



PROJECTING STABILITY TO THE SOUTH: THE ROLE OF NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION-SOUTH HUB

Conference Report
21 October 2019

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**This report follows the conference “Projecting stability to the south:
the role of NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub” organized by Ce.S.I.
with the support of the NATO Public Diplomacy Division.**



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AGENDA

Monday 21 October 2019

10.00 am

Roma Eventi Piazza di Spagna

Via Alibert, 5/a

Rome

09.30 am

Registration and Welcome coffee

10.00 am

Debate

- Brig. Gen. Ignazio Lax, Director, NSD-S Hub
- Col. Franco Merlino, Director, NATO SFA COE
- Giray Sadik, Eisenhower Fellow, NATO Defense College
- Marco Di Liddo, Senior Analyst, Ce.S.I.

Q&A session

Closing Remarks

- Andrea Margelletti, Chairman, Ce.S.I.

Moderator

- Gabriele Iacovino, Director, Ce.S.I.



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Security challenges in the southern flank and possible future scenarios

Almost nine years after the outbreak of the so-called 'Arab Spring', the region of the wider Mediterranean Sea is neither more stable nor safer than in 2011. Actually, the whole area facing *Mare Nostrum* continues to show considerable restlessness based on those same political, social, economic and security critical issues that have been common to the Middle Eastern and North African region for decades and which led to the 2011 unrests. The recrudescence of these factors has emerged more and more clearly in the recent years, drawing a trajectory full of uncertainties for the entire region, including the apparently more stable countries.

The critical element common to the MENA area countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is the relationship between population and institutions. The structure of the Arab State, built on a strong nationalist or autocratic system supported by a strong presence of security apparatuses in the public sphere, proves to be less and less able to manage the renewed requests of the population. Indeed, increasingly bigger portions of the population ask for greater social justice, the reduction of regional inequalities and room for the expression of dissent. The labor elites replicate the prudent redistribution scheme of wealth that sustained them for decades, but at the same time no genuine renewal of the social pact was provided. The protests in Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria, although with due differences, are a perfect example of this phenomenon.

These factors of structural instability are then compounded by the persistent effects of the regional crises in Syria and Libya. There is the concrete risk that the persistence of these conflicts not only makes them the center of gravity of regional competition, but also transforms them into multipliers of instability with noticeable effects well beyond the boundaries of the area. The Syrian scenario continues to project instability on neighboring countries, constantly threatening to overflow such conflict across the border, along the link connecting Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad, Ankara and Amman.



A fragmented Libya can destabilize the entire southern flank, deviating every intervention for the area to an emergency logic and making it more complex to develop policies able to address problems connected with long-term trends (the demographic changes of the African continent and the consequent migration flows to Europe) and with phenomena such as the increasingly widespread diffusion of jihadist radicalism.

Moving to the African continent, jihadist radicalism increasingly represents a form of expression of malaise of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, oppressed by poverty, underdevelopment and chronic governance gaps that force them to seek alternative interlocutors to institutions. These are minorities with little political representation, living in regions brought to their knees by the climate emergency and the drastic reduction of water resources and of soil at their disposal. The lack of food, water and fertile lands exacerbates inter-ethnic conflict, favors the social disillusionment that leads to radicalization and increases the spiral of violence. The religious rhetoric of jihadist groups in the Sahel is purely ideological: it is a simple framework that contains a speculative, but at the same time effective, political agenda for guaranteeing order in areas prey for anarchy. Indeed, such rhetoric seems to provide justice that is apparently more equitable and transparent than that of the governmental institutions and traditional tribal authorities, and that guarantees a more balanced redistribution of resources. Therefore, jihadist groups fill the void left by the State and, thanks to their widespread action on the territory, they obtain legitimacy by increasing their recruitment basin and their wide territorial range of action.

The vicious circle that links deleterious impact of climate change, unavailability of resources, gaps in governance and radicalization leading to violent extremism in the southern flank seems destined to worsen. Indeed, the analysis of the different trends (climatic, environmental, socio-political) suggests that, in the absence of profound interventions in the regional systems, the factors at the basis of radicalization will

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increase and, with them, the number of individuals who could decide to join a terrorist or insurgent group to improve their living conditions. If now the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization in Africa appears to be linked to rural dynamics, it cannot be excluded that, in the near future, violent radicalism will increase its proselytes in urban areas given the increment of demographic pressure and the rate of urbanization. Unemployment, poverty and overpopulation are factors destined to feed the resentment and alienation of future generations, opening up enormous spaces of maneuver for subversive and violent ideologies. In this context, jihadism could evolve, transforming itself from a conservative struggle for the rights of rural populations and marginalized minorities to mass proto-populist movements.

In this high-risk framework, international dialogue and the support of the Atlantic Alliance appear to be fundamental for the stabilization of the southern flank. These topics, the relative actions and policies adopted by NATO and the possible way forward were widely discussed during the conference “Projecting Stability to the south: the role of NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub”, organized by Ce.S.I. with the support of the NATO Public Diplomacy Division.



Overview of the conference's main outcomes

The threats emerging from the southern flank are becoming increasingly challenging and numerous, thus worrying Allies and, in particular, those member States directly facing the Mediterranean Sea. Italy, geographically located at the heart of *Mare Nostrum*, has always been the loudest voice in asking the Atlantic Alliance to focus with due attention on the security dynamics evolving in the southern front. Following Rome's suggestion, Secretary General Stoltenberg launched in 2017 a new NATO center in charge of monitoring the Middle East, Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa: the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub (NSD-S). The latter is part of a broader strategy aimed at projecting stability to the south through tailor-made policies and activities.

Brigadier General Ignazio Lax, Director of the NSD-S, provided a wide and in-depth overview of the main tasks and mission of his center as well as the methodology and approach used. He started his speech by listing some of the main threats present in the southern front: extremist ideologies, mass migration, climate change, drug trafficking, piracy, demographics, corruption, water scarcity, extreme poverty, pandemics, transnational organized crime, volatile security and poor governance. The role of the Hub does not solely consist in studying and analyzing the above-mentioned challenges, but also their root causes, symptoms and possible emerging menaces. Indeed, these threats are interconnected and also shared by many different countries: some may affect Europe more, others Africa or the Middle East. On this backdrop it is evident that the Hub was created to understand what may have an impact on the security of the Alliance in the next future. As Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated: "If NATO's neighbors are stable, NATO is more secure."

In order to achieve this ambition, the Hub was given a clear and comprehensive mandate: "to assemble, analyze and promote information sharing which contributes to NATO's comprehensive regional understanding, situational awareness

"The Hub was created to understand what may have an impact on the security of the Alliance in the next future".



and decision making; and to contribute to the coordination of activities in the South.”

Therefore, the Hub’s mission can be summarized in two main objectives. The first one is to improve regional understanding, which is an innovative and unique task. Thanks to a constant dialogue with people from the region, the Hub is able to introduce the Middle Eastern and African point of view on shared challenges to NATO decision makers and give pertinent recommendations. To emphasize how different perspectives can be, the Director of the Hub provided the example of mass migration: for Europe in many cases it represents a burden, whereas for Africa it embodies an opportunity as it reduces demographic pressure and it supports local economy thanks to the money that migrants send back to their countries of origin. The second objective is to overview and support, in terms of coordination, all the activities conducted in the region. Indeed, there are numerous NATO entities and member States as well as other international organizations and NGOs planning or carrying out activities in the south. In this case, the role of the Hub is to provide an as clear as possible situational picture, identify gaps to be filled, avoid duplication of efforts and ensure a broadly spread presence. This type of action supports capacity building in the region and the projection of stability. The Hub, which is based on article 2 of the Washington Treaty,¹ was described by General Lax, as a “docking station in which anyone can plug in by connecting, consulting and contributing to the coordination with all the stakeholders that are in the region.” Such connection is fostered by the methodology used by the center: hosting or attending events in the region and exchanging viewpoints with local stakeholders. Moreover, the Hub organizes monthly ‘webinar’ on specific topics. It consists in an online chat that connects more than 100 people (both

¹ “The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.” Article 2, Washington Treaty.



from the academia and not) who have the opportunity to share their opinion. This type of methodology is also distinctly aimed at building trust with partners and facilitating interaction. General Lax's speech described a center that has many tasks and objectives and, despite being a young reality, has already a clear operative picture in mind. Overall, it is possible to affirm that the Hub symbolizes NATO's continuing innovative approach towards a safer environment.

In order to understand the type of activities that can be conducted on the ground and what operative difficulties can be encountered on the southern front, Colonel Franco Merlino, Director of NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (SFA CoE), discussed the role of his center and some lessons learned.

Firstly, he underlined that SFA CoE is an international institution authenticated by NATO and financed by supporting nations². Secondly, he dispelled the myth that SFA is only about training soldiers; SFA is a broader environment in which actors cooperate to support local institutions in maintaining security. In other words, Security Force Assistance can be considered as a box of activities that identifies in which way the military can contribute to local security.

NATO developed a concept for SFA in 2014 and a doctrine in 2016. In detail, the Alliance has given the following definition: "Security force assistance includes all NATO activities that develop and improve, or directly support, the development of Local Security Forces and their Associated Institutions in crisis zones. Local forces comprise indigenous, non-NATO military security forces and will be defined by the North Atlantic Council." In this framework, NATO also specified that the goal of SFA is to "develop the capability to train and develop local forces in crisis zones, so that the local authorities are able, as quickly as possible, to maintain security without international assistance."

After having clarified the tasks and objectives of his center, Colonel Merlino analyzed some aspects to be considered in

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² The current supporting nations are Italy, Albania and Slovenia.



Defense Capacity Building initiatives when operating in North Africa and Sahel. The following lessons learned that he discussed are true for NATO, EU, bilateral and national operations. The first problem is the lack of an effective regional approach as well as of a coordinating authority for the actors performing activities. At this regard, in the southern front's scenario, Afghanistan can be considered as a case study: the disagreement between the military and political parts involved led to a duplication of efforts, energies and resources.

The political framework represents the second issue. If the local government intends to develop security in a different manner than that of the level of interest of the providers, it could be extremely complex to create synergies and obtain the desired results. Also, it can be difficult to identify the local leadership and the local security forces. In this case multiple questions arise: does the population support this leadership? Should former belligerents take part in the stabilization process? Clearly, these inquiries are difficult to solve and they need to be addressed case by case. Similarly, to the political framework, also the legal one could be problematic. Specifically, national caveats and the rule of law could complicate or limit the action and the capacity of the operators.

Finally, the lessons learned teach that it is fundamental to carefully choose the approach to be used and the timeframe in which to operate. The main choice is between a regional or a bilateral approach: in some cases involving the neighboring States could be a smart solution, in others maybe not. For what concerns the timeframe, starting from the assumption that SFA has a long-term vision, in the middle-term the focus should be on specific aspects at the tactical level. Small results should be gradually achieved already in the short term and step by step the bigger picture should be drawn.

In conclusion, Colonel Merlino underlined that "SFA is related to developing a system where the institutions play an important role"; as such it represents a wider framework for capacity building and defense activities. At this regard he recalled with satisfaction the establishment of NATO Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, as it



reinforces the Alliance's commitment to partners and helps projecting stability.

The innovative and comprehensive approach NATO has started embracing for the south reflects an extremely challenging and multifaced environment. Mr. Marco Di Liddo, Senior Analyst at Ce.S.I., discussed three complex threats present in the African continent: terrorism, demographic growth and mass migration. He considered terrorism the most challenging menace at the moment as it has experienced an impressive growth and it is constantly expanding. In fact, if in 2003/2004 there were barely any Sub-Sharan jihadist groups, today the most influential and dangerous jihadist groups are in the Sahel. The number of terrorist attacks carried out in the area is rising and challenging more and more the interests of NATO States. The In Amenas hostage crisis in Algeria in 2013 or the more recent attacks against a gold mine in the north of Burkina Faso only a few months ago are clear examples of a threat that is growing quickly and widely.

Such expansion is facilitated by the fact that the militant groups in the Sahel are able to comprehend the political, social and economic grievances of the local population better than the local governments. For instance, the Fulani ethnic group decided to join the Macina Liberation Front or Ansar ul-Islam groups because the local government was investing in agriculture to fulfil exportation needs instead of the local market's necessities. Hence, land property rights and the exploitation of resources were the main push factors for radicalization in the cases of Fulani and Tuareg as well. Moreover, in some contests there could be no other credible alternatives. Indeed, many African governments are facing a legitimization crisis and are unable to build trust among the local community. This lack of confidence also leads to a mistrust towards western partners and, sometimes, to a negative perception of NATO in the African continent: only a few amongst the society are aware of what the Atlantic Alliance really is and does. The most widely spread idea is that NATO is simply a military organization or the third arm of American imperialism in Africa. According to Mr. Di Liddo, the first step

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to address this type of prejudice and erroneous perception is to build trust by engaging the civil society. In this context the role of the Hub is crucial and can be, in the long-term, a gamechanger in Africa.

The second issue addressed was demographic growth: it is forecasted that in 2050 the population of the Sahel will double. However, the continent will not be able to absorb this manpower nor feed the entire population. As an overall consequence, many from the rural areas will flow to the cities and such internal migration will be an ulterior impulse for international migration. The latter is the third and last point raised by Mr. Di Liddo. Firstly, he underlined that migration is strictly linked to crime organizations: the Nigeria Brotherhood, for instance, controls human trafficking from Africa to Europe. As many among the local population are unemployed, they rely on criminal organizations for money and to improve their social status. Secondly, he suggested that migration itself is not a threat, but it can be perceived as such if European governments and electorates decide so. In this historical moment Europe is perceiving it as a menace and NATO's adversaries are perfectly aware of that: they use propaganda and information warfare to exploit the fear of European actors. In this case as well the role of the Hub can be fundamental in increasing awareness. Indeed, as Mr. Di Liddo loudly affirmed "the critics of the Hub think that NATO was born to solely face the Russian bear on the eastern border; but now the Russian bear is concealing itself into a lion and is pushing southward."

The dichotomy east/south has always been a core topic of discussion when analyzing NATO's current and future priorities. It seems that now the two fronts have reached an equilibrium on the Alliance's scale, also considering what Dr. Sadik, Eisenhower Fellow at the NATO Defense College, affirmed: "it's time to bust the myth that hybrid threats come only from the east and terrorism comes only from the south." Evidently, challenges to NATO are getting more and more interrelated, as proved by the growth of Russia in the MENA region.



He described the threats emerging from the south as increasingly complex, transnational³ and hybrid and, based on this context, he gave some suggestions on how the Hub could be improved to properly address them.

Firstly, he called upon collective effort, meaning that Allies must lead as an example for partners: if there are significant divisions within NATO, it will be more difficult to project such message outside the Alliance's borders.

Secondly, he affirmed that NATO's engagement towards the south should be a multi-stakeholder enterprise. In detail, NATO should integrate not only the political and military level when operating on the ground, but also the private sector, private society and NGOs. Indeed, as the threats we are facing are increasingly hybrid blurring the lines between domestic and international, civilian and military, State and non-state actors, so should our countermeasures be. Hence civilian-military cooperation should be enhanced and joint efforts between Allies and partners should be promoted. In this framework also the European Union can have a role in further engaging the civilian counterparts and cooperating with NATO.

In conclusion, Dr. Sadik considered the strategic dimension of the Hub: "to have NATO partnership filling that power vacuum in the south, instead of violent non-state actors". Furthermore, he suggested that the Hub should be placed within NATO's existing structures so that it can benefit from them. Most notably, the Alliance's counterterrorism strategy⁴ could be incredibly useful to the objectives of the Hub.

Evidently, the threats emerging from the south are increasingly challenging and the policies and actions NATO has launched are surely comprehensive and aimed at efficiently tackling the problems beyond the Mediterranean Sea. Nonetheless, two aspects are crucial when addressing these threats: political will and operative capacity. It is exactly on these two points that the conclusive remarks of Professor Andrea Margelletti, Chairman of Ce.S.I., focused on.

“As the threats we are facing are increasingly hybrid blurring the lines between domestic and international, civilian and military, State and non-state actors, so should our countermeasures be”.

³ For instance, transnational crime and terrorism.

⁴ NATO counterterrorism strategy: awareness of Allies (information and intelligence sharing), capability and capacity building, engage with partners.



It is clear that NATO has embraced a comprehensive and holistic plan for the south, which, however, in order to be efficacious, needs to be supported by all Member States. Indeed, many NATO States have different ideas on how to address the challenges coming from the southern flank. These differences also reflect on the decision-making process within NATO. The key words, in this case, need to be “coherence and cooperation.” As Prof. Margelletti pointed out, in fact, the threats emerging from the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa can have an impact not only on the countries facing the Mediterranean Sea, but also on other NATO States. Therefore, a sustained and truly collective effort is beneficial for the whole Alliance.

Strictly linked to the political will and the relative cooperation within NATO is the operative capacity of the Alliance to face new emerging threats. “Operative readiness has always been a priority for the Atlantic Alliance, when it comes to the south it needs to include capacity building packages and innovative tools such as the Hub.” As the threats emerging from the south are increasing in number and complexity, NATO should be prepared to address them in the most proper manner: constant dialogue, capacity building activities and support to the local communities are among the main actions to be implemented in the southern front.

In this context, the Hub can represent a crucial tool to both increase awareness on the real situation on the ground and build local trust and confidence. Professor Margelletti concluded hoping that the NSD-S Hub will enjoy full support of all Member States and will receive all the resources needed to fulfil its mandate and even go behind it. “We need to turn the uncertainties coming from the south into opportunities for the security of our countries and the wellbeing of our partners.”

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Recommendations

The challenges emerging from the southern flank are increasingly complex, interconnected and transnational. Climate change can lead not only to environmental problems, but also to the risk of extremist radicalization and mass migration; poor local governance leaves gaps for criminal organizations that are involved in human trafficking; extreme poverty can become an impulse for the youth to join radical movements, and so on. The peculiar characteristics of the threats present in the MENA region and in Sub-Saharan Africa make it extremely complicated to design appropriate policies and actions for dealing with them. Indeed, only a comprehensive approach that includes parallel diplomacy, capacity building packages and increased awareness of the actual local situation could, in the long-term, be successful.

NATO has, already since a few years ago, understood the complexity of the scenario and gradually approved policies and actions to deal with the emerging challenges. At this regard the Warsaw Summit of 2016 can be considered a turning point. The Alliance, in fact, introduced new concepts aimed at better addressing the southern front and its uncertainties. The adoption of the 360° approach led to an increased attention for the south. If, especially since 2014, the spotlight was on the eastern front, with the new approach NATO looks at all borders with the same glasses, but different lenses. Moreover, with the establishment of a ‘framework for the south’, NATO started focusing more carefully on achieving “better regional understanding and situational awareness, the ability to anticipate and respond to crises emanating from the south.”⁵ A step further was taken with the adoption of the principle of ‘projecting stability to the south’, which includes a series of initiatives to strengthen security outside the Alliance’s territory. Various operations like Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean Sea, numerous capacity building missions such

⁵ NATO Warsaw Summit Communiqué, July 2016.



as the packages recently approved for Jordan and Tunisia and the establishment of the NSD-S Hub are among the initiatives launched for projecting stability on the southern front.

If NATO's engagement towards the south has gradually increased throughout the years and is currently extensive and comprehensive, there are still some improvements and critical points to be addressed for ensuring stability beyond the Mediterranean Sea. The outcomes of the conference revealed some lessons learned and indicated the way forward.

Firstly, it is necessary to guarantee coherence among policies and actions for the South. Many actors, in fact, are involved in the area and generally pursue the similar goals with different means. NATO can be key in ensuring homogeneity of intents and activities and avoiding the duplication of resources and efforts when it comes to the action of its Member States. The Hub is already acting as coordinator and this represents an important tool. However, the Alliance's wider goal should be to set clear priorities and long-term goals. NATO could act as a political channel by filtering national intentions and turning them into the common interest.

Secondly, it is crucial to increase awareness in two directions: in the southern front and among Allies. A better understanding of NATO's mission in the MENA region and in Sub-Saharan Africa could facilitate its action locally, both in terms of training the security forces and providing assistance to the institutions. Therefore, the Alliance should also develop a strategy aimed at fighting information warfare that undermines western activities in the area. In this case as well the Hub can be of great support as it is creating a direct line with the continent. Furthermore, knowledge and awareness about NATO's real goals should also be increased among European institutions and citizens in order to ensure a sustained support. The issue of perception is crucial for a 70 years old organization undergoing a process of modernization and adaptation to new challenges.

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Thirdly, in light of an extremely complex and multifaceted environment such as the southern flank, the innovative role played by the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub can be crucial especially to truly understand the local issues, the people's point of view of the and their needs. In fact, any type of intervention can reveal itself inefficacious if the real situation on the ground has not been properly grasped. Moreover, the deep analysis carried out by the NSD-S Hub on the strict interrelation between threats can support the development of *ad hoc* policies and interventions. The Hub is creating a virtual bridge between two continents that can help exploiting opportunities and fighting challenges. Only a constant support in terms of resources and trust can assist in piling up more bricks.

The recommendations highlighted above should become part of the discussion in London during the upcoming NATO Summit, moment in which the Heads of State and Government of Member States will also review the current effort and evaluate possible future further engagement in the south. It is surely important to continue supporting operations aimed at increasing the capacity of local security forces and their level of efficiency in dealing with present and future threats in Africa and in the Middle East. Nonetheless, in order to fight the root causes of the problems that are afflicting the areas of interest it becomes crucial to address parallel issues and embrace an innovative approach. This can be part of the process of adaptation of the Alliance to the 21st century and to the new emerging challenges and can be beneficial in achieving the ultimate goal: to build a security architecture that guarantees peace and stability not only to the Member States, but also to partners and new interlocutors in the MENA region and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

“The Hub is creating a virtual bridge between two continents that can help exploiting opportunities and fighting challenges”.