



# NSD-S HUB

NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION - SOUTH

April 15, 2019

## Webinar “Perception on NATO in North Africa and Sahel”



NSD-S Hub, Via Madonna del Pantano, Lago Patria - Italy 80014

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## **ACRONYMS**

AU:	African Union
IO:	International Organizations
NAS:	North Africa and Sahel
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
PCM:	Partnership Cooperation Menu
JFCNP:	Allied Joint Force Command Naples
ISPI:	Italian Institute for International Political Studies
MENA:	Middle East and North Africa
NSD-S:	NATO Strategic Direction– South HUB
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CVE:	Countering Violent Extremism
AQIM:	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
MOJWA:	Movement for the Oneness of Jihad in West Africa
TSI:	Three Stones International

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On January 29, 2019, the NATO Strategic Direction – South Hub (NSD-S Hub) and Three Stones International (TSI) held an online chat forum to discuss “Perceptions of NATO in North Africa and the Sahel.” During the daylong event, NSD-S Hub personnel directly engaged with community and civil society leaders, including representatives from NGOs, think tanks, and academia from: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, DRC, Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Rwanda, Morocco, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, and Tunisia. Additionally, participants from regional/global experts joined from: Azerbaijan, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Kosovo, Switzerland, Turkey and USA.



## WEBINAR PROCESS

In the spirit of building networks and relationships with local communities in Africa, NSD-S Hub held this forum to explore in depth and gain perspective regarding the perception of NATO in the NAS region. During the forum, a diverse group of participants from 14 African countries engaged.

The main questions that the webinar addressed were:

- How should NATO engage in the region?
- How do different communities see NATO involvement?
- How should NATO engagement be different than bilateral engagements?
- Which role does NATO have in capacity building in the region?

The impressions and opinions of the participants were unfiltered and spontaneous, in order to maintain the authenticity and provide freedom to challenge NATO actions and positions, with the aim of capturing the perspectives of the contributors.

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## SECURITY CHALLENGES IN NORTH AFRICA AND SAHEL

The security challenges emerging from North Africa and Sahel, NATO's "Southern Periphery," are based on an overlapping of concurrent threats, a convergence of different actors with different priorities, and a conflation of issues coming from different sources<sup>1</sup>:

- Terrorism, with terrorist groups connected to insurgent groups and international organized crime (including illicit activities like trafficking of drugs, money, light weapons, organs or human being).
- Political issues, with the possibility of turmoil in future democratic transitions (after the failure of the Arab Spring some scholars are expecting an "African Spring") and the real chance of failed states having spillover effects to neighboring countries.
- Economic-environmental issues, with poverty worsened by resources scarcity increased by climate change, important energy supplies that could be threatened (gas/oil pipelines first of all) and also new threats coming from money laundering and new cryptocurrencies in the hands of criminal groups.
- Social issues, with risk of mass migrations on scales that are unconceivable today: the African youth bulge is projected to grow up to 850 million by 2050 and the African population is expected to be almost 5 billion by 2100<sup>2</sup>. With the urbanization, unemployment and marginalization of communities in the periphery<sup>3</sup>, the food scarcity and the risk of new diseases and pandemics, the demographic growth and movement will be a continuous source of instability in the region and outside.
- Technological issues, with informational wars going from propaganda based on efficient use of new media to the possibility of cyber-attacks and even the development of new technologies in hands of criminal and terrorist groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. "Security challenges and issues in the Sahelo-Saharan region". Perspectives from Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal. Germany, 2017-2018.

-Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Security in the Maghreb. Identifying Threats, Assessing Strategies, and Defining Success". Washington DC. January 2018.

-George Marshall European Center for Security Studies. "Crisis Response and Crisis Prevention on Europe's Southern Flank: Challenges and Opportunities". Garmisch-Partenkirchen Germany, July 2017.

<sup>2</sup> UN Population Division, "World Population Prospects, the 2015 Revision", UN, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Africa centre for strategic studies. "The Maghreb's fragile edges". Africa Security Brief. NDU-Washington DC, USA, N. 34, March 2018.

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## OVERALL PARTICIPANTS PERCEPTIONS

**1) The NATO brand can be improved in North Africa and Sahel (NAS).** According to the participants the opinions about NATO in the region is somewhat tainted by lack of information about NATO in general and its priorities in the area which often translates into a negative perception.

- On several occasions the participants in the event mentioned the difficulties for the local populations to distinguish actions of individual members of NATO and NATO itself, both in terms of interests and activities in the region.
- People in NAS have a limited knowledge of NATO partnership activities and efforts. During the course of the webinar NATO partnership and capacity building based on the Mediterranean Dialogue since 1994, or the relationships between NATO and AU<sup>4</sup> were hardly mentioned.
- Within the NATO military cooperation NATO could do more to emphasize how the effort is addressing root causes of insecurity in the region.

**2) It was appreciated that NATO is open to listen to civil society representatives from the region and seems to value their perceptions and needs.** The feedback from participants was enthusiastic. Many participants had not previously experienced such access to representatives of a global institution such as NATO. The mix of academics, development and humanitarian practitioners, journalists, representatives of NGOs and CSOs, as well as NATO members enabled rich and varied “insider” perspectives. Also, the facilitation and representation of NSD-S Hub and of TSI during the event was valued to guide the brainstorming and to immediately respond to participants’ queries.

**3) To change its perception, NATO could expand political and social actions to complement its military efforts.** For example, NATO can strive to gain a deeper understanding of the security-development nexus, helping to create bridges with the local communities through addressing issues that affect communities such as health security, community development, education etc. NATO could increase collaboration with the UN, EU, AU as well as regional organizations to support these actions and avoid overlapping and duplication.

**4) NATO can improve its communication in the NAS region.** Many of the participants expressed the view that NATO needs to clarify its role, to better globally educate civil society, differentiating between NATO and NATO member’s activities as well as NATO partnership

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<sup>4</sup> Mediterranean Dialogue is a political-military cooperation between NATO and the countries of North Africa and Mauritania, and the NATO-AU cooperation is based on military-technical issues, committed to expanding since 2016.

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activities, i.e. Mediterranean Dialogue. This effort could involve local and regional actors from civil society as NATO advocates.

## **SUMMARY OF DIALOGUE**

For the purpose of broadening the discussion during the webinar the initial research questions were developed into six theses with which the participants could agree or challenge:

- NATO is responding to the needs of the people in North Africa and Sahel.
- NATO is seen as a stabilizing actor in North Africa and Sahel.
- NATO engagement is different from bilateral engagements.
- NATO should continue to engage in capacity building.
- NATO has a role to play in North Africa and the Sahel.
- NATO should review its engagement strategy in North Africa and the Sahel Region.

Analysis is provided below for each of the dialogue's themes, which were presented in the form of declarative theses on which participants could comment.

### **THESIS 1: NATO IS RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE IN THE SAHEL AND NORTH AFRICA**

The primary sentiment of the forum was that NATO is currently not effectively responding to the human security needs of people in the region. Nevertheless, there were different views on how NATO should support the region. An individual respondent mentioned that NATO's support to Mauritania in the establishment of a crisis management center was very positive step and it could even be considered a good example for the region. Others felt that in order to respond to the needs of the people NATO should consider more concrete action to address the root causes of instability and insecurity, in particular in the area of development assistance, access to health, good governance, justice and institutional programs. The idea being that military assistance is just part of the solution, and that sometimes sole focus on military assistance treats the symptoms but does not address the causes of insecurity.

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It was also noted that security is essential to safeguard civil rights and rule of law and is a key driver for development, but that NATO should avoid any military help to African leaders who have a documented history of not respecting human rights.

Therefore, people want NATO to listen to their voice (including critique of African leaders not deserving of NATO support) and include them more in the decision-making process. One participant said that now is a good time to increase engagement with the NAS population through new agreements with the AU, regional and sub regional entities. There is momentum for the AU, and Africa in general and there was an urging to consider where new powers/influences when deciding how to engage on the continent.

### **THESIS 2: NATO IS SEEN AS A STABILIZING ACTOR IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL**

Community perceptions of NATO relayed by the participants are mostly negative. Thus, the impression of the participants was that this thesis statement is not true.

What are most commonly known by communities are NATO's military interventions. Communities do not know the partnership activities like capacity building in the Mediterranean Dialogue or the relationship between NATO and the AU. Therefore, NATO is seen as merely a military organization interested in European defense, not a political-military international organization that can bring stability and security to other regions.

Furthermore, NATO is considered to move too slowly and does too little to be considered a stabilizer. Other organizations that also have military presence on the continent like the UN and EU also conduct development activities, which is why they are perceived more than NATO as contributing to the stabilization of the region. It was noted that a prevention-oriented approach would challenge the perception of a NATO military intervention happening merely in response to events.

NATO, according to a respondent, needs to support national and local authorities on issues such as resources scarcity, climate change and food and water security, and should engage before a crisis occurs. Another important point was the illicit economy and related issues (smuggling, trafficking etc.) that make people and countries vulnerable to criminal and terrorist groups. Therefore, an exclusively security-pronged and reactive approach, that does not address root causes of insecurity and instability, fails to address basic needs of the people and risks eliciting negative perceptions.

### **THESIS 3: NATO ENGAGEMENT IS DIFFERENT FROM BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS**

On several occasions the participants in the event mentioned the difficulties for the local populations to distinguish actions of individual members of NATO and NATO itself, both in terms of interests and activities in the region.

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The principles of Mediterranean Dialogue based on non-imposition, nondiscrimination, two-way engagement etc. are little known by most people in NAS.

Also, some participants stated that to have genuine engagement with a country in the region, NATO should not only make agreements with local authorities but also make sure that other institutional bodies and local actors as well as communities are both informed and heard so agreements are understood, trusted and accepted.

#### **THESIS 4: NATO SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENGAGE IN CAPACITY BUILDING IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL**

Few participants mentioned familiarity with NATO's existing engagement in capacity building in NAS. Mediterranean Dialogue was mentioned but this was not necessarily seen as useful for the people as it does not involve the communities directly. The perception from participants was that NATO does not open itself to the knowledge of the real needs of the population. For this reason, confidence building measures, such as information sharing and transparent communication between NATO and partner countries will help to avoid further confusion on the role of NATO. Additionally, NATO should communicate its intention to engage in partnership activities such as capacity building, training and education programs clearly and more broadly.

Others pointed out that weak central governance is a common issue, especially throughout the Sahel region, and therefore capacity building would be crucial in order to strengthen states ability to respond forcefully against criminal groups. From a CVE perspective, they said that NATO, for example, could provide training to partners on the ground in NAS and that NATO is well positioned to lead this effort.

NATO is considered to have expertise, capabilities and interest to offer its assistance in capacity building to NAS. At the same time, NATO's offer is not yet felt by the population because of a lack of clear and transparent communication. Participants also stressed that an enhanced capacity building approach could provide military technical expertise and simultaneously establishing relationships and engaging with communities.

#### **THESIS 5: NATO HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL**

The impression of some of the participants was that NATO solely reflects the interests of its members and, therefore, does not have a valid role in Africa. At the same time, the viewpoint from other participants was that NATO could, and should, play a significant role in terms of fighting against insecurity, disorder, terrorism, poverty, and migration issues. Contributors pointed out that this could be done through supporting international like the UN, EU, or AU, and regional organizations like ECOWAS that already work on this and NATO could help filling the gaps in the security domain and indirectly assist in other areas (e.g. access to health and food security).

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Also, participants mentioned that NATO should involve local communities, besides national authorities, because the empowerment of local and regional stakeholders, both institutional and others would help not only against criminal activities and terrorism but also to put the basis for a long-term solution to the problems of instability and insecurity.

## **THESIS 6: NATO SHOULD REVIEW ITS ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL REGION**

The main response theme for this topic was that if NATO wants to improve its engagement in NAS to make it more suitable for the current security situation, it should focus on cooperation based on real needs as perceived by local actors. Without understanding the root causes of insecurity, any strategy is bound to fail because it is reactive and only addresses emergent problems. Engagement with local actors is crucial to gain a balanced and accurate understanding of the real needs of the societies. This is the key to improving the NATO brand within the communities.

The contributors emphasized that if NATO, for example, wants to support future CVE activities it must invest in the local institutions in order to make them autonomous, strong and inclusive. Stronger and more inclusive institutions are perceived by the participants as one of the bases of stabilization in fragile countries.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

The Hub would like to thank all the participants for their valuable contribution to the active discussions during the webinar. We really appreciate your contributions as they are essential to improving NATO's understanding. We look forward to engaging with you again soon on additional webinar topics related to Africa and the Middle East.

### **THE NSDS HUB MANAGER TEAM**

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