

NATO Headquarters and European Parliament Visit (Brussels, Belgium 13-14 March 2023)

On March 12th and 13th, 2023 a group of 18 students and 2 faculty members from the International Relations and Security Studies Graduate Program from the Political Science Department of the College of Economics and Political Science at Sultan Qaboos University traveled to Brussels, Belgium to visit the NATO headquarters and the European Parliament.

The two-day scholastic trip started on 13 March and upon arrival at NATO headquarters the delegation was greeted by Mr. Giovanni Romani, the Head of the Middle East and North Africa Section of the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division of NATO. After opening remarks from Mr. Giovanni Romani and Professor Cuneyt Yenigun, the group settled into the Washington Treaty Conference room to receive the first round of briefs and dialogue with policy experts at NATO.



Mr. Ruben-Erik Diaz-Plaja from the Office of the NATO Secretary General began the formal briefing session with a discussion on NATO's new Strategic Concept. The presentation highlighted the recent updates to NATO's foundational policy document which reflects the common understanding of the alliance. The document's new reference to Russian threats and Chinese challenges generated an interesting and enlightening dialogue during the time allotted for questions and answers. Next, Mr. Ferenc Hegyesi, a counter terrorism officer at NATO engaged the delegation with a presentation on NATO's approach to counter terrorism operations. The review of NATO's historical counter terrorism activities illuminated the reasoning behind the NATO's current counter terrorism mentality and policies and fostered a stimulating group discussion.



The first day's formal discussions concluded with a detailed conversation regarding NATO's relations with Russia and NATO's current support for Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. This discussion was led by Aleksander Bukowski from the Political Affairs and Security Policy Division and was exceptionally interesting as students discussed current events directly from newspaper headlines with a leading policy expert on the topic.

At the conclusion of these discussions the group proceeded to “The Diplomat” restaurant at NATO headquarters where they enjoyed a delicious three course meal while conversing with each other and experts from NATO. At the conclusion of the meal the delegation was transported back to their accommodations for the evening and had the opportunity to explore and enjoy the historic streets of Brussels.



On the second day the delegation was again greeted at NATO headquarters by the Head of the Middle East and North Africa Section from the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, Mr. Giovanni Romani. After a brief discussion about NATO’s partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa, Mr. Giovanni answered student questions on the topic. Following this, Dr. Cuyenet Yenigun and Dr. Noor Ahmad presented a gift to Mr. Giovanni on behalf of Sultan Qaboos University.



The schedule then shifted to a discussion regarding NATO’s role in the scientific arena. Dr. Ettore Marchesoni the Program Officer from the Emerging Security Challenges Division lead a dialogue about NATO’s Science for Peace and Security Program. His presentation detailed the development of scientific endeavors throughout the history of NATO and shared many projects currently occurring between NATO member and partner nations. He concluded with answering student questions and encouraged student and university participation in future research opportunities with NATO.

The final NATO presenter, Mr. Michael Ruhle, the Head of the NATO Climate and Energy Security Section from the Emerging Security Challenges Division, discussed the alliance’s approach to climate change and energy security. He addressed the difficulties of reducing the carbon footprint from modern military forces and emphasized NATO’s commitment to lead in technological advancements to improve energy efficiency of military equipment without sacrificing combat effectiveness. He concluded that efforts to mitigate climate change enhance the energy security of the alliance prior to answering the final formal round of student questions. The delegation then

explored the NATO library and enjoyed a rest at the coffee shop within NATO headquarters before traveling to the European Parliament across the city.



At the European Parliament, the students and faculty members received a briefing seminar covering the history of the European Union and describing some of the key political processes that occur within the European Parliament. This information was immediately reinforced by an opportunity to visit the European Parliament Hemicycle where the students were able to absorb the atmosphere of the world's largest transnational parliament and visualize the political processes in action. The group then proceeded to the Parliamentarium visitors center and enjoyed the interactive exhibits regarding the European Union and the European Parliament. The opportunity to use state of the art multimedia tools further supplemented the material discussed during the trip.

Overall, the trip was an incredible opportunity for the students and faculty from Sultan Qaboos University to enhance their knowledge of NATO and the European Union. The material learned within the classrooms of Sultan Qaboos University leapt off the textbook pages and into reality as

the students walked the halls of the institutional buildings of these two organizations. Additionally, the students seized the opportunity to directly discuss policy, ask questions, and dialogue with experts at NATO and the European Parliament to further enrich their learning. The group is extremely grateful for all the hard work required to organize this wonderful opportunity and will apply the memories and tangible lessons learned while in Brussels to their continued academic progress and success.