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US-Europe-Israeli Trilateral Relationship: The Strategic Dimension

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This paper reflects the opinion of its author only

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The following document summarizes the main issues and the arising conclusions that were deliberated at the preliminary discussion. The document does not detail all that was discussed and therefore is not binding upon the participants or the Conference's management.

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Placed in their broad strategic context, the multiplicity, complexity and high-risk nature of the challenges facing NATO and its allies in Hindu-Kush's arc of instability – Pakistan and Afghanistan – are nearly identical to those of Israel. Countering the possible break-out of WMD proliferation; the attempts to empower moderates and foster economic, social, and political development, while weakening and discrediting radicals; waging counter-insurgency and low-intensity warfare within an opaque order of international humanitarian law that rewards terrorists; these challenges lay bare not only common strategic challenges but also reflect the commonality and affinity of values shared by Israel and its natural Western habitat – the Euro-Atlantic community – and are sufficient for a broad-based partnership between Israel and NATO.

The “Declaration on Alliance Security”, issued at the NATO Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in April 2009, tasked the formulation of a new Strategic Concept. NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, intends to allocate resources and focus attention on the formulation process and open it up to input from think-tanks, academia, and civil society networks. Israel has a considerable interest in participating in this process on two counts:

Firstly, the new Strategic Concept will address NATO's challenges and new forms of strategic threats, such as cyber warfare; Israel and NATO should consider new areas of concrete cooperation to also include cyber warfare and missile defense. In this respect, it would be of particular interest to examine the possible strategic implications of the new US missile defense program (aka Phased Adaptive Approach PAA), of which Israel is considered an early partner, and which the US has offered as a national contribution to NATO's collective defense.

Secondly, NATO will reassess the format and structure of its relations with non-member countries. In this respect, Israel should assess its ambitions with regard to future relations with the Alliance and promote its understanding of the optimal structure to better future relations.

Thus, Israel should consider a contribution to the process underscoring the commonality of strategic challenges and threats facing both the Alliance and Israel, including the war on terror and WMD proliferation.

US Missile Defense Architecture

- In 2006, amid concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program, the Bush administration announced its intention to complete its long-range ballistic missile defense (that mainly gave an answer to the North Korean threat), by placing 10 anti-missile interceptors in Europe, with Poland and the Czech Republic being the leading countries under consideration.
- From the beginning, Russia has vehemently opposed the American program, for two main reasons: 1. It endangers Russia's capability to threaten the US; 2. Iran has no capability to threaten Europe, therefore rendering a third battery ineffective against the Iranian threat (Russia admitted that Iran presents a threat but it must be dealt with without breaking the "status quo"). It seems that the US administration has decided to withdraw from its plan in the framework of a grand bargain with Russia (and China). Namely, that in exchange for finding an alternative to the system being placed in Eastern Europe, Russia will support further and amplified sanctions on Iran.
- France has voiced the fear that such a program undermines NATO and reflects the Alliance's failure; the EU based its objection on the program's bilateral dimension, which harms the EU efforts for multilateral decision-making.

The Phased, Adaptive Approach

- In a 2009 threat-assessment, the Intelligence community allegedly evaluated that the Iranian short- and medium-range missile programs are developing more rapidly than the ICBM program.

- Based on the new assessment, technological advancement and most likely on Russian and European antagonism generated by the US program, the Obama administration decided to cancel the program and introduced the sea-based Aegis Weapons system and SM-3-based four-phased, adaptive approach for missile defense.
- The new US missile defense architecture, namely the "Phased, Adaptive Approach" (PAA), was unveiled in mid-September 2009. The PAA envisages a greater role for US sea-based capabilities to be deployed to the Mediterranean arena, especially the eastern Mediterranean (the sea-based Aegis system and SM-3 missiles), where Israel will have a role to play along with other interested parties.
- Nevertheless, it seems that the American program is unclear and driven by (denied) political considerations rather than military and defensive ones. Opponents to the PAA claim that the decision was taken hastily. Not only did the US not commit to a specific number of SM-3 to be deployed, it has not received any clear promise from China and Russia to engage in stopping Iran's nuclear program.
- Few doubt the need to address Atlantic community's exposure to Iranian ballistic missiles of increasing range and accuracy. The new approach makes southern Europe and the Mediterranean the center of gravity for the theater of missile defense over the next decade.
- From a European perspective, a nuclear Iran threatening Europe is a security challenge for NATO, one that NATO has to deal with, therefore putting its integration within the PAA a priority to be achieved by November at the Lisbon summit.

The Israeli perspective

- In introducing the new missile defense plan, Secretary Gates identified Israel along with Japan as the "early partners" of the new plan, referring specifically to US x-band sensors deployed to Israel and Israeli intercepting capabilities. Nevertheless, this new deployment could play in Israel's favor by integrating Israeli capabilities into a defense program protecting Europe, thus rendering Israel an essential component of the European deterrence.
- From an Israeli perspective, the near-term operational needs and strategic flexibility of the new missile defense program are the building blocks.
- These implications warrant thorough deliberation concerning the interoperability of Israeli capabilities with US and other assets and broader aspects concerning Israel's relations with the Atlantic Alliance and its freedom of strategic maneuverability.
- One cannot escape the notion that Israel is not only offered a potential reinforcement of its regional deterrent posture, but could also be part (in one way or another) in the collective defense system of Europe. In this sense, the new architecture may compel an Israeli reflection on the need to tie (formally or informally) its national security to the Atlantic collective defense system.
- From the Alliance's perspective, NATO could be reluctant to allow Israel's integration in the PAA since it will implicate the Alliance in the Arab-Israeli conflict and tie NATO to Israel's security.
- While Israeli systems are interoperable with the US Aegis-based ships, Israel will not be in a position to risk overstretching its operational capabilities in order to be part of the PAA system.

Conclusion

- On one hand, one of the most important questions Israel has to answer to is whether Israel's strategic relations with NATO will harm its strategic partnership with the US and force itself into a trade-off between NATO and the US. There is an urgent need to determine costs and benefits of such an alliance since the US seems reluctant to let Israel connect to NATO's program. The political cost of such a connection also needs to be considered. What would be the political price Israel would have to "pay" to the US should it join the PAA?
- On the other hand, Israel should strive to develop its interoperability capacities with NATO's project and be seen as an integral part of European missile defense. Nevertheless, any decision should be made while keeping in mind its

consequences on Iran; if being part of the PAA will drive Iran to accelerate its nuclear program, the connection is useless.

- Israel's double interest is contradictory and thus it seems that at the end of the day the US will decide as Israel will not take the risk of jeopardizing its strategic partnership with the US.

NATO New Strategic Concept

General

- Led by an expert group chaired by Madeline Albright, the upcoming NATO Summit in Lisbon scheduled to take place in November 2010 is expected to approve the new Strategic Concept.
- Israel must define a long-term strategy vis-à-vis the Alliance. Before doing so, Israel should formulate its own national security doctrine and conduct a cost/benefit assessment relating to closer relations with the Alliance.

Contradicting Trends

- NATO's Going Global – the trend, prevalent in recent years, shifts the focus towards threats geographically remote from Europe. This trend, perhaps best illustrated by the campaign in Afghanistan, has been the main catalyst for enhanced Israel-NATO cooperation in the past few years and is likely to continue.
- At the same time, the conclusions from the Afghan and Iraqi experiences could be a joint US -EU decision to limit their respective involvement to perimeters directly threatening each of their respective territories. This includes NATO's relations vis-à-vis Russia and other related topics, such as energy security, global warming and cyber security. Israel has to ensure that Iran, North Korea and proliferation remain a priority for NATO.

Advantages of Increased Cooperation

- The current volume of NATO-Israel exchanges is only second to the US-Israel military cooperation and is ahead of all Israel's other international military exchanges. Nevertheless, despite encouraging common activities, Israel and NATO are still distant from reaping the full benefits of their potential cooperation: currently, Israel participates only in a limited number of programs, exercises and working-groups.
- A NATO-Israel partnership can create a fruitful ground for cooperation in a variety of spheres: R&D, intelligence-sharing, missile defense, counter-terrorism, , command and control , military instruction and the learning of lessons from NATO's experience in Afghanistan. Strengthening relations with NATO will also promote Israel's interoperability, exposure to new ideas, learning from others' experiences and offering important economic opportunities for the military industries.
- There is a series of fields in which Israel can share its experience with NATO, including mining, law-intensity conflicts, training, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, maintenance etc. In return, Israel should realize the huge potential of partnership with the largest multilateral security organization and use NATO's experience in conflict management and large-scale catastrophes such as earthquakes.
- Although NATO is not officially threatened by the developing events in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, it has been increasingly involved in the Gulf of Aden due to anti-pirating activities. The latest developments in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Yemen, are of increasing importance to Israel and NATO which could create potential for an increase in military cooperation between the two, should NATO choose to get involved.

Beyond Partnership: Thinking out of the box

- Israel is a member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD). However, the MD process has not fostered concrete regional military and security cooperation between Israel and the other MD countries.
- The MD framework is important as a forum for regional politico-military dialogue. Israel's drive to strengthen its relations with NATO over the past few years has pushed other MD countries to enhance their respective relations with NATO. Israel has to therefore provide NATO with guarantees that it will not quit the MD, hence exploring two parallel channels: the MD and individual, specially tailored partnership.
- Mainly due to the political circumstances in the region, Israel "pays a premium" for its membership in the MD. Israel's attempts to deepen its bilateral cooperation with NATO are limited by the progress made by other MD countries. For example, NATO allies have refrained from granting a Status of Forces Agreement to MD countries, which, from an Israeli perspective, is essential for participating in NATO military operations and exercises. There is an urgent need to assess if this ceiling is to be broken. Although it is clear that NATO will not offer Israel a partnership outside the MD, this partnership has its costs and another, global-based partnership should be explored.
- NATO has redefined its structure based on its experiences in Kosovo and Afghanistan and is now rethinking its partnership structures
- A model for NATO's relations with third countries is contingent upon a thorough examination of the added value of upgrading NATO-Israel relations. This will also include setting long-term strategic goals for the relations.
- The model should allow the deepening of NATO-Israel cooperation beyond the current limits posed by its association with the MD. It would present a conceptual shift in the term of partnerships, replacing the geographical-regional rationale with a functionalist and value-based rationale.
- This model does not require the annulment of current regional frameworks, such as the MD and the Gulf States' ICI. Regional frameworks will remain as a venue for dialogue, with no effect on bilateral cooperation.
- The process of designing a new model should include the examination of possibilities for dialogue with other countries that have the same status as Israel but in different frameworks, such as Sweden or Finland, both members of the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) framework.
- Furthermore, Israel should strive to create a special status within NATO, based on the Georgian and Ukrainian models. Even after the war with Russia, Georgia's special status has granted it room to maneuver. Even after the war NATO upgraded Georgia's status. Israel has to therefore clearly define its goals for the next decade and derive any of its plans for cooperation with NATO from these set goals.
- Once the geopolitical situation changes, a different partnership other than that of the MD framework could be considered only after carefully weighting the entailed costs and benefits.
- On the other hand, thinking outside of the box within the MD framework should remain a compelling option. Israel and NATO should look for the optimal definition of partnership and common areas and field of cooperation, and leave the status issue for later. The status is only important if translated to political accomplishments, and therefore the first step should focus on content and redefining NATO and Israel mutual interests, and only once a *de facto* partnership is established, push forward a change of status.
- Israel will have to figure out its complex and important relationship with Russia; on one hand, Israel firmly requests that Russia not sell weapon systems to Iran and Syria, particularly those threatening to erode Israel's qualitative edge; on the other hand, Israel seeks closer relations with NATO.
- Israel has to therefore: 1. establish its long-term strategy vis-à-vis NATO, in coordination with the US; 2. keep Russia as an essential factor in future considerations; 3. be involved in the new strategic concept, particularly in the two areas of the redefinition of NATO's new threats and partnership status.