

# Israel and NATO: Opportunities and Risks

Zaki Shalom

## Introduction

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer visited Israel on February 23-24, 2005, in the first official visit by a NATO secretary. The visit was intended to promote strategic cooperation between NATO and Israel, thus implementing a resolution passed during the NATO summit held in Istanbul on June 28-29, 2004, calling for increasing strategic cooperation between NATO and specific Mediterranean countries, including Israel. The issues intended in the context of cooperation are activities against terrorism; activities against weapons of mass destruction; guaranteeing of borders; preparations for mass disasters and states of emergency; participation in NATO maneuvers; consultations regarding defense reforms, including relations between the political and military levels; and the prevention of arms and drug smuggling.<sup>1</sup>

The final communiqué in Istanbul had concrete implications regarding NATO's intention to deepen the ties with each of the Mediterranean countries named, according to specific circumstances and needs. Official Israeli representatives, including Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon,

were invited to participate in the NATO sessions; for the first time Israel received a formal invitation for its armed forces to participate in multilateral NATO maneuvers; and Israel was also invited to participate in NATO security activities against terror threats, currently underway in the Mediterranean. Israeli ambassador to the EU Oded Eran recently submitted to the NATO headquarters a proposal for development of relations between Israel and NATO. In this document Israel proposes raising the level of its dialogue and cooperation with NATO along bilateral and regional tracks.<sup>2</sup>

These events clearly indicate increasing interest on NATO's part in greater cooperation with Israel than in the past. The change in NATO's attitude to Israel reflects the turnaround that has taken place in recent years in the nature of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in its concept of the threats it faces and, consequently, its sense of who should be a member. NATO was set up in order to confront the Communist threat presented by the USSR, a threat that decreased significantly with the Soviet collapse. Following the events of September 11, 2001, NATO's concept of the nature

of the threats it confronted changed further. For the foreseeable future the major threat facing the free world, which NATO is supposed to defend, comes from radical Islam, whose primary sources of power lie mainly in the Middle East. Iran's nuclear activities have made a grave and more concrete contribution to the feeling of the threat facing NATO.<sup>3</sup>

In order to neutralize or at least reduce this threat, the growing assessment among NATO member countries is that it is important to increase military cooperation with Israel as well as with other Mediterranean states. These states share the fear of radical Islam, and accordingly cooperation should be established more firmly than in the past. It is therefore natural that Israel, which is vulnerable to the same threat and has earned much experience in combating it, would be integrated in NATO activities.

Thus far formal membership in NATO has not been proposed to Israel. It seems that members of NATO hesitate to establish full relations with Israel as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues and a political agreement is not in sight. However, the encouraging developments that have taken place recently in the Middle

East have increased NATO's interest in expanding strategic cooperation with Israel. These developments include Israel's determination to implement the disengagement plan; the strengthening of Abu Mazen's regime in the Palestinian Authority; the growing recognition by the Palestinian leadership of the need to prevent terrorism against Israel; the Sharm el-Sheikh conference; and the strengthening of relations between Israel and Egypt.

This is the backdrop to NATO's current interest in establishing close working relations with Israel, without far-reaching formal commitments. This approach allows the NATO countries to observe from close up the development of the political process between Israel and the Palestinians, and to upgrade relations, based on a timetable convenient both for them and Israel, where at the end of the process the option of Israel's formal integration in NATO might arise. If a viable political process between Israel and the Palestinian Authority does not begin, it will be possible to reduce, or even totally halt the cooperation, by relatively simple "administrative" means.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, the essay that follows addresses the various considerations that Israel must take into account when deciding on the nature of its future relations with NATO. The essay presents the various considerations at two different points on the time axis: the advantages latent in practical strategic-military cooperation at the present time; and the pitfalls in formally joining NATO, if and when

it is proposed to Israel in the future. Also included are the understandings that Israel should conclude with NATO before it would agree to join the organization.

### Greater Cooperation between Israel and NATO

From Israel's point of view, strengthening the security cooperation with NATO has important potential advantages in four areas: diplomatic,

The argument that integration in NATO will increase Israel's deterrent capability is true to only a limited extent, if at all.

strategic-defense, military-technological, and economic.

From the diplomatic aspect, strengthening the security cooperation with NATO countries will considerably enhance Israel's political status. It will be made clear to the Palestinian Authority and Arab countries, including Egypt, that the international community does not necessarily hinge cooperation with Israel on broad political agreement. It is clear that most NATO countries do not agree with Israel on its obligations in a final status agreement with the Palestinians, its activities in the occupied territories, and many aspects of its defense policy

as it combats the terrorism threat. However, this does not prevent them from establishing broad cooperation with Israel in the military, political, and economic fields. As such, this denies legitimacy to actions that were and perhaps are still in effect on the part of the Palestinians and other Arab countries, such as forceful activities aimed at weakening Israel's strategic posture or isolating it in the political and economic arenas.

Strengthening the cooperation with NATO countries will most probably enhance Israel's bargaining ability in its contacts with the American administration and also with the countries of the European Union, most of which are NATO members. Until now Israel has acted with the image of a fairly isolated country in the international community, whose sole ally is the US. When cooperation with the NATO countries increases, it will become clear that Israel no longer bases its security only on links with the United States. A greater supportive environment makes Israel less dependent on any one ally, and thus boosts its bargaining potential.

From the strategic-defense aspect, cooperation with NATO countries will enhance Israel's deterrence capability regarding potential enemies threatening it, mainly Iran and Syria. Enemy countries will have to take into account at least the possibility that Israel will not stand totally alone in the event of a war with them, even if actual assistance is not obligated by the protocol. The more Israel's image is strengthened as a country facing enemies who attempt to attack it for

no justified reason, the greater will be the possibility that aid will be extended to Israel by NATO. Furthermore, Iran and Syria will have to take into account the possibility that the increasing cooperation between Israel and NATO will strengthen Israel's links with Turkey, also a member of NATO. Given Turkey's impressive military potential and its geographic proximity to both Iran and Syria, Israel's operational options against them, if and when it sees the need, could gain considerable strength.

At the same time, increased practical cooperation with NATO countries does not excessively tie Israel's hands. As long as Israel is not a formal member of NATO, it can undertake a unilateral military initiative if it feels threatened or if its vital interests are endangered, without necessarily being accused by members of the organization of a betrayal of trust. This would be the case if, for example, Israel were to decide to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, or if it were to see fit to initiate a military operation against Syria or the Palestinian Authority.

Regarding the military-technological dimension, cooperation with NATO countries is likely to expose Israel to advanced technologies and military operational methods that will help it cope better with future threats that it may encounter, both in the event of war or during current security activities. Joint maneuvers with NATO countries will enhance IDF knowledge and experience in the large-scale operation of land, sea, and air forces. In addition, as part of the war against terrorism, Israel may

be exposed to sources of information and methods of operation that up to now have not been accessible.

From the economic aspect, increased cooperation with NATO countries will award Israel a special status regarding arms deals – both in exports and imports. Although Israel already enjoys a significant status as a major non-NATO ally of the US,<sup>5</sup> it may be assumed that increased cooperation will expose the NATO countries to Israel's special military-

**The inclination of NATO members will be to demand that Israel reduce even further the extent of its military operations.**

technological capabilities, including methods of combating terror. The result may well be the expansion of export markets for Israeli weapon and combat systems.

In the final analysis, the continuation and strengthening of military cooperation with NATO countries serves the political-military-economic interests of Israel. It has significant potential gains with relatively few costs. The major issue that must be addressed regarding increased cooperation with NATO is the final product at the end of the road, i.e., the possibility that Israel will be offered full, formal membership in NATO. Is-

rael must take into account the danger that increased practical cooperation with NATO countries will entangle it in a mass of dependencies that will not totally prevent, but will make it difficult to refuse, accepting an offer of full membership of NATO.

### **Israel's Membership in NATO: A Problematic Option**

At present the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes the foremost obstacle to Israel's membership in NATO. If and when there appears on the horizon the possibility of a political settlement, even if only a limited one, it may be assumed that the question of Israel's full and formal membership in NATO will arise. Formal membership in the organization will certainly enhance the advantages discussed above that are latent in cooperation with this powerful strategic organization. Furthermore, if additional Arab countries join NATO at the same time as Israel, this is likely to strengthen the fabric of cooperation in relations between Israel and the Arab world in establishing a solid peaceful atmosphere.

However, the question of Israel's formal membership in NATO – when this becomes relevant – obligates a different and more extensive set of considerations than those regarding the cooperation that is currently under discussion. This set of considerations raises grave questions regarding the value of this step.

The argument that integration in NATO will increase Israel's deterrent capability is true to only a limited extent, if at all:

■ The order of battle currently possessed by Israel awards it considerable strength, permitting it to create a reliable dimension of deterrence against potential threats of a military confrontation.

■ Israel possesses strong bilateral relations with the US, which in practice award it the status of an informal ally. Since Israel's establishment, all US administrations have declared their deep commitment toward Israel and to preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

■ Israel possesses a nuclear option, i.e., it enjoys a situation in which the countries of the region, and in fact, the entire international community, regard it as a country having a nuclear capability without it itself ever having stated whether or not it possesses such a capability.

■ Practical cooperation with NATO countries has already expanded and will continue to expand Israel's deterrent capability.

Thus the question that must be asked is: will Israel's formal membership in NATO increase its deterrent strength *beyond* that which it would already possess and likely possess in the foreseeable future? It seems that joining NATO will contribute to Israel's deterrent capability only marginally, if at all.

Furthermore, the major threat confronting Israel currently and in the foreseeable future is not that of an all-out war involving regular military forces, for which the additional strength of NATO would indeed be significant. The possibility of such a threat has decreased in recent years,

and the more immediate threat confronting Israel now and in the foreseeable future is that of low-intensity warfare, which might include the use of certain types of mass destruction capabilities. Israel is therefore required to find a deterrent capability against these types of threats, all the while aware that it lacks internal and external legitimacy for the use of its total capability and as such is compelled to restrict its use of force.

Consequently, it is doubtful if the

**Israel would be required to neutralize or place under supervision its own nuclear facilities in order to justify similar action against other states in the region.**

additional capability that may be achieved by joining NATO will be of significance in increasing Israel's deterrent capability against these threats. Moreover, it is difficult to assume that membership in NATO will increase Israel's political ability to use the entire strength it currently possesses. On the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that the inclination of NATO members will be to demand that Israel reduce even further the extent of its military operations and avoid taking steps that might impinge on individual liberties or norms of war within the international community.

Even if we posit that an Arab-Israeli military confrontation is a real possibility in the foreseeable future and that it is worthwhile for Israel to have a NATO guarantee, the question remains regarding the reliability of the commitments of member countries to come to Israel's aid if its security or vital interests are endangered. The history of the State of Israel contains not a few cases in which the international community, including the United States, preferred to ignore its commitments, even when signed agreements and understandings existed. When put to the test, various considerations and interests are likely to cause NATO countries to reach the conclusion that it is preferable for them to avoid providing real aid to Israel in order to minimize the damage incurred by honoring their commitments.

The NATO treaty, like many international agreements, supplies the member countries with a broad range of legal and formal arguments that elegantly permits them to evade fulfilling their commitments. Various terms that appear in Article 5 of the organization's convention – the article defining the nature of the mutual guarantee – are terms capable of a variety of interpretations. As such they can provide a wide range of reasons justifying a failure to implement the guarantee to supply aid in the event of an attack. The capability of each country to realize this option of evasion is of course conditional on its relative strength in the organization and its dependence on the other member countries.



Another possibility that must be taken into account is that the NATO countries might wish to act as required by the treaty and aid Israel in the event of its being attacked, but will be unable to do so because of objective, concrete reasons. For instance, if member countries are involved in another conflict at the same time, they may already be obligated to allocate most of their resources elsewhere. Or, there may be strong internal opposition to military involvement on Israel's behalf and it will be necessary to achieve a broad national consensus for such a step. Such processes can take a long time and involve protracted negotiations between opposing elements.

From Israel's point of view, however, the time element is liable to be critical in periods of strategic crisis, and aid that is not supplied immediately may become irrelevant. At the same time, the American administration, considered the major element in Israel's defense, already demonstrated its willingness to defend Israel at a time when it faced grave danger during the Yom Kippur War, without being formally obligated to do so as part of any defense treaty. It is therefore doubtful if the marginal addition of NATO membership will provide a significant contribution to Israel's security, and thus it seems preferable for Israel to examine strengthening its strategic links with the US in the direction of a bilateral treaty, rather than joining NATO.

Another consideration is the risk that NATO membership would considerably restrict Israel's military

freedom of action at a time of crisis involving an Arab or Islamic state. The NATO convention does not formally rule out unilateral action by one of the member countries taken in order to defend its vital interests. However, without doubt at least some of the senior member countries would expect Israel, which would rely on protection by the powers in the event of its being attacked, to consult with them, or at least inform them before it took action liable to drag them toward an overall military confrontation with another country.

These circumstances would confront Israel with a grave dilemma. If it decides to consult members of NATO before taking military action, it must expect to encounter opposition from most if not all of them. If it acts despite this, it will be regarded as ignoring the views of its fellow members. If it acts without prior consultation with NATO countries, it will take the risk of prompting angry responses by them because they have been presented with a fait accompli contrary to the atmosphere that is supposed to exist between the members of the organization.

Furthermore, Israel's membership in NATO would likely incur increased pressure to surrender the nuclear option it currently possesses. One of Israel's major arguments justifying its nuclear option was that the Western powers were not prepared to provide it with "absolute" guarantees for its defense as part of a permanent defense treaty, along the lines of the NATO alliance. Consequently, survival considerations dictated that

Israel had no alternative other than to develop an independent nuclear option. If Israel did in fact join a strong and stable international defense treaty organization, in which the US is also a member, it could easily be argued that it no longer has a reason to justify retaining the nuclear option.

Such a step would confront Israel with a dangerous situation regarding one of its major sources of strength. At this stage and in the foreseeable future Israel is unable to give up the nuclear option. However, its demand that nuclear threats by other countries in the region be neutralized will encounter demands to practice what it preaches. In other words, Israel will be required to neutralize or place under supervision its own nuclear facilities in order to justify similar action against other states in the region. It is very doubtful if Israel's leadership will be capable of withstanding the pressures applied to it at a time when an apparently generous and far-reaching proposal of formal membership in the most powerful strategic alliance is extended.

Another factor that should deter Israel from joining NATO is the commitment made by every candidate member according to Article 5 to supply military aid to a NATO member attacked by another country.<sup>6</sup> Consequently Israel must consider the possibility, remote though it may seem, that NATO membership may lead to pressure to send forces to distant areas for a war in which it has no direct interest. This is a situation that Israel has not experienced, and

without doubt would spark broad opposition among the Israeli public. The IDF, it will almost certainly be argued, was established as an army to defend the state and the people of Israel, and it is therefore inconceivable that the lives of Israeli soldiers should be endangered in missions that do not directly relate to Israel's defense.

The final consideration involves the political dimension of the settlement with the Palestinians. The European countries play a dominant role in NATO, but their stance on a final settlement is in general contrary to Israel's position. Israel's joining NATO is liable to award the European countries greater legitimacy for involvement in the political process, along

with a variety of forms of pressure. The overall result might be a major reduction in the status and weight of the US in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Such a development is contrary to Israel's interests. It is therefore important for Israel to ensure that the United States, rather than European states, continue to lead the political process in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

The Istanbul declaration provides a clear expression of a new marked tendency by NATO to upgrade its relations with Israel. The invitation to senior Israeli representatives to take part in varied sessions of the organizational institutions and the invitation to Israel to participate in multilateral NATO maneuvers are among the clear indicators of this trend. Such a process awards Israel important political, strategic-military, and economic advantages, and imposes no excessive restrictions on it. It permits each of the sides to cooperate up to the level it finds convenient, on the understanding that such a move will serve its interests. It is therefore not surprising that various circles in Israel regard this status most favorably.<sup>8</sup>

Until now Israel has not been formally invited to join NATO. It seems that the major obstacle to membership is the absence of a viable political process that could lead to a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. If and when such a process begins, Israel may be required to address the question of

whether membership in NATO serves its interests. Now, however, is the time for Israel to deliberate the issue, particularly given the weight of the factors opposing formal NATO membership. Israel's overall interest is to strengthen the strategic cooperation with member countries of NATO without crossing the threshold of formal membership. It is virtually certain that in the foreseeable future NATO will have a similar interest, namely, to maintain or else enhance the strategic cooperation with Israel.

If however, the option is raised of formal membership, it is essential that Israel achieve understanding with the leading countries in NATO regarding two major issues. The first is that NATO members will agree to the existing strategic understandings between Israel and the US regarding the nuclear option. In addition, Israel's military freedom of action must not be limited by NATO countries if and when Israel feels that a real threat exists to it or to its vital interests.

## Notes

1. The Istanbul declaration followed the Mediterranean Dialogue initiative announced at the meeting of NATO ministers in December 1994. At that time strategic cooperation was discussed between NATO members and seven Mediterranean countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia: <http://www.nato.int/docu/update/2004/12-december/e1208c.htm>
2. Amir Oren, "Muhammad, 30 Push-ups," *Haaretz*, February 11, 2005. See also Amos Harel, "They want an affair with the IDF, but not a marriage: as part of the world struggle against terror NATO is vigorously courting Israel and is inviting it to numerous exercises. However, Israel's joining the organization is still out of the question," *Haaretz*, December 16, 2004.
3. Chuck Hagel, "NATO Expands Its Boundaries," *USA Today*, March 2004, pp. 54-57. See also Thomas L. Friedman, "Expanding Club NATO," *New York Times*, October 26, 2004; and "NATO, the Mediterranean and the Middle East," Deputy Secretary General's Keynote Address at the Royal United Services Institute Conference, November 29, 2004.
4. Amir Oren, "Don't Misunderstand Us," an interview with the secretary of NATO, *Haaretz*, February 24, 2005.
5. On the status of an ally that is not a member of NATO, see: Dore Gold, *Israel as an American Non-NATO Ally: Parameters of Defense-Industrial Cooperation*, Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1992.
6. "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."
7. For the official positions of the European Union regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see the European Union and the Middle East Peace Process, [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/mepp/index.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/mepp/index.htm). On the disputes between Israel and the EU, see Akiva Eldar, "Europe is Investing, Europe Wants a Return," *Haaretz*, April 22, 2004; Shlomo Shamir and Aluf Ben, "A Crisis between Israel and Europe following the Condemnation of the Fence in the UN," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2004; Natan Gutman, "The EU demands that Israel Halt Construction of the Fence and Dismantle it. The US Opposes Transferring the Debate to the UN," *Haaretz*, July 11, 2004.
8. See the announcement of the Israeli ambassador to the EU, Oded Eran, regarding Israel's desire to expand its cooperation with NATO countries, Mark John, Reuter's Agency, February 9, 2005. See also Amnon Abramovitz, "Israel is approaching NATO," Ulpan Shishi, Channel 2 television, January 28, 2005, from Yifat, Media Information, Tel Aviv.