

What Role for NATO in the Middle East?

Apr 22, 1999



Brief Analysis

In the longer run, Kosovo will have a dramatic impact on the U.S.-European relationship. Kosovo has raised questions about the powerlessness of Europeans in the face of Kosovo-like conflicts as well as the dangers Europe must confront. Kosovo will be the catalyst for the overdue post-Cold War debate over the role of NATO and the U.S.-European relationship. The debate in the United States will focus on the Europeans' inability to police their own backyard, while Europeans will focus upon what America did, in addition to the poignancy of seeing the displacement of one million refugees and the bombing of a European city. For both, these are ghosts from the past that will lead to a reassessment of NATO's role, even if the Kosovars are able to return and NATO's mission is a success. In short words, the most likely outcome of the Kosovo crisis will be a lessened role for NATO.

The impact of the Kosovo crisis will be to make a NATO role in the Middle East less likely. Given that the Kosovo action has turned out to be riskier and longer than expected, there is no possibility that NATO members will regard Kosovo as a model for action in the Middle East in the event of ethnic tensions or disagreements about minority rights. NATO may engage in reinforced dialogue with some Middle East states, but that seems likely to be the limit of its involvement in the region.

Europe Will Increase its Role in the Middle East

At the same time that the role of NATO is being brought into question by Kosovo, Europe is re-entering the field of world-power politics as a major player. Within a decade or so, the European Union (EU) will comprise twenty-five countries, acquiring a weight that could cause a displacement of U.S. interests. The displacement need not necessarily lead to a clash between the EU and the United States. It is possible for the relationship to be complementary. The relationship may take more of the form originally envisioned at the founding of NATO in April 1949, when the U.S. role was seen as transitional until there emerged a strong, united Europe able to manage its defense policy on its own.

The Middle East will be an arena for increasing EU involvement. European action in the Middle East is spurred by three factors. First, the greater Middle East, from Algeria to Turkey, is vitally important to the EU because of its intrusiveness on Europe, resulting from migration, the threat of terror, and the impact on domestic European politics (e.g., through immigrant communities).

Second, from the European perspective, it seems as if conditions in the area are not improving much. The EU would like a quick success in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the creation of a stable Iraq, and an end to the civil war in Algeria -- none of which appear to be on the agenda.

Third, the European perception is that U.S. policies in the region have been ineffective. Europeans feel more vulnerable economically and geopolitically to the failure of U.S. policies than the United States does. Europe also feels that U.S. policy has not helped EU economic interests -- the need for external markets and high unemployment -- which play a significant role in European policy toward the Middle East.

Signs of the Future European Role

Europe wants a role in the region even though the balance of the EU agenda and the EU's lack of military power limit the influence it can exert. Still, over the past six months, the EU has demonstrated a resolve to establish its own policies independent of the United States in the Middle East:

- The willingness of European countries to move toward a common defense was well illustrated by the December Anglo-French summit at St. Malo, France, the first such bilateral summit between the preeminent European military powers since 1962. Europe is looking within the next five to seven years to establish a European security and defense identity (ESDI) and common foreign and security policy (CFSP), to use the EU terms.
- The EU's unanimous and unequivocal position on a Palestinian state at the Berlin EU Summit in March was followed up by a letter that pointed to Jerusalem as an occupied city. Support for Palestinians is reinforced by the coming to power of young, center-left leaders who came of age in the 1970s, and who have an affinity for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and a Palestinian state. The summit demonstrated the possibility for a policy complementary to that of the United States, recognizing that the United States is still the prime actor. Europe is well positioned for such a role because of the historically deep ties between Europe and the Middle Eastern states, as well as the European sensitivity to the growing presence of Islam in European states -- both of which serve to inspire European understanding of how the Middle East works.
- The Barcelona process of aid and cooperation between the EU and the other Mediterranean states was advanced by the April 15-16 meeting in Stuttgart attended by all the Mediterranean governments, including Syria and Libya as well as Israel.
- The March appointment of former Italian prime minister Romano Prodi as president of the EU commission signals the increasing importance in EU affairs of the Mediterranean states, with their natural interest in Middle Eastern developments. Prodi wasted no time in visiting Algiers to pledge a new relationship between Christianity and Islam.
- The oil deal between Iran and European firms announced in early April served as a reminder that Europe has economic interests that have not been soothed by the clashes of the last several years.

The Effect on Turkey

NATO has been the principal institutional link between Turkey and the West. If NATO becomes less significant to its members' security strategy, Turkey will suffer. Furthermore, there is little if any prospect that Turkey will join the West's other major institution, the EU. There is no possible way in which Turkey could even engage in serious negotiations with the EU for membership during the current round of EU expansion, which will bring the EU to twenty-five members. And by the time the EU has twenty five members, the very nature of membership in the EU may come to be redefined; indeed, the EU has scheduled for 2000 or 2001 an intergovernmental conference to review the rights, privileges, and liabilities that EU membership entails. Therefore, Turkey would be well advised not to concentrate on EU membership, but instead to ask what kind of relationship with the EU it will have in the future.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Benjamin Orbach.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)