Shared Responsibility and Comprehensive Security in the MENA Region

Strategic Workshop
Outline

Dr. Petra Weyland
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The purpose of this workshop is to share viewpoints on the topic of shared responsibility and comprehensive security in security partnerships around the Mediterranean. We argue that a common understanding of this issue is essential to achieve more security for all. Security for people, regions, and states in today’s world, to no small extent, hinges on how sharing and responsibility are given meaning and life. To a great extent these factors determine the quality and effectiveness of security partnerships. We argue that when partners put their understandings of shared responsibility on the table—when they share their thoughts and experiences—they can gain a clear picture of commonalities and differences. Then common efforts to achieve more security for all become much more effective.

With these considerations in mind we want to bring together people from around the Mediterranean to exchange their ideas and perspectives from their region, and offer proposals derived from their personal and professional backgrounds. We call this endeavor a Strategic Workshop because we want to give people with an interest in strategic and out-of-the-box thinking a space to put forward their ideas and discuss them.

We hope you will come up with suggestions on how to move forward in security partnerships around the Mediterranean and make recommendations as to how “the EU can improve its ability to foster civilian-military cooperation.”

In what follows, we put forward some initial reflections on shared responsibility in security partnerships, hoping to thus stimulate fruitful discussions.

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1 I would like to thank Ambassador Douglas Griffiths and Maj Thomas Döll for their constructive comments and their encouragement.

Shareholding

Sharing Threats and Challenges to Our Security

1. Nobody would doubt today that states and people—men, women and children living around the Mediterranean—share many threats and challenges to their security. Be it terrorism, transnational crime, climate change, poverty, mass migration, pandemic diseases, or others—we all are faced with challenges and threats to our personal security, and sometimes to the security of our governments or even entire regions.

   People, and their governments, around the Mediterranean have many of these threats in common; we all share them.

Shared Security Challenges—Differing Impingements

2. While we share common security challenges, their actual repercussions may impinge upon us differently. One nation or community may consider an issue to be a serious threat, while others may actually even experience the same issue as a solution to a security threat. Take, for example, illegal migration. While Europeans see massive illegal migration from Africa as a major security threat, communities in Africa may see it as a remedy for security threats. They consider migration not to be illegal but rather a long-established habit of temporary labor migration. For their societies, migration is not a threat, but comes with the opportunity of future remittances urgently needed to stabilize weak economies. And if African communities do consider migration a threat, then it is in terms of brain drain, and not in terms of threats to social systems and cultural identity as in the West.

   Thus, we cannot take for granted that security challenges and threats have the same impact for all of us. Being explicit about this is important.

3. Or we may ignore threats developing far away from us, thinking that it does not concern us. But in the globalized world we live in, this might turn out to be wishful thinking. More likely than not, these threats may sooner than later travel beyond national or continental borders and endanger stability far from their point of origin.

   So, even if we are not affected directly, it makes sense to give due attention to our partners’ security concerns.

4. Even as we share many challenges to our security, we may be faced with them to different degrees and in different ways. Agricultural producers in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from climate change much more acutely than farmers in Western Europe, and may not have access to the same remediation resources. The lives of people in the MENA region are threatened by terrorism to a much larger extent than people living in Europe.

   Though we all share threats and challenges, the degree and forms of their impact may differ. In trustful partnerships, these differences in impact should be acknowledged.
5. Communities, ethnic or religious groups, women, men and children share insecurities, but they may experience them differently. The evolving security situation has a disproportionately negative impact on vulnerable communities. Religious and ethnic minorities have become ever more vulnerable in recent times. Civilians increasingly suffer from a massive lack of security.

How do gender and insecurity relate to each other? How is insecurity experienced by ethnic and religious minorities, by men and women and the youth in source and transit countries of migration, and how do migrants adapt their security to life in emerging minority communities?

Looking at security and insecurity from the perspective of shared responsibility needs to include a mainstreaming approach.

Shared Threats—Differing Assessments

6. Even when partners agree that they have a certain security threat in common, they do not necessarily share the same threat assessment. Perceptions may differ. What is analyzed to be a major existential threat in one state, in one society, may actually be perceived as a far less urgent problem in another state or society. For example, in Europe, terrorism, illegal migration, and Islam are often perceived as the most urgent threats. In the MENA region and beyond, experts and public opinion often rank corruption, poor governance, and poverty at the top of the insecurity list.

Not only are differences in threat impact important, so are differences in perceptions and analysis.

7. Divergent assessments and perceptions of shared threats result from different methodologies on researching root causes. Often, what comes as an analysis of root causes amounts to a mere descriptive enumeration of facts and figures. Others ground their analysis in unearthing the societal, cultural, and political causes. Divergence does not stop in different methodologies, especially when it comes to violent extremism. Often there is fundamental disagreement about the very nature of root causes, which goes back to what has since Eduard Said been termed orientalism. Especially in the West, public opinion and analysts alike depart from what has hence been called Essentialism—seeing at the very core of the problem certain “aggressive” verses of the Qur’an. The critics of orientalism, on the contrary, argue that political economy provides the key to understanding. In short, some say security threats emanate from issues of culture and identity; others say that it has to do with unjust north-south relationships and authoritarianism.

We argue that sweeping such differences in assessment under the rug stands in the way of fruitful security partnerships. It is therefore worthwhile to give them their due attention.

8. Another issue which should be brought to the table involves the very nature of security. When we make assessments about security challenges, what security do we actually mean, and what security do we actually intend to achieve? And what takes precedence? Are we referring to state/national, regional, or human security? Are terrorism or illegal migration perceived
and acted upon as threats to state security or to human security? We submit that in many cases, human and state security are interrelated and determine each other. They are mutually dependent upon each other. An example here is gender-based violence (GbV) as a weapon of war. As numerous examples of the recent past show, these crimes against humanity first of all concern the very human security of the victims. But as a weapon of war, gender-based violence is designed to destroy ethnic, religious, and even state security.

We cannot separate human security from state security.

Sharing Agency and Tools in Countering Threats and Challenges

9. The quality and effectiveness of security partnerships also depends on who the actors and agents are. It seems obvious that the success of security partnerships to no small extent depends on inclusiveness. Who is involved in analyzing problems? Who is involved in devising means to counter them and in executing counter measures? Who executes them? Who is it besides security experts? Government functionaries, security services, diplomats? Which “human security” stake holders are included in security partnerships? Are younger generations involved? What role do women play in security partnerships? What about civil society, and ethnic and religious leaders?

We argue that all stakeholders, especially women and youth and minority representatives are important partners in countering security threats.

10. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail...It seems obvious that not every tool is appropriate to every security threat. We cannot counter what is essentially a human security threat with means appropriate to fight threats to state security.

Or can we?

Responsibility

Besides the agreement that in today’s globalized world we share security threats, there is another notion that has gained prominence in recent years, and that is sometimes seen as closely interconnected with the notion of sharing. This is responsibility. What we ultimately need is shared responsibility.

11. This is most obvious with regard to the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) paradigm. The concept of R2P—the responsibility to protect civilians, as it has evolved since about the millennium—proceeds from the understanding that such responsibility first and foremost lies with the state. Only when a state fails to live up to its obligation to provide protection from crimes against humanity does responsibility shift to the international community.

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Responsibility may be practiced in many peaceful ways—mainly of a diplomatic and humanitarian nature. But it may also be decisive if the Security Council so decides.

In short, responsibility here means that state authorities and the international community share the obligation to guarantee security for the civilian population, a notion which has been widely accepted.

Most significantly, the concept of R2P signals a shift from the exclusive focus on traditional state security to human security. The UN Commission on Human Security report entitled Human Security Now, published in 2003, fleshed out the concept in detail. It also brings in the notion of shared responsibility when it states:

“[But] the existing international security system is not designed to prevent and deal effectively with the new types of security threats. New multilateral strategies are required that focus on the shared responsibility to protect people.” (CHS 2003:23) (Emphasis added)

12. The question is how to translate this requirement of shared responsibility into meaningful action. What does it mean for security partnerships and comprehensive around the Mediterranean? Given the long shared history of the peoples living around the mare nostrum; given the strong economic, political, and cultural relationships; given the fact that security has deteriorated tremendously since the Arab Uprisings; given the readiness to invest in comprehensive security—it is imperative to think about how to imbue shared responsibility with meaning beyond the simple statement of it being a requirement.

13. So, where to start from? Maybe a good starting point is a definition recently proposed by Yascha Mounk:

“Responsibility can mean many different things in its various everyday uses. It can be a call to help others, for example by serving one’s country, by taking care of one’s children, or simply by helping an old lady cross the street. It can be an admonishment to act morally in one’s private life, for example by being a good parent or an honest partner. Finally, it can also mean facing up to mistakes, taking ownership over poor decisions instead of quibbling them away with bad excuses.” (Emphasis added)

14. How can we translate this definition into the Mediterranean context? We are putting forward here some suggestions in the hope they will stimulate our discussions.

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“Responsibility can mean many different things in its various everyday uses”

It might well be that understandings of what responsibility means for everyday uses of ordinary people and functionaries in the MENA region, in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the European Southern Mediterranean countries, the EU and for other multilateral players actually do mean different things. It can also mean that their assessments about how their partners practice responsibility differ from those of their partners. It is worthwhile to share viewpoints here.

... “a call to help others”....

Indeed, Europe and the multilaterals largely agree that they have a responsibility to help. They have created many tools and mechanisms to “help” MENA countries and beyond. But how is this “help” experienced by those who actually practice help and those who are “helped”? What “help” do they think is “helpful” to create security?

What are the workshop participants’ experiences and understandings of the partners’ help? Is a “call to help others” a call for a “top-down” or “bottom-up” approach? Or is there even any need for a call to help others? What is the relationship between a “call to help others” and a “calling to help others”?

“an admonishment to act morally”

Is this a relevant issue in our context? And if so - who admonishes whom to act morally; which side of the Mediterranean is admonishing which side? Does an admonishment to act morally come with a strong reminiscence of the colonial past? Is this neo-colonial? Cultural imperialism? When is it justified?

Maybe “shared responsibility” is or should be simply an issue of pragmatism, of realism, and not of morality and idealism.

“facing up to mistakes, taking ownership over poor decisions instead of quibbling them away with bad excuses”

Should we engage more decisively in examining our lessons learnt from previous experiences with security partnerships and engagements around the Mediterranean? How can we do so in a cooperative way?

Towards a Roadmap for Proactive Partnerships

How can we create a shared roadmap for proactive partnerships? How do we translate an understanding of shared responsibility into a roadmap for proactive partnerships? Should such a roadmap include binding target agreements? How can women, youth, minorities be proactively included in partnerships?

These are the issues we would like to put on the table for debate at the workshop. We invite all participants to share with us their thoughts and experiences from their personal and professional backgrounds. What do these issues look like from their perspective? What other issues need to
be brought to the table? How would they define a genuine “shared responsibility” in achieving security around the Mediterranean? What needs to be done?

We are looking forward to stimulating debates and challenging new policy recommendations.