

Broadband Diplomacy and the NATO-Israel Advance

Tommy Steiner • Fall 2016



Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a joint press conference earlier this year. (Photo: NATO)

The official upgrade of NATO-Israel relations with the imminent opening of a formal Israeli mission at NATO's headquarters is one in a series of diplomatic measures and initiatives that are broadening the base and reach of Israeli diplomacy. Indeed, Israel's NATO upgrade was a result of Turkey's decision to demonstrate concretely its willingness to resolve the Turkish-Israel dispute, eventually accomplished at the end of June. Israel's burgeoning strategic and diplomatic ties with Turkey's foes (at the time) – from Russia and Egypt to Greece and Cyprus – probably prodded the Turkish leadership to resolve its conflict with Israel. Notably however, the branching out of Israeli diplomacy – in both its neighborhood and beyond – is not without limits, challenges, and risks. Moreover, the new advances in Israeli diplomacy are not value-based, but rather transactional and instrumental. Although Israeli and NATO leaders repeatedly invoke shared values, this relationship too is first and foremost driven by their perceived instrumentality.

NATO "Upgrades" Israel

On May 4, NATO and Israel announced that Israel would open an official mission at NATO Headquarters and that Israel's ambassador to the European Union would be formally accredited to NATO. Simultaneously, NATO announced the opening of similar missions by Bahrain and Kuwait and that Jordan's embassy to Belgium would be accredited and serve as the kingdom's mission to NATO.

The opening of official missions by several Mediterranean and Middle Eastern partners is an important milestone in NATO's efforts to engage countries in the region. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept underscored the role of partnerships and the need to streamline NATO's various partnership programs and enhance their effectiveness by adopting new policy instruments. Adopted at a 2011 ministerial meeting, NATO's New Partnership Policy offered all affiliates the possibility of a formal partnership that would allow each to pursue an individual relationship shaped by the interests of the Alliance and the affiliated country. The new policy however, was not fully implemented because Turkey had indicated that it would veto any partnership program that included Israel. In the depths of the Turkish-Israeli crisis – the downgrading of diplomatic relations in September 2011 – the Turkish veto threat risked the entire partnership program for 2012. NATO's then-Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, made it clear that Israel would not be excluded from the partnership program and worked out a last-minute compromise at the end of 2011.

Thus, in effect, Turkey held NATO's partnership aspirations in the Middle East and Mediterranean hostage almost until the resolution of its dispute with Israel. NATO was unwilling to move ahead with its other partners in the region and leave Israel behind. The sole exception, to which Israel probably provided its tacit consent, was the case of Jordan. At NATO's Wales Summit in September 2014, NATO designated five of its 41 partners as "enhanced opportunities partners" – one of which was Jordan. These five would hold closer political dialogue with NATO, gain more access to NATO's exercises and expertise, and increase their military interoperability with the alliance's forces. Subsequently, NATO invited additional partners to join an offshoot of this initiative – the Interoperability Platform (IP). Several Mediterranean and Middle East partners have since joined the IP, which essentially is a flexible forum bringing together allies and partners to examine a broad range of issues regarding interoperability for future crisis management – from command and control, through education and training, onto exercises and logistics.

Rapprochement with Turkey

Back to Israel: The announcement of the decision to open new official missions of three Middle Eastern countries came six weeks before the eventual signing of the Turkish-Israeli agreement of 2016. The upgrade would not have been possible without Turkish approval. It should be noted that NATO offered the opening of an Israeli mission shortly after the adoption of the new NATO Partnership Policy in April 2011, but, according to NATO's procedures, Israel formally had to submit a request. To avoid a Turkish veto, Israel never officially responded at the time, and presumably did so in 2016 only after receiving clear assurances that Turkey would favor the motion. In retrospect, the possibility that Turkey would use the NATO track to demonstrate its willingness to resolve its outstanding disputes with Israel was revealed as early as the summer of 2014 when Turkish diplomats unofficially inquired of Israeli experts (the author included) what Israel would want to achieve with NATO. Nonetheless, the "Turkish factor" was not mentioned in any of the related Israeli official statements regarding the upgrade.

Although Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed the opening of the Israeli mission at NATO as a contribution to Israel's national security, the perception is more circumspect among Israeli senior officials. To illustrate, had the Israeli defense establishment considered developing relations with NATO as a priority, the Israeli military attaché who deals with NATO would not be posted in The Hague, but rather in Brussels. True, in past years, successive Israeli defense chiefs have made a point of attending the annual meeting of NATO's Chiefs of Defense with their Mediterranean counterparts (normally held in January). However, the overall Israeli impression is that participation in NATO activities requires tedious deliberations that do not always yield satisfactory results. For instance, Israel's offer in 2009 to contribute a naval corvette to then-NATO's maritime operation in the Mediterranean was never picked up by the alliance, even before the onset of the dispute with Turkey.

Is NATO a Priority for Israel?

It is important to note that the Israeli defense establishment has not prioritized participation in NATO exercises and has not allocated sufficient resources to that end. Evidently, the Israeli defense establishment prefers bilateral cooperation with key NATO allies – the United States, Germany, Italy, France, and others. Israel's sub-optimal prioritization of working on a multilateral basis is reflected across the board regarding activities with NATO, extending beyond military cooperation.

Israel's preference for conducting strategic and military cooperation on a bilateral basis with NATO allies is a result of several factors. First, Israel lacks experience with, and

appreciation for, the role and potential of multilateral defense and cooperation. Former top Israeli defense chiefs have contended that multilateral military operations are inefficient, referring dismissively to NATO's operations in the Balkans in the 1990s. Second, NATO's engagement in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East never acquired strategic importance. The sole exception was the NATO-led operation in Libya, but that also revealed serious strategic and operational limits of the alliance. The European reluctance to seriously consider an Israeli proposal to have NATO lead a peace operation in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war added to doubts regarding the strategic relevance of NATO in the Middle East. Thus, until NATO assumes a strategic role in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, if ever, Israeli engagement with NATO will not be a high priority. Third, intra-alliance divisions and the repeated doubts that European and American leaders occasionally express regarding the organization's future do not enhance the Israeli "strategic appetite" for closer relations. Finally, and perhaps unlike other Western NATO partners, Israel's approach to cooperation with NATO is purely instrumental. Israeli officialdom does not view close relations with NATO as a means to underscore and cement its Western and democratic-liberal credentials. Rather, Israel's diplomatic and defense establishment view relations with NATO from a strict functional perspective – how to yield tangible benefits and possibly enhance Israel's strategic posture.

Combining the above factors with a well-established Israeli aversion to formal alliances, one can understand that Israel does not seek NATO membership. Traditionally, the Israeli defense establishment views alliances as curtailing strategic freedom of action. It is no coincidence that Israel never sought a formal alliance with the United States. Furthermore, having Israel become a NATO ally would necessitate amending and re-ratifying the founding 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. The treaty specifies that it is open to accession to "any other European State." More importantly, the treaty and its famous Article 5 refer to collective defense against armed attacks only in "Europe or North America." Without amending the treaty, Israel would not stand to benefit from NATO's collective defense.

Significance of the Upgrade

The current upgrade in NATO-Israeli relations is, however, significant and extends beyond the important diplomatic symbolism of formal accreditation of Israeli envoys. There is no doubt that even the rather modest staff presence and office space that the new mission will acquire offers new opportunities for cooperation and exchange. The accredited envoys will allow streamlined and enhanced defense and intelligence cooperation and exchanges between Israel and NATO – and in that respect, Israel has much to offer and to benefit. Following other Mediterranean and Middle East partners (Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain,

and the UAE), one should also expect that Israel will join NATO's Interoperability Platform in the near future – yet another venue that will expose Israel to additional opportunities.

NATO's Key Interests

Considering the future of its relations with NATO, Israel should follow NATO's newfound interest in Mediterranean security. True, NATO's main focus is – and will remain in the foreseeable future – a resurgent Russia. However, NATO's recent Warsaw Summit did pay attention to challenges emanating from the South – the Mediterranean and the Middle East: the inflow of refugees and the threat of jihadist terror. Israel has a vested interest in following NATO's plans and ambitions in the Mediterranean and contributing to shaping effective and mutually beneficial responses, particularly those regarding the threat of terror.

Should NATO enhance its strategic posture in the Mediterranean, Israel might consider pushing for an even more substantial upgrade in its relations with NATO. In becoming an "enhanced opportunities partner," Israel would acquire the institutional infrastructure enabling the closest possible level of cooperation. Compared to the current advance of opening a modest Israeli mission, having NATO designate Israel as an "enhanced opportunities partner" would constitute a strategic upgrade offering Israel a relationship nearly on par with other full members of NATO – "all but Article 5."

From an Israeli perspective, a strategic upgrade would require considering the broader Middle East balance of power and Israel's myriad regional diplomatic and strategic relations that have expanded in the past two years. One major aspect of Israel's current regional dealings is its increased diplomatic and strategic engagement with Russia. It appears Russia's growing strategic role in the Middle East is not entirely unwelcome from an Israeli perspective.

The regional and global amplification of Israel's diplomatic and strategic relations – particularly with Russia – were a main consideration in the final push of Turkey to move to resolve the dispute with Israel and to open the door of NATO headquarters to an Israeli mission. The "big picture" of Middle East power politics and Israel's diplomatic outreach will also be a major factor when (and if) the time comes for Israel to consider pursuing a strategic upgrade with NATO.

Israel's Expanding Diplomatic Reach

In the past two years, Israel has invested considerable resources expanding its diplomatic reach across Asia (focusing on China and India), Africa, and even Latin America. Simultaneously, Israel has boosted its strategic relations and cooperation in its immediate neighborhood – the Eastern Mediterranean and the very heart of the Middle East.

This effort is also reflected in the closest-ever relations with Russia – once again a power to reckon with in the Middle East. Since re-assuming the post of prime minister in 2009, Netanyahu has cultivated a relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Netanyahu is the Western head of government who has most frequently visited Putin. Media reports also suggest that the two leaders phone each other regularly. For his part, Putin went out of his way for events marking the 25th anniversary of the resumption of Russian-Israeli diplomatic relations. These overtures included hosting Netanyahu and his wife at a gala concert at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. It is hard to think of any other Western head of government saying during such events, “We certainly feel at home.”

Beyond symbolism, it appears that Russia and Israel have reached strategic understandings regarding Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war. Despite its alliance with Iran in Syria and cooperation with Iran’s proxy, Hezbollah, Russia respects and appears to uphold Israeli interests in Syria and has not condemned alleged occasional military strikes at regime and Hezbollah assets in Syria attributed to Israel. Considering that Russia’s allies in the Middle East are Israel’s archenemies, such strategic coordination might seem surprising. However, one could contend that, from an Israeli perspective, Russia is the only reliable and sufficiently powerful actor that can contain and control Iran’s regional ambitions. Undoubtedly, since Russia’s military intervention in Syria, Iran has taken a back seat and its influence on the trajectory of the war has diminished.

It thus seems that Russia and Israel respect each other’s interests in the region and beyond. Just as Russia has not commented on the NATO-Israel advance, Israel refrains from commenting on Russian actions in Ukraine. Should Israel consider a strategic upgrade of relations with NATO – with all other regional factors including Russia’s role in Syria remaining equal – Israel will have to consider the Russia factor. Nothing could better reflect the depth of the changes in Israel’s strategic and diplomatic calculations.

The Russian-Israeli relationship played a role in the resolution of the Turkish-Israeli dispute. Turkey’s shooting down of a Russian warplane last November triggered a severe crisis between the two countries. Until then, Turkey and Russia maintained close cooperation despite their irreconcilable goals in Syria. Several Turkish commentators pointed out that Turkish isolation required mending fences with Israel. Furthermore, although there is no

evidence to support an Israeli role, it is quite interesting to note that the Turkish-Russian rapprochement followed the Israeli-Turkish accord. Similarly, the surprisingly flourishing triangular relations between Israel, Greece and Cyprus revealed the increasing strategic isolation of Turkey.

Israel and the Sunni Arab States

Another important factor shaping regional power relations is the closer Israeli-Sunni Arab relationship. Arguably, Israel has achieved its most significant advances with Egypt and several Arab Gulf countries. Israel's close strategic relations with Egypt since the counter-revolution in 2014 are increasingly made public. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi all but publicly urged the formation of a unity government in Israel that would see the Labor Party joining Netanyahu's coalition. Egypt and Israel share close strategic interests regarding the situation in Sinai and Palestinian territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Although Israel's relations with other Sunni countries in the Arab Gulf have yet to be "outed," media reports suggest increasingly frequent and substantive meetings between Israeli and Arab Gulf officials, including meetings in the region. In July, an unofficial delegation from Saudi Arabia led by a retired general visited Israel. Simultaneously, the ongoing public debate in Saudi media regarding potential relations with Israel was until recently unthinkable.

Challenges Ahead

Having attained clear tangible achievements that have enabled the upgrade of relations with NATO, Israel's new diplomatic campaign is not without challenges, shortcomings, and risks. Many of these new relations are transactional and reflect carefully weighted interests subject to change over time. The development of Israel's respective relations with Turkey and Russia are not "meetings of minds and hearts" with shared values and ideals. As noted above, some of these countries engage closely and partner with other countries and actors that are in conflict with Israel and pursue interests that are incompatible with Israel's. Managing such relations, in short, is a strategic headache. Israel seems to appreciate the transient nature of some of these relations and is not seeking constraining alliance relations. Therefore, an ever-closer strategic relationship with NATO will require careful Israeli consideration.

Arguably, Israel's official enthusiasm for its new global outreach reminds many observers of the troubled nature of Israel's "old" relationships – with the United States and Europe – that are the NATO allies. Two main issues have soured Israel's relations with its traditional

Western allies – the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the Western approach to Iran’s nuclear file. While these remain focal points of Israel’s bilateral exchanges with the United States and the vast majority of European countries and the EU, they are not on the agenda in Israel’s exchanges with NATO. Furthermore, the United States has paid little if any interest in the development of NATO-Israel relations since their inception in 1994. Rather, the standard-bearers of developing NATO-Israel relations on NATO’s side are senior officials of its international staff. However, should a strategic upgrade of NATO-Israel relations become relevant, Europe’s critical position toward Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue could become a factor. As a top NATO official told an audience of senior Israelis, “the corrosive effect” of Israel’s settlement policy is having an impact in NATO’s internal deliberations led by envoys of the alliance’s allies. In addition, senior NATO officials have expressed their dismay to Israeli counterparts regarding Israel’s close relations with Russia.

Israel’s Future

Israeli officials forcefully reject suggestions that the “Israeli pivot” to Asia, Africa, and Latin America and its closer relations with major countries in its neighborhood, Russia included, have any bearing on the long-standing relations with the United States or Europe. Although Israeli denials seem to echo equally forceful American denials that the United States is disengaging from the Middle East as it “pivots” or “rebalances” to Asia, Israeli officialdom continues to consider relations with the United States as the bedrock of its national security. Rather than viewing Israel’s new “broadband diplomacy” as undermining relations with the United States and the West, the wise management of Israel’s growing diplomatic and strategic advances will benefit the West. Eventually, Israel’s growing diplomatic and strategic clout in the Middle East and beyond could well become an asset for the United States and the West. NATO could also benefit from a resourceful and influential partner. Weak and isolated partners are normally not in the position to provide tangible proceeds to the alliance.

Tommy Steiner is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the IDC Herzliya.
