

# Opinion & Comment

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## The NATO example

Relations between Europe and Israel appear to have reached an unprecedented low, following Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza and the failure of the Annapolis process. The basic disputes, which mainly involve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, are fueled by mutual misperceptions and a lack of appreciation of respective interests and motivations.

European officials are harshly critical of Israeli policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians; Jerusalem views this criticism as unfair and one-sided. European officials are frustrated because they believe Israel is marginalizing their role in the region; Israel maintains it is a victim of European "double standards" and discrimination. This leads both parties to resort to "megaphone diplomacy."

The predominantly one-dimensional nature of European-Israeli relations does not serve either party's fundamental interests. The reciprocal vilification of each other's positions will not lead to upgraded relations, nor will it give Europe more influence in the Middle East peace process. It also cannot mitigate the anti-Israeli protests by European Muslims and left-wing activists. Instead, over the past nine months, the discourse between Europe and Israel has become a dialogue of the deaf, which has led key European and Israel officials to write off all hope of salvaging the wreck that is their bilateral relationship.

In contrast to its relations with the EU, Israel's ties with NATO have become significantly stronger in the past three years, though

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with limited public and media attention. Israel's relationship with NATO is second only to its military cooperation with the United States, in terms of the volume of exchanges. NATO officials have expressed particular interest in more cooperation with Israel, due to its considerable experience in asymmetric warfare, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism – essential elements for the war in Afghanistan. Press reports have revealed, for example, Israel's intelligence cooperation with the alliance concerning Iran and international terrorism, as well as its willingness to contribute a navy corvette (Sa'ar-5 type) to NATO's Mediterranean anti-terrorist maritime operation.

Most interestingly, both Israeli and NATO representatives have made a point of pursuing mutually beneficial cooperation

all but divorced from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Uninformed observers may assume that this approach is due to U.S. involvement in NATO. But in reality, the United States has played at most a marginal role in facilitating NATO-Israel relations. The truth is far simpler: The burgeoning relations between NATO and Israel reflect the fundamental strategic interests, and values, shared by Europe and Israel. The two face the same strategic threats, namely proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and radicalism.

Both Israel and Europe should be motivated to promote and upgrade this political-military relationship, pursuing a strategic partnership between the alliance in Afghanistan and Israel, which would also be reflected in diplomatic terms. The current relationship has reached a "glass ceiling" – perhaps invisible, but strongly felt by both parties – that impedes substantial development. Even without being a full NATO member, Israel has much more to benefit from and contribute to the Afghan alliance, as do other major partners, such as Sweden, Finland and Australia.

Beyond the concrete benefits, promoting a formal partnership of Israel with NATO – the hub of transatlantic strategic dialogue – could facilitate a broad political exchange and engagement between Israel and Europe. Offering Israel a status akin to that of Finland and Sweden could underscore its sense of belonging to the Western democratic world, its natural habitat. This opening would give the sides an opportunity to better appreciate each other's positions, interests and motivations, and afford each a larger role and more input in the other's regional policies.

In this respect, Europe has much to learn from the United States. The U.S. influence on Israel is different from that of Europe, because the U.S. considers and treats Israel as a strategic asset. This is not to say there are no disputes between America and Israel. But U.S.-Israel relations go far beyond the Palestinian issue, and are not one-dimensional. This has allowed the Obama administration to engage its Israeli counterparts regarding its new strategic outlook for the region, while taking into account Israel's vital interests. As a result, the Netanyahu government has adopted a policy that is more attuned to the new American regional approach.

A new relationship based on an upgraded Israeli role in NATO could launch a strategic European-Israeli partnership infused with less resentment, enabling both parties to consider each other an asset rather than a liability. It could offer Europe and Israel a new narrative, based on shared values and interests, facilitating mutual appreciation and understanding. This in itself would not necessarily solve all differences and disputes, but it would definitely place them in a more manageable context, one that would give both parties meaningful input.

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