



BOĞAZIÇIMUN ADVANCED

2025

the Legacy

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO)

STUDY GUIDE

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#BridgingTheGap

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Letter from the Secretary-General

Meritorious participants of BoğaziçiMUN Advanced 2025,

It is with warm hugs, sincerity and utmost privilege to welcome you all to this edition of BoğaziçiMUNAdvanced. I'm Selin Ayaz, a senior Double Major of Political Science & International Relations and Sociology at Boğaziçi University. Having four years of university Model UN experience (alongside 5 years prior) under my belt, I will be serving as your Secretary-General.

For this version of BoğaziçiMUN, both of our teams have worked from day to night to give you the best experience ever. I would first like to thank my amazing Deputy-Secretaries-General, Maya Gençdiş and Emir Elhatip, for their continuous effort and clever wit. Another person that I'm thankful for is our esteemed Director-General, Irem Ayber. She and our Deputy-Director-General Azra Çökük are some of the most hardworking people I've known, they are tireless in their work and you will get to experience the fruits of their labour when we meet in September. We've prepared 9 different committees covering a wide range of topics. NATO is a one them, a one of a kind committee, with the important agenda item of "Assessing NATO's Strategic Role in Stabilizing the Middle East: A Multilateral Approach to Security, Deterrence, and De-escalation in Light of the Iran-Israel Conflict and the Syrian Crisis". As by the theme of our conference, this committee honors the legacy of Gökhan Şeheri, one of our founding members as well as the former Secretary-General of BoğaziçiMUN 2018. I would like to thank the hardworking Under-Secretaries-General Eylül Su Karaman and Pelin Onat as well as their Academic Assistant Rüzgar Bakır for their efforts in making this committee come to life.

We've always used the phrase "Bridging the Gap" as our motto. This year, we are combining this with the legacy. Each edition of BoğaziçiMUN has been about providing our participants with the best experience they've ever had so far. Each time, we try to outdo ourselves and become the best version so far. This edition has been no different as all of us have vigorously and tirelessly worked so far. Now the ball is in your court. I invite you all to take a step forward and feel the legacy.

Warmest regards,

Selin Ayaz

Secretary-General of BoğaziçiMUN Advanced 2025



Letter from the Under-Secretaries General

It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to the NATO Committee at BoğaziçiMUN Advanced 2025. We, Eylül Su Karaman, a student of Economics at Istanbul Technical University, and Pelin Onat, pursuing Political Science & International Relations at TED University, are deeply honored to serve as your committee board members for this year's conference.

As representatives of your assigned nations within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, you will be placed at the heart of some of the most pressing challenges facing the international community. Your task extends beyond national representation: you are entrusted with engaging in meaningful debate, shaping well-grounded policies, and seeking viable solutions through cooperation. This responsibility calls for not only knowledge but also diplomacy, negotiation, and leadership. The study guide you now hold has been carefully prepared to provide a strong foundation for your research and debate. We encourage you to immerse yourselves in the materials, actively participate in discussions, and your skills in persuasion, consensus-building, and strategic thinking throughout the sessions. Rest assured, the Chairboard stands ready to support you during this journey. We encourage you to approach the agenda with both intellectuality and enthusiasm, seizing the opportunity to challenge your perspectives and grow as delegates.

Before concluding, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Honorable Secretary-General, Ms. Selin Ayaz, whose leadership made this conference possible. We also thank our esteemed Deputy Secretaries-General, Mr. Emir Elhatip and Ms. Maya Gençdiş, for their invaluable contributions, as well as our diligent Academic Assistant, Mr. Rüzgar Bakır, whose dedication greatly enriched this study guide. We sincerely hope that you will find this guide both enlightening and inspiring. It has been a privilege to prepare it for you, and we eagerly look forward to witnessing your energy, intellect, and diplomacy in the coming days.

With our best regards,

Eylül Su Karaman & Pelin Onat

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I. Introduction to the committee: NATO

A. History

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, was founded in 1949, right before the Cold War, the war between the United States and the Soviet Union, or, for another calling, the war between liberalism and communism. The Alliance was founded as a precautionary measure against Soviet actions under the leadership of the United States. On April 4, 1949, twelve countries from both Atlantic Regions signed the “North Atlantic Treaty,” which was the official founding of the Alliance.

B. Scope And Mandate

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded on several principles, all serving the ideas of peace, development, and security in its member states and around the world. Beyond all, as stated in the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO’s main principle is collective defence, which is mostly defined in Article 4,5 and 6 of the treaty.

NATO states its purposes under five general ideas, which aim to ensure the wellbeing of all states in the world. These five principles can be cited as,

- Peace and security in Europe and North America
- Ensuring stability at home by engaging outside of NATO
- Making collective decisions through consultation and consensus
- Setting NATO’s strategic direction on the current issues
- Adapting to new security challenges as the world changes.

C. Members

Its founding members were the United States of America, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom. Greece and Türkiye (1952), West Germany (1955; now as Germany); Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (1999); Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (2004) Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), North Macedonia (2020), and Finland (2023) were among the new signatories. Also, even not an active participant in meetings. Sweden’s accession was also completed to the Alliance.



D. Structure

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a political and military alliance that encompasses various subordinate entities. The North Atlantic Council and the Nuclear Planning Group, consisting of NATO delegates, are responsible for overseeing the political affairs of the organization. The military committee, comprising military matters. NATO is governed by a unified secretariat that supervises both factions.

1. North Atlantic Council

The North Atlantic Council functions as the primary political entity responsible for making decisions within NATO. The council supervises all military and political endeavors, as well as any emerging security issues that may pose a threat to the organization. Each nation appoints a representative to the council for discussions on operational and policy matters that require consensus decisions. The North Atlantic Council is the sole entity created by Article 9 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Annually, the NAC convenes summit meetings at the level of heads of state and government to evaluate and guide the political direction of the alliance, as well as to address and resolve any emerging issues.

2. Nuclear Planning Group

The Nuclear Planning Group is the highest-ranking organization responsible for making decisions and acting on nuclear issues within the alliance. It also engages in discussions regarding additional policies related to nuclear power. The nuclear strategy of NATO is constantly assessed, adapted based on new data, and altered as required. The establishment of this organization in 1966 aimed to enhance the nuclear power capabilities within NATO through a more robust framework.

3. Decision-Making Procedure of the Alliance

NATO consists of both a civilian and a military framework. The North Atlantic Council (NAC), which is the highest political authority responsible for making decisions, is located in Brussels and is led by the Secretary General.

The military (MC) is tasked with providing vital recommendations on military matters. The NAC has the authority of all key MC documents. The NAC attains consensus by ensuring



that no government expresses any objection. No official vote is conducted when governments express their stance. Ultimately, the military decisions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are made by a governing body that primarily consists of discussions regarding action proposals and directives, which are subsequently presented to the North Atlantic Council for approval.

II. Agenda Item: Assessing NATO's Strategic Role in Stabilizing the Middle East: A Multilateral Approach to Security, Deterrence, and De-escalation in Light of the Iran-Israel Conflict and the Syrian Crisis

A. Syrian Crisis

1. Timeline of the Civil War

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, is a quite complex and multi-faceted conflict that has had devastating consequences for both the Syrian population and the neighbouring countries, and profound implications for regional and global politics. The war emerged from various interconnected political, social, and economic grievances and quickly escalated into a violent and long-lasting struggle involving numerous international actors (Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview (February 2024) [EN/AR], 2024). The starting point of the Syrian Civil War can be traced back to the broader wave of uprisings known as the Arab Spring, which made its way across the Middle East and North Africa starting in late 2010. The Arab Spring was distinguished by extensive protests, autocratic regimes, demands for greater political freedom and social justice, and economic hardships.

In Syria, these injustices were further magnified by decades of authoritarian rule of the Assad family, which began with Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1971 and continued under his son Bashar al-Assad from 2000 onwards. The Assad regime kept its power by combining political repression, control over security, and a sponsorship system favoring only certain segments of society while excluding others (Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker, n.d.) The conflict officially began in March 2011 when peaceful protests broke out in the southern city of Daraa after certain teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall got arrested and tortured. These protests quickly spread to other parts of the country, they were also fueled by similar incidents of government oppression and called for democratic reforms. The government's forceful repression of these protests, which also included the use of live



ammunition, mass arrests, and torture, sparked further nationwide protests that demanded political reforms, freedom, and, evidently, the end of Assad's rule (Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview (February 2024) [EN/AR], 2024).

As the protests spread and intensified, the situation rapidly evolved into an armed conflict; by mid-2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed by the defectors from the Syrian military with the aim of overthrowing Assad's regime. The conflict soon attracted various rebel groups, each with its agendas and backing from external powers. The war became marked by its extreme violence; abuse of human rights, war crimes, and the use of chemical weapons. Different factions fought for control, including extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, complicating even further the conflict. The Assad regime's strategy of surrounding and bombarding rebel-held areas resulted in significant civilian casualties and widespread destruction. The conflict quickly drew in international actors pursuing their strategic interests (Lister, 2015). Russia and Iran have provided substantial military, economic, and political support to the Assad regime. Russia's military intervention in 2015 was a turning point for the war and enabled the Assad regime to regain a significant amount of territory; Iran has also been a crucial ally, given that it provided financial aid, military advisors, and support to Shiite militias fighting alongside Syrian government forces (Lund, 2019). The United States America and Western Allies initially provided support to opposition groups and later shifted their focus to combating extremist groups like ISIS. The United States of America has conducted airstrikes and deployed special forces in Syria to support anti-ISIS. Operations and deter the use of chemical weapons. Western countries have imposed economic sanctions on the Assad regime to pressure it into negotiations (Conflict in Syria | Global Conflict Tracker, n.d.). Türkiye has also been involved in the conflict with the primary aim of countering Kurdish forces and influencing outcomes in northern Syria. Türkiye supported various opposition groups and conducted military operations to prevent the establishment of a free Kurdish autonomous region along its border as it saw this as a threat to its territorial integrity. Various Gulf states have also provided support to different rebel factions based on their own geopolitical interests.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have funded and armed opposition groups as they were seeking to counter Iranian influence in Syria (Lund, 2019). The Syrian Civil War has resulted in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. According to the



United Nations, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, and millions have been displaced both internally and as refugees in neighboring countries and beyond. The war has also led to a significant destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and homes, contributing to widespread suffering and hardship for the Syrian population. Humanitarian access has been severely restricted in several areas, further increasing the suffering. International organizations have struggled to provide aid and support to affected populations due to the ongoing violence and logistical challenges (Syria, 2022). As of 2024, the Syrian Civil War has largely entered a prolonged state, with the Assad regime regaining control and power over most of the country. However, particularly in the northwestern part of the country, acts of resistance and ongoing conflict persist. The war's long-term resolution is still not certain, yet there are international negotiations and humanitarian efforts aimed at achieving a lasting peace. The continued presence of extremist groups and foreign interventions complicates the conditions for a comprehensive settlement (Lister, 2015; Syria, 2022).

2. Current Situation

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led a swift offensive culminating in the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Assuming the role of interim president, head of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa dissolved the 2012 constitution, parliament, security agencies and launched a new government. A five year interim process was formalized in March 2025. Through enshrining Islamic jurisprudence as a primary source of legislation and also upholding women's rights and separation of powers, the new charter included a variety of ministers from different ethnic and religious groups. While the governance was going through these, on March 10 2025, Sharaa and SDF leaders also reached an agreement in order to integrate Kurdish majority groups and institutions to the Syrian state.

3. Humanitarian and Security Fallout

Syria is going through its worst-ever drought in 36 years and its wheat production slashed by 40%, hence, this situation eventually resulted in critical shortages in subsidized bread and increased reliance on limited imports and emergency. Around 25.6 million people, more than half of the population, are food insecure while 3 million of them are at the risk of severe hunger (Reuters, 2024). On the other hand, reconstruction of the country is going to cost more than \$400 billion as the calculations show. The Syrian government, the United States,



Jordan and the other countries are working toward a ceasefire and a rebuilding of Syria plan but the numbers are way too high which creates concerns about the vague future of the country.

B. Iran-Israel Conflict

Conflict between the states of Iran and Israel had started on June 13 2025 and it continues still. In the first days of conflict, both countries attacked each other with a tremendous amount of missiles which targeted several types of areas. The very anticipated attack conducted by Israel, which mainly targeted the nuclear facilities and military sites. Prior to the attack, nearly two years of war between these states set up a substructure for the following events. Following days in which fighting increased, the United States of America became involved in this conflict and targeted the most crucial and fortified sites in Iran's nuclear program. Eventually on June 24, a ceasefire was announced which brought an end to a 12 day war. Even though breaches happened against this ceasefire, currently no war affects the area.

1. Key Sites of Iran's Military-Industrial Complex

Nuclear Sites of Iran:



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Military Sites of Iran:



Oil Infrastructure Sites of Iran:



2. Background of the Conflict

Until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Israel and Iran were considered as allies, nevertheless, after the Revolution, they became enemies. Back then, the newly founded Islamic regime in Iran started to blame the United States of America and Israel for the things that were not going as planned in the country. Tension between these countries hit the top after Iran revealed their secret nuclear program which resulted in the toppled regime of Saddam Husein by the US-led forces.

One of the most important purposes of the United States and Israel in this ongoing conflict was limiting Iran's pursuit and development on nuclear weapons. As known publicly, attaining nuclear weapons was banned in the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" in 1968. While tension between countries was continuing to grow, in 2015, Iran reached an agreement with the United States, Russia, China and several European countries called "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)". Mainly expected impact of this plan was limiting Iran's nuclear program and delaying their capability of developing a nuclear weapon for at least a decade. Iran enjoyed relief from the international sanctions that they were dealing with. This agreement lacks details about the restrictions on Iran's ballistic missiles programs and was not enough to obstruct the pursuits of conventional weapons. With the changing president of the United States, new president Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the agreement less than three years later saying that "This was a horrible one-sided deal. It didn't bring calm, it didn't bring peace, and it never will." In 2019 Iran started to work on the enrichment of uranium and in about 4 years they stocked enough material to reach a nuclear breakout, although the timeline for actual weaponization remained vague.

In 2024, following the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Israel significantly diminished Iran's reach in the Middle East in its retaliation against Iran's major allies. Although the primary theater for conflict that year was Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, Israel also decapitated the Iran-aligned group Hezbollah in Lebanon in September–November, which in turn facilitated Ahmed al-Sharaa's toppling of Pres. Bashar al-Assad in Syria in December. When Israel and Iran twice exchanged direct strikes—first in April 2024 and again in October—Iran downplayed the effectiveness of Israel's missiles at striking its



military targets, and Iran's barrage of missiles toward Israel largely failed to cause significant damage or casualties.

3. Hot War Period

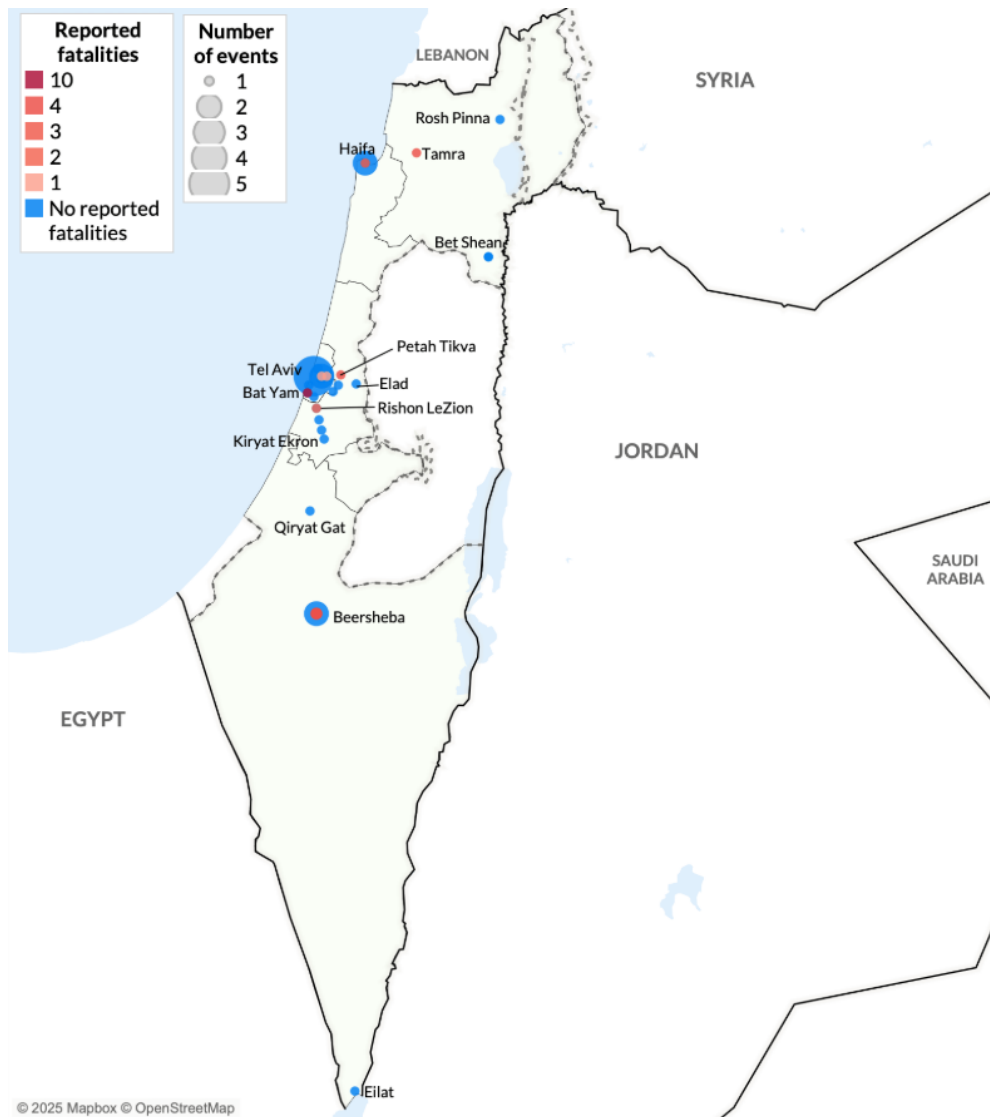
After then, Israel continued asking for support from the United States to strike Iran at a planned date, April 2025. However, with the return of Donald Trump to the United States presidency, he chose to come to a peaceful new deal with Iran. In June, negotiations for this deal faltered and Iran decided to accelerate its efforts on uranium enrichment, hence, Israel launched an attack on June 13 in coordination with its intelligence agency, Mossad. This attack resulted in death of many major military leaders of Iran including Hossein Salami, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; Mohammed Bagheri, the chief of staff of the armed forces; Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the IRGC's (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) air force and many nuclear scientists. Furthermore, Iran's primary uranium enrichment facility, air defense, missile systems, nuclear facility complexes near Isfahan and Iran's ministry of defense in Tehran were damaged as it is reported.

Israeli strikes targeting Iran's ballistic missile infrastructure:



On the other hand, Iran sent hundreds of drones, missiles, ballistic and supersonic missiles to Israel, especially its capital Tel Aviv. Even though Iran's response was not as spot on the mark as the Israelis', the targets received massive damage. An Iranian missile also made an impact in the Kirya area in central Tel Aviv which houses military facilities like headquarters for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) yet, according to the Israeli reports there was no significant damage.

IRGC missiles' direct hits in Israel:

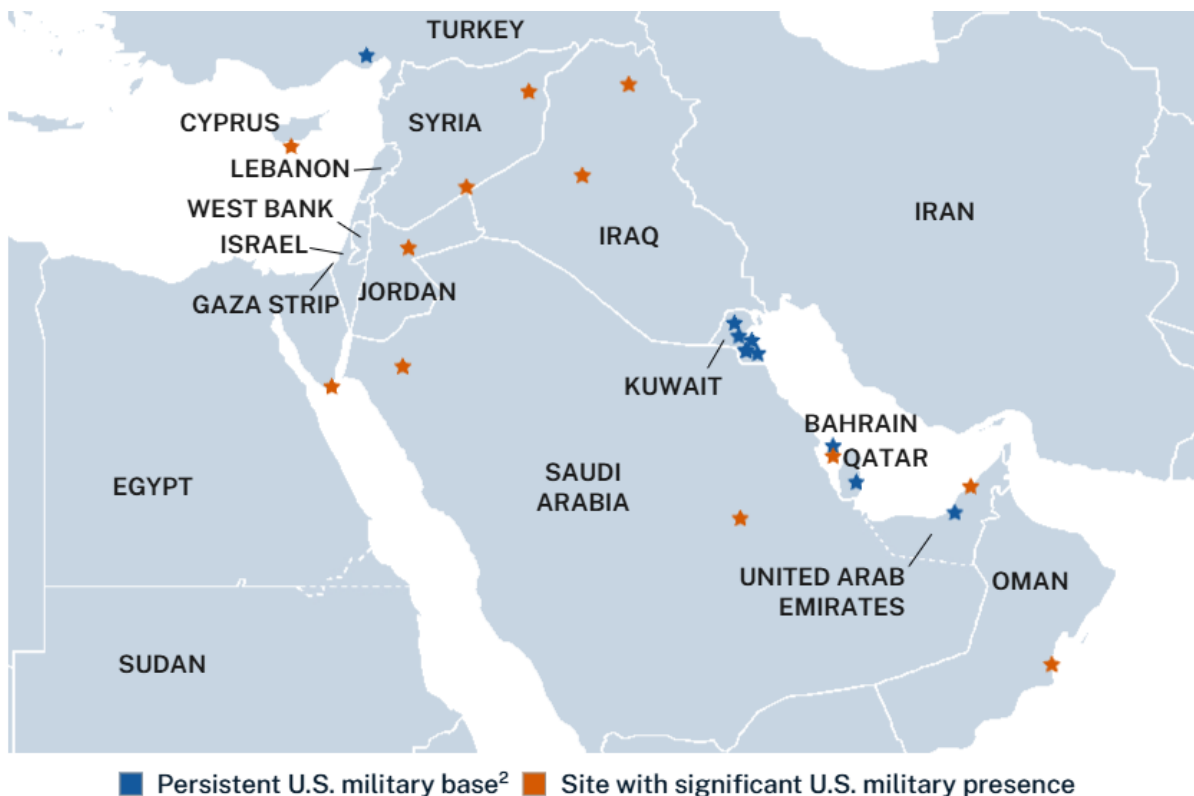


The main purpose of Israel is to destroy the nuclear capability of Iran but they didn't have enough resources and power to do it by themselves. Initially, the United States decided to be involved with the conflict and struck nuclear facilities of Iran in Fordow, Natanz and



Isfahan on June 22. Iran hit back by launching missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, which also hosts US forces. This counterattack was more of a symbolic kind, considering there was a warning before it. The US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessed that Iran succeeded in moving its stocks of uranium before the attacks, however, the following day John Ratcliffe, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), stated that new information they gathered showed these strikes dealt severe damage to Iran's nuclear facilities.

The United States' Military Presence in the Middle East:



4. Ceasefire Agreement

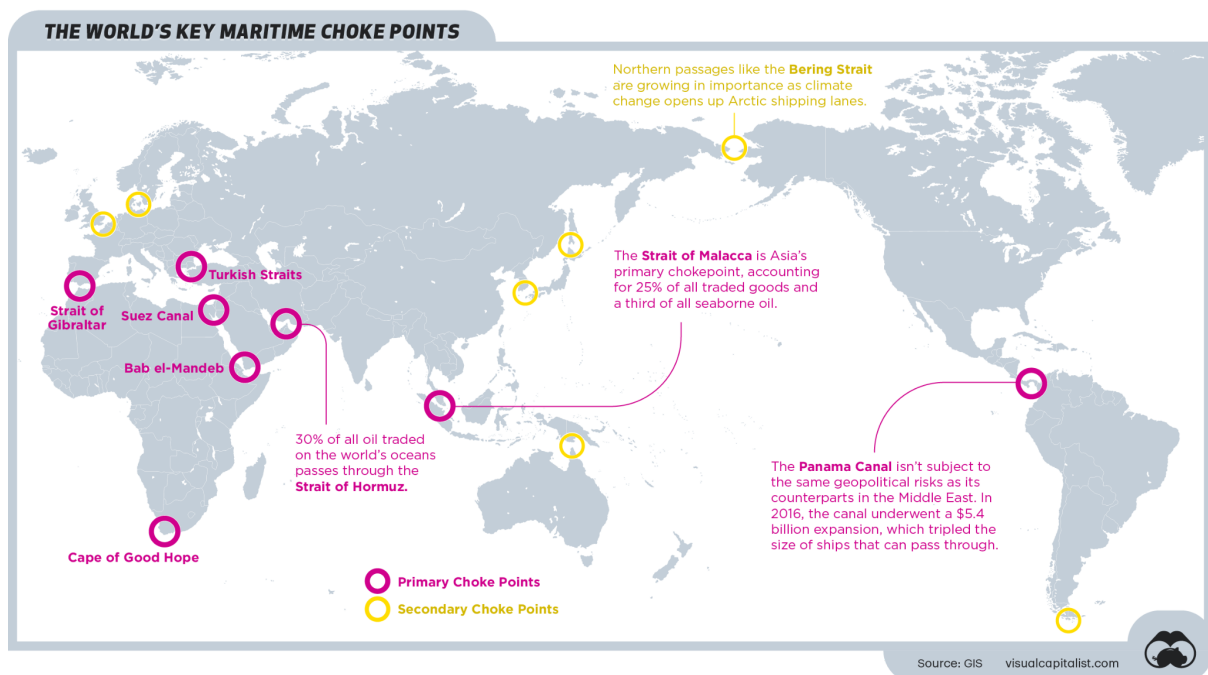
Just two days after, on June 24, a ceasefire agreement announced by Donald Trump which includes 12 hours of cessation of hostilities by Iran, then another 12 hours of cessation of hostilities by both Iran and Israel. Despite the serious violations, the conflict officially came to an end.

C. NATO's Strategic Interest in the Middle East

Over the past two decades, NATO's involvement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been driven by recurring security concerns rather than a long-term strategic



vision. Since 2001, the Alliance has consistently pursued objectives centered on counterterrorism, preventing the spillover of regional conflicts, strengthening partner capacities, and safeguarding vital maritime trade routes (IAI, 2024). Operations such as Active Endeavour, Sea Guardian, and Ocean Shield reflected NATO's maritime priorities, while interventions like Unified Protector in Libya and the ongoing NATO Mission Iraq underscored its role in crisis management and capacity-building (NATO, 2023b; CSIS, 2024). Yet, despite this record of activity, NATO's engagement has remained largely reactive and fragmented, constrained by intra-Alliance divergences and a lack of consensus with MENA partners on what constitutes shared security threats (FIIA, 2025). At the same time, the Alliance cannot ignore the region's persistent instability; from protracted conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen to terrorism, organized crime, fragile governance, and human-security challenges such as migration and climate pressures. These dynamics directly affect NATO members through risks of terrorism, uncontrolled migration flows, disruptions of energy and trade routes, and the growing presence of external powers such as Russia and China (Hudson Institute, 2024; Heiss, 1995). As reaffirmed in the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, NATO views stability in the Middle East not only as a matter of regional concern but as a strategic imperative for the security and resilience of the Alliance as a whole (NATO, 2024a; MEI, 2024).



Key global maritime chokepoints such as the Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, and Strait of Hormuz to serve as vital transit routes for energy and trade, underlining NATO's maritime concerns in the region: Visual from VisualCapitalist illustrating global chokepoints.

1. Protection of the Member States

One of NATO's foremost strategic interests in the Middle East arises from its duty to protect Alliance members directly exposed to regional instability. Türkiye, as it shares borders with Syria and Iraq, remains the most immediate case: the Syrian civil war, refugee flows, and cross-border terrorist activity have repeatedly tested NATO's ability to uphold its Article 5 commitments. NATO has deployed Patriot missile batteries and enhanced air defense systems to Türkiye, while also providing intelligence and reconnaissance support to reduce the risk of spillovers (NATO, 2023a). Beyond the southern flank, instability in the MENA region has translated into broader risks for European members, including terrorism, organized crime, and migratory pressures (FIIA, 2025). As conflicts persist, NATO frames its protective mandate not only in terms of deterrence at the border but also through proactive regional engagement and stability operations, which can be defined as a stance reinforced by the Washington Summit Declaration's recognition that "conflict, fragility and instability" outside Euro-Atlantic borders pose direct threats to Alliance security (NATO, 2024a; MEI, 2024).

2. Energy Security and Maritime Routes

The Middle East remains as an essential lifeline for NATO economies due to its role in global energy supply and its control over maritime chokepoints. Instability in areas such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Eastern Mediterranean has the potential to disrupt energy flows and global trade, directly affecting European and North American markets (MEI, 2024). NATO has historically responded with maritime operations designed to secure these flows: Operation Active Endeavour (2001) countered terrorism in the Mediterranean, while its successor, Operation Sea Guardian (2016–present), expanded the mandate to include countering human trafficking and supporting maritime situational awareness (Hudson Institute, 2024). Similarly, Operation Ocean Shield (2009–2016) in the Gulf of Aden was launched to deter piracy and safeguard shipping lanes critical for energy and trade (CSIS, 2024). These efforts claim that NATO's role in protecting maritime routes and ensuring



energy security is not optional, but central to its strategic interest in the region, particularly given the vulnerabilities of its southern flank (IAI, 2024).

3. Counterterrorism and Non-member States

The Middle East has long been a base of operations for extremist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates. These groups destabilize fragile states in the region and pose direct and indirect threats to NATO allies through terrorist attacks, radicalization networks, and the recruitment of foreign fighters (FIIA, 2025). For NATO, this makes counterterrorism not only a matter of homeland defense, but also of addressing instability at its source.

Secondly, the **NATO Mission Iraq**, which launched in 2018, illustrates this preventive and cooperative approach. Rather than engaging in direct combat, the mission focuses on training and advising Iraqi security forces, supporting them in developing sustainable defense institutions and preventing the resurgence of Daesh (NATO, 2023b). This not only strengthens Iraq's security but also reduces the risk of wider regional spillover.

Beyond Iraq, NATO engages non-member states through the **Mediterranean Dialogue (MD)** and the **Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)**. These frameworks allow partners such as Jordan, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies to cooperate with NATO through intelligence sharing, military training, and joint planning on counterterrorism and crisis management (Hudson Institute, 2024; NATO, 2024b). In doing so, NATO reinforces its role as a security partner while promoting regional resilience.

By working with non-member states, NATO extends its security perimeter beyond Alliance borders. This cooperative approach reflects the recognition that the security of NATO's citizens is linked to the stability of neighboring regions. Counterterrorism, in this sense, is not limited to short-term threat mitigation but also contributes to building long-term resilience and stability across the MENA region (IAI, 2024; Heiss, 1995).

While NATO's strategic interests highlight *why* the Alliance is engaged in the Middle East, they do not fully explain *how* these priorities are pursued. This requires looking at NATO's concrete involvement: its mission in Iraq, structured cooperation with Mediterranean and Gulf states, and its partnerships with key regional actors such as Israel and Jordan. Together, these initiatives reveal the practical expression of NATO's strategy.



D. Existing NATO Involvement

1. NATO Mission in Iraq

The most visible NATO engagement in the Middle East today is NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), established in 2018 at the Iraqi government's request (NATO, 2023a). Compared to earlier missions, the NMI is not a combat mission. Rather, it is an advisory mission with a focus on strengthening local command structures, restructuring defence education institutions, and training Iraqi officers. Its primary objective is to prevent Daesh from returning and ensure that Iraq can maintain its own security in a sustainable manner (Hudson Institute, 2024). NATO's overarching strategic objective of preventing conflict and terrorism is accomplished through capacity-building rather than direct intervention (see Part VI). This is a long-term, useful method.

Furthermore, the NMI is important for NATO because it shows a change in doctrine from short-term interventions to building long-term resilience. It also shows that NATO is trying to keep instability in the region from spreading to its own territory, which is in line with the Alliance's main goal of protecting its members and fighting terrorism (see Part VI). The mission also works with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, showing that NATO can work as a multiplier in multilateral settings instead of acting alone (MEI, 2024).

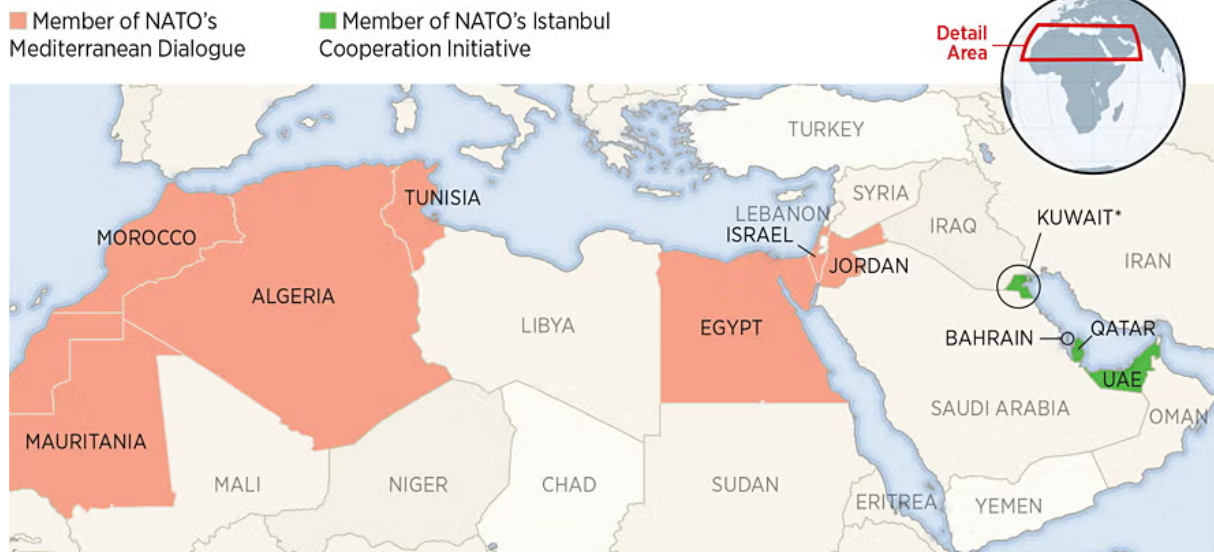
2. Cooperation with Mediterranean Dialogue & Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (MD/ICI)

The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), which started in 1994, has seven partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia (NATO, 2024a). The MD's goals are to improve understanding between countries, work together to fight terrorism, and make the region safer. NATO helps regional militaries work together by holding joint exercises, military training programs, and political talks. This is important in a region where trust is low.



MAP 1

Overview of the Middle East and North Africa



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

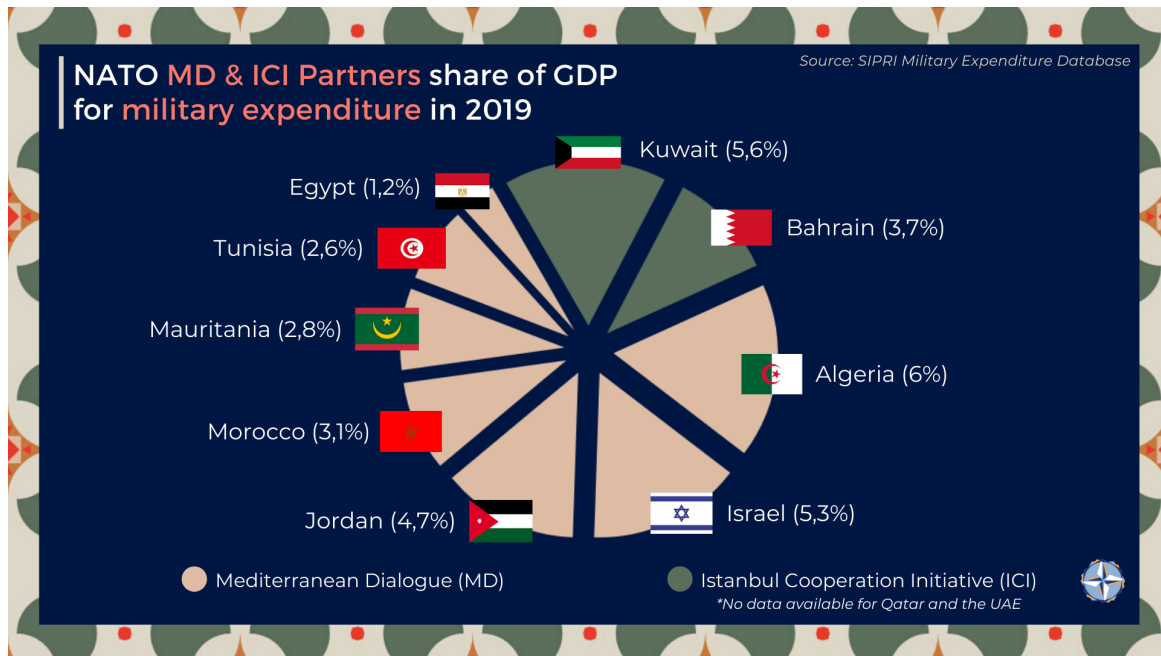
IB6089 heritage.org

This map highlights NATO's core regional partnership frameworks; the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) as revealing the member states active in political consultation and security cooperation across North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf.

NATO started the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) in 2004 to strengthen its ties with the Gulf monarchies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE (CSIS, 2024). The ICI, on the other hand, is more about practical cooperation, like training for counterterrorism, border security, modernisation of defence, and maritime surveillance. The ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait opened in 2017, marking NATO's first permanent physical presence in the Gulf. It serves as a regional hub for training and consultation (NATO, 2024b). This move shows that NATO is interested in protecting maritime and energy routes, and it also gives the Alliance a place to talk about new threats like cyber warfare and hybrid attacks.



The MD and ICI are both examples of NATO's cooperative security principle. They make sure that threats are dealt with both militarily and politically, and they also build trust with states that are not NATO members but have a lot of power in the region.



A visual breakdown illustrating how different countries engage with NATO, via the MD and ICI, as either dialogue participants or cooperative partners, reflecting varying levels of engagement: Derived from a graphic representation of MD and ICI partnerships.

3. Partnerships with Israel, Jordan and Gulf States

The MD and ICI set the framework, but NATO's real involvement can be seen in its specific partnerships with countries like Israel, Jordan, and the Gulf monarchies.

Israel has one of its strongest partnerships with NATO. It takes part in joint military exercises, sharing intelligence, and fighting terrorism. It has also sent naval assets to NATO's maritime missions, like Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean (Hudson Institute, 2024). The cooperation goes beyond traditional areas to include new ones like cybersecurity, which shows that NATO knows how advanced Israel's technology is.

People think that Jordan is NATO's closest ally in the Arab world. Jordan is involved in the Mediterranean Dialogue and also hosts NATO-sponsored training programs and joint exercises. It has an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program (IPCP) with NATO that



includes border security, fighting terrorism, and modernising the military (MEI, 2024). Jordan's location next to Syria, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia makes it an important partner for NATO's southern security strategy.

Under the ICI, NATO has strengthened its ties with Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE in the Gulf. For instance, the UAE sent troops to Afghanistan to work with NATO troops, and Qatar has been working on programs to improve its defence capabilities (CSIS, 2024). NATO gets operational support, access to important bases, and better maritime security across important sea lanes through these partnerships. This directly supports NATO's strategic goals of energy security and counterterrorism (see Part VI).

These partnerships form a networked approach to regional security, in which NATO uses cooperation with key players to expand its influence, protect important trade and energy flows, and deal with transnational threats without having to keep large numbers of troops in place all the time.

E. Key Challenges

On the topic of key challenges, it can be stated that NATO's involvement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is influenced by its strategic interests and the substantial difficulties it faces in converting those interests into cohesive action. Geopolitical realities, disagreements between member states, and the changing roles of other regional and international actors are what make these problems so hard to solve. Four main issues are especially important: NATO's lack of a direct presence in Syria and Iran, the danger of conflict with Russia and Iran, the challenges of working with non-NATO countries, and the need to find a balance between diplomacy and deterrence.

1. Lack of Direct NATO Presence in Syria/Iran

NATO has sent troops to Iraq and Libya with clear missions, but it has not sent troops to Syria or Iran on purpose. This lack is due to legal, political, and strategic reasons. In Syria, disagreements among NATO members about whether or not to intervene, along with Russia's long-standing military presence since 2015, have made it impossible for NATO to agree on direct involvement (GMF, 2022). Instead, NATO has taken an indirect approach by using Operation Active Fence to strengthen Türkiye with Patriot missile defence batteries to stop



missile and air threats from Syria (NATO, 2015). This shows that the group is taking a reactive stance, putting the safety of its member states ahead of intervention in the region.

Furthermore, NATO's absence is even more obvious in Iran. As Tehran sees the Alliance as a hostile Western group, member states are still split on whether NATO should confront Iran or talk to it diplomatically. Because of this, NATO's actions are still limited to monitoring, deterrence, and maritime security operations that deal with threats linked to Iran, like the harassment of shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz. NATO can't change the outcomes in two of the most unstable regional theatres because it doesn't have a direct presence there.



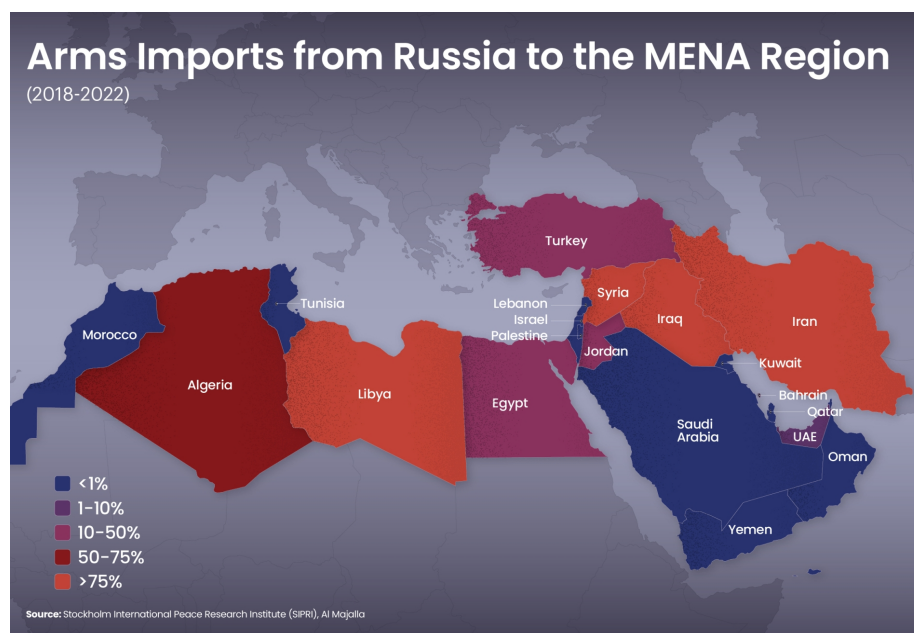
Since this section explains NATO's absence vs. the active influence of Iran and Russia, this map makes the imbalance clear, showing why NATO faces strategic challenges without direct presence. Adapted from an ECFR map detailing Iran-Russia regional strategies.



2. Risk of Escalation with Russia/Iran

Observing the risk of escalation with Russia/Iran, it can be stated that NATO can't do much in the MENA region because it might have to fight directly with big powers, especially Russia and Iran. Russia has a military presence in Syria, including the Hmeimim Airbase and the Tartus naval base. This puts it close to NATO's southern flank. Any NATO action in Syria could cause tensions similar to those seen in proxy wars during the Cold War (Reuters, 2025). NATO members are still not on the same page, though. Eastern European countries want to stop Russia on the Alliance's eastern flank, while Mediterranean countries focus on threats from the south. This makes it hard to balance resources.

Moreover, Iran makes things even more difficult for NATO. Tehran uses its "Axis of Resistance" network, which includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen, to spread its power across many fronts, which directly threatens stability in the region (MEI, 2024). NATO believes that any military action against Iran could disrupt the flow of energy around the world, anger Gulf allies, and possibly lead to a larger conflict that goes beyond the Alliance's mandate. Because of this situation, NATO is careful and often only takes on defensive and advisory roles instead of projecting power directly.



The map shows NATO vs. Russian/Iranian footprints in the region, highlighting escalation risks. : Visual based on regional power mapping by the Washington Institute .



3. Coordination with Non-NATO Actors (UN, Eu, Arab League)

Another ongoing problem is that different countries don't always work together to solve problems in the Middle East. NATO is not always the only group involved; it often has to work with the UN, the EU, and regional groups like the Arab League. However the differences in mandates and politics will often make it hard for people to work together well.

Furthermore, the UN Security Council has been stuck on Syria since 2011, which shows how hard this is: Russia and China have blocked NATO-supported resolutions, so the Alliance has had no legal way to intervene. NATO's Operation Sea Guardian works with the EU's Operation Atalanta to fight piracy at sea, but the two operations aren't always well-coordinated and their mandates can overlap (CSIS, 2021). The Arab League has had trouble with credibility and capacity, which has made it less effective as a partner, even though it has started projects like its observer mission in Syria.

Because these institutions don't work together, there are too many people doing the same thing, the burden isn't shared evenly, and the political messages are mixed. For NATO to coordinate effectively, it needs to find a balance between its defence strengths and the political legitimacy of other players. It also needs to avoid giving the impression that the West is in charge of regional security.

4. Balancing Diplomacy vs Deterrence

It can be stated that finding the right balance between diplomacy and deterrence may be NATO's biggest problem. Deterrence is important, though. For instance, putting missile defences in Türkiye, staying ready in the Eastern Mediterranean, and showing military strength all help members feel safe and keep enemies away. On the other hand, putting too much emphasis on deterrence could make stories about Western militarisation stronger, which could make countries like Iran and Russia dig in even more in the area.

The Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) are two examples of diplomacy that give people a chance to get involved. However, these mechanisms have problems: partner countries often think that NATO's involvement is uneven or too closely tied to U.S. interests (Hudson Institute, 2023). Also, disagreements within



NATO, like Türkiye's different approach to Syria and its growing ties with Russia, make it hard for the Alliance to show a united diplomatic front.

Consequently, NATO needs to take a two-pronged approach: it needs to protect its members with credible deterrence and talk to regional states to build trust and capacity. NATO must find this balance if it wants to stay important in the MENA region without making conflicts worse.

III. Questions to be addressed

1. How should NATO respond to the renewed escalation between Iran and Israel, considering its mandate and current presence in the Middle East?
2. How should NATO members balance their relations with Israel and the United States on one side, and with Iran's regional influence on the other?
3. How can NATO contribute to preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Iran, while respecting international treaties such as the NPT and JCPOA?
4. How can NATO ensure that its military presence in the Middle East does not escalate tensions further or provoke retaliation?
5. How much should NATO's main job of protecting its member states grow to include threats that come from outside of NATO territory, especially in the Middle East?
6. How can NATO protect energy security and shipping routes without using too many resources or doing the same thing as other groups, like the EU?
7. What kinds of counterterrorism cooperation with countries that aren't NATO members are possible without hurting NATO's credibility or breaking the laws of the country?
8. What can we learn from NATO's mission in Iraq, and should these lessons be used to plan missions in other unstable countries in the future?
9. Are frameworks like the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) good enough for today's security situation, or does NATO need to change and add to them?



10. What can NATO do to strengthen its ties with Israel, Jordan, and the Gulf States without giving the impression that it is taking sides in regional conflicts?
11. Since NATO doesn't have a direct presence in Syria or Iran, should the Alliance keep its focus on deterrence at its borders or think about being more active?
12. How can NATO work better with the UN, EU, and Arab League so that they work together instead of against each other?
13. Should NATO put military readiness first to reassure its members or political dialogue first to build trust with regional actors when trying to balance diplomacy and deterrence?

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