



Briefing Paper No.113

14 December 2023

Contact:
Dr. Ian Davis
Email: idavis@natowatch.org
www.natowatch.org

A role for NATO in ending the Israel-Palestinian crisis?

Martin A. Smith

A political plan for ending the Israel-Palestinian conflict is urgently needed, but a clear endgame for the war Israel launched in retaliation for the massacre of 7 October remains elusive. This briefing is a contribution to a much-needed debate as to who should rule Gaza and the West Bank after the current war ends. There is no easy path forward, but the urgency for regional and global diplomacy cannot be overstated. The views represented here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NATO Watch or any of its associates.

Introduction

The current conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip has given a new lease of life to the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian crisis, entailing the creation of a viable, sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. And yet, seventy-six years after it was first put forward as the preferred choice of the international community, there is no compelling evidence that it can actually be made to work. The same goes for the 'one state' alternative which has been advanced by some scholars in recent years. No Israeli government will countenance an option that would, by definition, necessitate the end of Israel as the Jewish State. Given the [deficiencies of the two- and one-state options](#), the author has argued elsewhere in favour of a hitherto little-considered alternative: [a three-state solution whereby Gaza reverts to Egyptian control while the West Bank](#)

[becomes, once again, part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.](#)

This briefing considers the role that NATO – through its often overlooked 'Mediterranean Dialogue' (MD) – could play in helping facilitate this outcome. It begins by tracing the MD's evolution since 1995, paying particular attention to the stakes the three states of Egypt, Jordan and Israel have developed in it. The second part then considers the viability of a three-state settlement and the contributions towards facilitating this that NATO might make.

The NATO Mediterranean Dialogue

The NATO Mediterranean Dialogue was officially launched in early 1995, with officials suggesting that 'Islamic militancy' had replaced Soviet communism as the most significant threat to western security interests. This was not the most propitious backdrop for the launching of a 'dialogue' with a group of mainly Islamic states (the 1995 invitees were Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania, with Algeria joining five years later). The contrast with the burgeoning Partnership for Peace (PfP) for Central and Eastern Europe was stark. Whereas PfP was based on a cooperative premise, comments from western officials suggested that the MD was being founded [to manage perceived threats to NATO members from the southern Mediterranean, rather than encouraging states there to become real partners.](#)

There was a lack of depth to the MD in its early years: illustrated by the fact that national representatives from NATO member states initially had little to do with it. The 'dialogue' consisted of bilateral meetings at NATO headquarters between NATO officials and representatives from the partner states. [NATO members had not reached a consensus on what they hoped to achieve from the process.](#) The US emphasised 'hard' security issues and a strategic focus on the eastern Mediterranean. Southern European states, chiefly France, Italy and Spain, were concerned with economic security and migration from North Africa and their focus was therefore on the western Mediterranean. Germany, the UK and NATO's Scandinavian members were less interested in and sometimes only barely supportive of the whole initiative.

Nevertheless, at the 1997 Madrid summit, member states agreed on an MD upgrade. A 'Mediterranean Co-operation Group' (MCG) was created within NATO headquarters to take overall responsibility for the dialogue. This established for the first time an institutional mechanism for NATO members to input directly into the process: an indication they were finding greater interests in engaging with their Mediterranean interlocutors in the NATO context. The NATO-led operations in Bosnia were instrumental here: Egypt, Jordan and Morocco all made military contributions to these from 1996 on the premise of helping their Muslim co-religionists to recover from the civil war and establish their roles in the governance structures created by the Dayton peace agreements. Reflecting this new operational focus, annual MD 'Work Plans' were also developed. Until the Madrid summit, the kind of cooperation on offer had been restricted to joint seminars, partner state attendance on courses and observation of NATO military exercises. Following the creation of the MCG and under the impetus of the operations in Bosnia and later Kosovo, a more practical operational focus began to develop.

During the 2000s the MD would make steady, if often unheralded, progress in developing further institutionalisation and

operationalisation. [Egypt and Jordan contributed troop contingents to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\) in Afghanistan, while Morocco contributed to the Kosovo Force.](#) Dialogue within the MD also broadened and deepened. The number of joint activities [rose from 60 in 1997 to over 600 in 2007](#), with these ranging from military contacts and exchanges of information on maritime security and counter-terrorism, to access to educational programmes provided by NATO and joint crisis management exercises. Egypt, Jordan and Israel all led in creating 'regional centres of excellence' open to both NATO members and other states in the Middle East. Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia [signed agreements with NATO on the protection of classified information](#), making it possible for them to have access to a more ambitious level of cooperation as well.

This institutionalisation helped ensure that despite appearing temporarily unsteady and undermined by the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings and subsequent conflicts and backlash, the MD would evolve further. At the 2010 NATO Lisbon summit, members had decided to [develop individual "partnership" relations](#) with the dialogue states. This effectively allowed the MD to develop PfP-style programmes of military training, exercising and cooperation between partner states and NATO members/alliance institutions. This was a pivotal decision. By 2016 [Rachid El Houdaigui](#), a Moroccan analyst, noted the emergence of "a community of interests in the areas of capacities, education, training and exercises" between NATO and its MD partners. Two years later, a [major report on the future of the Mediterranean Dialogue](#) from the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), observed similarly that the MD had become "a valuable exercise in building a security community in north-south and south-south terms".

This evolution echoed the development of the PfP two decades earlier in providing a framework for tailored cooperative programmes between NATO and its partner states. The key difference has been that aside from fleeting discussion among a few

American scholars about [possible Israeli membership](#) at the time of the 2006 Lebanon War, there has been no indication of NATO membership being either sought by or offered to any of the MD partners. What seems to appeal to them is the developing perception of what NATO embodies in terms of collective defence, and the possibility of buying into something similar on a regional basis. This has been reflected in, albeit episodic, discussions since 2021 on the possibility of establishing a 'Middle Eastern NATO'. In June 2022, [King Abdullah II of Jordan publicly backed this idea](#), stating that "I would be one of the first people that would endorse a Middle East NATO...I'd like to see more countries in the area come into that mix". [Reports on a possible normalisation of relations](#) between Saudi Arabia and Israel (a process suspended but seemingly not terminated by the current Israel-Hamas War) have also stressed a demand from the Saudi side for a 'NATO-style' security guarantee of the kingdom's security from the US, primarily no doubt as a deterrence and insurance policy against the Islamic Republic in Iran.

Egypt, Jordan and Israel in the Mediterranean Dialogue

The GMF report noted earlier rightly concluded that the MD now constitutes "one of the very few vehicles for Arab-Israeli dialogue in a multilateral setting". Israel is of course excluded from Arab regional forums including the League of Arab States and Gulf Co-operation Council. It also has sour views of the United Nations, which many Israelis regard as both [ineffective](#) and [biased against their state](#). Egypt, Jordan and Israel have all developed significant cooperation with NATO within the MD framework since 2010. *Jordan* can claim to have been [the most positive and committed partner](#) since the inception of the dialogue, no doubt reflecting its close and long-standing defence relations with the UK and US and relatively vulnerable geostrategic and geoeconomic position (resource poor and surrounded by larger and more powerful neighbours). Since 2010 it has developed an [array of cooperative activities](#) and in 2023

became the first partner state to publicly raise the possibility of [opening a NATO liaison office](#) in its capital, Amman. Reflecting on this, one local commentator suggested that "[Jordan could be the regional center](#) for the [NATO] alliance, and through this center, there can be coordination with regional countries". Such an expansive role would be congruent with King Abdullah's stated interest in seeing more of his neighbours "come into the mix".

NATO's relations with *Egypt* developed more slowly. As recently as 2018 [Adel El-Adawy](#), an Egyptian analyst, argued that "Egypt's relationship with NATO remains marginal with many challenges affecting the prospects of closer ties". Among the latter had been the political instability in the country from late 2010 through to 2013, when the elected Islamist President, Mohamed Morsi, was overthrown in a de facto military coup headed by then-General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who subsequently became president. Most NATO members accepted this on realpolitik grounds, but Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan objected to an unconstitutional action against a fellow Islamist leader and [blocked further development of Egypt-NATO links](#) until 2020. Once the block was lifted, President El-Sisi moved quickly to develop an individual partnership programme. Perhaps most significant was the announcement in late 2022 that [the Egyptian navy would take command](#) of an element in the multinational maritime operations ongoing in the Mediterranean under the successor to NATO's Operation Active Endeavour. This operation has both practical and symbolic importance for NATO, stemming from its inception in 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11 and NATO's consequent invocation of Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty. As well as being one of NATO's longest-running military operations, it is the only extant mission originating from that unprecedented invocation of NATO's core collective defence commitment.

NATO's relations with *Israel* have followed a broadly similar course. In the early years of the MD, NATO members informally agreed that, in the interests of maintaining Arab participation, they would [not allow cooperation with Israel to](#)

[develop at a faster pace than with Arab partners](#). From 2010-2016 further development was also blocked by Turkey, following the violent interdiction of a ship crewed by Turkish activists trying to infiltrate supplies through the Israeli sea blockade of Gaza. [Once this was lifted, Israel moved quickly to upgrade its liaison status at NATO headquarters](#). Although the cooperative activities developed within the MD framework have been primarily bilateral between the partners on the one hand and NATO and its members on the other, the dialogue process has also – importantly – facilitated ministerial and diplomatic contact and discussion within multilateral settings, both formal and informal. This has been important in providing opportunities for Israeli representatives to engage in exchanges and consultations with their Arab counterparts. In July 2021, for example, [it was reported](#) that then-Foreign Minister Yair Lapid discussed the stalled peace process with the Palestinians with his Egyptian opposite number, Sameh Shoukry, on the margins of meetings in Brussels at NATO headquarters and the EU's Foreign Affairs Council.

Participation by all three partner states in NATO operations, dating back to the Balkan stabilisation missions of the 1990s has normalised the view that NATO may have a role to play operationally in assisting with the transition to a settlement of the Israel-Palestinian dispute. In Autumn 2023, [former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert](#) called for a NATO stabilisation force to be deployed to post-conflict Gaza. [Egyptian President El-Sisi has also entertained this possibility](#), saying that “there can also be guarantees of forces, whether NATO forces, United Nations forces, or Arab or American forces, until we achieve security”.

Prospects and challenges for a Three-State Solution

A potential three-state solution to the dispute has one immediate advantage over the proposed two- and one-state options: it is not historically hypothetical. A three-state solution actually pertained for two decades, from the

conclusion of the Armistice agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbours in 1949 to the six-day war of June 1967. During this period, the West Bank and Gaza Strip (the areas of mandatory Palestine [originally earmarked by the UN](#) for an Arab Palestinian state), which were not conquered by Israel during the wars of 1948, were absorbed by Jordan and Egypt, respectively. The Arab populations of mandatory Palestine who had not fled to other states thus found themselves living in one of the three states.

Egyptian and Jordanian rule during this earlier period had a questionable legal basis – because it prevented implementation of the UN's partition plan envisaging a Palestinian state alongside Israel – and neither granted full political rights and freedoms to their Palestinian populations. Nevertheless, there was notably little resistance in either Gaza or the West Bank. For most of the time Egypt and Jordan also acted effectively to prevent armed Palestinian Fedayeen from launching cross-border attacks against Israel.

Today, a revived three-state option might be considered unstable and unjust because it would deny independent statehood to the Palestinian people. The persisting failure to negotiate a two-state solution, however, has led to a steady decline in Palestinian support for statehood. [Polling evidence collated by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research](#) has shown Palestinian support for two states declining from over 50 per cent in mid-2016 to just 33 per cent by the end of 2022. Conceptually, the argument that nothing less than sovereign statehood will be acceptable as a safeguard of Palestinian identity and culture is also questionable. [The commentator Jacob Savage](#), a supporter of the three-state solution, puts this view well:

The idea that national identities remain static is a late 20th century fiction. Palestinian identity has been in flux since the Ottoman period, and there is no reason to think that it is now frozen in place. Indeed, after receiving Jordanian citizenship in 1950, many residents of the West Bank came to see themselves as Jordanian. Yet following the Israeli conquest

in the 1967 Six-Day War, they quickly adopted a pan-Palestinian identity.

This explains the lack of active Palestinian opposition to Egyptian and Jordanian rule in Gaza and the West Bank from 1949-1967, even though both in some senses were 'occupation regimes'. The crucial fact in both cases was that they were also *Arab* regimes advancing pan-Arabist claims of 'Palestine' as an integral part of the 'Arab World'.

[Polling has shown](#) Palestinian respondents identifying the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza as the biggest and most pressing challenge facing Palestinian society today. Past negotiations on a two-state outcome were bedevilled in part by disagreements over Israeli demands to maintain some element of control even after a transition to formal Palestinian independence. Citing security concerns, Israeli governments demanded an enduring right to deploy troops in the West Bank's Jordan Valley and maintain control over Gaza's airspace and territorial waters. A three-state outcome would, by definition, bring the occupation to a complete end because these territories would be fully integrated into existing sovereign states. Unlike in 1949-1967, today both Egypt and Jordan have peace treaties with Israel, and it is not conceivable that the latter could maintain anything other than normal inter-state relations with either, including honouring the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

In Gaza, Israel and Egypt will face the major challenge of negotiating a transition to a more normal border management and regulatory regime to replace the hostile blockade-and-quarantine approach adopted following the Hamas takeover there in 2006-2007. It is here that the temporary deployment of a NATO-led stabilisation force could play an important confidence-building and facilitative role, along the lines recently suggested by former Prime Minister Olmert. There might also be a similar role for a NATO force in helping to manage the transition from Israeli occupation of the West Bank. A significant problem will be the future of Israeli settlers, with around 750,000 currently living in the West Bank and East

Jerusalem. It is inconceivable that the half-million plus living in the former would simply be absorbed by Jordan and it is accepted, at least informally, that there will be land-swaps enabling Israel to incorporate the main settlement blocs. [According to The Economist](#) however, that will still leave around 100,000 Israeli Jews living in smaller settlements and 'outposts' who would need to be relocated. Previous Israeli governments have removed settlers from Sinai as part of the peace agreement with Egypt in 1982 and from Gaza in a unilateral 'disengagement' in 2005. In both cases, however, the numbers involved amounted to less than 10 per cent of the West Bank figure. It is highly likely that there will be opposition and resistance to an eviction from what many settlers consider the biblical lands of 'Judea and Samaria', and this is therefore a key challenge that may require support from a multinational NATO-led security and assistance force.

It is sometimes assumed that leaders in Egypt and Jordan today have no interest in re-incorporating Gaza and the West Bank. Because a revived three-state option has not yet been seriously considered, however, neither has spoken their last word on the subject. In the case of Jordan, it can be noted that the government under then-King Hussein maintained its claim to restitution of the West Bank (and continued to pay the salaries of thousands of civil servants there) until 1988 – over two decades after Jordan's forced eviction by Israel in the Six-Day War. Further, the government retained [ambitions to \(re-\)create some kind of Jordanian-Palestinian 'federation'](#) even after the signing of the Oslo agreements of 1993-1995, under which Israel formally recognised the Palestine Liberation Organisation (rather than the Jordanian monarch) as the 'sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'.

Since the overthrow of the government of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 there have been significant and growing challenges posed by violent Islamism and criminality in Egypt's Sinai region, which is adjacent to Gaza. The seriousness of these problems should not be underestimated. [Adel El-Adawy](#) has noted that

at the height of the violence and lawlessness, “around 60 percent of the [Sinai] peninsula was not under state control”. [Foreign Minister Shoukry](#), meanwhile, has claimed that 3,500 Egyptian security personnel have been killed “fighting terrorism in Sinai”. The problems have festered due to perceived official neglect of the Sinai region and international aid and assistance that would certainly follow the incorporation of Gaza would, if spent wisely, help to ameliorate them. There can be little doubt that hundreds of millions of dollars and euros would be made available by the US and EU in support of any final resolution of the Israel-Palestinian dispute. The criminality and lawlessness associated with the smuggling of weapons and other supplies by Hamas across (and under) the current Egypt-Gaza border could also be tackled if the impoverishment and oppression that can act as potent breeding grounds for radicalism and violent extremism were ameliorated by an infusion of aid and assistance, the ending of the Israeli blockade of Gaza and its progressive incorporation into the Egyptian polity and economy. Once again, stabilisation during the crucial, fragile transition phase could be buttressed by the deployment of a NATO force, as envisaged by President El-Sisi.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that a three-state solution will not be easy to implement. Nor would it be a panacea for all aspects of the Israel-Palestinian dispute. It does not directly address the status of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees. However, an agreed end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and blockade and destruction of Gaza would generate momentum toward fresh and creative approaches on these issues: perhaps involving building on the Jordanian monarchy’s role as custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem’s Old City and combined repatriation-and-resettlement programmes for refugees involving Israel and a wider circle of Arab states.

The argument developed here is that a way forward is possible, nonetheless. NATO has a potential role to play in helping to facilitate it.

Thanks to the experiences gained through participation in the Mediterranean Dialogue, leaders in Egypt, Jordan and Israel have come to see the Alliance as a trusted, reputable and potentially reliable partner in helping them to implement an agreement. Considering the limited and shaky origins of the MD three decades ago, this in itself is no small achievement.

Martin A. Smith is Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He is currently writing a book on US policy and attitudes to Palestinian self-determination since 1919. The views here are his own.

DONATE NOW PLEASE

NATO Watch is a small non-profit organisation that provides **independent oversight and analysis** of NATO. **If you share our vision for a transparent and accountable NATO** please donate whatever you can afford to help NATO Watch thrive. Click on the picture below to find out how you can make a donation.

