NATO’s Mediterranean Dialog
The Emergence of a Front Line in the War on Terrorism
Dick A. Leurdiijk

Introduction

In early 2004, the newly appointed Secretary-General of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, said in one of his first public statements that he intended to boost the so-called "Mediterranean Dialog" in a drive to bolster the war on terrorism. In his perception, the heightened threat of terrorism meant that NATO’s seven Mediterranean partners – Israel, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Jordan and Egypt – had a common interest in cooperating with NATO, saying: “We face common threats. Terrorism is not a threat that is directed exclusively at NATO countries; it is as much a problem for those countries as it is for NATO,” adding: “It’s clear that the Mediterranean Dialog is taken very seriously by NATO and by me.” Committing himself in his new function to revitalizing the Dialog, he said: “I will certainly invest personally in the Dialog […], and I would not be surprised if that was also an important element of the Istanbul Summit.” His statements were an early indication that NATO, in the year in which the tenth anniversary of the Dialog will be commemorated, was clearly thinking about how to give body to its relations with its partners beyond a mere “dialog.” NATO’s Supreme Military Commander for Europe, General James Jones, underlined that NATO’s center of activity, which for fifty years had been focused on the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, had shifted to the Middle East and Africa. These, and a series of other similar policy statements, were all reflecting a growing consensus among policymakers about the region’s new geostrategic significance. As part of NATO’s much broader “geographical reorientation,” the Mediterranean was upgraded into one of “the front lines of the war on terrorism,” according to the US Ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns.

Opening the Dialog

The first talks in the context of the Mediterranean Dialog took place on Friday February 24 1995. Then NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes had separate meetings with the NATO Ambassadors of five countries for initial discussion on security problems in the Mediterranean, after an earlier decision of the North Atlantic Council in December 1994 about opening a dialog with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Initiative for the dialog was the result of urging from the three NATO members that border the Mediterranean – Spain, Italy and France – that NATO had an interest in stability in the Mediterranean region. Referring to the start of NATO’s enlargement process, aimed at its Central and Eastern European neighbors, the three members felt that NATO was focusing too much on its eastern flank, to the detriment of problems that could arise along its southern borders, taking into account the potential for instability in the region, mainly as a result of Islamic fundamentalism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The (then) Italian Defense Minister, among others, warned that NATO could not wait for the south to become fully destabilized or its political structures to collapse, calling for a form of “political counterproliferation” aimed at the prevention of risks in the southern region, before those risks exploded into violent crises, as had been the case in the Balkans. Towards the end of 1995 NATO decided to pursue the dialog, to extend it to Jordan, and to give it a permanent character.

The Relevance of the Mediterranean Dialog Revisited: The Aftermath of 9/11

The events of September 11 2001 would also have an impact on the Mediterranean Dialog. In October 2001 a meeting was held at ambassadorial level, aimed at making a joint assessment of the prevailing security situation. It resulted in a “convergence of views” on the
threat of terrorism, leading the partners to express their strong wish to intensify their consultations, according to a NATO official. A few weeks later, after a meeting with President Bouteflika of Algeria, then NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson reminded reporters, referring to the October meeting, of the Alliance’s decision “to pay more attention” to the Mediterranean Dialog, “especially in the current circumstances,” explaining: “We are inextricably linked together. We share the same security area.” In early December 2001 the Alliance issued a formal statement on “NATO’s Response to Terrorism,” which included references to NATO’s relations with its Mediterranean Dialog partners:

Our fight is not against Islam or the innocent people of Afghanistan. […] Our fight, the fight of the international community, is against the terrorists, their networks and those who harbor them, as stated in resolution 1368 of the UN Security Council.

 […] We applaud the unambiguous stand taken by our Mediterranean Dialog partners, which have unreservedly condemned these attacks. We reaffirm our willingness to provide assistance, individually or collectively, as appropriate and according to our capabilities, to Allies and other states that are or may be subject to increased terrorist threats as a result of their support for the campaign against terrorism.

In the months after the events of 9/11, the Atlantic Alliance started, in the words of Lord Robertson, a “policy of active engagement,” leading among other things to an effort at establishing strengthened relations with the Mediterranean region. During 2002 Lord Robertson took a leading role in this respect. In April 2002 he declared that in the new security environment, the Partnership for Peace program, NATO’s special relationships with Russia and Ukraine, NATO’s enlargement process, operations in the Balkans and the fight against terrorism were all symbols of what he saw as a “policy of active engagement,” adding that the policy was far from exhausted: “There is one region in particular that stands to benefit from closer relations with NATO, and where NATO stands to gain as well. It is, of course, the Mediterranean region.”

Underlining that the Mediterranean is a region where three continents meet, with over twenty bordering countries, Lord Robertson explained why the region mattered to NATO. He cited instability among the reasons—saying “the Mediterranean region is thus a legitimate part of NATO’s area of security interest” —terrorism, and NATO’s concerns on problems such as proliferation, energy security (some 3,000 ships cross the area every day), economic disparities and migration. To amplify the Mediterranean Dialog further, Lord Robertson proposed “enriching it by more military cooperation in areas where we have common interests,” taking advantage, he said, of the experience gathered in the Partnership for Peace program. For that reason, he thought “the Dialog should acquire an enhanced political and practical dimension,” concluding that the time had come “to move NATO’s Mediterranean Dialog from the sideline to centre stage.”

As an immediate follow-up to his words, the North Atlantic Council decided in May 2002 in Reykjavik:

[…] to upgrade the political and practical dimensions of our Mediterranean Dialog, including by consulting with Mediterranean partners on security matters of common concern, including terrorism-related issues, as appropriate. These efforts will aim to bring our Mediterranean partners even closer to NATO, and give fresh impetus to the Dialog by the Prague Summit.

While the Ministers thus anticipated the outcome of their next “transformation summit,” Lord Robertson, speaking in Rome in September 2002, again urged further enhancement of the
Dialog, emphasizing that “NATO’s Mediterranean Dialog must be part of the Alliance’s transformation agenda,” for evident reasons:

Events last year have reminded us [...] of the continuing volatility of the Mediterranean region. And of the way in which this volatility impacts also on our safety, on our economies, and on our general sense of well-being in Europe and America.

Experience with our Mediterranean Dialog clearly shows that the Alliance can indeed offer valuable practical cooperation in areas of common interest. That it can help dispel misconceptions and build confidence. And that, in so doing, it can help eradicate any notions that may exist about the West being pitted against the Arab world.

In its Prague Summit Declaration, the Council agreed to go a step further than in Reykjavik, by saying that the political and practical dimensions of the Mediterranean Dialog should be upgraded “substantially” – through encouraging “intensified practical cooperation” and “effective interaction on security matters” – without, however, giving any further details on the specifics of these intentions. At a further meeting with the Dialog partners one month after the Prague Summit, it was agreed that enhancement of the political and practical dimensions would address “security matters of common concern and result in more regular consultations and a greater number of cooperative activities, such as conferences, high-level visits, training, military exercises and other forms of cooperation.”

2003: Toward a New Departure

It was evident that against the background of the results of Prague, the main question with respect to the Mediterranean Dialog in 2003 would be how NATO would start implementing its intention to upgrade further the political and practical dimensions of the cooperation. At its meeting in Madrid in June 2003, the North Atlantic Council called on NATO’s Ambassadors to “explore the possibility of strengthening the Dialog” in order to be able to “go on to a phase of active cooperation,” said a NATO official. In July 2003 Lord Robertson urged for “a new departure of NATO’s Mediterranean Dialog,” in parallel with and as a natural follow-up to what he saw as NATO’s transformation, initialed at the Summit in Prague. He thought that such an approach is “not rhetoric,” given that: a) the Mediterranean partners have shown more and more interest in learning from and working with the Alliance; and b) that NATO, for its part, needed political and practical support from the countries in the region as it prepared for major peace-support operations in their neighborhood. In this context, he referred to NATO’s anti-terrorist maritime operation – Operation Active Endeavor – in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The Secretary-General identified five areas that would deserve particular attention for cooperation: the fight against terrorism; combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; crisis management; defense reform; and military-to-military cooperation.

In December 2003, Ministers directed their Ambassadors to come forward at the Istanbul Summit in June 2004, in consultation with all Mediterranean Dialog partners, with “options to develop a more ambitious and expanded framework for the Mediterranean Dialog,” aimed at improving “cooperation in a number of fields, including on defense reform and interoperability, including through Partnership for Peace-like instruments, and open more Partnership activities to the Mediterranean Dialog partners on a case-by-case basis.”

The Istanbul Summit: Options for a More Ambitious and Expanded Framework

In the run-up to the Istanbul Summit, various policymakers, both from within and outside the Atlantic Alliance, had already anticipated the call to generate options for the development of “a more ambitious and expanded framework” for the Mediterranean Dialog. At the same time,
the renewed interest in further engagement between NATO and its Mediterranean partners was also reflected in more comprehensive policy statements and initiatives beyond the framework of the Mediterranean Dialog, both in terms of scope of engagement (beyond the strict security field), geographical reach (the Greater Middle East), and the number of participating states. Over a broad front, both European and US policymakers showed great interest in contributing to the debate, including NATO officials, European Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs, US Senators and the US administration.

In early 2004 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer committed himself to an effort to give body to the Mediterranean Dialog by building up a security partnership. He acknowledged that NATO had had difficulty in getting the Dialog off the ground after it was launched in 1994. “You cannot say that there is a big drive in the Arab world at the moment for NATO,” he said, thereby expressing publicly his dismay over the lack of involvement and commitment on the part of the Arab partners. One week later, in an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, he presented an “ambitious agenda” for his first year in office, linking NATO’s presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its military capabilities, with the dynamics of NATO’s initiative to reach out to the world, saying:

> We will soon welcome seven new countries into the NATO family. We are helping the Balkan countries return into the European mainstream. NATO is engaging with Russia and Ukraine; building our partnerships with countries across Europe, through the Caucasus, and into Central Asia; strengthening our bridges to countries of North Africa and the Middle East, and building a strategic partnership with the European Union.

In early February 2004 the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, urged reinvigoration of NATO’s relations with the Mediterranean by giving it a broader basis, proposing a “Transatlantic Initiative for the Near and Middle East,” to be taken jointly by NATO and the EU, and covering more countries (NATO and EU member states, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Lebanon) and four main priorities: security and politics, the economy, law and culture, and civil society. In March 2004 the Italian Foreign Minister, Franco Frattini, presented the Italian government’s ideas on strengthening the Mediterranean Dialog by giving Italy’s “vision” on a comprehensive long-term political strategy for NATO, arguing that NATO not only needed the military capacities to respond rapidly to crises once they arise, but also an overarching political strategy for the use of “soft power” tools in preventing such crises altogether, adding:

> Geopolitical reality strengthens the case for a concerted Euro-Atlantic political strategy. It is clear that the major challenges we face today, as well as those we are likely to face in the future, are consequences of problems in regions on Europe’s southern and southeastern flanks. This vast area extends from the Balkans to Afghanistan, including the Mediterranean, the Greater Middle East, the Black Sea and Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Frattini argued that in order to defeat terrorism and the threats associated with it, Europe and America have a common interest both in fostering democracy, stability and economic development “in this entire region,” with NATO’s Mediterranean Dialog and the EU’s Barcelona Process offering “excellent starting points,” and in linking the development of relations with the Mediterranean countries to the broader initiative of the “Greater Middle East.”

With these remarks, the Italian Foreign Minister hinted at the “Greater Middle East Initiative,” as announced by the US administration – a “master plan” mainly aimed at bringing democracy to the area. The plan was modeled on the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which aimed at promoting political freedoms and respect for human rights. It would involve Western
institutions such as NATO and the European Union, culminating in direct economic assistance, in providing political and economic expertise and in security arrangements. All of this was a consequence of fears in Washington that the Middle East, without such reforms, would remain a region with a large potential for instability and a basis for terrorism.

Concluding Remarks

NATO's Mediterranean Dialog was launched ten years ago on the assumption that security in Europe is closely linked to security and stability in the Mediterranean. The events of 9/11 not only confirmed the argument, but added a new sense of urgency to the need to respond to the so-called "new threats of the twenty-first century" – international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Now, in the run-up to NATO's Summit in Istanbul, the relevance of the Mediterranean has been described as "one of the front lines of the war on terrorism," underlining its new geostrategic significance. It also implicitly justifies NATO's involvement in the region on the assumption that NATO has "a legitimate interest in developments in the Mediterranean, inter alia because of their impact on the stability of the whole region which is of concern to the Alliance" – the formulation used by NATO to justify its initial involvement in Kosovo in early 1998. Furthermore, a series of recent incidents, such as the terror attacks in Madrid (including its supposed "Moroccan connection"), Syria, Saudi Arabia and, of course, Iraq, have contributed to the realization of the potential for instability throughout the region. But there are other factors as well that could contribute to instability, with an impact on the security of NATO, which are partly already recognized by the Alliance, with issues such as political reform, economic disparities, energy (in)security and the vulnerability of sea lanes, migration, desertification, human trafficking, drugs, the illegal trade in arms, demographic trends, etc.

After NATO's decision in December 2003 to upgrade the Mediterranean Dialog by generating "options to develop a more ambitious and expanded framework for the Mediterranean," NATO is expected in Istanbul to unveil a cooperation pact, opening up a new chapter in its relations with the Mediterranean Dialog partners. According to a NATO official, the Alliance is thinking along two tracks: a) consolidating the Dialog with seven partners by introducing "partnership (for peace) elements" specifically tailored to the Mediterranean countries; and b) broadening the membership by enlarging the Mediterranean Dialog to the Greater Middle East. In the meantime, NATO invited its Mediterranean Dialog partners to contribute to Operation Active Endeavor, after its decision, only two months ago, to expand the Operation to cover the whole of the Mediterranean Sea, through such measures as intelligence-sharing and offering port facilities.

At the same time, however, recognizing that the "war on terrorism" requires more than attacking the al-Qaeda network with military means, it was realized that a counterterrorism policy requires a comprehensive approach aimed at removing the circumstances, or the breeding ground, for terrorism. This explains why calls for upgrading the Mediterranean Dialog have become embedded in broader policy frameworks, including a still expanding role for the Alliance in the area, given its presence in the Mediterranean Sea and Afghanistan, its role in Iraq, and possibly in the longer term the Greater Middle East. In January 2004, US Senator Chuck Hagel proposed, besides expanding relations with the Mediterranean countries, four other areas where NATO could play a greater role in bringing security and stability to the Greater Middle East:

- drawing Turkey closer and supporting its EU membership in order to encourage continued political and economic reforms in Turkey;
- eventually assuming responsibility for all military and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan, including Operation Enduring Freedom;
- starting discussions on taking over the Polish sector in central Iraq, or possibly providing a division for northern Iraq; and
beginning to plan for a role in securing an Israeli-Palestinian peace, which could
eventually be monitored by NATO troops.

The Mediterranean Dialog reflects only part of NATO’s transformation agenda, as adopted in
Prague in November 2002. For now, I conclude that the Mediterranean Dialog has in the
meantime become part of the effort to reposition the Alliance as an instrument in the fight
against international terrorism. This includes its ambition to act as a “global player,” starting
with its involvement in peace support operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and possibly
an expanded role in both countries (depending on the situation on the ground). Against the
background of this dynamic environment, NATO’s new Secretary-General presented NATO
as an exporter of security that is reaching out to the world, by saying: “Our goal is for NATO
to make us all safer by exporting security, using a range of tools, including partnerships,”
while adding: “The need for outreach and engagement is a common theme in NATO’s
strategic concept, the European security strategy, and the US national security strategy.”
Such an approach will of course have far-reaching consequences for NATO’s future position,
for the further development of the Mediterranean Dialog and its partners. In this respect,
NATO’s Summit in Istanbul will certainly be about “building new bridges,” to use de Hoop
Scheffer’s words.

In March 2004 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that if the UN undertakes new
peacekeeping operations in Africa during 2004, support from NATO would be “tremendously
helpful.” Annan welcomed the willingness of the Alliance to “go global,” citing its recent work
in Afghanistan as an example. Saying that the UN expected “a surge” of new peacekeeping
operations across Africa in the year ahead, he added: “NATO might be employed in a ‘peace
enforcement’ role, much as the European Union deployed Operation Artemis in the
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as a bridging force before the deployment of a UN
operation.” While thus welcoming the role of NATO as a “global player,” well beyond its
original operational limits, Annan praised NATO’s preparedness to send troops to Iraq if
requested, adding that the UN and NATO would continue to discuss the world’s collective
security system, as well as peace support operations, in the context of their regular contacts.
An expanded framework for the Mediterranean Dialog should certainly be part of a common
NATO-UN agenda.

Dick A. Leurdiik is a senior research fellow, lecturer and political commentator at the
Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael” in The Hague. This article
contains slightly adapted text of a presentation given at a symposium entitled ‘Examination of
the Regions of Crisis from the Perspectives of Turkey, NATO and the European Union, and
their Impacts on the Security of Turkey’, organized by the Turkish General Staff in Istanbul on