

Regional Security Frameworks in Israel

Oded Eran

Director of the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv. Israel's Ambassador to the EU and NATO between 2002-2007

O Enquadramento Regional de Segurança de Israel

Comunicação proferida pelo Embaixador Oded Eran, no IDN no dia 23 de Fevereiro de 2010, no âmbito do ciclo de conferências intitulado *Visões Globais para a Defesa*.

Lecture delivered by the Ambassador Oded Eran at the Portuguese National Defence Institute on the 23rd February 2010. The lecture was delivered in the context of a cycle of seminars on the subject Global Visions for Defence.

The proposition of a regional security framework is presumably based on the following assumptions:

- That a region and its member states are agreed upon their definition as a region within certain geographical boundaries.
- That the member states of this certain region have certain common attributes which bind them together.
- That these member states can identify common threats.
- That they have a common desire to meet these threats on a regional basis.

This set of assumptions hardly applies to the Middle East. In some cases the four elements I mentioned are all absent. The Middle East has acquired several geographical definitions and none of them is helpful to this discussion, mostly because the geographical source of the threat does not necessarily correspond to the threats.

The geographical definition of the region relates to the region as the area between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. This definition leaves Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan outside the region. It also leaves the Maghreb, North Africa, outside the region. It is questionable whether Somalia or Sudan fall within this definition.

But when the sources of the threats to the region are mapped, it is clear that some emanate from precisely those countries left out if the geographical boundaries contain just the space between the Gulf and the Mediterranean. This is not a simple matter because whenever the geographical size is increased, the looser the framework – political, economic and security – become and the smaller the benefits are. That is to say that if we add Pakistan and Afghanistan to the region because that is from where some of the threats came from, the more difficult it will be to create a binding framework.

Regardless of the geographical boundaries of the region, the Middle East lacks the sufficient degree of political cohesiveness to allow for home grown regional security arrangements. There were, in the 20th century, attempts to create political, economic and even security frameworks, most of which have not succeeded. The ones in security were mostly attempts by the super powers of the time to create a buffer against one another. This is the origin of the pro-American, pro-British Baghdad Pact and this is the basis for the Egyptian-Syrian pro-Soviet alliance in the middle of the 1950's. The fragmentation of the Middle East continues and even deepens. Furthermore, regional frameworks require a certain degree of willingness to give up national sovereignty. It is difficult to produce a single country in the Middle East region which has reached the degree of political maturity to be able to forgo certain attributes of sovereignty. All of the regional, Arab associations in the region are of a loose, unbinding nature, where no sovereignty is given up

and pan-Arabism, which was a mighty political force just 40 years ago, is part of history.

Even more discouraging will be the attempt to define, in a formal manner, the enemy. It is quite probable that in the inner courts, behind the scenes, even if Israel were to be present in these secret meetings, Iran or certain Moslem fundamentalist groups would be unanimously declared the common threat. This will not be done collectively in a manner sufficient to forge a common framework to collectively combat this threat, or even to contribute to efforts conducted by other non-regional forces.

The combination of all these absent, but necessary, elements makes it almost impossible to create a regional security framework born from within the region itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, the two quite recent attempts to produce regional cooperation in these matters were initiated outside the region under the umbrella of NATO and the European Union. First was the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue which was launched in 1994 and now includes seven countries – Mauritania, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria in North Africa and Egypt and Israel in the Middle East. The structure has been flexible enough to allow two tracks. In the early stages, most activities were done in the context of the group and it developed to the extent that the seven Chiefs of Staff now meet annually with their NATO partners. The Foreign and Defense Ministers of the seven non-NATO countries meet as well and units of the seven Mediterranean Dialogue members may participate in certain NATO exercises. The second track, which was developed in recent years, is based on the principle of differentiability, which allows each of the seven to proceed in its cooperation with NATO according to its capabilities and wishes. NATO has reached Individual Cooperation Programmes with some of the seven MD countries, but at the same time the multilateral track is preserved. NATO's annual work programme for the MD aims at building joint activities in civil emergency planning, crisis management, border security and defence reforms and defence economics. The list includes seminar courses and exercises.

The weak and strong points of the Mediterranean Dialogue are clear. On the one hand, it is more an individual cooperation with NATO than a collective cooperation between two groups – NATO and a group of Mediterranean countries. But it is a fact, not to be disregarded, that in spite of the confrontation between Hizbullah and Israel in 2006 and Hamas and Israel in 2008-9, all the Arab States in the MD have continued their participation in the NATO MD activities including the meetings between high-ranking officers. The framework is of course partial and does not include Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority and the cooperation between the seven themselves is very minimal, but the MD creates a potential which could be further developed.

An almost identical process was launched by the EU in 1995 at the Barcelona Conference and the Barcelona Declaration. The logic of this effort was similar to the one of the NATO MD. The Iraq 1991 war and the 1993 Oslo Accords created regional political circumstances which were conducive to the establishment of regional cooperation. On the security matters, the Barcelona Declaration was "hijacked" by Egypt which has been campaigning against Israel's nuclear capabilities. The general security basket in the declaration is therefore heavily tilted in this direction. The two sentences which are directed to the issue of security are ridiculously vague and abstract. These sentences read "Promote conditions likely to develop good-neighbourly relations among themselves and support processes aimed at stability, security, prosperity and regional and sub-regional cooperation.

Consider any confidence and security-building measures that could be taken between the parties with a view of creation of an "area of peace and stability in the Mediterranean", including the long term possibility of establishing a Euro-Mediterranean pact to that end".

The Declaration of the summit of Paris on 13 July, 2008, creating the Mediterranean Union on the basis of President Sarkozy's idea, was basically a reiteration of the Barcelona Declaration and added platitudes. The annex to the Paris declaration specifies six priority areas for the Union. None of them has to do with cooperation in security. One is called civil protection and deals mostly with catastrophes.

Simultaneously with NATO, the EU also reached, in 2004, the conclusion that an element of differentiability is necessary and the individual action plan offered to some of the EU Mediterranean neighbours was aimed at allowing them to progress more rapidly than the others in their bilateral relations with the EU.

It is clear from this short description that both NATO and the EU had very limited success in creating regional cooperation. Notwithstanding sub-regional security cooperation mechanisms such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the failure to establish regional security is mostly the result of the regional states reluctance to work within mechanisms created outside the region and imported. But part of the failure, paradoxically as it may sound, is the result of a timid approach by NATO and the EU, which were willing to accept that the slowest and more reluctant Mediterranean partners will dictate the pace of the progress and the depth of the regional cooperation. Evidently, Arab-Israeli relations have been a major factor in the Arab attitude towards regional cooperation with Israel as an equal member and events in the peace process, both negative and positive, influenced Arab positions towards regional cooperation.

The analysis above does not mean that regional security cooperation is not possible even under the current circumstances. In spite of the experience of NATO and the EU, it is still an open question whether outside involvement is necessary.

The NATO experience is not totally discouraging. It shows readiness even under strained political circumstances, to maintain a certain degree of dialogue. It is evidence of willingness to accept a framework provided there is a sufficient degree of flexibility, allowing participants to proceed at their own pace.

NATO could try a bolder approach while attempting to use a flexible approach. For the time being, it is the constraints which NATO imposes on itself which prevent, to a certain extent, greater progress towards regional security cooperation. The current efforts to devise a new strategic concept for NATO under the New Secretary-General and former Secretary of State Albright should, in my view, recognize not only that the Middle East and the area beyond produce both the sources of threats but also allies in meeting these threats. It is also evident that, at least for the time being, the region, regardless of its geographical definition, is unable to produce on its own a comprehensive system of collective security. What NATO can offer is a partial substitute through the creation of ad-hoc "coalitions of the willing". There cannot be, for obvious political reasons, a formal coalition against terror and certainly not against terror based on Islamic fundamentalism. There can be an informal forum in which even operational aspects can be discussed. The same can be said about Iran and its nuclear ambitions. It is a source of concern to every state in the Middle East. Again, for several reasons, this cannot be translated into a cohesive framework but informal discussion can take place.

Another aspect which should be looked at is the contribution of third parties to the security aspects of possible agreements between Israel and its neighbours. The past experience is not encouraging. The deployment since 1949 of UN Forces did not prevent wars and in 1967, the hasty decision to remove the UN force from the Sinai was a cause, though a minor one, for the outbreak of the war. International deployment will, however, be needed to fulfill certain functions. Ultimately it is, of course, the decision of the direct parties to the agreement to preserve it, but they may need third party involvement in terms of monitoring and maintenance of low level security arrangements.

In summing up, I would like to reiterate that the region as a whole still lacks the level of political cohesion necessary for a meaningful security cooperation. Sub-regions such as the Gulf and North Africa are better united at this point for cooperation. Connection between the sub-regions, creating a framework, providing a political umbrella and structuring the discussions can be provided by an outside organization such as NATO.

There is also room for low-key preparations for a third-party deployment in the context of security arrangements which will be part of the agreements between Israel and its neighbours.