial level, as such the hopes were not fulfilled.

Given the constraints on multilateral cooperation framework, both Israel and NATO were looking for alternative solutions to make the most of their partnership. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, Israeli capabilities in crisis prevention and management became much more important to NATO than before. Two options were floated to bring out the latent possibilities: Israeli membership in NATO or a more conservative approach of taking out NATO-Israel relations from the constraint of the multilateral platform and enhance its bilateral aspects. Israeli membership in NATO was envisioned in a transitory period during the first decade of the century, and, even though in hindsight it seems implausible, significant politicians voiced the idea. As regards NATO, José Maria Aznar mentioned it as part of creating a global NATO, together with Japan, Australia, and other like-minded countries. From the Israeli side, Uzi Arad, former national security advisor, promoted the idea among others. A global NATO could have been a useful trajectory in the development of the alliance in moving away from collective defence and taking a global role in cooperative security and crisis management following the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. While this initiative did not get traction, it was a useful maximalist approach to serve as a catalyst in embarking on a closer bilateral partnership with Israel, while also maintaining the multilateral framework in parallel.

The milestone of NATO-Israel relations was the Individual Cooperation Programme (ICP) in 2006, the first such agreement signed with a country outside of Europe. The agreement gave Israel a head start over other Middle Eastern states in many areas to strengthen its cooperation with NATO. The format also served NATO interests, as it enabled the utilisation of Israeli military knowhow and capabilities tailored to the needs of the mission and goal. Israel benefited from having a well-understood bilateral relation in which it maintained its freedom of decision (Arad 2006, 6). In practice, this means that NATO keeps the Mediterranean Dialogue alive, which promises equal treatment of all partners, while developing more intensive cooperation with some countries, including Israel through, ICPs. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept was written in a changing security environment which redefined the relations with Israel. The concept, written after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, but before the 2014 Russian aggression on Ukraine, put a lot of emphasis on the region spanning from North Africa through the Middle East (including the Persian Gulf) to the borderlands with Russia. The 2011 NATO Partnership Policy offered to the members of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation the possibility to access deeper and more operational partnership frameworks (NATO 2011, 2-3). During the 2010s, the Russian and Middle Eastern threats had dual effects on NATO's relations with Israel. On the one hand, the 2014 aggression by Russia reinvigorated NATO efforts to secure its eastern flank and collective defence once again became not only the main, but also the most present task. On the other hand, the process of the "Arab Spring" led to several civil wars. In addition, the regional

instability, fragmentation, and radicalisation proved that the southern strategic direction remains highly relevant even in parallel with a reinvigorated eastern threat. The partnership with Israel was strengthened in practical security cooperation and in political consultation as well. Mainly in naval cooperation, we had witnessed a rapid development, as the now well-equipped and highly capable Israeli navy became a valued partner in NATO's naval efforts (Lappin 2017). The Israeli representation on NATO HQ in Brussels in 2016 showed that the level of cooperation reached a higher level.

4. The Future of NATO-Israel Cooperation

In the above assessment, we have briefly described the evolution and logic of NATO's approach to the Middle East and in partnering with Israel. What are the factors which positively or negatively affect the partnership in 2023 and beyond?

From the Israeli point of view, *the biggest obstacle* for developing the cooperation is the potential for reduced Israeli freedom of decision and the erosion of the inclination of defending the country on its own (Freilich 2018, 305). Furthermore, the eventual participation in conflicts in which Israel does not want to fight, or not in complete agreement with NATO (entrapment) also discourage a formal alliance or a too close alignment. Two prime examples of these are the conflicts with Russia and China, and their Middle Eastern presence. Israel is perfectly aware that the Russian military presence in Syria poses a challenge for its assertive policy and conduct there, therefore, it is in constant dialogue with Russian forces in order to continue, albeit with certain constraints, its strikes against Iranian, Hezbollah, and Syrian targets, which could pose a threat on its Northern border (Kaduri 2023, 8). Israel can aspire to the ambition level of significantly contributing to regional stability in the Middle East, but it cannot and does not want to be involved in a distant conflict with Russia. The relations with China are even more complicated, as Israel and the US are in a debate on Israel's economic and technological cooperation with China, which it had to limit (Oded, Eilam, Orion, Shavit, Mil-Man, and Fadlon 2023, 15-19). However, it is highly doubtful that Israel wants to further alienate the second power on the globe that can provide significant support to Iran and other regional enemies. The Israeli army is primarily preparing to confront regional forces, a potential regional hegemon or alliance, currently Iran and its allies, clients, secondarily to all manifestation of terrorism (Israeli Defense Forces 2018, 16-19). It does not stand and cannot stand ready to be engulfed in a great power war outside the Middle East. In addition, it is not in NATO's interest to be dragged into Middle Eastern conflicts. Israeli military actions, due to the Israeli military strategy's preference for preventive and pre-emptive strikes, always carry an escalatory potential.

The second obstacle is Turkey's role in NATO and Ankara's regional aspirations connected to reshaping the Middle Eastern balance of power. Ankara is not interested

in an overt Israeli presence in NATO, as the Hellenic-Israeli axis can be a strong counterforce in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the Turkish-Israeli relations change dynamically according to the interests of the two states, and therefore, Turkey is not interested in completely blocking pragmatic cooperation between NATO and Israel, as it can serve its interests as well. It is also worth noting that Israel cannot readily share sensitive information with NATO if it knows that they can get to hostile actors in Turkey, and indirectly to Hamas or other actors. In addition, it is also true that Israel cannot counterbalance all forces in the Middle East alone, therefore, having Turkey as a partner is useful for Israel as well, to a certain degree.

Finally, NATO itself must be mentioned as a limiting factor, as the exact role of the military alliance is also questioned among the alliance members themselves. Therefore, we cannot speak of a unified Middle East strategy of NATO, there are only general aims, with Member States having differing goals in the MENA (Biscop 2020). On NATO's part, the exact goal of the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation is not clear, especially considering the re-emergence of the importance of the eastern flank. This in between nature of the southern strategic direction limits the efficiency of NATO's activity. Moving towards a global NATO, in which crisis prevention and management and cooperative security would have to come to the forefront among NATO's core tasks, has been taken off the agenda. This does not mean that these tasks became irrelevant after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, but rather the opposite is true. If NATO must concentrate most of its forces literally on its eastern flank, then it is even more important to have partner states that are able to carry the weight of securing the alliance's southern flank with support. This is a beneficial goal from NATO also on a cost-efficiency basis. The repeatedly promised restructuring of NATO's partnership system understandably did not happen in 2022, which only means that this task must be carried out in the future.

Regardless of all the factors limiting NATO-Israel cooperation, the rapid strengthening of relations proves that there must be more positive factors supporting the partnership. Following the hypothesis of the paper, by considering these factors through the lens of alliance theory, we should get to the current level and trajectory of NATO-Israel cooperation. The first is Israeli political will. Alongside maintaining the freedom of decision, the Israeli political and security elite is aware of the limits of their state to protect itself and the importance of external partners (Eizenkot-Siboni 2019, 10). In the end, Israel does not aim to balance the potential regional hegemon and its clients alone. Therefore, it is interested in sharing the burden. Israel does not have the option to bandwagon with a potential hegemon, so it chooses to partly balance, partly buck-pass the threat. Cooperation with NATO is a useful tool in this sense, in terms of practical cooperation and through political consultation as well. Israel receives support from the strongest military alliance in the world in order to balance regional threats, but it can also maintain its freedom of decision

when actively waging its campaign between the wars strategy and degrading Iranian and its client forces. Israel also buck-passes some of the burden, firstly to the United States and also to Turkey, which is the only NATO country with major land borders in the Middle East. It is not that Israel would not be interested in a firm security guarantee if it came under attack, but it is in no position to offer such guarantees to any other state due to its constraints and the potential for a harmful entrapment by an alliance. An ever-closer partnership with NATO, short of membership and binding security commitments, is the best choice Israel can make when it comes to a military cooperation, but this is still a very beneficial offer for Israel.

For NATO, Israel is a key partner, especially in naval missions, missile defence, and cyberwarfare. Alongside these concrete areas, Israel is a bulwark against regional hegemonic aspirants in its region that would be hostile to the transatlantic alliance. As already mentioned, Israel, while it is a regional great power in military terms, it cannot itself aspire to be the regional hegemon in the Middle East (Mearsheimer 2014, 61). However, a strong Israel could also not be cost-efficiently subjugated by an aspiring potential hegemon and continue with dominating the Middle East. In other words, Israel is a high capability, low resolve security partner, which means that it is useful for deterrence and regional force projection purposes but not for offering security assurances to other actors. It is also in NATO's interest that it does not demand any binding commitments from Israel, because thereby Israel remains a flexible actor in the Middle Eastern balancing process.

NATO does not have to take any responsibility for Israel's assertive military actions in the region, therefore it can serve as a constant unfettered deterrent against all other anti-status quo actors. This policy also indirectly supports other regional NATO partners, as an independent Israel effectively follows an ambiguous conventional military policy; a hostile power can never know what step would initiate an Israeli retaliation. Israel's dual nature as a great power, its strengths and weaknesses in this unique combination make it an outstanding partner for NATO. Israel aims at defending itself on its own as much as possible, effectively doing the work for NATO in providing security in its region.

Finally, the changed security environment provides the utmost relevance for Israel-NATO cooperation. Russia's military presence in the Middle East means that a collective defence challenge can emerge from the southern strategic direction as well (NATO Reflection Group 2020, 34). This has become a grave concern especially after the Russian invasion in Ukraine during which Russia and Iran developed their cooperation to an unprecedented level, by Iran allegedly supplying drones to Russia. Israeli activities in the scope of its "campaign between wars," which degrade Iranian and allied forces and military assets in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran itself, is a useful asset to NATO in weakening this emerging anti-status quo partnership. Beyond the campaign between wars, which is Israel's way of grey zone military activity, Israel

presents a threat of going to full-scale war against Iran, providing deterrence in the Middle East without direct NATO commitments.

5. A Blueprint for NATO-MENA Security Partnerships?

While highlighting the uniqueness of Israel as a military power that can indirectly serve NATO interests explains the state and trajectory of this particular partnership, the question remains whether this can be a useful blueprint for other MENA states.

A comprehensive framework (the Mediterranean Dialogue), coupled with an individual partnership agreement with each partner states, remains the best approach for NATO to guarantee security in its southern flank (Lesser 2020, 18). This method enables NATO members to cost efficiently station forces in the Mediterranean, and primarily work through southern partners that aim to serve their own security interests. A multilateral framework is useful for coordinating joint actions in the Mediterranean and the Gulf region, when the "greatest common denominator" can lead to mutually beneficial missions and projects. When it comes to higher ambitions for cooperation, the individual partnerships, short of mutual defence agreements, also work for virtually all MENA and Gulf states, apart from Syria, Libya, and Yemen, which are still in a civil war and are, therefore, outlying cases for now. For different reasons, all MENA states strongly oppose any suspected foreign attempt to constrain their freedom of decision, similarly to Israel. MENA states are, however, interested in receiving support for their own security providing activities, and, due to the persistent distrust among them, cannot pass on the opportunity to get NATO support, especially if their regional competitors already benefit from it.

Turning back to alliance theory and the three choices that a nation can choose to guarantee its own security, the attractiveness of NATO partnerships can be explained thoroughly. The main threat to non-potential hegemonic MENA states are the proximate hostile powers and entrapment by an outside alliance is a threat only in the extreme. Against the primary threat of potential hegemonic ambitions bandwagoning is an unattractive strategy, as it leads to loss of sovereignty, and there are no effective regional hegemons to bandwagon with, only anti-status quo potential hegemonic powers. Any bandwagoning attempt would turn the particular state into part of a sphere of influence and a warzone, as we can witness in the Syrian case. Buck-passing is only partly an option, because, with the US less-interested to commit conventional forces to fight wars in the Middle East, the only other power to buck-pass a threat to is another potential regional hegemon, again creating an entanglement in the regional conflicts between the most assertive military powers, without the added support provided by the balancing strategy. The best option, therefore, remains balancing and receiving as much external support as possible without being entrapped by constraining security commitments or creating inflexible

structures leading to more tensions in the region. Also, as alliance theory suggests, successful balancing can only happen with a partner which is not able to dominate the balancing state (Walt 1985, 5). This is why NATO partnership is attractive to Israel and can be to other MENA states as well, as NATO does not aim at dominating its partners, but looks for cost-effective security solutions in the south. Furthermore, any state that receives external support gets a power advantage and therefore the potential threat it represents to other regional states grows. All actors are therefore interested in receiving outside support in order to, at minimum, maintain the regional balance of power. NATO is not interested in providing capabilities which can aggravate existing tensions between states, such as the enmity between Morocco and Algeria, but in working on initiatives which support stability. Therefore, NATO's partnerships in the south, while beneficial for the alliance and the neighbours as well must be guided by a careful, holistic strategy in order to not leave gaps in countering threats, while also taking into consideration the sensitivities of the partner states, and their particular threat perceptions.

Conclusions

Without a doubt, Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has made NATO's eastern flank and collective defence the alliance's top priority. This does not mean, however, that the southern strategic direction will become absent in NATO planning, just that it will require more cost-effective solutions to achieve goals on that front.

Security partnerships are tools through which NATO can achieve its limited strategic aims, when it can build upon the self-interests of southern states. This paper demonstrated that partnerships suit well MENA states that require external support, but are reluctant to engage in binding security commitments and have complex threat perception, which needed to be taken into careful consideration.

The example of the NATO-Israel cooperation, which is the most advanced of the partnerships, can serve as an example of building towards a dual-track approach, having a multilateral framework and tailored bilateral partnerships at the same time. This approach, however, needs more investment from NATO once capabilities are freed up from focusing on Russia's invasion in Ukraine. First and foremost, the investment must come in the form of aligning existing frameworks in an overarching partnership strategy, including the Mediterranean Dialogue, Istanbul Cooperation, and the Partnership for Peace and set their relationship with the ICPs. NATO must also reassess opportunities which were opened by the signing of the Abraham Accords and possible normalisation of relations by further Arab states with Israel.

The paper argues that the logic clearly supports more robust southern partnership for NATO. However, its inherent potential depends on a clear understanding on their limits and the intent of the partner states, upon which a new framework can be built in the coming years.

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