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Strategic Implications of Establishing a NATO Liaison Office in Jordan

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This article was published in the Bahraini newspaper Akhbar Al Khaleej on July 30, 2024.

On July 11, 2024, the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates announced the establishment of a NATO liaison office. This decision was a result of the NATO summit in Washington, held from July 9-11, 2024. This summit produced significant outcomes; however, from a research perspective, we always examine the position of the Middle East and the Gulf region concerning the outcomes of these summits. This is highlighted in three key areas: first, NATO leaders discussed a special report on the future relationship between NATO and southern countries, including the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, and Sub-Saharan Africa; second, the 20th anniversary of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative launched in 2004, which four Gulf states joined while Saudi Arabia and Oman remained outside it; third, the appointment of the former Dutch Prime Minister as the new NATO Secretary General.

From the official Jordanian statement, it is evident that the establishment of this office is part of NATO's commitment to enhancing cooperation with neighboring countries, as indicated in the final communiqué of the NATO summit in Lithuania in 2023.

Before discussing the implications of establishing this center, it is essential to highlight that Jordan's relationship with NATO has included numerous areas of cooperation over the years. Jordan is a member of the Mediterranean Dialogue Initiative, launched by NATO in 1994, which includes seven Mediterranean countries. This year marks the 30th anniversary of its launch. In 2005, a NATO minesweeper visited the Jordanian port of Aqaba for three days. In 2013, NATO provided practical training on protecting civilians during wars, benefiting 100,000 individuals in various Jordanian cities. These examples, among others, demonstrate NATO's role in supporting the security capabilities of its partners.

Despite the strategic significance of NATO choosing Jordan to open this office, it represents a significant development in NATO's relations with southern countries. The announced activities of the center include conferences, training courses in strategic analysis, emergency planning, public diplomacy, cybersecurity, climate change management, crisis management, and civil defense. These areas are of priority and interest to southern countries due to their chronic crises, presenting challenges for both allies and partners.

This office is not the first of its kind for NATO regarding southern countries. In February 2017, NATO announced the establishment of the South Hub, aimed at coordinating information on terrorist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, based in Naples, Italy. In January of the

same year, NATO opened the Regional Center for the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in Kuwait, aimed at providing training courses, workshops, and lectures on energy security, strategic planning, and civil emergency planning and crisis management.

The three centers, located in southern countries or NATO member states, complement each other in analysing the security environment in which NATO operates, in addition to enhancing partner capabilities through the mentioned courses.

Some may question why such centers are established when there are already other frameworks for cooperation between NATO and its partners, such as individual partnership and cooperation programs within the Istanbul Initiative and regular Mediterranean Dialogue meetings at the ministerial and other levels. The answer lies in NATO's general and specific strategy. After the Cold War, NATO began forming partnerships to adapt to new realities and dispel the traditional Arab perception of NATO as a tool of Western military intervention in crises. For Arab countries, the non-military security provided by NATO through these courses has become a priority, especially in crisis and disaster management and maritime security, areas where regional countries urgently need NATO's expertise.

Moreover, NATO's decision to establish this center cannot be separated from the competition with Russia in the region and NATO's desire to affirm its commitment to southern security, as highlighted by the recommendation to appoint a special envoy for the south, similar to decisions made by major countries and the European Union. Despite the importance of this step, my experience with NATO policies highlights three points: first, NATO is fully aware of the challenge of changing perceptions regarding its policies outside its territories, especially after the Afghanistan experience, and works gradually to avoid counterproductive results; second, any threat to the southern front means a threat to NATO's vital interests, as seen in the intervention in Libya on March 11, 2011, through "Operation Unified Protector," where the unrest in Libya at the time led to oil prices nearing \$112 per barrel. However, NATO only intervenes in crises outside its territories under certain conditions, including unanimous approval of its 32 members and an international resolution indicating a role for regional organisations; third, NATO prefers not to lead international efforts to address threats but rather works within coalitions, such as its role in combating piracy off the coast of Somalia and the Horn of Africa through the "Operation Ocean Shield" mission, which began in 2008 and moved to the Black Sea in 2016 for a new mission.

While the decision to open this office is significant and will not be the last, with plans to open two more centers on climate change and the impact of conflicts on women, the debate continues, even among NATO researchers, regarding the broad concept of the south. The Gulf states should be

prioritised in NATO strategies, considering the deterrent role NATO can play and the need for greater involvement in addressing Gulf regional security threats.