



Academic Paper

# The Future of the Middle East's Role in NATO Strategy



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## The Future of the Middle East's Role in NATO Strategy

Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Since its establishment in April 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began with 12 founding members (US, UK, France, Italy, Portugal, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Norway). It has since expanded to 32 Western states, including Türkiye.



The alliance's primary objective was to confront the Soviet Union in particular and socialist movements more broadly across Europe and its periphery. An antagonism most clearly embodied in the Warsaw Pact, established in 1955.

Despite ongoing variation in defining the Middle East's geopolitical boundaries,<sup>2</sup> a clear distinction must be drawn between its treatment as a geopolitical concept (where the region is defined by geographical factors shaping the political behavior of its constituent units, or by how it is engaged internationally, either as a region or as separate entities) and as a geostrategic concept (where it is assessed in terms of its strategic value within great-power competition). From this perspective, Europe has alternately framed the region as the "Orient," reflecting a cultural lens rooted in Eurocentrism and colonial thinking, or as the "East" within a Eurasian framework that excludes Russia, despite Vladimir Lenin having considered Russia an Asian state. By contrast, Asian, particularly Russian and Chinese, literature commonly refers to the region as "West Asia,"<sup>3</sup> a designation that is primarily geopolitical rather than geostrategic.

This suggests that the European perspective (including European NATO) conceptualizes the Middle East through geographical proximity and shared historical-cultural legacies, rooted in the earlier framing of the Ottoman Empire as the "Eastern Question." This discourse later evolved into categories such as the Near East, Middle East, and Far East. The US strategist Alfred Mahan, in 1902, defined the Middle East as the region between the Arabian Peninsula and India, with a particular focus on Iraq and Iran. During the First World War, the term "Middle East Command" designated the British military command, whose scope extended to North Africa and the western edge of the Indian subcontinent. In 1921, Churchill established a Colonial Office unit, the Middle East Department, covering Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq.

France, as reflected in the French encyclopedia *Larousse*, often expands the Middle East to include Arab Asia, Egypt, Türkiye, Iran, Libya, Sudan, and at times Afghanistan,



Pakistan and India. This reflects a relative prioritization of the geopolitical dimension over the geostrategic one (without denying their mutual interdependence) in the European approach, in contrast to the US tendency to foreground the geostrategic dimension. These divergences have produced interpretive differences that will be examined later.

### **First: The Evolution of NATO’s Functional Divergence**

It is important to recall 1966, when a Franco–US dispute emerged over what French President Charles de Gaulle viewed as US dominance in NATO decision-making, which he considered a constraint on French sovereignty and a reflection of Europe’s overreliance on the US for defense. This led him to withdraw France from NATO’s integrated military command and remove US forces from French territory. He also sought to base France’s security on an independent nuclear deterrent rather than US support, while expressing concern over the Anglo–American relationship and its implications for French policy. As a result of these tensions, NATO headquarters was relocated from Paris to Belgium.<sup>4</sup>



The dispute over NATO’s mandate and the scope of its strategic role within Europe or beyond it reflects one dimension of divergence between the two sides of the Atlantic. However, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and its formal termination in July 1991 raised a more fundamental question: what is NATO’s function after the collapse of its principal adversary, and what are the main axes of transatlantic disagreement?:

1. The strategic vision presented by US envoy Nicholas Burns at the NATO Council meeting in Prague in 2003 illustrates the US conception of NATO’s renewed role. He argued, “NATO’s mandate is still to defend Europe and North America. But we don’t believe we can do that by sitting in Western Europe, or Central Europe, or North America. We have to deploy our conceptual attention and our military forces east and south. NATO’s future, we believe, is east, and is south. It’s in the Greater Middle East.”<sup>5</sup> This orientation was later reflected in NATO’s intervention in Libya and in the 2021 transfer of Israel to US Central Command (CENTCOM) from the European Command (EUCOM), reinforcing Burns’s vision.



**Nicholas Burns**

Nevertheless, these developments highlight a persistent transatlantic divide: Europe prefers a regionally bounded NATO role, while the US promotes a global mandate. This divergence has recently been reflected in Europe’s reluctance to join efforts to blockade the Strait of Hormuz.



2. Another dimension of the transatlantic divide concerns NATO's financial burden. This issue predates the Trump administration and has long been raised by the US. From its perspective, it bears a disproportionate share of NATO's costs, while Europe benefits from the security umbrella without a comparable contribution. US policymakers often frame this through the lens of Public Goods theory, whereby collective security functions as a public good that enables Free Riding by some actors.<sup>6</sup>

3. The growing overlap between NATO policies and EU defense initiatives has raised key questions about the boundaries of their respective roles, particularly as strategic priorities increasingly diverge among member states. This divergence has been evident in contrasting US and European positions on Ukraine, as well as in differing responses to the Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz and, more broadly, in approaches to war with Iran.<sup>7</sup> These tensions were further exposed by Europe's explicit rejection of NATO participation in US-Israeli operations against Iran. In response, President Trump threatened to withdraw from NATO, while US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth declined to reaffirm US commitment to NATO's collective defense. Instead, he called for a revised strategic approach, including confronting "Islamic terrorism through a clearly defined crusader perspective," increasing pressure on Türkiye and the European left, and reassessing NATO's scope of operations and burden-sharing arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

4. Some experts argue that Trump's position and his threats to withdraw from NATO raise a strategic question: whether NATO remains a US priority amid major global shifts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of China, and the growing influence of regional powers beyond Europe. This has revived a more Europe-centered conception of NATO, in contrast to the US approach, which seeks to globalize the alliance.



## Second: Possible Scenarios for the Future of NATO

Given the widening scope of political instability in the international system, the need for alliances and defense agreements is unlikely to diminish. Table (1) presents the number of countries in each geopolitical region that fall into the negative range of the Political Stability Index as of the end of 2024.

**Table 1: Political Stability Index Across Countries Worldwide<sup>9</sup>**

Region	No. of Unstable Countries (Negative Score)
Africa	44
Asia	25
Middle East	13
Europe	8
South America	6
Australia and Oceania	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>

In light of current international dynamics, future scenarios suggest the following:<sup>10</sup>

**1. Continued NATO cohesion with a more balanced partnership:** European states are expected to sustain higher military spending, already underway, with targets of reaching 5% of GDP by 2035, while assuming a greater role in shaping the alliance's strategic direction, as reflected in NATO's own doctrinal discourse. Meanwhile, any US withdrawal would require congressional approval or a two-thirds majority in the Senate, an unlikely prospect at present, though not inconceivable in the longer term.

**2. Reinforcing US hegemony:** This scenario may unfold through sustained US pressure on Europe, linking security guarantees and the US role to increased European defense spending, while reducing US commitments, which account for about 62% of the NATO's total defense expenditure. Over time, this could shift the alliance from a collective security framework toward a looser defense arrangement with more limited obligations. This trend is reflected in objections by some European states to the use of their airspace by US military aircraft, as well as their reluctance to allow European bases to be used for US operations against Iran.<sup>11</sup> US dominance is further evident in the absence of consultation with European partners regarding the war with Iran. In addition, Article 5 of the NATO's treaty conditions collective defense on an armed attack against the US or any member state, criteria not met in this case. Transatlantic tensions have consequently widened, particularly following Europe's refusal to participate in efforts to open the Strait of Hormuz.



**3. Gradual European disengagement:** marked by the development of a European army and the establishment of parallel institutions alongside those of NATO, while maintaining periodic threats of withdrawal from the alliance. This trajectory is reflected in the following indicators:<sup>12</sup>

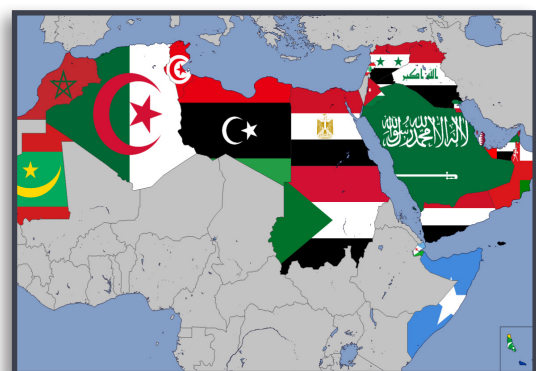
- a. The “Readiness 2030” roadmap outlines a comprehensive plan to establish a unified “EU defence market with common rules that enable industry to produce faster and at larger scale.”
- b. Industrial reinforcement: The ReArm Europe plan aims to increase investment and advance the establishment of a European Defence Union.
- c. Joint procurement and financing: member states are encouraged to prioritize European products, supported by new mechanisms, such as the Defence Equity Facility, that strengthen collaborative research, development and acquisition.
- d. Strategic focus: priorities include air and missile defense systems, drones and the establishment of an “EU-wide military mobility area by 2027.”
- e. EU–NATO cooperation: despite the pursuit of European strategic autonomy, alignment and complementarity with NATO remain integral.

**4. Gradual disintegration:** driven by a partial US withdrawal from select alliance institutions or operations, reducing NATO to a largely symbolic framework. This scenario would be reinforced by escalating disagreements over major international issues, particularly given that Article 5 of the charter requires consensus for decision-making. Such a requirement risks deadlock on key issues, especially with 32 members increasing the likelihood of divergent interests.<sup>13</sup>

**5. A shift within NATO toward a functional division of labor:** whereby the US focuses on global responsibilities beyond Europe, while European states assume primary responsibility for their regional security.

### Third: The Arab NATO Question

Within a Global NATO scenario, the Middle East would likely fall within the US approach to advancing such a framework, as noted earlier. In this context, an “Arab NATO” would function as an “operational extension” rather than an independent alliance between Arab states and the US, which entails several implications:



1. NATO expansion without formal membership, through the consolidation of interconnected security networks, as outlined in various US policy research frameworks. This is reflected in initiatives such as the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).<sup>14</sup> The aim is to reduce direct European security engagement in the Middle East and shift greater responsibility to regional actors, with NATO providing coordination and support. It also reflects efforts to extend the Helsinki model to the Middle East, whereby Western powers, following the 1975 Helsinki Conference with the Soviet Union, used cultural and human rights cooperation to penetrate the Eastern bloc and contribute to its fragmentation. Some Western think tanks have proposed adapting this model to the Middle East. However, a fundamental difference remains: whereas liberal forces within the Eastern bloc were able to occupy the resulting power vacuum, no comparable actors are positioned or permitted to do so in the Middle East, given that the main alternative forces are explicitly opposed to Israel. This limitation has led some US institutions to promote an alternative framework centered on encouraging “moderate” Islamic movements under the concept of “Finding Partners for the Promotion of Democratic Islam.”<sup>15</sup>

2. Linking the preceding NATO scenarios with the concept of an Arab NATO suggests the following:<sup>16</sup>

- a. The transformation of Arab forces into a local operational arm of NATO within a globalized security network, functioning as part of the southern Atlantic sphere.
- b. A division of roles in which Arab actors assume the operational and logistical burdens of implementing NATO strategies, thereby reducing the material and human costs borne by the NATO side.

Accordingly, Arab involvement in the war with Iran alongside Israel and the US can be understood through key international relations theories on military alliances. These include Flexible Alliances, where alliances evolve into multi-layered networks; Security Globalization, referring to transregional alliance structures; and Externalized Burden Sharing, which redistributes security responsibilities beyond Western actors.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Fourth: The Paradox in the Arab Security Outlook**

When a state enters an alliance, its decision-making authority is expected to identify its primary security threats, determine the relevant international frameworks, and assess how to leverage them to mitigate those threats. However, the Arab side is effectively aligning with major sources of its own strategic threat in order to counter risks that primarily concern others. Israel, as a strategic threat to the Arab world, shares ties with influential Arab states in their relations with NATO, an alliance that has been among the foremost guarantors of Israel’s security. Consequently, granting NATO access to military bases under the banner of cooperation, and enabling the projection of threat toward a third party (Iran), amounts to assuming security burdens without corresponding gains, particularly in confronting the primary sources of threat to Arab security.



Here, it is essential to distinguish between three levels of security:

1. Regime security: The survival of the ruling authority, whether a party, president or monarch.
2. State security: The protection of territorial integrity, natural resources and political borders.
3. Societal security: The maintenance of political stability, alongside welfare and progress in scientific, technological, cultural and public health domains, etc.

Arab alliances are largely structured around regime security as the primary objective. Arab states differ, however, in how they rank the remaining two dimensions: some prioritize societal security after regime security, followed by state security, while others reverse this order by placing state security second and societal security third. In practice, both societal and state security are often subordinated to regime security, a configuration that aligns with the preferences of Western states and Israel.

Current divergences within NATO between the US and Europe further illustrate differing security hierarchies. The US, alongside Israel as a NATO-aligned partner, tends to prioritize state security over societal security, whereas Europe gives greater weight to societal security. In contrast, Arab states consistently elevate regime security above both. This distinct prioritization facilitates the external instrumentalization of Arab regimes by actors such as NATO.

### **Fifth: Future Implications of the Scenarios**

Using the Futures Wheel technique,<sup>18</sup> a preliminary set of outcomes can be identified in relation to the fragmentation gradual erosion, or reconfiguration of the NATO's geopolitical scope, as also suggested in Nicholas Burns' statements:<sup>19</sup>

1. Regional states are likely to shift toward temporary security arrangements rather than durable alliances, thereby increasing divergence in intra-Arab relations.
2. The absence of an external security umbrella guaranteeing the "security of Arab ruling regimes," whether directly or indirectly, could intensify the regional arms race beyond its current level (spring 2026). Without NATO's stabilizing role, direct or indirect, states are likely to rely more heavily on self-help logics, which in turn would further intensify military competition across the region.
3. Arab states, particularly those more dependent on Western support, may increasingly seek to balance their relations among major powers, including the US, Europe, Russia and China.
4. The gradual fragmentation or erosion of NATO could heighten Israel's security concerns, particularly if it coincides with a relative US disengagement from the Middle East in favor of more strategically prioritized regions such as East Asia, or a renewed post-Trump focus on the Ukraine crisis. Such shifts would likely ease external pressure on regional actors, especially Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.



5. Estimates suggest that oil's share of total energy demand has declined from 46% in the mid-1970s to around 30% as of early 2025. Concurrently, technological advances are increasingly shifting toward clean energy, which is likely to reduce competition over the Arab region.<sup>20</sup> This trend, in turn, lowers Israel's strategic value and further contributes to NATO's diminishing engagement in the region.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of the problematics surrounding the definition of the region and the underlying rationales of its various designations, see Michael Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael Gasper (eds.), *Is There A Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), *passim*.
- <sup>3</sup> Walid El Hourri, From MENA to WANA: Why terminologies matter, site of Global Voices, 11/9/2024, <https://globalvoices.org/2024/09/11/from-mena-to-wana-why-terminologies-matter/>
- <sup>4</sup> For relevant US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports on this matter, see Memorandum: France, NATO and the US, site of CIA, 15/3/1966, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00826A000400010062-3.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Nicholas Burns, The New NATO and the Greater Middle East, site of U.S. Department of State Archive, 19/10/2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/25602.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> For further details on this aspect and the range of perspectives surrounding it, see John Oneal and Mark Elrod, “NATO Burden Sharing and the Forces of Change,” *International Studies Quarterly* journal, vol. 33, no. 44, December 1989, pp. 435–456.
- <sup>7</sup> Jordan Becker, “Accidental rivals? EU fiscal rules, NATO, And Transatlantic burden-sharing,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 56, no. 5, September 2019, pp. 697–713.
- <sup>8</sup> John Irish and Steve Holland, Trump threatens NATO exit, scaling up tensions with allies, site of Reuters News Agency, 1/4/2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/trump-threatens-nato-exit-scaling-up-tensions-with-allies-2026-04-01/>  
See also Pete Hegseth, *American Crusade: Our Fight to Stay Free* (Nashville: Center Street, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Political stability – Country rankings, site of TheGlobalEconomy.com, [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb\\_political\\_stability](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_political_stability)
- <sup>10</sup> See details in Aleksander Olech, What does NATO’s 2025 report say about its future?, site of Defense24, 1/4/2026, <https://defence24.com/defence-policy/what-does-natos-2025-report-say-about-its-future>; Patryk Jagnieža, Donald Trump is considering leaving NATO, Defense24, 1/4/2026, <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/donald-trump-is-considering-leaving-nato>; and European Commission: Joint Research Centre, d’Artis Kancs, *European Defence Readiness*, site of arXiv, 2025, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2501.00058>
- <sup>11</sup> Lyse Doucet, What do Trump’s latest comments on leaving Nato mean for the alliance?, site of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 1/4/2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c79je4vldq5o>
- <sup>12</sup> For details, see White Paper on the Future of European Defence, site of Legislative Train Schedule of European Parliament, 20/3/2026, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-new-era-for-european-defence-and-security/file-white-paper-on-eu-defence>; and Acting on defence to protect Europeans, site of European Commission, 19/11/2025, [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en)
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Tait, Can Trump pull the US out of Nato – and why is he considering it?, site of *The Guardian* newspaper, 1/4/2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/01/trump-nato-explainer>



- <sup>14</sup> For details, see Philip Gordon, *NATO's Growing Role in the Greater Middle East* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006), p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam, Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2005/MR1716.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1716.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth, site of Crisis Group, 7/6/2004, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/middle-east-north-africa/b014-broader-middle-east-and-north-africa-initiative-imperilled-birth>
- <sup>17</sup> Chris Donnelly, Building a NATO partnership for the Greater Middle East, site of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 1/1/2004, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2004/01/01/building-a-nato-partnership-for-the-greater-middle-east>
- <sup>18</sup> The Futures Wheel technique maps the interlinkages among consequences, both direct and indirect, by systematically tracing each consequence outward into multiple causal directions. For example, starting from NATO fragmentation, one follows successive political effects: first-, second-, and third-order. until reaching the end of the study horizon. The same process is then repeated for economic, military and social dimensions. The terminal outcomes of each wheel are subsequently integrated to construct a cross-impact matrix, capturing how final-stage effects interact, reinforce, or constrain one another in shaping the projected future scenario. For details, see Walid 'Abd al-Hay, *Manahij al-Dirasat al-Mustaqbaliyyah wa Tatbiqatiha fi al-'Alam al-'Arabi* (Methods of Futures Studies and their Applications in the Arab World) (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Studies and Research, 2007), pp. 53–63.
- <sup>19</sup> For further details on these points, see Giulia Daga, NATO's Dilemma in the MENA Region: A Critical Reflection, site of Istituto Affari Internazionali, 12/4/2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c05/natos-dilemma-mena-region-critical-reflection>; and Mathieu Droin et al., NATO and Its South: Redefining the Terms, site of Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 17/5/2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-its-south-redefining-terms>
- <sup>20</sup> Global Energy Review 2025: Key Findings, site of International Energy Agency (IEA), 24/3/2025, <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2025/key-findings>

