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NATO or no



Iranian nuclear reactor Photo: AP

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Israel en route to defense pact?

Israeli membership in NATO has advantages and disadvantages

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On October 16th, Israel and NATO established a new cooperation agreement. Israel is the first non-European nation which NATO has chosen to work with in the frame of its Individual Cooperation Program (ICP). The program specifies 27 areas of cooperation including response to terrorism, intelligence sharing, political dialogue, and a host of military and civilian issues including search and rescue operations.

The boost in cooperation provides an opportunity to further enhance the relations that evolved in the past year, and comes just weeks ahead of NATO's upcoming summit in Riga.

As part of the burgeoning NATO-Israel relationship, NATO's Secretary General visited Israel last year, and his deputy concluded a visit to the area Tuesday. Addressing the Atlantic Forum of Israel, the latter noted that with the new agreement, the bilateral relationship has acquired a strategic value in its own right.

Both parties have been advancing the upgrade in their relations gradually and cautiously. The trend however, is clear: Israel wants an official partnership with the organization.

NATO has two basic forms of associations – partnership and membership. As an alliance, NATO membership is first and foremost a mutual and collective defense pact. In the past, partnership served as an interim phase towards membership.

End goal: Membership?

The question is whether Israel's aspirations for a partnership signal an end goal or an interim phase after which Israel will pursue membership in NATO.

The answer to this is based on an assessment of the efficacy of a formal alliance. This can be achieved bilaterally with the United States or multilaterally with NATO. These options reveal Israeli considerations and misgivings, since mutual defense pacts have both advantages and disadvantages, such as the limiting of one's freedom of action.

Israeli membership in NATO entails an American formal defense guarantee and renders superfluous a bilateral defense pact. There are those in the US who contend that Israel must strive for a relationship similar to that of the US-UK special relationship – NATO allies that maintain a parallel strategic bilateral relationship governed by written and implicit arrangements and understandings.

Israel can of course concentrate on achieving a defense pact with the US alone, perhaps even without delay, utilizing the last term of the friendly Bush administration. Conversely, considering the misgivings of a defense pact, it is also possible to forego both possible NATO membership and a defense pact with the US.

There are Americans, such as Dr. Ronald Asmus, or Europeans, such as former Prime Minister of Spain José Maria Aznar, who contend that it is in NATO's interests to achieve a pact with Israel in order to tackle jointly global threats and to maintain regional stability.

Assessing the benefits

Israel will assess the efficacy of joining the Alliance considering what it foresees in the geopolitical arena, as well as threats stemming from the possible nuclearization of Iran.

If Israel reaches the conclusion that an alliance will provide it with an additional layer of deterrence above and beyond its current level it will then have to decide whether to pursue the multilateral option (with NATO) or the bilateral one (with the US), or perhaps even both.

In any case, either option will require a considerable Israeli effort to overcome misgivings and inhibitions, as well as active, energetic and sophisticated statecraft leveraging its capabilities to obtain its goals. If these goals prove to be out of reach, or if Israel opts to be satisfied merely with advanced levels of cooperation, then a deepening of relations within the existing frameworks must be realized to its fullest potential, either with NATO and the new ICP or with the United States, or both.

It is worthy to note that the last generation of Israeli prime ministers, at times discreetly and at times overtly, aspired to achieve a formal defense pact and alliance with the US. It seems that within the anticipated strategic reality, it is wise to consider such an upgrade.

Operatively speaking, it would be most appropriate to utilize the final two years of the responsive Bush administration to achieve a defense pact with the United States. But if such an option will not come to fruition, because of practical political reasons or otherwise, then the NATO route will be the one to pursue.

Prof. Arad of the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya chairs the Atlantic Forum of Israel

[Back](#)