

**The "Level of Ambition" in NATO-Israel Relations:
Amidst Middle East Turmoil and NATO's New Strategic Concept and Partnership Policy**

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Introduction

Israel's relations with NATO evolved within the framework of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. Launched in February 1995, the Mediterranean Dialogue was designed as a confidence building mechanism – to improve mutual understanding and to dispel misconceptions about NATO's aims and policies among its new regional interlocutors. The Mediterranean Dialogue started slowly, but gathered momentum. The number of Dialogue partners grew from five to seven, eventually including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, in addition to Israel. From modest beginnings, the Mediterranean Dialogue now incorporates hundreds of bilateral and multilateral activities, including the active participation of some of the Mediterranean members in NATO operations.

Officially considered one of the Mediterranean Dialogue's "most dynamic participants,"² Israel's leaders and officials have continuously expressed their interest in enhancing and upgrading NATO-Israeli cooperation, citing common values and interests. In that respect, and considering its unique capabilities, Israel has long been unofficially regarded an outlier among its regional counterparts in the Mediterranean Dialogue. The regional multilateral setting held Israel back from expanding functional cooperation. Reluctant to let Israel advance ahead of its Mediterranean peers, NATO constrained its ambitions for cooperation to the lowest common denominator of the Mediterranean countries. Israeli officials involved in managing the relations with NATO came to view this situation with disdain, regretting the shackles imposed on further developing meaningful cooperation. While functional and concrete cooperation has been on the rise, the pace of growing ties has often frustrated Israel. Furthermore, multilateral meetings at senior ministerial levels were effectively discontinued in 2008 and the frequency of NATO and Mediterranean Dialogue Chief of Defense (CHODs) meetings has been reduced.

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² Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Address to the 11th Annual Herzliya Conference, February 9, 2011 <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/?CategoryID=539&ArticleID=3366>.

As this article outlines however, there is now hope for a considerable turnaround. NATO-Israel relations are arriving at strategic crossroads, which could serve to take this relationship to new levels, particularly following the introduction of NATO's new partnership policy.

Looking ahead, NATO-Israel relations' "level of ambition"³ will primarily depend on the future of NATO and on three specific aspects of the Alliance's eventual direction: the implementation of its new partnership policy; its role as an alliance and capacity to deepen Western strategic cooperation and defense integration; and its strategic-military role in an increasingly volatile Middle East. NATO-Israel relations are not, however, entirely up to NATO, and Israel's willingness to seriously commit to a strategic and military multilateral partnership is also crucial. Furthermore, external factors could affect the future course of NATO-Israel. First, the continuation of Turkish-Israeli discord could considerably lower both NATO and Israel's level of ambition. Second, while insofar the Arab-Israeli conflict played no role in NATO-Israel relations, the likely protraction of the conflict will impact the relationship, even if indirectly. In sum, the current and ongoing interplay among the above-listed factors seems to be creating an elastic moment that will shape NATO-Israel relations for years to come.

Following a short review of the evolution of the relations, the paper will assess the factors shaping the relationship and conclude with policy recommendations aiming to realistically enhance NATO-Israel partnership.

The Evolution of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and NATO-Israel Relations: 1994-2010

The "Invention" of the Mediterranean Regionalism

In the aftermath of the Cold War, and with Euro-Atlantic attention focused on the transition and integration of Central and Eastern European countries, the strategic concerns of Spain, Italy, France, and Portugal were closer to home. The Mediterranean Basin European countries were concerned that the socio-economic under-development on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean could potentially "spillover" to the north in the form of mass immigration. Emboldened by the apparent breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, the European "Southern Flank" countries sought to direct some Euro-Atlantic attention and resources to their "near abroad."

Italy and Spain were the primary drivers of numerous Mediterranean fora. Virtually all European and Euro-Atlantic organizations (European Union/Communities, Western European Union, NATO, Council of Europe, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) unveiled Mediterranean frameworks by the mid-1990s, in addition to mostly informal non-governmental

³ In NATO common parlance, the Level of Ambition (also denoted as LoA) "establishes in military terms the number, scale and nature of operations that the Alliance should be able to conduct". NATO, "The Defence Planning Process: What does it Mean in Practice," Updated June 15, 2007 <http://www.nato.int/issues/dpp/practice.html>. Unless specified otherwise, I use this term to connote the potential scope and depth of NATO-Israel relations, not necessarily in operational terms.

and sub-regional/"mini-multilateral" Mediterranean groupings.⁴ Thus, in the 1990s, the Mediterranean witnessed an outburst of multilateral initiatives. Institutional diffusion and emulation inspired by inter-organizational competition clearly played a role in the proliferation of Mediterranean initiatives.

Two principal initiatives survived the 1990s – the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. While other frameworks, particularly the informal ones, were considered important, attention was shifted to the principal Euro-Atlantic institutions, the EU and NATO, which had the sufficient institutional and financial resources to underwrite joint activities. While the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, also known as the "Barcelona Process," gained more attention because of its ambitious self-declared agenda, NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue evolved more gradually, and probably more realistically.

An inability to produce a clear vision for the process in terms of goals, objectives, and cooperation programs characterized the first decade of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. During this period, the annual work program of the Mediterranean Dialogue consisted of some 35 activities. Both NATO allies and their Mediterranean interlocutors did not consider the framework highly important or relevant, and held dialogue at senior official levels.

NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue

Two major factors shaped the gradual, if not hesitant, development of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue in the 1990s. First, and unlike Central and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and the Broader Middle East were uncharted waters for NATO. As Central and East European countries historically dominated NATO attentions, NATO had no prior engagement or experience with the Mediterranean or Middle Eastern actors. Furthermore, the idea of institutionalizing relations with third countries in a multilateral setting was a novelty for the Alliance, which was emerging from the Cold War and forced to tackle entirely new challenges.

Secondly, internal divisions even among the Mediterranean members of NATO constrained the Alliance's ability to implement opportunities for substantial cooperation.⁵ While Spain and Italy led NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, France was far more reluctant, viewing NATO as an American "toolbox" in which it was not fully integrated.⁶ Alternatively, France sought to bolster the security dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership by pursuing a "Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Peace and Stability." Negotiations on the Charter led by the French EU Presidency fell apart in late 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada and the Israeli-Palestinian impasse. While the Middle East Peace Process had a relatively limited effect on the

⁴ For a review of the various Mediterranean multilateral frameworks during the 1990s, see: Alberto Bin, "Multilateral Diplomacy in the Mediterranean: A Comparative Assessment," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3, Summer 1997, pp. 57-75.

⁵ Alberto Bin, "NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue: A Post-Prague Perspective," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2002, pp. 117.

⁶ Since the French withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command in the late 1960s, France harbored deep suspicions concerning NATO's extra-European and "global" outreach.

Mediterranean Dialogue, it nonetheless has since lingered behind the evolution of the process writ large and NATO-Israel relations in particular.⁷

One can trace the turning point in NATO's attitude to the region and to the Mediterranean Dialogue to the events of September 11, 2001. It would take NATO three more years to set out a clearer blueprint for its engagement in the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East at the June 2004 Istanbul Summit. In the Istanbul Communiqué, the Allies agreed on a more ambitious and expanded framework for the Mediterranean Dialogue. NATO leaders announced their desire to transform the Mediterranean Dialogue into a "genuine partnership," but the official status of the Dialogue remained a framework of cooperation.

The fundamental rationale for NATO's newfound interest in the Middle East is straightforward: most of the threats currently facing the Alliance originate from the Broader Middle East. Several months after the Istanbul Summit, NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer made the first-ever visit to Israel by a NATO Secretary General. Addressing an audience in Israel in February 2005, Mr. Scheffer stated:

It is not difficult to see why building closer relations between us has become a strategic imperative. Our strategic environment is confronting us with new developments that are simply too powerful to be ignored: [f]irst, the interplay of Middle Eastern and transatlantic security is becoming ever more evident. Demographics, economics, and energy needs create an ever-closer interdependence between us. New threats—such as terrorism, the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, and transnational organized crime—affect us all and require a common response. 9/11 and the Iraq crisis merely reinforced what we already knew: how this region will evolve will affect Euro-Atlantic security in a fundamental way. So the Middle East and the transatlantic community are – to use a fashionable term – increasingly interdependent...

Curiously, the Middle East initiatives launched at Istanbul – the enhanced Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) – were part of US President Bush's "Greater Middle East" Agenda, renamed under the aegis of the G8 the "Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA)" Agenda. The expectation that NATO would play a substantial and concrete role in addressing political under-development in the region and contribute to regional democratization through defense cooperation never materialized.⁸ Further, and with the clear exception of NATO-Israel relations, it would be difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness of NATO's outreach to the Mediterranean partners to address the aforementioned "strategic imperative" of jointly tackling common challenges of the Euro-Atlantic community in the decade following September 2001.

Rather, the Mediterranean Dialogue evolved along two simultaneous tracks: occasional multilateral politico-security dialogue and the development of primarily bilateral military-to-military cooperation. On the multilateral politico-security track, progress included two Defense

⁷ For instance, see also: Amnon Barzilai, "A Conciliatory Nod From NATO," *Haaretz*, January 2, 2002.

⁸ Fred Tanner, "NATO's Role in Defence Cooperation and Democratisation in the Middle East," *International Spectator*, No. 4, 2004, pp. 101-113.

Ministers' meetings and two Foreign Ministers' meetings. While ministerial level meetings no longer take place, Chiefs of Defense of the Mediterranean Dialogue Countries' regularly meet with their NATO counterparts, members of the NATO Military Committee. On its part, NATO augmented its public diplomacy in the region to underscore the broad potential of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. Public diplomacy has since become one of the main efforts of NATO in the region.⁹

The "Bilateralization" of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and its Relations with Israel

In addition to improved discourse, the number of opportunities for concrete, practical cooperation under the Mediterranean Dialogue process increased. While NATO leaders reiterated their decision to open the partnership programs to the Mediterranean Dialogue Countries during subsequent NATO summits, this did not come to fruition fully. Rather, new tools and mechanisms were derived from the Partnership for Peace program and opened to Mediterranean Dialogue Countries on a limited basis.

Perhaps more importantly, the Istanbul Summit also led to the development of bilateral tracks within the framework of the multilateral process of the Mediterranean Dialogue. In October 2006, after a prolonged negotiation process of more than 18 months, Israel and NATO concluded an Individual Cooperation Program (ICP). Israel was the first country outside of Europe – and the first among NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue Countries – to reach such an agreement.

This was an important step because from its outset, actual cooperation within the Mediterranean Dialogue was limited mostly to the multilateral framework. Thus, while Israel considered itself a natural partner of NATO, it was nonetheless restricted to the joint agenda of the other Mediterranean Dialogue Countries. This joint agenda reflected the lowest common denominator, essentially Egypt, which from the beginning was not interested in an enhancement of NATO presence in the area. Egypt was the only Mediterranean Dialogue Country that formally opposed NATO sending forces to southern Lebanon during the 2006 military campaign. In this context, one can also understand Israel's appreciation when Egypt became the second country of the Mediterranean Dialogue to conclude an ICP (a year after Israel, in October 2007).

The NATO-Israel ICP, renewed and modestly expanded in December 2008, is a wide-ranging framework that enables the expansion of the scope of current cooperation. Detailing numerous areas of cooperation, the ICP includes response to terrorism, intelligence sharing, armament cooperation and management, nuclear, biological, and chemical defense, military doctrine and exercises, civilian emergency plans, and disaster preparedness.

Yet, while intended to reduce the restrictions imposed by the multilateral framework, the ICP has several shortcomings. NATO officials emphasized a need to retain a certain balance within

⁹ Nicola de Santis, "Opening to the Mediterranean and the Broader Middle East," NATO Review, Autumn 2004.

the Mediterranean Dialogue; that is to say that NATO does not wish for Israel to move “too far” ahead of the other Mediterranean countries. An indicative anecdote of this “balance” was that senior NATO officials expressed their delight at the conclusion of the ICP with Egypt because it allowed moving ahead with Israel. Notwithstanding, this also reflected that Israel’s relations with NATO were held hostage by Egypt. This “glass ceiling” continued inhibiting Israel’s ability to expand cooperation with NATO.

The ICP as a framework agreement, if not as a laundry list of areas of cooperation, was insufficiently detailed to commence implementation of any of the programs and activities listed. Rather, the implementation required further negotiations and coordination. Israel also sought to implement the undertakings of NATO’s leaders to open up all partnership frameworks to Mediterranean Dialogue Countries, yet NATO excluded several critical programs.

In addition, the lack of formal partnership had an adverse effect on the relationship. As opposed to the “Partnership for Peace” (PfP) Countries, NATO refrained from concluding a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Mediterranean Dialogue Countries. This led to substantial impediments in promoting the bilateral relationship and developing military-to-military cooperation. Senior Israeli defense officials and IDF command have been reluctant to send Israeli troops to NATO exercises.

A useful example of the difficulties posed by the absence of a SOFA was the posting of an Israeli Navy Liaison Officer to NATO Allied Joint Force Command Naples, the headquarters of Operation Active Endeavour. Israel announced in 2006 that it was willing to contribute to NATO’s maritime anti-terrorist operation in the Mediterranean Sea, Operation Active Endeavour. Later that year, NATO and Israel officially exchanged letters agreeing to the posting of a liaison officer. The officer was only posted in early 2008 after protracted negotiations involving NATO, Israel, and Italy to overcome the absence of a SOFA. Notwithstanding, both NATO and Israeli officials have since expressed their satisfaction with Israel’s modest contribution to this operation.

Israeli officials became increasingly wary and dissatisfied with the outcome of the ICP. A senior Ministry of Defense official went on the record stating that one could learn more from reading newspapers than from the official intelligence sharing between Israel and NATO. He said that Israel seeks any opportunity to improve the relationship, but that “with every initiative to develop this relationship, the frustration is bigger than the hope.”¹⁰

However, this criticism, along with the Israeli disappointment in NATO’s unwillingness to assume a role in Lebanon, is also a positive indicator. It demonstrates Israel’s high expectations of NATO and its continual desire to substantially upgrade this relationship. At the 2007 NATO-Israel

¹⁰ Senior official of the Israel Ministry of Defense speaking at the Second NATO-Israel Symposium, 22-23 October 2007, at IDC Herzliya.

Symposium, then Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Livni, stated: "Israel seeks a formal partnership relationship with NATO."¹¹

Upgrading NATO-Israel Relations: The Conceptual Evolution

During the second decade of the Mediterranean Dialogue, a handful of Israeli and Atlantic officials and think-tankers started addressing the political and institutional shortcomings of NATO-Israel relations and exploring possible paths for facilitating closer relations and breaking the "glass ceiling". Shortly after the 2004 NATO Istanbul Summit, a few Israelis, Americans, and even Europeans entertained the idea of full Israeli membership in NATO.

Inspired by the warm welcome extended to an informal study group that visited NATO Headquarters in September 2004,¹² two policy papers outlined the rationale for full NATO membership of Israel – one written by two Americans, Ron Asmus and Bruce Jackson, and the other written by Uzi Arad and the author.¹³ This visit also led to the submission of a formal Israeli proposal to upgrade relations in January 2005. An on-record session at the December 2004 Herzliya Conference in Israel and the subsequent first-ever visit of NATO's Secretary General to Israel in February 2005 created a small policy debate that gained media coverage. Israel's envoy to NATO, Oded Eran, explained to the *International Herald Tribune* that for Israel, "(e)ntering NATO would create a kind of psychological insurance policy."¹⁴

This position was also supported by several European leaders, most prominently by former Spanish Prime Minister, José María Aznar, in a report entitled "*NATO: An Alliance for Freedom.*" In his treatise, President Aznar advocated that NATO should become the security provider for the entire Western world and should promote democracy and freedom.¹⁵ As part of a total reconfiguration of the Alliance to tackle current strategic threats, President Aznar suggested it invite Israel, Australia, and Japan to join. Aznar's advocacy was closely tied to the Bush administration's effort to broaden the scope of NATO's partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic arena, and the notion of "global partnerships" in the run-up to the 2006 NATO Riga Summit.

Nonetheless, the US administration distanced itself from the issue of enhancing NATO-Israel relations. While many who view NATO as US-dominated surmised that the US would act as the

¹¹ Address by Tzipi Livni, Vice Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Second NATO-Israel Symposium, 22-23 October 2007, at IDC Herzliya, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-8D505318-9FBEEA67/natolive/opinions_60087.htm .

¹² Amir Oren, "Inside Track/Searching for a Political Atlantis," *Haaretz*, November 26, 2004.

¹³ Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson, "Does Israel Belong in the EU and NATO?," *Policy Review*, February-March 2005; Uzi Arad and Tommy Steiner, "Israel and the Euro-Atlantic Community: An Israeli Perspective," Paper submitted to the Fourth Annual Herzliya Conference, December 2004.

¹⁴ Oded Eran was quoted in Judy Dempsey, "Israel Explores Closer Link to NATO, Even Membership," *International Herald Tribune*, March 3, 2005, p. 3; See also, Steven Erlanger, "The Talk of Herzliya: A Modest Proposal – Israel Joining NATO," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2004.

¹⁵ See also Uzi Arad, "Israel en route to defense pact?," *Ynetnews*, October 25, 2006 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3319627,00.html>.

main proponent of an advance in NATO-Israel relations, US officials expressed reluctance and were not the main drivers of this relationship.¹⁶

It soon became clear however, that Israeli NATO membership was simply not on the cards. From a NATO perspective, Israel's admission would have required a ratified amendment of the Washington Treaty, the founding document of the Alliance. From an Israeli perspective, there was considerable reluctance to enter into a formal defense pact with the US, let alone in a multilateral setting, which was considered to potentially impede Israel's self-assumed strategic freedom of action.¹⁷ Israel's expected insistence on preserving its independent strategic assets was considered a factor that could forestall NATO membership, even though it made no sense to weaken a new alliance member.¹⁸

Advocates of intensified NATO-Israel relations moved away from a push for elusive membership and rather focused on upgrading the relationship to a status equivalent to the Partnership of Peace. In line with the American-led initiative to introduce "global partners," the idea was to single-out Israel from the Mediterranean pack for partnership. Ron Asmus, Uzi Arad, and Oded Eran outlined two scenarios that would engender such an upgrade – an Iranian nuclear threat or the conclusion of an Arab-Israeli peace agreement. In a 2006 op-ed,¹⁹ Asmus explained that should Iran acquire Nuclear weapons, the West should make an unambiguous and clear public commitment to Israel via NATO. Alternatively, when Israel reaches a final status agreement with the Palestinians, closer relations with NATO could be offered as a security guarantee, or as Uzi Arad and the author put it, Europe's "contribution" to the peace process.²⁰ Both scenarios underlined the Western interest in providing Israel strategic reassurances. Nevertheless, it became clear to the Israeli advocates that setting apart Israel for NATO partnership would not work.

In the run-up to the process of revising NATO's Strategic Concept, NATO-Israel advocates devised a new strategy for obtaining NATO-Israel partnership, prepared by the Atlantic Forum of Israel and shared with its partners and like-minded interlocutors, including the American Jewish Congress. As Israel was ineligible to join the Partnership for Peace, the working assumption of the "roadmap" was that Israel would not receive preferential treatment for partnership. Thus, the advocates concluded that only through the reform of NATO's partnerships will Israel be able to attain formal partnership: reforming NATO's partnership structures in such a way that would

¹⁶ See for instance, remarks on the issue in the Q&A segments of Amb. Kurt Volker, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, at Howard University's Model NATO Conference Washington, DC, February 23, 2006 < <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/docs/volker022306e.htm>>.

¹⁷ See for instance, Zaki Shalom, "Israel and NATO: Opportunities and Risks," *Strategic Assessment* 7(4), March 2005.

¹⁸ On this point, see also Arad & Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Ronald D. Asmus, "Contain Iran: Admit Israel to NATO," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2006. The unidentified Israeli interlocutors mentioned in the op-ed are Uzi Arad and Oded Eran.

²⁰ Arad & Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 11; See also, Rosemary Hollis, "The Israeli-Palestinian Road Block: Can Europeans Make a Difference," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 2, 2004, p.6.

subsequently permit an upgrade of Israel's formal status. The idea was to have NATO design its partnerships on "a case by case, functional, flexible, and tailored basis."²¹

At that point, there was a growing understanding in NATO that the structures of its relations with third countries were outdated. The work on NATO's new Strategic Concept was considered a strategic opening for a much-anticipated reform. Furthermore, the advocates now moved away from presenting the case for such partnership as a European/American gesture (or "sweetener"), and instead advocated a general reform of NATO's partnerships. Furthermore, the advocates posited that forging a NATO-Israel partnership would be of mutual benefit, both in terms of military-to military and security cooperation, and within a broader strategic context of the challenges emanating from the Mediterranean and Broader Middle East.²² Said otherwise, in forging a partnership with Israel, NATO would not be favoring Israel, but rather pursuing the Alliance's own interests.

As detailed in the next section, the outcome of NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, in the form of the newly approved Partnership Policy in April 2011, met the aspirations of the NATO-Israel advocates in full. However, none of the advocates expected this outcome, as the issue of partnerships was not high on the NATO agenda until the very last stages of work on the Strategic Concept. During the final stages of the run-up to NATO's 2010 Summit in Lisbon and with strong US encouragement, NATO's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen placed the issue of NATO partnerships on the Strategic Concept's agenda. With defense budgets across the Atlantic slashed, officials considered that one of NATO's key added values would be facilitating interoperability of NATO defense assets with partners from across the world.

The issue of NATO Partnerships became one of the key deliverables of NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept. Yet, the outcome was not machinated by Israeli advocacy, although Oded Eran and the author foresaw the reasons for it: "In the aftermath of the global financial crisis motivating calls from certain allies to reduce NATO's 'level of ambition,' the Alliance has a vested interest in augmenting cooperation and interoperability with its partners."²³

²¹ Uzi Arad, Matthew Mark Horn, and Tommy Steiner, "Statement for the Record Submitted to the Joint Hearing on "Israel and Europe: Strengthening the Partnership,"" Before the Subcommittees on Europe and on the Middle East and South Asia, Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, July 9, 2008.

²² Arad, Horn & Steiner *op. cit.*, which was submitted to a US Congress hearing focused on shared NATO-Israel interests in military-to-military and security cooperation. A subsequent unpublished but widely circulated policy paper focused on the shared Atlantic and Israeli interests in the Broader Middle East. See, Tommy Steiner & Oded Eran, "NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Broader Middle East: A non-official Israeli Perspective and "Food for Thought,"" Unpublished paper, April 2010.

²³ Steiner & Eran, *op. cit.*, p.11.

Shaping the Future of NATO-Israel Relations: The Principal Factors

A. NATO's New Partnership Policy: First among these factors is NATO's new Partnership Policy, unveiled in April 2011, which is a direct outcome of NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept. The long anticipated streamlining of NATO's partnership programs and the adoption of new policy instruments alone might come to be considered a watershed in NATO-Israel relations. Outlined in a series of documents published following a NATO Ministerial Meeting in Berlin in April 2011, the new policy offers all third countries, including Israel, the possibility of formal partnership and allows each to pursue an individual relationship shaped by the interests of the Alliance and the partner country.²⁴

The new policy statements endeavor to transform and enhance NATO's partnerships – making them more efficient and flexible. They also strive (in text at least) to allow partners, particularly in NATO-led operations, to have a more substantial "shaping" role in assessing evolving crises, planning responses, and executing operations. The new policy offers (along with a set of new acronyms) enhanced political consultation, strengthened practical cooperation, support for defense education and training, more operational partnerships, and flexible formats (28+n) for consultations.

From a Mediterranean perspective, the most important aspect is NATO's commitment to normalize, streamline, and equalize the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative frameworks with the Partnership for Peace. NATO undertook to establish a single Partnership Cooperation Menu and a tailored Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program (IPCP) as an entry-level program available to all partners. The Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) and Planning and Review Process (PARP) will also be open to partners beyond the Partnership for Peace on a case-by-case basis, with the approval of the North Atlantic Council. In this respect, offering all partners the opportunity to establish formal and permanent missions to NATO is also of importance. Furthermore, the decision to have the new Partnership Cooperation Menu (PCM) as a "rolling program" will enhance opportunities for cooperation and hopefully resolve the need to negotiate partners' participation in each and every program. Undoubtedly, the internal NATO institutional reform of working committees will also streamline and facilitate partner participation.

Nonetheless, the new policy instruments still lack on one major aspect – they do not provide for Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA). Enhancing military-to-military cooperation and the participation of partners in NATO Operation will be impossible without removing this hurdle, possibly through the IPCPs or IPAPs.

As such, the new policy lays the necessary institutional infrastructure for upgrading NATO-Israel relations. Encouragingly, both parties have already taken steps towards implementation: NATO

²⁴ The primary document is "Active Engagement in Cooperative Security: A More Efficient and Flexible Partnership Policy" http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_04/20110415_110415-Partnership-Policy.pdf.

has extended an invitation to Israel to open a formally accredited, permanent diplomatic mission at NATO Headquarters; and both parties held a formal bilateral strategic dialogue at senior officials' level.

While one could consider a NATO-Israel formal partnership an end itself, sustaining the partnership will primarily depend on the relationship's functional and strategic components. In turn, NATO's role as an alliance and an international politico-military institution will determine the NATO-Israel politico-military areas of cooperation and coordination.

B. NATO's Role as a Political Institution and Military Alliance: The position of NATO as a major international institution, as the political hub of transatlantic affairs and the West, and its strategic posture and efficacy as a military alliance will determine the interest and value of third countries in forging and investing in partnership relations with NATO, Israel included.

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept has not cleared the doubts surrounding the vitality and durability of the Alliance. The process of reformulating NATO's Strategic Concept incorporated well-staged international policy events and unearthed a mass of insightful and thought-provoking policy-oriented research, publications, and symposia.²⁵ Yet, it remains unclear as to what extent the Strategic Concept has indeed resolved intra-alliance strategic differences. While previously the American interest in the Alliance focused on contending with emerging risks from the Broader Middle Eastern "arc of instability," it appears that the current US administration is less interested in addressing these challenges and wishes to end its so-called "Middle East detour." According to a recent review of US foreign policy, the prevailing wisdom in the administration is that "America needed to rebuild its reputation, extricate itself from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and turn its attention toward Asia and China's unchecked influence in the region."²⁶

If this sentiment reflects a sustainable strategy shift, the derivative is a loss of US interest in NATO. NATO's operation in Libya could be considered indicative of this new approach, as this is the first NATO military operation in which the United States chose not assume the commanding position, but rather "led from behind." Notwithstanding, one could raise considerable doubts about whether the Middle East will cease to be high on the American, or for that sake the Atlantic, strategic agenda.

Despite inherent and occasional tensions and disputes, the Atlantic community has been crucial in shaping international politics since World War II. The Euro-Atlantic community brought about the peaceful and positive resolution of the Cold War, and while one cannot ignore the shifting balance of power to East, the Western world will remain the nucleus of world politics for the foreseeable future. Over the past six decades, tensions and crises befell the Alliance and skepticism concerning its durability loomed high, but the Alliance reinvented itself. Regardless of

²⁵ See NATO HQs listing of publications and reports relating to the 2010 Strategic concept: <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/strategic-concept-bibliograpy.html>

²⁶ Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011 http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza .

the strategic shortcomings exposed in the Libyan operation, NATO's platform providing an international integrated military command for a multi-national operation proved essential and second to none.

It is also evident that the financial crisis engulfing the United States and Europe over the past three years is taking a toll on NATO and its overall "level of ambition." Virtually all NATO allies have cut their defense budgets, the US included, and the vast majority of allies fail to reach the agreed defense-spending target. US Defense Secretary Gates' warning in his last policy address in Brussels, before stepping down in June 2011, that NATO risks "collective military irrelevance" due to insufficient defense spending by European allies stirred the NATO policy community. NATO's spokesperson confirmed Secretary Gates' misgivings and added: "there is clearly a long-standing concern about the transatlantic gap in defense spending. There is a risk that European allies may fall even further behind in terms of technological developments."²⁷

The political and strategic impact of the financial crisis for the Western world appears to be a defining moment for NATO's future, but not necessarily in a negative sense. This crisis offers the opportunity for NATO to assume a leading role in promoting concrete defense integration or as NATO's Secretary General put it, "Smart Defense."²⁸ While Secretary Gates argued that one could not consider this a panacea, Rasmussen's proposal for enhancing defense pooling and sharing of resources among European allies has enacted a policy debate on the issue. While previous European experiences in defense integration and military R&D cooperation could be best described as poor and inefficient, the policy mood in Europe seems to be changing and coming to appreciate that now more than ever before closer military integration is essential. The November 2010 Anglo-French agreement on defense and security cooperation is a useful indication in that respect.

Therefore, NATO's ability to promote defense integration along the lines of "Smart Defense" will be particularly critical for the future of the alliance. Furthermore, promoting defense integration in NATO would be highly relevant for NATO-Israel relations. If the Alliance seriously tackles defense integration and opens this process to its partners, Israel could become a major player in this endeavor, similar to its special status in the European Union's R&D programs.

Furthermore, the emerging security challenges identified in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, specifically cyber-security, missile defense, and counter-terrorism focused on defense of critical infrastructure, are key areas in which Israel is considered one of the most advanced countries in the world. This has not escaped NATO and the June 2011 NATO-Israel strategic dialogue at the

²⁷ On Secretary Gates' statements and subsequent debate, see i.e., David Alexander & David Brunnstrom, "Gates Parting Shot warns NATO Risks Irrelevance," *Reuters*, June 10 2011 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/10/us-usa-nato-idUSTRE7591JK20110610>.

²⁸ NATO's Secretary General unveiled the idea of "Smart Defense" at the Annual Munich Security Conference on February 4, 2011. For the NATO report on the Secretary General's address at Munich and "Smart Defense", see "NATO Secretary General calls for "Smart Defence" at Munich Conference," http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_70327.htm.

level of senior officials paid considerable attention to exploring avenues to develop cooperation on these issues.

From an Israeli perspective, much of the interest in relations with NATO goes beyond functional security and defense-related cooperation, as important as it may be. NATO is the icon and principal multilateral institution of the Atlantic community. Israel shares with NATO the core values enshrined in the Washington Treaty. In that respect, NATO and the West are Israel's natural habitat. It is also worth noting that the strategic challenges and threats facing the Alliance, namely radical Islam, global terrorism, and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) are the very same threats Israel faces. Thus, as these challenges unfold, Israel is a natural partner to NATO.²⁹

C. NATO's Role in the Middle East: From a Southeastern Mediterranean perspective, it seems plausible to argue that the future of alliance will also depend on NATO's role in a changing Middle East. Despite the strategic desire of the Alliance's principal power to shift its attention away from the Middle East to the emerging Asia-Pacific arena, more likely than not, the Middle East will continue to occupy considerable strategic attention, particularly for Europe, but also for North America. If the Libyan operation is any indication, NATO and its European allies will probably be forced to take the lead in addressing Middle East challenges and threats to their vital interests. In contending with Middle East challenges, NATO will need to rely on several willing partners, Israel included. A credible NATO addressing the strategic challenges in the Middle East will also be well positioned to play a constructive role in the aftermath of Israeli-Arab conflict resolution.

Concluding Remarks

Taken together, NATO-Israel relations will primarily depend on the future of NATO. In this respect, the late Ronald D. Asmus, considered by many the godfather of NATO-Israel relations, wrote in the run-up to the 2006 Riga Summit:

There is potentially more interest in and demand for closer ties with NATO than often realized. There are indeed countries who would welcome close ties with a NATO willing to work with them and able to project stability to their respective neighborhoods...At the end of the day, the willingness of...countries to partner with NATO depends on the successful reform in the Alliance. The ability to attract and forge new partnerships depends on whether NATO can transform itself into the kind of modern Alliance that addresses global threats and can help meet the security needs of these countries. If NATO succeeds in making that leap, the Alliance will not suffer from a shortage of

²⁹ Arad, Eran, and Steiner, *op. cit.*

*global partners wanting to work with it. If it fails to do so, the interest in becoming a global partner of NATO will wane.*³⁰

While NATO's future role and policies will be determining factors, Israel bears responsibility for this relationship. In the course of a few years, there is a growing appreciation within the Israeli defense establishment of the potential benefits of closer relations with NATO. What began with considerable reluctance to a "talking shop" has become a discernible interest within the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to further develop the relationship. This was demonstrated when the IDF led an Israeli initiative to contribute a Navy Corvette to NATO's Article 5 "Operation Active Endeavour."

Nonetheless, the very idea of a multilateral alliance contradicts the basic and deep-running concept of Israel's national security, which is predicated on self-reliance. The concern that closer relations with NATO could somehow inhibit Israel's self-assumed strategic freedom of action is present in all the exchanges of Israel with NATO. While this attitude has been somewhat mitigated, especially under the IDF's former Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Ashkenazi, there are still some reservations concerning deeper involvement in multilateral military-to-military cooperation and participation in multilateral operations. In short, to further develop this relationship, Israel will have to come to fully appreciate the benefits of multilateralism in defense and military affairs and assume a more realistic approach with regard to the possible limits imposed by close partnership with NATO.

Beyond the broad strategic perspective underlying this paper, two not-entirely-unrelated issues concerning current events might also bear considerable consequences for this relationship. The impact of the current Turkish-Israeli fallout for NATO-Israel relations remains unclear. From a NATO perspective however, it would be important to underscore that Turkey-Israel relations pale in comparison to the problematic relationship between Turkey and the EU, a derivative of the Cypriot conflict and Turkish-Greek discord. From an Israeli perspective however, Turkey's NATO's membership might impede the development of NATO-Israel relations. While Turkey could institutionally block the upgrading of Israeli relations with NATO, Israel might also be reluctant to sharing and contributing assets and capabilities offered to all NATO allies, Turkey included.

Curiously, the potential opening in NATO-Israel relations comes at a time when Israel's diplomatic relations with NATO's alter ego, the European Union, are in dire straits and a considerable number of NATO and EU members negatively view Israel's policies on the Arab-Israeli conflict. While NATO-Israel relations have so far been nearly divorced of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the development of this relationship was considered a catalyst for broadening the

³⁰ Ronald D. Asmus (ed.) *NATO and Global Partners: Views from the Outside [Riga Papers]*. Washington DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006, p.3.

European-Israeli agenda, the protraction of the Arab-Israeli conflict might take a toll on enhancing NATO-Israeli partnership.³¹

³¹ Tommy Steiner, "The NATO Example," Haaretz, September 18, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/the-nato-example-1.7648> .