



RESEARCH PAPER

Research Division - NATO Defense College, Rome - No. 55 – January 2010

What future for NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative?

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Now that the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), launched by NATO in June 2004 in a spirit of outreach to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, is into its sixth year and has almost reached the age of reason, it is time to draw up an initial balance sheet and offer some food for thought about the ICI's future. There are four reasons why this is appropriate: 1) at the Alliance's 60th Anniversary Summit in Strasbourg-Kehl, the NATO Heads of State and Government stressed the importance of Gulf region security and stability for the Alliance²; 2) in his inaugural address, the new NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, spelled out his determination to strengthen relations with ICI (and Mediterranean Dialogue) member states, listing this process as one of the three top priorities of his term of office³; 3) NATO is currently developing a new strategic concept that is intended to provide a road map for the Alliance and its partners in the coming years; 4) in view of the highly precarious strategic environment in the Gulf at the moment, NATO's engagement in the region is perceived as both a stabilizing and a potentially destabilizing factor. This state of affairs has given rise to a number of imponderables⁴. There is uncertainty about the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan, where the Alliance has been engaged since 2001 in its first major out-of-area operation and where there is a real danger of a spillover of the conflict into Pakistan and the Gulf region. It is unclear at the moment whether the Iranian nuclear crisis – a source of threats and instability across the Middle East – can be resolved. There is concern about the worsening security situation in Yemen, especially with the increase of violence and the growing presence of Al Qaeda in the country, which could weaken Saudi Arabia. There are worries about fluctuating oil prices and the impact of the financial crisis on Gulf countries⁵. Lastly, there is anxiety about what will happen to Iraq after withdrawal of US troops, already under way and a potential trigger for regional destabilization.

Research Paper

ISSN 2076 - 0949

(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Print)

ISSN 2076 - 0957

(Res. Div. NATO Def. Coll., Online)

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Imprimerie CSC Grafica

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² NATO Strasbourg-Kehl Summit Declaration, paragraph 38, 4 April 2009: www.nato.int/cps/fr/natolive/news_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease.

³ NATO Secretary General's press conference, 3 August 2009: www.nato.int/cps/fr/natolive/opinions_56776.htm

⁴ Christian Koch: "The Gulf and the International System", Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009, Gulf Research Center, Dubai, 2009, pp. 79-93.

⁵ The international stock market plunge on 26 November 2009, reported by several press agencies, highlighted the financial fragility of certain Gulf emirates, including Dubai.



The ICI and the Mediterranean Dialogue: two distinct approaches

On 28 June 2004, the NATO Heads of State and Government gathered in Istanbul made a proposal to the countries of the broader Middle East to take part in cooperative efforts to strengthen regional stability, particularly in the security sector⁶. Known as the "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative", the offer was addressed primarily to the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates)⁷. It came at a very challenging time, when NATO, up to then absent from the Gulf, was compelled to engage on the periphery of this strategically crucial region within the framework of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), established in Afghanistan on 20 December 2001 by UN Security Council resolution 1386. The ISAF mission ran in parallel with Operation Enduring Freedom, targeting the Al-Qaida network and the Taliban, who had entrenched themselves in Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. At the same time, the Alliance was also preparing to conduct the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I), although the presence of the military coalition was arousing the increasing hostility of many Iraqis and renewed anxiety among their neighbours. Through the ICI, therefore, the Alliance was trying to reassure the Gulf oil monarchies by preempting any criticisms of undue influence over the region and by establishing rigorously pragmatic bilateral cooperation focused on: 1) defence reform, through the promotion of civil-military relations, the establishment of new budget procedures for defence spending, and new planning mechanisms; 2) interoperability, to be achieved by more joint exercises, training and education activities; 3) the fight against terrorism, particularly through intelligence sharing; 4) the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; 5) assistance with border security and monitoring; 6) cooperation in civil emergency planning (especially ecological disaster response). The Initiative is based on joint ownership by the regional states and takes into account their diversity and specific needs. It does not impose conditions, but is simply intended as a complement to other regional or international initiatives aimed at sharing experience and

expertise. It targets areas where NATO can add value, and seeks to build bridges between ICI member states and the NATO countries that are least familiar with the Gulf⁸. To avoid any misunderstandings, the proponents of the initiative explicitly state that the ICI partnership is not meant to lead to NATO membership or to provide security guarantees⁹.

In early 2005, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and then the United Arab Emirates officially joined the ICI. Saudi Arabia and Oman decided against membership, but did not turn down the invitation. The cooperation offer is addressed not only to GCC members but also to any of the interested countries in the region that subscribe to the initiative's aims and content. In theory, therefore, there is nothing to prevent countries such as Iraq, Iran, Yemen, or even Syria or Lebanon, from joining. Each new candidate's application simply has to be examined and endorsed by the North Atlantic Council in the light of the aspirant's intrinsic merits. Most of the other Mediterranean states (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia) are already members of the Mediterranean Dialogue, established in 1994 by NATO in order to build bridges between the two shores of the Mediterranean and to strengthen regional security and stability¹⁰. In theory there is nothing to prevent Mediterranean Dialogue member countries from becoming ICI members as well, and vice versa. In practice, however, the ICI and MD member states are anxious to preserve their geographical specificities, arguing that each partnership is to be seen in its own distinct geopolitical context and is based on different premises: the Mediterranean Dialogue was founded in the peaceful context dominated by the Madrid peace process (1993) and the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference, whereas the ICI was born in a climate of acute tension created by the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the burgeoning Iranian nuclear crisis. It is therefore no accident that the former is a "Dialogue", giving priority to the political dimension, while the latter is simply an "Initiative", confined to exclusively practical cooperation, which scrupulously rules out any risk of political exploitation. At the moment, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the ICI have different implementation procedures: the MD offers a choice between a multilateral format (28 plus 7) and a bilateral

⁶ NATO's Istanbul Summit Communiqué, 28 June 2004: www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_211023.htm. and www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_211017.htm

⁷ The Gulf Cooperation Council was set up on 25 May 1981 on Saudi Arabia's initiative in order to counter potential spillover from Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 and reduce the risks of destabilization caused by the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war on 22 September 1980.

⁸ Nicola de Santis: "Opening to the Mediterranean and Broader Middle East", *NATO Review*, Autumn 2004 (www.nato.int/docu/review/2004/issue3/english/art4.html).

⁹ Paragraph 3-e of the Istanbul Summit Communiqué of 28 June 2004: www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_211017.htm

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of this partnership, see Pierre Razoux: "NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue at a crossroads", *Research Paper 35*, NATO Defense College, Research Division, Rome, April 2008.



approach, while the ICI envisages only a bilateral format (28 plus 1).

Despite these two distinctly different approaches, the MD and the ICI share the same objective: to create strong ties based on trust and cooperation between NATO and the countries of the Middle East. The member states of both partnerships can pick and choose from a range of cooperation options, which include the opportunity to set up individual cooperation plans and offer access to specific tools (the e-Prime data base and the Partnership Action Plan against Terrorism). Today, the various fields of this practical cooperation, favouring interoperability, overlap considerably.

An overall positive track record so far

As early as 2005, an ICI follow-up group consisting of political advisers from delegations of NATO member countries was set up to define the procedures to be followed, draw up a list of the practical activities proposed and supervise their implementation. Every year since then a team of experts has visited the four ICI member countries to assess their needs, analyse the local political constraints and adapt cooperative programmes accordingly. All the observers, experts, journalists and authorities involved in ICI monitoring agree that the aims set in June 2004 have now been largely achieved, particularly in the field of military cooperation¹¹. It must be admitted, though, that the ICI's objectives were very modest in comparison with those set for NATO's other multilateral partnerships (the Partnership for Peace and the Mediterranean Dialogue). In terms of content, every area of cooperation, even if this is essentially military (85 % of activities), has been explored, while less emphasis has been placed on civil-military relations and budget procedures, which appear to be the sole responsibility of the authorities concerned. The NATO Secretary General and his deputy visited all the ICI capitals and in return received several visits from the ambassadors of those countries at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels. The NATO Defense College paid an official visit to Qatar and the United Arab

Emirates from 13 to 18 December 2009. This was the first time that the College had made stops in ICI member countries during a field study and was a sign of the partnership's growing importance for the Atlantic Alliance.

However, the ICI's lack of a political dimension has up to now prevented formal meetings from being held at the level of foreign or defence ministers, and still less at the level of heads of state. To make up for this relative lack of political visibility, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain are vying with one another in their offers to organize high-level seminars in their own countries. Qatar has even volunteered to host possible regional modules of the NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC), the new twice-yearly course for participants from MD and ICI countries, inaugurated at the NATO Defense College in Rome in early 2009¹². Only Kuwait for the time being is not involving itself in active efforts of this kind, as it is facing a drastic reduction in its officer personnel and is worried about the danger that the crises in Iraq and Iran may spill over onto its own territory¹³.

In quantitative terms, the number of activities actually carried out has increased by 70 %, rising from 33 in 2005 (first annual plan) to 57 in 2008¹⁴, yet progressing more slowly than the proposed cooperation activities, which tripled during the same period, rising from 180 to 470¹⁵. This growth has been facilitated by agreements on security and protection of classified information between NATO and Kuwait (2006), Bahrain (2008) and the United Arab Emirates (2009). Negotiations taking place with Qatar could also lead to agreements in the coming months. The actual number of activities, while constantly on the increase, is still below the level of the Mediterranean Dialogue. For the moment none of the four ICI member states has expressed the wish to establish an Individual Partnership Programme¹⁶, though Kuwait and Bahrain have shown interest.

As regards operational cooperation, only the United Arab Emirates have contributed to the Alliance's stabilization operations, committing over one thousand troops in Kosovo a few years ago, taking part in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and

¹¹ As demonstrated by the many frank discussions held under the Chatham House Rule at several recent seminars: "Manama Dialogue" (IISS), Bahrain, 11-13 December 2009; "NATO & Gulf Security", NATO Defense College, Rome, 2-3 December 2009; "3rd International Conference on the Mediterranean Region and the Middle East", CASD, Rome, 19-20 November 2009; "NATO ICI-UAE Seminar", Abu Dhabi, 28-29 October 2009.

¹² For information on the NRCC, visit: www.ndc.nato.int/education/courses.php?icode=10

¹³ In 2008, the most recent year for which consolidated statistical data are available, the ICI member states carried out 57 cooperation activities (25 by the UAE, 13 by Qatar, 12 by Bahrain and 7 by Kuwait). Kuwait, despite its GDP and its population, which make it the second highest-ranking ICI, seems the least active of the four ICI partner countries.

¹⁴ The consolidated statistical data for 2009 were still not available at the time of writing this paper.

¹⁵ The ICI cooperation offer proposes 560 activities for 2009. It is planned to offer almost 700 in 2010.

¹⁶ Unlike the MD countries: five out of seven of them have agreed, or are in the process of agreeing, an individual cooperation programme with NATO.



deploying 25 personnel today to the ISAF headquarters in Kabul. This contribution is greatly appreciated by Alliance member countries. So far, the other ICI member states have not wanted to take part in NATO stabilization operations, but there is still room to hope that they may do so in the future.

Undeniable assets

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative's greatest asset is the lack of any misperceptions about its content and philosophy. Each of the parties is fully aware of its practical scope and its limits. The aim is not to establish a dialogue between civilizations but to cooperate in rigorously defined technical areas.

The partnership's second asset is the fact that ICI member countries have plenty of funds at their disposal for cooperation in defence. This means that they can procure the military systems, particularly in the command and communications area, that are essential for genuine reform of their armed forces. Most importantly, they can afford to fund the cooperative efforts required by the partnership without being obliged – like six out of the seven Mediterranean Dialogue countries – to request NATO financial support. There are no constraints, therefore, on the numbers of personnel that ICI partner countries can commit for their cooperative efforts. It is not unusual to see delegations from ICI countries taking part in NATO seminars and courses. This financial independence unquestionably helps to create balanced relations among all ICI members, preserving each actor's self-esteem and thus reducing the risk of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Paradoxically, the material well-being of these states can sometimes hinder cooperation, especially when the funding allocated by NATO to interns or research fellows who are citizens of Gulf countries (for internships or fellowships of several months' duration) is far lower than the income that these people can expect in their own country of origin. For example, despite intensive efforts by Alliance representatives, there are still no applicants for the four-month fellowship in the NATO Defense College's Research Division, which has been on offer to researchers from ICI countries for four years now.¹⁷ The two Mediterranean Dialogue fellowships, on the other hand, arouse genuine enthusiasm.

The ICI member states are confronted by the problem of lack of qualified personnel available to take part in partnership activities. It is not because there are no resources of this kind, but because, given the modest size of their armed forces and universities, states tend to keep the most qualified personnel for their own use. The small number of available personnel explains the huge disparity between the Alliance's cooperation offer and the activities that partner countries have actually chosen. In 2008, the four ICI countries selected an overall total of only 88 activities out of the 470 proposed (a mere 19 %) and actually performed only 57 (65 % of the chosen activities). These statistics put into perspective the exultant communiqués that simply list the number of activities proposed and do not take into account the ones actually carried out.

Very real obstacles

Leaving aside these statistical considerations, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative is faced with very real obstacles for which both partner countries and the Alliance are responsible.

■ In the GCC

The negative perception of NATO in the region. As numerous Arab experts point out, NATO's intervention in the Gulf is erroneously conflated with that of the United States and its image has been adversely affected by the policies conducted by George W. Bush in the region until 2008¹⁸. Indeed, a large section of public opinion in the Gulf is unaware of NATO's existence, and most decision makers do not understand why it is trying to extend its field of action in this region. Those who are familiar with NATO still regard it as the military arm of American policy in the region¹⁹. Some editorialists go so far as to question whether it is in the interest of GCC countries to establish close relations with NATO, given the organization's lack of a clear strategy²⁰. Many people complain that there are no Alliance liaison bureaux in the region. Since Barack Obama's arrival at the White House and his speech in Cairo, this negative view has tended to diminish, even though NATO's engagement in the region is still affected by the continuing operations in Afghanistan, the American

¹⁷ For more information on this four-month research fellowship, for which the sum of 15,000 Euros has been allocated, see: www.ndc.nato.int/research/research.php?icode=4

¹⁸ See Mustafa Alani: "Arab perspectives on NATO", *NATO Review*, Winter 2005 (www.nato.int/docu/review/2005/issue4/english/art3.html), and also Kassim Bouhou: "L'OTAN et le monde arabe: peur, dialogue et partenariat", *Politique étrangère* 1:2008, IFRI, Paris, p. 125.

¹⁹ See the findings of the seminar in Bahrain from 19 to 20 April 2007, in the framework of the ICI, on the theme "Media in a Changing World: GCC and NATO visions", published in the 6 June 2007 issue of the *Akhbar Al Khaleej* daily newspaper. The surveys commissioned for the seminar show that 92 % of those questioned think that NATO's sole task is to apply US foreign policy in the region.

²⁰ "60 Years of NATO: Enlargement and Effectiveness", The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 15 April 2009.



presence in Iraq and the US administration's apparent incapacity to put pressure on the Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu to agree to concessions to the Palestinians. Most of the rulers of GCC member states adopt a cautious approach to NATO's engagement in the region.

The absence of Saudi Arabia and Oman from the GCC.

All researchers and analysts agree that the absence of these two key countries is a major obstacle to the future of the ICI. Between them the two states own 70 % of the GCC's military potential and their armed forces are considered to be the most credible on the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, their monarchs have a decisive political influence on regional balance.

To justify its refusal to join the ICI, Saudi Arabia says that it wants to remain master of its own sovereign domain and is opposed to the presence of foreign troops, including Arab forces, on its territory. A more mundane explanation, bearing in mind its political and military clout, is that the Saudi kingdom is displeased because it was not the first to be consulted when the ICI was being created and refuses to join a regional partnership that does not accord it *primus inter pares* status.

Oman's position is more difficult to define. As the guardian of the Strait of Hormuz and therefore of the Gulf lines of communication, the sultanate knows that it must stay on the good side of Iran, its immediate neighbour, especially as throughout history the two states have always enjoyed positive relations and have important shared business interests. In the 1970s, the Shah of Iran's army fought alongside Omani forces against the Dhofar rebellion. After the Islamic revolution, the sultanate of Oman brokered negotiations between Tehran and Baghdad during the long Iran-Iraq war when all the other Arabian Peninsula states had sided with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The Iranian regime is also grateful for the sultanate's benevolence towards the Omani Shiite community (5% of the population). Sultan Qaboos fears that Omani membership of the ICI would incur the displeasure of the Iranian regime, as he knows that it could exert real nuisance power over him, but at the same time he is afraid to annoy Britain and the United States, with whom he has very close bilateral ties²¹. He is extremely circumspect about any form of cooperation that might lessen his grip on the

Omani army, with which he has a special relationship and considers as the guarantor of his throne. As justification for his policy of regional balance and good neighbourly relations, the Sultan of Oman argues that Gulf security should be the exclusive responsibility of the Gulf States and should not rely on foreign backing.

The lack of a common strategic vision. This was one of the major findings of the seminar organized jointly by NATO and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in the framework of the ICI²². Participants bemoaned the absence of a common strategic vision in the GCC, particularly with regard to Iran, Iraq and Yemen. The position taken by each member of the GCC to these challenges is, quite understandably, conditioned by its own specific concerns²³. This lack of a common vision is aggravated by self-censorship on the part of civil and military authorities in GCC member countries, who are reluctant to venture into an area of competence that in their culture is the sultan's exclusive preserve, and refuse to become involved in palace business. This tendency, however, is becoming less marked, because of the presence of an increasing number of local research centres that offer an appropriate forum for renewed strategic thinking.

The persistence of rivalries inside the GCC. For centuries the Gulf region has been a rich melting-pot of diverse cultures, religions and traditions which have made it into an arena where rivalries between empires, nations and tribes, frequently with very different interests, have been played out. Neither decolonization nor the establishment of the states that make up the Gulf region today have put an end to these rivalries, particularly as the region still has the world's largest proven reserves of hydrocarbons. Inevitably, this abundance of resources is greatly coveted, as demonstrated by the various border disputes between the countries of the region, though many of them now seem to have been settled²⁴. In addition to border and energy issues, rivalries among GCC member countries are also fuelled by family and clan squabbles, demographic imbalances and religious sectarianism, as any visitor to the region can see. The failure of the project to set up a monetary union for the six GCC countries²⁵, in spring 2009, is evidence of the rivalries that continue to undermine the regional

²¹ As the author learned during talks in Muscat on 14 and 15 December 2009.

²² A detailed account of this seminar is published in the supplement to the *Lettre d'informations stratégiques TTU* n° 736, on the subject "L'OTAN, le Moyen-Orient et la sécurité", 18 November 2009.

²³ As the author of this paper can testify, after two rounds of talks in the Gulf in May and December 2009.

²⁴ For an insight into the border disputes, chiefly between Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, see the reference article by Kamal Mohamed al Asta : "Towards a Theory for the Security of the GCC States" (*Strategic Studies Series* No. 33, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 1999, pp. 66-67) or the monograph by Ashraf Mohamed Kishk : "The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative: Obstacles and Propositions", *NDC Fellowship Monograph* No. 1, NATO Defense College, Rome, December 2009, p. 12.

²⁵ Since then, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar agreed to reset this project without Oman and the UAE.



organization's credibility, such as the rival diplomatic initiatives (by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait) taken over the last few years to resolve the Middle East conflict. These rivalries are condemned by the two competing television networks, Al Jazeera (Qatar) and Al Arabiya (Saudi Arabia). Rivalry, together with the lack of a common strategy, weakened the GCC's attempt in the mid-1980s to set up the "Peninsula Shield" common defence force of about 7,000 personnel consisting of contingents from the six GCC member countries and tasked to intervene in the event of an attack on a member state. In practice, this unit, which had no truly integrated command and control system, never took part in operations, not even during the Gulf War from 1990 to 1991, and has now been disbanded. It was not until December 2009 that GCC member countries, faced with the risks of destabilization arising from the Yemen crisis, announced that they wanted to create a new rapid reaction force of several thousand personnel, based on a shelved project, originally proposed by Kuwait two years earlier²⁶.

The reigning families' relative mistrust of the military. The reigning families in the Gulf are very nervous about the influence that their armed forces could have over society²⁷. They point out that a number of Arab monarchies (in Egypt, Iraq, Yemen and Libya) have been overthrown by the army. Consequently they are driven by their constant fear of a military coup to give army key posts to members of the ruling family. Paradoxically, they perceive the presence of a large number of foreign mercenaries in their armed forces, including in combat positions, as a guarantee of stability. They know in any case that few of their subjects would rush to enrol in the event of confrontation with a well equipped modern army. On the whole, many Gulf rulers prefer a stable regime to efficient armed forces²⁸. They do not always welcome the reform process advocated by NATO, as they are afraid that the military could turn against them²⁹. Ironically, these regimes are procuring the costliest state-of-the-art weapons systems but are reluctant to adopt the combined structures and procedures needed to make the most efficient use of

them. Matteo Legrenzi, an expert on GCC security policies, thinks that the four ICI member countries have indeed accepted NATO's cooperation offer because they believed that they had no choice in the current climate of the global war against terrorism³⁰. On the other hand, they are very interested in the Alliance's offer concerning cooperation in the security reform sector, particularly police reform. This would help them to deal more effectively with the risks of terrorism and illegal immigration, which they see as a threat that could weaken their regimes. In any case, the rulers of these four countries are aware that they do not have the necessary critical mass of armed forces to protect their citizens in the event of a serious crisis in the Middle East³¹. That is why they rely on the presence of foreign contingents who provide them with defence under bilateral agreements, despite the population's palpable reluctance to accept foreign troops on national soil.

The importance of bilateral agreements. In the absence of an effective regional security framework, the four ICI countries continue to prefer their longstanding bilateral relations with the United States, the United Kingdom and France³². To diversify their supply sources and take further advantage of competition, they no longer have any reservations about doing business with Russia, China and India.

The continuation of the Israeli-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This conflict continues to poison relations between the Arab world and the West, increasing prejudice and mutual misperceptions. We must have no illusions: as long as the conflict exists, it will continue to influence the collective imagination and the Arab world's perception of the West, even though it has a less powerful impact in the Gulf countries than it does in the Maghreb and the Mashrek, mainly because of business cooperation, as Sabine Hofmann rightly points out³³. Several GCC countries have tolerated the presence of Israeli trade missions on their territory, though these were terminated after Israel's military intervention in Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2009). It is significant that the Israeli media have been writing more articles on the financial

²⁶ Announcement made at the GCC summit held in Kuwait from 14 to 15 December 2009 – *Gulf News*, 16 December 2009.

²⁷ Matteo Legrenzi: "Did the GCC Make a Difference? Institutional Realities and Unintended Consequences", in Matteo Legrenzi and Cilja Harders (Ed.) "Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation and Regionalization in the Middle East" Ashgate, Burlington (VT), USA, 2008, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 110.

²⁹ Matteo Legrenzi: "NATO in the Gulf: Who is Doing Whom a Favor?", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, Spring 2007, pp. 69-75.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.70.

³¹ For an insight into the military forces of ICI member countries, see the excellent article by General Musa Hamad Al-Qallab: "Defense Affairs in the GCC Countries", *Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, Gulf Research Center, Dubai, 2009, pp. 199-230.

³² As borne out by the inauguration of a joint French base in the UAE on 25 May 2009, alongside the US bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman.

³³ Sabine Hofmann: "Regional Cooperation Under Conflict: Israeli-Arab Business Cooperation in the Middle East" in Matteo Legrenzi and Cilja Harders (Ed.) "Beyond Regionalism? Regional Cooperation and Regionalization in the Middle East", op. cit., pp. 185-202.



crisis affecting the Emirate of Dubai, stating that its impact on the Israeli economy would be “limited”, and thus effectively acknowledging the existence of joint business interests³⁴.

The lack of a SOFA between NATO and ICI countries.

Although negotiations are in progress with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, ICI member countries have up to now refused to sign an agreement with NATO on the legal status of the Allied forces (Status of Forces Agreement – SOFA) that would be deployed on their territory. For reasons of principle and sovereignty, the authorities in ICI countries refuse to grant NATO troops a status that would depart from common law jurisdiction and grant them immunity from Islamic law (Sharia). On their side, the Alliance member countries collectively refuse to allow Sharia law, which in their view does not provide sufficient protection, to be applied to their personnel. In the absence of such an agreement, the status of forces is managed on a case by case basis by the application of bilateral agreements. Clearly, this deficiency impedes the development of the partnership, particularly from the operational point of view, and limits the possibilities of multilateral NATO- ICI exercises.

The excessive personalisation of working relations.

For cultural reasons, Gulf rulers prefer to deal with people rather than institutions and give priority to the interlocutors whom they know and respect. As a result, they sometimes tend to regard approval as a favour granted by them in order to maintain good relations with their chosen interlocutors, who are thus obliged to make regular efforts to keep their GCC partners interested. And so, to bypass this bureaucratic obstacle and establish genuine cooperation, a long telephone call or a hand-delivered personal letter is essential. While this person-to-person approach is an admirable way of initiating cooperation, it would be advisable to re-establish relations on a more institutional footing, in order to ensure the ICI's long term survival and prevent the partnership from being a hostage to personal relations³⁵.

■ **Within NATO**

The reluctance of some Allies to accept NATO's engagement in the Gulf. Some of the new NATO

member states do not seem to have grasped the importance of having a special partnership with the Gulf States. They are not conversant with the region and do not always understand its strategic significance. They are afraid that such a partnership would detract from the priority that NATO should, in their view, be giving to Russia on the one hand, and on the other to the Eastern European states that have not yet joined the Alliance. This reluctance is increased by the other Allies, who are tired of seeing NATO pursuing what appear to be vague and elusive objectives in distant theatres. From this point of view, the ISAF's problems in Afghanistan only increase the public's reluctance and doubts in Western countries, which are less and less inclined to bear the heavy costs, especially in terms of human lives, of missions in remote theatres. It would be beneficial if the Alliance could do some work in the educational sphere and make it very clear, once again, that the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative have no hidden agendas: their aim is not to persuade partner countries to contribute to NATO operations, but quite simply to promote stability and cooperation.

The pursuit of competing bilateral agendas. Energy deals, arms sales³⁶ and civil nuclear cooperation programmes fuel rivalry among certain Allies who have a strong presence in the Gulf region and undeniably are an obstacle to progress. The main agenda of these Allies is often perceived as being mainly driven by commercial interest and the need to defend their own influence in the region, without always considering NATO's agenda.

Financial constraints. It seems clear that the Alliance, in view of the new strategic concept being developed, the announced cuts in a number of military budgets, the very high cost of certain defence programmes and the financial constraints that it is facing, will start to streamline its cooperative efforts. The content and achievements of partnerships will be subjected to rigorous scrutiny³⁷. As underlined by Philip Gordon, an American expert who has served on the US National Security Council, “It would be naive, however, to conclude that NATO's growing involvement in the region is a linear or irreversible trend”³⁸. This scepticism is increased by the determination to capitalise on the investments made in a climate of severe financial constraints.

³⁴ *Guysen Israel News*, 30 November 2009.

³⁵ A mere faux pas can thus be interpreted as a personal affront that could lead to a review of previous agreements.

³⁶ See in particular Pierre Tran: “Gulf Missile Proliferation”, *US Defense News*, 23 November 2009.

³⁷ Keith Hartley and Binyamin Solomon: “NATO and the Economic and Financial Crisis”, *Research Paper 52*, NATO Defense College, Rome, October 2009.

³⁸ Philip Gordo: “NATO's Growing Role in the Greater Middle East”, *Emirates Lecture Series 63*, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 2006, p. 25.



The fear of being involved in the Middle East conflict.

Several Alliance member states that maintain special relations with the Arab world and with Israel do not want to find themselves caught up against their will in the Israeli-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which in their view is impossible to resolve and could damage the policies pursued on the home front. These states are afraid that if the Alliance plays too strong a role in the Middle East, including through the ICI, they will be drawn insidiously into a stabilization mission on the ground, which could turn out to be very risky, very costly, would require large numbers of personnel (at a time when Afghanistan is still the declared priority) and would be very difficult to implement in operational terms. This is why the Alliance keeps insisting on the Quartet's primary role in the peace process and on the three indispensable conditions for NATO's engagement in the area: a real peace accord between the parties, a UN Security Council mandate, and an official request for NATO intervention from the parties.

Iran: at the heart of concerns

All Gulf States are keeping a close eye on Iran as they anxiously await the outcome of the standoff between the international community, headed by the US, and Tehran on the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme³⁹. This outcome, whatever it may be, will determine the GCC member states' attitude to a new regional security architecture, and hence the position they take with regard to NATO.

None of these states is in favour of a military solution to the Iranian crisis, because they all know that this would have drastic consequences for them. The GCC member states, therefore, prefer dialogue with Tehran, even if their interests, official discourse and stances all vary⁴⁰.

The Iranian regime, however, displays a desire for dialogue with its Gulf neighbours and the West. It seems to want to re-establish a win-win relationship with the United States and the wider Atlantic community⁴¹. It must be remembered that Iran, paradoxically, has a long

tradition of good relations with the Alliance via neighbouring Turkey, which has been an active NATO member since 1952. The Iranian regime has undoubtedly taken account of the fact that NATO has survived the Cold War and has adapted to new missions. In the opinion of Iranian analysts, Tehran knows that it will have to put up with a standing American military presence in the region, but it is aware of the growing influence of the Europeans in the Alliance. In fact, the Iranian regime would prefer a NATO international force near its borders, in Afghanistan and Iraq, rather than exclusively American contingents⁴². These analysts think that cooperation between NATO and Iran would be productive in more ways than one. It would smooth the path to resolution of the *Israeli-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian* conflict, contribute to the stability of the Alliance's eastern borders, make it possible to fight more effectively against drug traffic from Afghanistan and facilitate the ISAF's job in the country⁴³. Nor is Iran perforce hostile to the ICI, as it sees this partnership as a means to dilute American military presence in the Gulf and promote reforms and republican ideas in the Arabian Peninsula oil monarchies. For some Iranians, the fact that Iran and NATO are neighbours should be an incitement to set up a bilateral partnership, for example in the form of a NATO-Iran Council, in order to keep the peace on their common border and discuss common security interests in the Middle East, the Gulf, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan⁴⁴. This partnership would be very well received, especially as Turkey, which has said that it wishes to maintain excellent relations with Iran, plays a crucial role in alleviating tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan and in serving the long-term energy interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran⁴⁵.

NATO, in the meantime, maintains a cautious stance, though without closing the door on dialogue. Preliminary contacts have been arranged between the Alliance and Iran for an exchange of views on Afghanistan. These discussions have so far been inconclusive and their renewal seems to depend on the outcome of the Iranian nuclear crisis. Numerous other unofficial contacts have taken place alongside seminars and international meetings, leading to exchanges of ideas and proposals.

³⁹ See the excellent report edited by Sir Richard Dalton for Chatham House: "Iran: Breaking the Nuclear Deadlock", RIIA, London, Autumn 2008.

⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi take a hard line on Iran, whereas other emirates and countries adopt a more conciliatory tone.

⁴¹ Kayhan Barzegar: "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam", *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, pp. 173-189. For a summary of current Iranian foreign policy, see also the report on "NATO & Gulf Security", published by the NATO Defense College on its Internet site: www.ndc.nato.int.

⁴² Nasser Saghafi Ameri: "The Emerging NATO: Impact on Europe and Asia", Center for Strategic Research, Tehran, 3 December 2006.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mahmood Vaezi & Nasser Saghafi Amer: "NATO and the Security Environment of Iran", *Research Bulletin* 9, Center for Strategic Research, Tehran, 12 October 2007.

⁴⁵ Iran is seeking to diversify its gas and oil supply routes and is planning a more or less long-term connection to the energy distribution network being established by Turkey to supply energy to Europe.



Unanswered questions

To give fresh impetus to the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO and its ICI partners must reflect together on the answers to be given to a number of very sensitive but vitally important questions. They could take into consideration the following thoughts.

What added value can NATO give?

In other words, what can NATO bring to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula that the United States, the United Kingdom and France, the three most active Allies in the region, are not already providing under bilateral agreements concerning military and security assistance? There are a number of answers to this question.

The partnership with NATO first of all offers our Gulf partners a forum for debate and a mechanism for an agreement with the West on how to tackle the crises that will inevitably arise in the region. As stressed by Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the last ICI seminar in the United Arab Emirates (29 October 2009): "NATO is the only international organization that produces and exports security"⁴⁶. Now it just so happens that the Gulf States see themselves as importers of security. Claudio Bisogniero is more explicit on the matter, stating that "the Alliance could, through its public diplomacy efforts, find a balance between hard security and soft security more easily than other international actors"⁴⁷. Rolf Schwarz, a former coordinator for the ICI, endorses this view: "NATO continues to be an attractive organization because it combines US hard power with European smart power"⁴⁸. In addition, NATO offers a balanced partnership and a readiness to listen that has no equivalent in the bilateral relationships the Gulf countries have elsewhere. It also offers an education, training and interoperability tool that is unparalleled in the Western community. It brings its expertise into the area of post-conflict stabilization, particularly as regards the comprehensive approach and security sector reform, which could be of benefit to a weakened state like Yemen.

NATO also represents a sort of back-up insurance policy vis-à-vis American security guarantees, which are still perceived as essential but can no longer count on the total confidence and the favourable predisposition of ICI member states⁴⁹. Abdulaziz Sager, the Saudi Chairman of the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai, is very explicit. "Up to now, the main strategy to provide for Gulf security has

been to rely on one big external power, the United States, to maintain the status quo, provide at least a minimum of security and prevent Iran and Iraq from putting their plans into action. Yet the widened dependence on the US has proven not to be the answer for achieving lasting security in the Gulf ... It is time for the GCC Gulf States to send a strong signal to NATO of their desire to see cooperation deepened and expanded."⁵⁰ Today, ICI member states insist on the very beneficial role that NATO could play in stabilizing Iraq.

Lastly, in a serious crisis, NATO offers a broader framework for political action than an ad hoc coalition. This latter argument is all the more important in the event of an Iran that has, or is suspected of having, nuclear weapons. If it should become necessary to engage in a complex game of nuclear deterrence with Iran, there is absolutely no doubt that NATO's presence in the region, even through the ICI, would help to dissuade Iran from pursuing a reckless course of action that could escalate out of its control.

These arguments, however, hinge on NATO's continued credibility. In this regard, the outcome of NATO's mission in Afghanistan is perceived by a number of our Gulf partners as a test case. If the Alliance attains the objectives set in Afghanistan and can demonstrate that it has not failed in its mission, its credentials are safe. If it does not, then inevitably, in the eyes of our partners, NATO's credibility will be badly dented.

What security guarantees is NATO prepared to grant to ICI member countries?

In order to be credible, the Alliance must also clarify its strategy with regard to ICI member countries and think about what it would be willing to give them in terms of actual security, because these States feel under threat, particularly from Iran, and they want to know what NATO would do in the event of an attack or threat of an attack on their territory. Rather than involve itself in delicate arguments about potential formal assurances of security, the Alliance could put to its Gulf partners Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened". It would also do well to remind them of the precedent of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, when a Western coalition force, backed by several Arab contingents, intervened to put an end to Iraqi aggression

⁴⁶ Quoted in the supplement to the *Lettre d'informations stratégiques TTU*, no. 736, already mentioned.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with the author, Rome, 3 December 2009.

⁴⁹ "NATO: The Gulf's Last, Best Hope for Peace and Stability?", The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 30 January 2008. The author of this article, who has asked to remain anonymous, goes one step further and believes that "a NATO presence in the Gulf could enable the regional states to rid themselves elegantly of the high political cost of an alignment with the US that so far has been too close."

⁵⁰ Abdulaziz Sager: "The Gulf and NATO: time to revisit relations", NATO Review, Summer 2008 (www.nato.int/docu/review/2008/08/nato_gulf_relations).



against Kuwait, without a formal defence agreement between Kuwait and any of the coalition member states. The US Operation "Earnest Will", the reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers during the Iran-Iraq war, is another illustration of extended protection in crisis. We must also convince our partners of the bottom line: if their existence is threatened, their security will be protected by the Western community, with or without formal guarantees, and whatever the legal framework for intervention may be. They must also realize that their technical partnership with NATO will inevitably enhance their armed forces' effectiveness and interoperability with any forces deployed to assist them.

How can NATO attract Saudi Arabia without incurring the displeasure of its neighbours?

On one hand, NATO and the countries that have already joined the ICI seem convinced that Saudi Arabia must be included. Its presence, in both military and political terms, would give the partnership sufficient critical mass to relaunch cooperation and hence increase regional security. All the Allies have agreed that if Saudi Arabia requests to join the ICI, they will facilitate its accession. The Secretary General of NATO met the members of the Saudi royal family during the ambassadors' conference organized by NATO and the ICI in Bahrain in 2008. He also held several discussions with the Saudi emissaries during their visits to the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, in 2006 and 2009. Additionally, the former Deputy Secretary General of NATO had several meetings with the Saudi minister of foreign affairs, and on each occasion mention was made of Saudi Arabia's potential membership of the ICI. For the moment Saudi Arabia seems to be more interested in ad hoc cooperation with NATO outside the ICI, focusing on maritime security and counter-piracy, the two issues that most concern the Saudis. NATO has real experience in this area as a result of its counter-piracy mission, Operation Allied Provider, conducted in 2008 off the Somali coast. The recent spillover of the Yemeni crisis along the Saudi border could however lead Saudi Arabia to review its position and agree to be part of a broader partnership framework. It would thus be able to contribute to stabilizing Yemen, in order to prevent this country from becoming a failed state and undermining the security of the Saudi kingdom.

On the other hand, the ICI member countries all have complex relations with Saudi Arabia and are afraid that its inclusion in their partnership with NATO could further strengthen Riyadh's predominance and sideline them.

This is why the Alliance should step up its efforts in order to convince our partners on the Arabian Peninsula that their partnership with NATO must be a balanced relationship based on mutual consent and transparency, in which each state benefits from the same cooperation offer and the same opportunity to defend its own interests. This is yet another reason why the Alliance should have more contact with the Sultanate of Oman to urge it to join the ICI, where it would act as a counterweight to Saudi Arabia if the latter becomes a member. With this aim in mind, a team of NATO Defense College researchers conducted an exploratory mission in Muscat in December 2009, where they saw for themselves the genuine interest taken by the Oman authorities in this partnership. There is no doubt that the prospect of Saudi Arabian membership of the ICI is a stimulus for Oman. Given this favourable attitude, it would naturally be highly desirable if these exploratory steps could be followed by more official overtures to Oman by the NATO international staff⁵¹. Likewise, both Omani and Saudi officials should be invited to take part in the courses organized by NATO schools and the NATO Defense College.

How can we promote the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative without sidelining the Gulf Cooperation Council?

The four ICI member countries, as Saudi Arabia and Oman, insist on the importance of the GCC's political framework, which could serve as the foundation, in the future, on which to build security architecture for the countries of the Arabian Peninsula⁵². They do not want the ICI's progress to be made at the expense of the GCC. The ICI must not, in any case, replace the GCC. It might, therefore, be in NATO's interest to develop direct contact with this organization, perhaps through direct relations between the Secretaries General of the two organizations. Saudi Arabia, which has crucial influence within the GCC, would be very much in favour of this. Oman would be equally in favour because it would thus be able to join the ICI more easily without annoying its powerful neighbour, Iran, and would be shielded by the collective will of the GCC. NATO could thus hold more working and coordination meetings in future in the 28 plus 4 (ICI) plus 2 (Saudi Arabia and Oman) format, as it has done before on several occasions. Whatever steps are taken, the GCC states unanimously agree that NATO's engagement in their region must supplement but not replace that of other international organizations and must comply with international law.

⁵¹ A personal letter from the NATO Secretary General to Sultan Qabous, followed by a visit from the NATO Deputy Secretary General to Muscat, could help re-launch the procedure for Oman's accession to the ICI.

⁵² As emphasized by Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, Diplomatic Adviser to the King of Bahrain, during the Manama Dialogue Bahrain from 11 to 13 December 2009.



Should the ICI be merged with the MD?

The reply is unanimous: ICI and MD member countries think that a merger of the two partnerships would have catastrophic results. They stress the need for a clear distinction between the two bodies, so as to safeguard their geographical and geopolitical specificities. Some argue that the partnerships should be split into regional sub-groupings (Maghreb, Mashrek and the Gulf)⁵³. To strengthen their determination to distance themselves from the Mediterranean Dialogue, the ICI member countries also insist that until an equitable solution is found to the Palestinian question, they are not prepared to sit at the same table as Israel, an MD member.

Some common-sense advice

To conclude, it would be helpful to draw up a decalogue of guiding principles for NATO's outreach to the Gulf countries:

- 1) **Improve the perception, understanding and visibility of NATO in the region** through media and information campaigns and joint visits organized in concert with the local authorities, targeting not only the ruling elites but also public opinion. NATO could sponsor regular surveys and set up one or more local liaison bureaux. It could also organize a regular annual seminar, similar in format to the Manama Dialogue organized by the London-based IISS, to provide a forum for debate on security and regional cooperation issues. Providing more materials about NATO and its activities in Arabic on Internet would help. Another – less costly – way to improve NATO's image in the region would be to build up intercultural dialogue between Alliance countries and ICI member states.
- 2) **Consider what NATO could offer in terms of effective security**, for example by establishing a joint crisis prevention centre, developing emergency plans for possible NATO intervention in the Gulf, strengthening the capacity building in the maritime security sector and helping to set up a "Regional Disaster Response Coordination Centre" along the lines of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. This is an area in which all our partners have shown great interest⁵⁴.
- 3) **Diversify the partnership offer by aiming at quality rather than quantity**. Four areas are regularly cited by

our partners: maritime security, counter-piracy operations, energy security and joint naval exercises. Naval cooperation, whatever its procedures and its aims may be, has the advantage of being able to project NATO's presence in the region without deploying ground forces, thus limiting the occasional vehemently hostile reactions from the public. More NATO Standing Naval Group ships, therefore, could call in at Gulf ports, thus sending a positive signal to our partners.

- 4) **Help GCC member countries to define a common strategy**. Applying the iterative approach used to develop its own new strategic concept, NATO could help GCC countries to develop their own strategic concept, step by step, by encouraging them to think about threats and then to reach a mutual agreement on the security stakes in the Gulf region.
- 5) **Encourage ICI member countries to adopt an Individual Cooperation Programme with NATO**, while taking a cautious approach to defence reform, an extremely sensitive subject for GCC leaders.
- 6) **Promote multilateral cooperation within the ICI**. The time, it seems, has now come to elevate the ICI from a partnership based on strictly bilateral cooperation to one open to multilateral cooperation. Today no Partner state appears to be opposed to this. Every opportunity should be seized to promote multilateral exchanges and organize ministerial (foreign affairs and defence) meetings in the 28 plus 4 format or even 28 plus 4 plus 2 (with Saudi Arabia and Oman). To give more meaning to this multilateralization of the ICI, the political dimension should be included in relations between the West and the GCC states, which are currently dominated by a military, security-based approach.
- 7) **Foster ICI enlargement**, by concentrating outreach efforts towards Saudi Arabia and Oman. If one of them becomes a member, it will make it easier for the other to join. If Yemen can be stabilized, it could be another candidate for membership in the longer term.
- 8) **Find the best formula for lasting cooperation with Iraq**, in accordance with the guidelines expressed at the Bucharest summit⁵⁵, either in the framework of the ICI, if all member states agree, or under an ad hoc partnership comparable to the NATO-Ukraine or the NATO-Georgia Commission. It will need to be stated

⁵³ Kassim Bouhou: "L'OTAN et le monde arabe", op. cit., p. 125.

⁵⁴ Suggestions made by NATO Defense College Senior Course 114, Committee 7, in its research project on "NATO and the Gulf region", July 2009.

⁵⁵ Section 17 of the NATO Bucharest Summit's declaration underlines the necessity to establish "a structured cooperation framework to develop NATO's long-term relationship with Iraq".



very clearly that the Alliance has no desire to extend enlargement to Iraq. A partnership of this nature would undoubtedly benefit enormously from the special relationship that Turkey is now building in Iraq, but also from the important role that Turkey intends to play from now on in the Middle East.

9) Pursue an informal dialogue with Iran, using whatever practical procedures may be required. Iran is a key actor that should be included in any durable security architecture in the Gulf. It continues to have great influence over the Afghan and Iraqi theatres where NATO member countries are currently engaged.

10) Last but not least, promote transparency and mutual trust among ICI member countries, drawing on the OSCE's experience in this domain. The ICI, like the Mediterranean Dialogue, has an extremely valuable asset: the ability to promote transparency and trust among partner countries.

In the final analysis, the future of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative will certainly depend on whatever offer NATO decides to put on the table, but above all it will depend on the level of engagement of partner countries and their determination to transcend their rivalries. It will also depend on the crucial decisions that President Obama makes on Middle East issues, especially Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It will depend, equally, on the Iranian regime's response to the international community's offer of negotiations and on the attitude of the European Allies, who are torn by interests that at times conflict. Each actor, then, is confronted by its own responsibilities. Faced with an uncertain future, each side must try to steer the ICI along a course that is in the common interest. To this end, partner states must decide what they really need and find the best way to convince the public of the utility of their partnership with NATO. The Alliance, on the other hand, must continue to display flexibility. Above all, it must be patient.