



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ISRAELI MEMBERSHIP IN NATO: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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With the apparent impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the simultaneous enlargement of both the European Union and NATO, various proposals to redefine the relationship between Israel and Europe have been raised as a way of possibly linking these two phenomena. According to some officials in Brussels, NATO wants to promote deeper political and military relations with Israel and a number of Arab states and will invite their representatives to the Alliance's next summit meeting on June 28-29 in Istanbul. Moreover, it has been suggested that the prospect of much closer relations with the Europe might give Israel an extra "security safety-net" that would enable it to be more "generous" in negotiations with the Palestinians.

Can the carrot of membership in NATO help cut the "Gordian Knot" entangling Israel and the Palestinians? Can a closer embrace by Europe lower the barrier of suspicion and distrust of the EU, which Israel sees as biased in favor of the Palestinians? Any analysis of the implications of Israeli membership in NATO and virtual (if not formal) accession to the EU requires a careful look at the attitudes of the main four players: NATO, the EU, the Palestinians, and Israel. In the context of NATO, two relevant mechanisms need to be examined. The first is

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Program, which encompasses Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Thus far, the Dialogue has provided little more than a loose framework for meetings, seminars and visits meant to achieve some higher level of communication and mutual understanding. The choice of the partners for this program reflected a desire to base the dialogue on Mediterranean countries politically "ripe" for some kind of cooperative relationship that included Israel. But ten years after it was launched, the program still keeps a rather low profile. However, at the Prague Summit in November 2002, NATO Heads of States and Governments endorsed an ambitious upgrade of the Mediterranean Dialogue and identified fourteen possible areas of cooperation, including:

- Scientific and Environmental Affairs, focusing on technology programs such as terrorism-related R&D;
- Crisis Management, in which context the Mediterranean countries could be updated on and involved in NATO crisis management policies;
- Border Security; and
- Combating Terrorism, meaning consultations, intelligence-sharing and expert-level meetings on the terrorist threat.

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The second mechanism is the Partnership for Peace (PfP), which was initiated in 1994 with the aim of reinforcing stability in and promoting defense cooperation with former Warsaw Pact countries. PfP now includes 30 countries in Western and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Three of these countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland -- joined NATO in 1999, and seven others – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Rumania – will join this year. For these ten Eastern European countries, membership in the PfP was an appropriate corridor to NATO membership.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO began to transform itself into a peace-keeping/peace-enforcement organization. But since September 11, the war against terrorism has become a top priority. This mission provides the context for the decision of the Prague Summit to create a NATO Response Force (NRF). This technologically advanced and highly flexible force of 21,000 will be made up of elite elements from member countries and should be fully operational towards the end of 2006.

Israel can benefit politically and economically from participation in both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the PfP, and its intelligence capabilities and counter-terrorism experience would enable it to make substantial contributions to the missions of both mechanisms. But NATO may hesitate to encourage Israeli membership in the absence of progress in the peace process and a broader improvement in the atmosphere in the Middle East. And European support for Israeli accession either to NATO or the EU is likely to be even more contingent on those kinds of regional changes. European reservations would certainly be reinforced by the Palestinians, who can be expected to oppose any intensification of Israel-NATO ties even if the peace process gets back on track and a solution to the conflict seems attainable, but especially if those conditions are not met. In either case, the Palestinians (and

other Arabs) would almost certainly object to any institutional arrangement that seemed to entrench Israeli military dominance in the region. Consideration of Palestinian sensitivities would give European members of NATO a reason to move very cautiously on the question of Israeli accession.

Finally, Israel's perspective is likely to be marked by certain ambivalence, depending on the circumstances. Israel has traditionally been wary of any foreign involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly on the part of Europe. Moreover, unless and until progress in the peace process leads to a significant reduction in terrorist activity against it, Israel will be unable to spare much of its limited financial and manpower resources for cooperative international efforts. On the other hand, NATO membership and a closer industrial and economic relationship with the EU would convey important benefits. Most importantly, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty might, in some cases, provide a major guarantee of Israeli security. Membership in NATO would also remove many of the obstacles to defense-industrial cooperation, not only with NATO countries, but also with the EU itself.

Thus, the "corridor" for Israeli membership in NATO could be divided into two phases – the first, an enhanced Mediterranean Dialogue; the second, membership in the PfP. Membership in NATO and a closer relationship with the EU offer a variety of advantages for Israel. Whether or not these options become available depends largely on decisions made in Washington, Brussels and other European capitals. But Israel would have good reasons to give serious consideration to any initiatives that might be forthcoming from those quarters.