

# NATO and Its South: The Challenges the Allies Cannot Afford to Ignore

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## Abstract

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has redirected NATO's strategic attention toward the Eastern Flank, yet instability and persistent threats across its Southern Neighborhood continue to affect the Euro-Atlantic security environment. The article argues that Moscow's growing presence in the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel, combined with regional conflicts with global implications and the diffusion of hybrid threats, dictate the need for a renewed NATO role in the South. For NATO to pursue a more effective posture, however, it must address its perception deficit in the region and treat the Southern and Eastern Flanks as interconnected strategic spaces mobilizing its full partnership architecture. The article concludes with policy recommendations for both broad strategic proposals and measures specifically targeted at countering Russia's influence. It also highlights that sustained coordination with the EU is essential to support NATO's broader engagement.

## Introduction

Russian 2022 aggression against Ukraine has reoriented NATO's attention and strategic priorities towards the Eastern Flank prompting the Allies at the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague to agree to increase their defence and defence-related spending to 5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2035. Yet, even as events in Europe dominate Allies' attention, the Middle East and the wider Southern Neighborhood are characterized by growing instability and persistent threats that NATO cannot afford to ignore. In parallel, there is a growing recognition that NATO faces similar challenges in the South and the East, and that the security of these different neighborhoods is increasingly interconnected<sup>1</sup>. Russia, "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area"<sup>2</sup> has deployed a variety of means to enhance its geostrategic interest in the Southern Neighborhood (Middle East, North Africa and Sahel)<sup>3</sup>, while, at the same time, China continues to deepen its network and cooperation in the South. Moreover, the Hamas attack against Israel on 7 October and the subsequent disruption of maritime freedom by Iran's proxy, Ansar Allah, underscored for the Allies the urgent need to tackle multiple crises simultaneously and in parallel across different areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Kinnimont, Jane, and Isabelle Werenfels. 2024. *Regaining NATO's Southern Neighbours: The Alliance Should Seize the Opportunity to Jointly Reshape Southern Partnerships*. SWP Comment 2024/C 25. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). <https://doi.org/10.18449/2024C25>

<sup>2</sup> NATO. 2022. *Strategic Concept*. Adopted 29 June 2022. Paragraph 8.

<sup>3</sup> Borshchevskaya, Anna. 2016. "Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.

The challenge for the Allies is to better understand the ways in which Southern-origin threats shape and affect the Euro-Atlantic security environment. Aspiring to become a more decisive actor in the Middle East resolving the structural sources of Middle Eastern instability is not an expectation consistent with NATO mandate, nor is it realistic. In grand-strategy terms, the Alliance's strategic interests lie instead in mitigating spillover risks and strengthening its own resilience through calibrated, partner-based engagement. As Brands<sup>4</sup> states, grand strategy requires a deep understanding of the threats faced and the resources available to engage, protect and enhance the actor's interests and goals. Yet, NATO is a multinational alliance including 32 sovereign states. Its member countries do not consistently share similar threat perceptions, strategic priorities, or preferred instruments of action. These variations in national interests and strategic preferences become particularly apparent when it comes to the complex security environment of the Middle East. Divergences, dilemmas and internal fragmentation are inherent in multinational security institutions such as NATO. As Snyder, Walt and Keohane underscore divergent national preferences can impede alliance coherence, particularly when threat perceptions vary across member states<sup>5</sup>. It is important to mention that these dynamics constitute some of the main constraints that NATO faces in the shaping of its Middle Eastern engagement. Yet, the great mosaic of threats that the Alliance faces in the South leaves the heterogeneous Alliance little space and choice but to adopt flexible approaches. The complexity of the threat landscape in the South encompasses wider inter-regional challenges such as migration, hybrid operations, disinformation campaigns, food and energy security among others. In fact, the regional security complex theory (RSCT) conceptualises the Middle East as a region defined by intense inter-regional linkages and overlapping external interventions<sup>6</sup>. The unique characteristics of Middle Eastern security architecture as well as the Sahel and North Africa imply that NATO cannot treat its Southern neighbourhood as strategically separate from its deterrence posture on the Eastern flank.

### **Strategic context and threat landscape in the Middle East: interlinked threats with the Eastern Flank.**

From maritime security breaches and terrorism to the Russian disinformation campaign and non-state actors, the Middle East's threat landscape is full of complex, interconnected risks that NATO cannot risk to overlook. The existence of persistent threats and instability in the Middle East contribute to the shaping of a highly unpredictable strategic environment from where different crises emanate. In addition to the traditional threats (such as state-centric disputes and conflicts between nations), the Southern Neighborhood is particularly vulnerable to terrorism, demographic challenges, acute water shortages and political instability. These challenges reinforce one another, creating a cycle of fragility that decreases the resilience of the states and the regional cooperation with significant spillover effects on Euro-Atlantic security.

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<sup>4</sup>Ryan, David. 2015. "What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush. By Hal Brands." *International Affairs* 91 (2): 448–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12274>.

<sup>5</sup>Snyder, Glenn H. 1997. *Alliance Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>6</sup>Buzan, Barry, and Ole Wæver. 2003. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

While NATO has its eyes firmly on Ukraine and the Eastern Flank, the Islamic State aspires to exploit the reduced American presence in Syria and the fragmented state to rebuild its network and capabilities. At the same time, jihadist organizations, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and Islamic State affiliates such as ISIS-Sahel and ISIS-West Africa Province benefit in North Africa and the Sahel from weak state institutions and political vacuums stretching from southern Libya through Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and into northern Nigeria. Terrorism, “the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity” as NATO identifies it<sup>7</sup>, remains far from defeated in the Southern Neighbourhood. The broad nature and diffusion of threats coming from active terrorist groups and non-state actors constitutes one of the greatest challenges that the Alliance has to address. While the NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI) represents a successful example of cooperation between NATO and Iraq in fighting terrorism and building effective armed forces, the threat of terrorism demands from the Alliance a forward-looking approach and active engagement. For example, Houthis’ recent involvement in the disruption of maritime security demonstrates how regional terrorist groups or proxies of third actors in the Middle East can shake the pillars of inter-regional and international security by disrupting international trade, freedom of navigation and undermining the stability of critical trade routes. The 2023-2024 Red Sea crisis highlights how localized conflicts can rapidly escalate into broader crises with global implications; implications that NATO should not risk to ignore.

In parallel, Russia’s disinformation campaigns and increased influence in the Middle East have emerged as a key challenge for NATO. Although NATO’s strategic focus is centered on countering Russia’s aggression along the Eastern Flank, the Alliance cannot overlook the parallel challenges emerging to its south. The Kremlin spends USD 1.5 billion per year on propaganda beyond its borders<sup>8</sup>. In the Middle East, Moscow’s increased influence includes sophisticated disinformation campaigns, media partnerships, local media offices, and diplomatic outreach designed to enhance political leverage<sup>9</sup>. A closer look at Russian-sponsored media in the Middle East reveals how Moscow achieved to expand its communication outreach in Arabic speaking countries. This trend is demonstrated by the country’s increased influence in the region through the RT Arabic. The Arab language branch of the notorious Russian state-owned TV channel (previously known as Rusiya al-Yaum) was launched as early as 2007 and it now dominates the Arab World’s media landscape as one of the region’s top three most-watched news broadcasters, alongside Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera<sup>10</sup>. Research on hybrid warfare highlights that Russia’s disinformation efforts are aimed not only at shaping regional narratives but also at eroding trust in Western institutions<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> NATO. 2024. *Washington Summit Declaration*. Adopted 10 July 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Kovalčíková, Nad’a. 2025. “Shielding Democracy: A Triple C Framework for Turning Principles into Practice.” *EU Institute for Security Studies Commentary*, November 21, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Galeotti, M. 2017. *Hybrid War or Gibrinaya Voina?* Mayak Intelligence.

Renz, Bettina, and Hanna Smith. 2016. “Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Going Beyond the Label.” *Aleksanteri Papers*.

<sup>10</sup> Janadze, Elene. 2022. “The Digital Middle East: Another Front in Russia’s Information War.” *Middle East Institute*. April 19, 2022 and RUSI. 2024. “Russia Is Winning the Global Information War.” *Commentary*, May 7, 2024. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

<sup>11</sup> Polyakova, Alina, and Spencer Boyer. 2018. *The Future of Political Warfare*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Moscow's disinformation efforts and propaganda after the Ukrainian invasion were coupled with a significantly higher volume and frequency of posts in social media by Arabic Sputnik and RT Arabic. This escalation illustrated two key dynamics; first, how the Kremlin adapts its messaging to local audiences to widen its strategic reach, and secondly, how the region's heavy reliance on social media platforms for news enables Russia to develop highly effective communication strategies capable of reaching millions of people across the MENA region<sup>12</sup>. The results and effectiveness of this large-scale disinformation campaign could be easily demonstrated when examining the outcomes of the Arab Youth Survey 2022. The survey reveals a concerning trend for the Alliance; more young Arabs (aged 19-24) blame the United States and NATO for the war in Ukraine rather than Russia<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, they view NATO and its Western partners less as regional stability guarantors and more as actors whose actions need to be questioned.

Iran, China and Russia have seized the moment to increase their influence and strategic interests in the region. Tehran retains a significant network and capabilities to destabilize the region. Iran's continued investment in ballistic missiles, UAVs, and hybrid warfare tactics underline an immediate risk to NATO's security environment, not only by threatening partners and maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb through its proxies, but also by enabling Tehran to provide material support to Russia for use against Ukraine. Additionally, Tehran's close ties to China and North Korea<sup>14</sup> further multiply the strategic challenges and coordinated efforts to undermine Western security interests.

The example of Iran's role in the region highlights two important points. First, Tehran's material support for Russia in the war against Ukraine underscores that the Southern and Eastern Flanks constitute highly interconnected geopolitical spaces<sup>15</sup>, where developments in one theatre directly shape the security environment of the other. Second, Iran's growing cyber capabilities and its provision of military technologies to Russia highlights that risks originating in the Southern Neighborhood can diffuse across systems, networks, and intermediary actors, rather than through geographic proximity alone. This pattern reinforces the need for NATO to understand the South not as a separate strategic domain, but as a source of inter-regional risks and threats that influence the Euro-Atlantic security environment.

In conclusion, MENA's threat landscape signifies the existence of challenges that are not isolated in the region but rather form integral components of the broader strategic environment that confronts NATO. Thus, the Southern Neighborhood hosts a dense collection of challenges, such as terrorism, hybrid warfare, disinformation and state fragility, that increasingly intersect with the threats faced along the Eastern Flank. Most importantly, apart

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<sup>12</sup>Janadze, Elene. 2022. "The Digital Middle East: Another Front in Russia's Information War." *Middle East Institute*. April 19, 2022.

<sup>13</sup>Borshchevskaya, Anna. 2023. "Russia's Disinformation Machine Has a Middle East Advantage." *Foreign Policy*. March 23, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Cakirözer, Utku (Rapporteur). 2025. *Iran's Threat to Regional and Euro-Atlantic Security*. GSM Report 025 GSM 25 E rev.2. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. September 11, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Atalan, Yagiz. 2024. "The Future of NATO's Southern Flank." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. July 10, 2024.

from the coordinated Allied efforts in the Eastern Flank, NATO needs to confront Russia's influence and enhanced presence in the Southern Neighborhood as Moscow leverages the regional instability to amplify its influence. Iran's axis of resistance (even after the weakening of its proxies) remains a regional multiplier of instability, while Tehran's support to Moscow constitutes a persistent threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Lastly, as China expands its political and economic footprint, the dividing line between "southern" and "eastern" risks becomes ever more vague. Consequently, the Alliance cannot act decisively without mobilising the full spectrum of means and partnerships at its disposal to address these interconnected and cross-regional challenges.

### **NATO's partnership architecture in the Middle East: linking existing partnerships to a new roadmap.**

Despite the complex dynamics in the region and the sceptical view of the Arab world on NATO<sup>16</sup> after the interventions in Libya and Afghanistan, the Alliance has nevertheless succeeded in establishing special partnership programmes across the Southern Neighborhood, many of which provide useful platforms for a more strategic approach towards the Middle East. NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) remains the Alliance's primary partnership framework with MENA states, bringing together Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. Through the MD, NATO has established structured political consultations and practical cooperation on issues such as counter-terrorism, interoperability, defence reform, and civil emergency planning. In parallel, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) offers a tailored partnership framework with Gulf countries, currently including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Yet, ICI partners have pursued bilateral cooperation with NATO with the goal to meet national-tailored needs and activities in the area of defense instead of collective intra-Gulf interoperability<sup>17</sup>. In a need to better understand the security issues and avoid the obstacles of multilateral engagement, NATO launched the Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs) that enable Allies to engage with each regional partner in a manner suitable both to their ambitions and particular challenges<sup>18</sup>.

Alongside these multilateral-type frameworks designed to foster political dialogue and encourage mutual cooperation, NATO's Mission in Iraq (NMI) remains a notable success story. The NMI represents a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission supporting defence institution-building, professional military education and security sector reform. Moreover, as NATO seeks to minimize crisis management interventions and avoid the high political risk, the Alliance announced the opening of a new Liaison Office (NLO) in Amman, which represents the first-ever NATO liaison office in the region. According to the Strategic Concept 2022, the Alliance prioritizes crisis prevention, deterrence and cooperative security over large scale interventions. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept counts the challenges

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<sup>16</sup>Saddiki, Said. 2012. "Arab Public Opinion and NATO after the International Military Operations in Libya." *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 11 (2, Summer): 79–88.

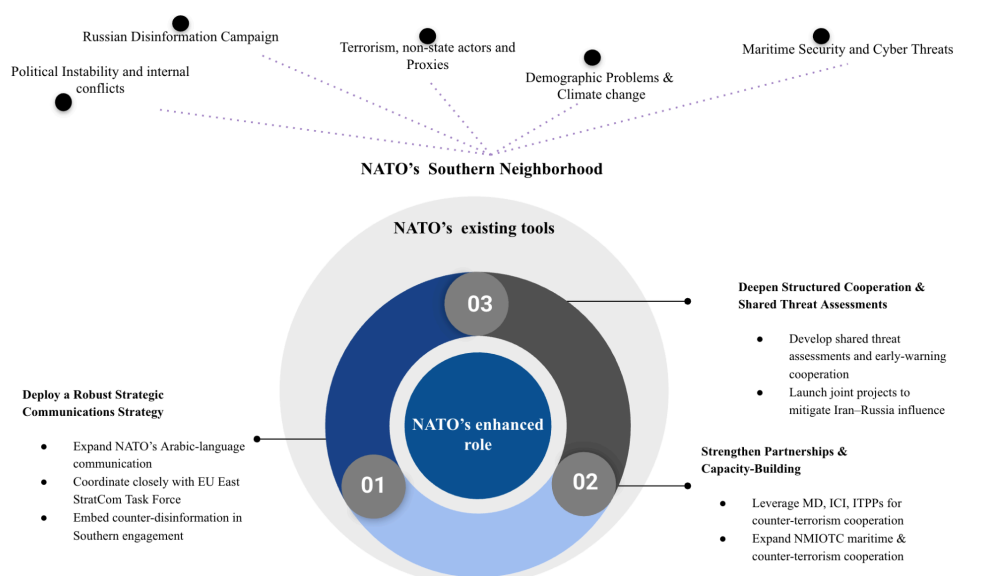
<sup>17</sup> Ardemagni, Eleonora. 2018. "NATO's Gulf Partnerships: Betting on Military Education." *ISPI Commentary*, July 6, 2018

<sup>18</sup>Francken. 2024. *Russia in NATO's Southern Neighbourhood*. GSM 24 E rev.2 FIN. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. (Paragraph 67).

confronting the Alliance in the South stating that the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions face “*interconnected security, demographic, economic, and political challenges. Climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity are now defining features of the security landscape. This situation provides fertile ground for non-state armed groups, including terrorist organisations, and creates opportunities for hostile strategic competitors like Russia to engage in destabilising and coercive operations*” (NATO, 2022).

Moreover, in the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept the South appears in connection with Russia<sup>19</sup>. In paragraph 8 of the strategic document<sup>20</sup>, the Allies stated that Russia “aims to destabilize countries to our East and South” directly linking the two theaters. Therefore, NATO cannot preserve a 360-degree approach solely focused on the Eastern flank.

Graph 1: “NATO’s Southern Strategy: Threats, Existing Tools, and Enhanced Engagement”



In order to address the perception deficit in the Southern Neighborhood and to balance the Russian presence, NATO should:

- *Expand its communication strategy in Arabic language.*

**Overall:** NATO needs first and foremost to address its perception problem in the region that was largely shaped during and because of its Allies previous interventions in the region (ex. Libya). This could be addressed through the expansion of NATO’s Public Diplomacy efforts in Arabic and potential cooperation and synergies with Arabic speaking local media leveraging the Alliance’s presence and acceptance in the Middle East, Sahel and North Africa. The correction of persistent misperceptions that undermine NATO’s role in the region will enable the Alliance to operate effectively in the region. Additionally, NATO should

<sup>19</sup> Tardy, Thierry, ed. 2022. *NATO’s New Strategic Concept: NDC Research Paper No. 25*. Rome: NATO Defence College Research Division. September 25, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> NATO. 2022. *Strategic Concept*. Adopted 29 June 2022. Paragraph 8.

coordinate closely with the European Union's East StratCom Task Force and the EU External Action Service to ensure consistent messaging, avoid duplication and leverage the EU's monitoring infrastructure for foreign information manipulation.

**Russia targeted:** NATO should prioritise strategic communications as a core element of the Alliance's Southern policy and recognize the full range of the hybrid threats coming from Moscow's heavily invested disinformation campaign in the region. Any act needs to be linked to a well-built sophisticated communication approach and a counter-disinformation component against Russia. The objective is not to emulate Russia's disinformation efforts, but to provide a coherent, credible and culturally resonant narrative of NATO's aims and limitations.

- *Elevate and use ICI/ MD for enhanced regional cooperation*

**Overall:** The Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative have long served as the Alliance's fora in the South. Yet, NATO should also seek to increase cooperation with other regional or international organizations such as the African Union, UN or Union for the Mediterranean. This will enhance the Alliance's role and image in the region, particularly making more clear NATO's "real intentions" and added value. Establishing structured cycles of consultation with willing partners, deeper operational cooperation in areas such as air and missile defence, cyber security and maritime domain awareness, and the development of shared threat assessments linked to NATO intelligence and early-warning processes through existing means such as the ICI and MD will enable NATO to play a more active role.

**Russia targeted:** it's worth mentioning that the Alliance must build on these existing partnerships but at the same time, should deepen cooperation with third countries from Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>21</sup>. Sharing information on current challenges and threats like climate change and energy security would increase mutual trust and also provide a variable solution to Russia's deep influence in the South. Russia has exploited vulnerabilities in conflict affected regions in parts of Africa and the Arab world and entrenched itself through arms transfers, military contractors, resource extraction deals and highly coordinated disinformation campaigns portraying Moscow as a reliable and non-intrusive security provider. To counter Moscow, NATO should deploy its means like the MD and ICI to launch joint analytical projects with Southern and Sub-Saharan partners in the areas of hybrid threats, climate-related insecurity and energy vulnerability, issues that Russia routinely exploits for political leverage. In doing so, MD and ICI would become not only vehicles for traditional defence cooperation, but also instruments for building regional resilience and trust, exposing malign influence and strengthening the credibility of NATO's Southern engagement.

- *Promote cooperation for maritime security*

**Overall:** The NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre (NMOTC) provides an ideal foundation for deeper partner engagement considering its geographical position in

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

northwest Crete, Greece and high expertise in interdiction, maritime domain awareness and hybrid-threat training. Given the high vulnerabilities of critical maritime checkpoints in the Red Sea and the Gulf, the Center could host a series of NATO-EU joint workshops on maritime security awareness, officers' exchange programs and training curricula with willing partners of the Southern Neighborhood in order to enhance NATO's strategic partnerships in the region over critical maritime security issues and build trust. Additionally, the NMIOTC could play a vital role in leveraging NATO-EU cooperation and facilitate a level of institutional synchronisation between them that neither organisation can achieve independently.

**Russia targeted:** Beyond its mandate and its mission to support Maritime Interdiction Operations, NMIOTC is well positioned to address NATO's growing perception deficit in the Arab world and counter Russian-sponsored disinformation. The Center serves as a place for frequent engagement with regional officers, placing it as an ideal hub for developing Arabic-language strategic-communications initiatives and organising regional maritime-security diplomacy events with Southern partners. This dual operational and communicative role would not only enhance NATO-EU complementarity but also strengthen NATO's credibility and visibility across the Southern Neighbourhood, demonstrating to regional partners that the Alliance offers tangible benefits grounded in cooperation, transparency and shared security interests and a credible alternative to Moscow's and Beijing's influence.

NATO's diverse partnership frameworks across the Southern Neighborhood, the appointment of NATO special representative for the Southern Neighborhood demonstrate that the Allies have already available a broad, adaptable architecture for engagement in the region. NATO's ability to shape a consistent engagement with a stable and secure Southern Neighborhood will depend not only on the structures and partnerships it has developed, but on its capacity to use them strategically, consistently and in partnership with regional actors. In the Mediterranean and Gulf region, the diffuse nature of threats emanating from the South necessitate coordinated actions and broad cooperation with the EU as both actors share the same neighborhood and face parallel risks.