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Israel and NATO – Between Membership and Partnership

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Shlomo Ben Ami

INTERDISCIPLINARY CENTER HERZLIYA
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INSTITUTE FOR POLICY AND STRATEGY

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Israel and NATO – Between Membership and Partnership

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Prof. Shlomo Ben Ami*

Executive Vice President, Toledo International Center for Peace (CITpax)
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel

In recent years NATO has been undergoing major changes in both its deployment and objectives. Two landmarks define these changes, the end of the Cold War which rendered NATO's defensive strategy against the Soviet Union obsolete, and the 9\11 attacks on the United States which changed both the profile of the enemy and the very nature of the battlefield. It also changed the theater of operation, and forced the Alliance to shift its attention from Europe to the Mediterranean, the Middle East and beyond.

Israel is a keen believer and supporter of NATO's shift of attention beyond Europe into the Middle East and the Mediterranean. In a world where everything is globalized, so are also inevitably the threats. No one country , and even no one block of countries can truly safeguard its security by just confining itself to its geographical boundaries.

Both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative aspiring to transform NATO's relations with friendly states along NATO's borders from Dialogue to partnership is an idea that fully concurs with Israel's belief in a regional system of security and cooperation in the Middle East as being vital for the creation of the proper conditions for an Arab-Israeli peace, and indeed for our collective capacity to combat terrorism and curtail the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

I strongly believe that in a NATO that goes global Israel shares practically all and every one of the objectives of such a transformed Alliance. At some point in the future, when this ever frustrating Arab-Israeli peace process comes to fruition, and the common ground of values and democratic ways of life we share with the members of this Alliance is allowed to be projected free of the moral burden of our conflict with the Palestinians, full NATO membership for Israel might hopefully not be ruled out.

For this to happen, however, Israel would have to reshape its defense doctrine that has traditionally been based on self-reliance and freedom of decision. The question for Israel would then be whether it is ripe to adopt NATO's consultative and consensus-based approach to national security decision-making.

Cooperation and even partnership with NATO – an interim stage potentially leading to membership – is a different matter. Notwithstanding the stalled peace process and the adverse effect that Israel's conflict with the Palestinians is having on its international standing, NATO and Israel have been incrementally strengthening their cooperation in recent years. This serves the interest of both sides. Such is NATO's interest in Israel that Patrick Hardouin, a high official at the Political Affairs and Security Policy Department of the Alliance, made it explicit in 2006 that "the ups and downs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must not limit Israel-NATO cooperation."

True, as is the case of the Barcelona Process to which both Israel and the Arab countries are associated, the NATO frameworks of regional partnership are susceptible to creating a tension between the broader regional framework and the bilateral relations Israel is interested in developing with NATO. Yes, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a challenge, but by no means the only one. Morocco, Algeria and Libya are hardly partners for such regional cooperation; and this might be also the case for other Arab countries in the Middle East. Both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Initiative might suffer from the lack of a real multilateral culture of cooperation in security matters among the main regional players. Also, the Arab conservative incumbent regimes, many of which suffer from a serious deficit of legitimacy and from a mounting challenge from Islamic radicalism that sees them as the puppets of the West, might

not be especially eager to be identified with a Western alliance whose main objective in the region is to fight Islamic terrorism.

This dilemma makes currently Israel-NATO bilateral cooperation, in which both sides seem to be keenly interested, into the main working pattern. If a regional multilateral endeavor is not yet possible, Israel's objective is to advance in the bilateral domain with the Alliance. In fact, such an emphasis is not that remote from NATO's own attitude to both the MD and the ICI whereby each of the members in these frameworks develops bilateral cooperation with NATO according to its needs and constraints – some of the offers made in the Mediterranean Dialogue such as the reform of the security and defense system and border security might look attractive to some countries, but they are not exactly what Israel looks for in its cooperation with NATO - yet without of course disengaging this from the inevitable regional context.

In fact, by enhancing the bilateral cooperation with NATO Israel has helped strengthen NATO's relations with some Arab partners. It was precisely because Israel signed the Individual Cooperation Program with NATO that countries like Egypt and Jordan followed suit in order not to be left behind. Morocco looks like being the next Arab country to sign the ICP. Indeed, of all the members of the Mediterranean Dialogue it was only Israel and Morocco that accepted NATO's invitation to join the Alliance's drill CMX08. In 2010, Israel would be the sole representative of the MD countries in the CMX09 drill in the Alliance's headquarters.

Not surprisingly, then, of all the states in the region, it is Israel that has established the closest links with NATO. Israel believes in NATO's capabilities and in its growing global relevance; and our sense is that NATO also believes that there are valuable benefits it can draw from the lessons of Israel's unique military experience. Israel was the first country to conclude an ICP with NATO, through which it conducts an ongoing strategic dialogue with the Alliance covering a wide array of areas, including terrorism, intelligence sharing, nuclear proliferation, armaments and logistics, and rescue operations. Israel also joined NATO's naval control system in the Mediterranean, contributing for the time being a liaison naval intelligence officer to Operation Active Endeavor in the Alliance's headquarters in Naples. NATO's Council (NAC) has approved in principle Israel's offer to contribute a ship to the Alliance's patrols in the Mediterranean, but the process might still take time to materialize.

NATO is now in the middle of a process to develop an updated, new strategic doctrine. Israel would like to contribute to this momentous debate, and indeed to the configuration of NATO's strategic concept, with an emphasis on issues such as the definition of the nature of the new threats, and the regional aspects pertaining to them. Israel would probably also be interested in contributing its perspective on the major political trends in the region, namely the role of Iran and the struggle between the incumbent conservative, pro-Western regimes and the emerging challenge of the radicals. The outcome of this momentous struggle is bound to have an impact not only on the chances of an Arab-Israeli peace, but will also condition the vital interests of the West in the region, and probably beyond. Israel has so far shown a keen interest to engage NATO in a dialogue and in advanced levels of cooperation. The deepening to their fullest potential of relations within the existing frameworks is clearly an Israeli objective today.

As to the relations between NATO and the countries associated with the partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, Israel's aspiration is to be able to share practically those instruments and activities that are open to the PfP, and not yet to Israel. In other words, my understanding of the Israeli position is an expectation of a more forthcoming attitude by NATO in developing its bilateral links with Israel without necessarily linking this to the pace of the cooperation with the Arab side. Obviously, a credible peace process would make this easier for NATO to meet the Israeli concept. But, even short of a peace agreement, it is still possible to create an umbrella of regional cooperation with a menu common to all, but one under which each of the countries would be allowed to develop its cooperation with NATO according to its own needs and priorities.

Before trying to spell out some of the fields of cooperation Israel can develop with the Alliance, let me make it clear that a partnership with NATO is by no means seen in Jerusalem as a way to circumvent and avoid the Arab-Israeli peace process. On the contrary, such a partnership is an incentive, perhaps even a vital building block, for an Arab-Israeli peace.

The options for further cooperation are then many; they range from intelligence and procurement to the development of an updated anti-terrorism doctrine, including cyber-terrorism. The upgrading of Israel's bilateral relations with NATO may cover every conceivable domain thus bringing the partnership to an association that is short of full membership only by not binding the parties to article 5. Israel would emphasize its objective of having the benefit of a multilateral NATO umbrella without the attack-on-one-is-an-attack-on-all obligations. This means adding to the current levels of cooperation domains such as these:

*Upgrading intelligence cooperation to the level that Israel has, say with some friendly countries in Europe. This does not mean that there is no intelligence cooperation at the present. Press reports indicated recently how Israel shared with NATO intelligence on Iran's nuclear program, and on its development of long-range missiles. This was done as part of an intelligence assessment in connection with the possibility of deploying an American missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic

- Joint drills. So far Israel is not an integral part of NATO's manoeuvres.
- This will require synchronization of systems, which in any case is vital for interoperability in times of war.
- Put in place semi-operational activities on the model of Active Endeavor.
- Joint training of officers
- Political and civil cooperation, for example in matters that have to do with the interpretation of the rules of warfare and international law, and the adaptation of both to the requirements of the asymmetric battlefield. We believe that NATO would face in the future predicaments similar to those Israel faced in its fight against Hamas and Hizballah.
- Israel has developed an especially advanced know how in the fight for the detection and derailing of the movement of terror finances, and this can obviously be an important domain of cooperation.
- Closer relations with NATO's Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMS) with which Israel signed in November 2007 a Memorandum of Understanding on Logistic Support Cooperation.

As a whole, NATO's reluctance to engage in the political aspects of the Arab-Israeli peace process fully concurs with Israel's view. Too many external actors are not exactly Israel's idea of the process. But, the trust that is gradually developing between Israel and NATO makes more probable that Israel would support a role for NATO as a peace keeping force in the framework of any future peace deal between Israel and its neighbors. In fact, Israel was friendly to the idea that NATO forces should be deployed as a buffer force along the Israel-Lebanon border in the wake of the 2006 war. But, Hizballah was likely to view such a force as a proxy Israeli army, and hence reject its deployment.

There can be, however, an indirect role for NATO in the peace process. It is my view that what is lacking is not another peace plan, nor one more mediator. The parameters of an Israeli-Arab peace agreement are clear to all, and yet the parties are incapable of reaching a settlement. What is lacking is an international choreography whereby vital external actors, such as the US, NATO and the European Union, will advance assurances and offer baits to the parties that would help coax them into making the necessary concessions for peace. NATO's current position is that once a peace accord is reached, and the parties ask NATO to send a peacekeeping force, and the UN Security Council approves it, the Alliance would respond. However, NATO should perhaps consider to assume a commitment in advance of a peace deal, and as an incentive to the parties to go for it. A promise for closer association of, say, Israel and Palestine to the EU, an offer by NATO that Israel could be a full member of the Alliance if it so wishes, or that the Alliance would assume responsibilities that would help guarantee the implementation of the security aspects of any peace deal should a settlement be reached, can serve as an important incentive.

The architect of Israel's security doctrine, David Ben-Gurion, was throughout obsessive with the need for Israel to be a member of the Western Alliance. Chronically pessimistic about the chances of an Arab-Israeli peace, he looked for guarantees to the survival of an embattled and isolated Jewish state. The unwritten alliance with the United States, the military capabilities of the IDF, the breakthroughs so far produced in the peace process - peace with Egypt and Jordan, the Arab peace initiative and the chances, however difficult, for a settlement with Syria and the Palestinians –

and the shared interest of the pro-Western forces in the region to curtail the rise of radicalism and cut short the Iranian threat have now changed the security parameters in the region.

The Arab- Israeli conflict is no longer, assuming it ever was, the sole strategic divide in the region. The chances for a regional system of security and cooperation are not as a remote as they looked in Ben Gurion's days. Also, the threats are no longer the exclusive concern of the regional actors, for they directly affect all and every member of the Western Alliance. These can be addressed through cooperation and partnership that does not necessarily call for membership. The common interest is vital enough for the parties to join hands in fighting the threats common to all in a truly strategic partnership.