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Israel and NATO

Which Course Will Relations Take?

Thomas Papenroth

The debate over a new strategic alignment for Israel has received further momentum since the first visit of a NATO Secretary General to Israel in February, 2005. Israel must ask itself if a stronger presence in the Euro-Atlantic community would better serve its security than the political unilateralism which it largely exercises at present. Israel has always been loathe to take on coalition commitments, as political autonomy is one of the guiding principles of its actions. Since the Six-Day War (1967), a special partnership has developed with the USA, which annually provides Israel with, among other things, up to three billion US dollars in economic and military support.

A stronger presence in the Euro-Atlantic community does not mean full NATO membership for Israel. This remains unrealistic in the long term, but a process of mutual rapprochement can be initiated. In principle there are three options: first, the further development of relations in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue, second, Israel's admission to the Partnership for Peace program (PFP) and third, the deepening of bilateral contacts.

If Israel considers a stronger rapprochement with NATO within the context of a possible strategic reorientation, it will above all take the areas of diplomacy, defense, and military technology into account, as here lie the advantages of the alliance over other organizations.

The Pros and Cons of Further Rapprochement with NATO

From a diplomatic point of view, the possibility of enhancing Israel's political status speaks for a stronger relationship with NATO. So far, Israel has been seen as a state

unwilling to enter into coalitions. A politically clear statement in favor of a stronger rapprochement process would signal to the Euro-Atlantic community that Israel would like to shed this image. A further pro-argument is that Israel could improve its negotiating position with the USA, its only allying partner to date, by diversifying its cooperative relationships.

In terms of immediate national defense, NATO has little to offer Israel. In a classic military sense, Israel is vastly superior to the "Arab World." Israel, however, does not normally see itself challenged by conventional military wars, but rather by "low-

intensity conflicts.” Furthermore, the country does not possess a strategic depth, which is a reason why Israeli governments have always attached such high importance to intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance, as well as to the air force. Stronger cooperation with NATO would be of limited use on both counts. NATO possesses neither pronounced experience in low-intensity warfare nor is it ready to lend Israel more strategic depth by entering into an obligation of assistance at this time.

Israel’s deterrent potential would not necessarily be enhanced by closer ties with NATO. All potential opponents are already aware that the USA would stand beside Israel in the event of a confrontation. Closer ties with Brussels, however, could potentially allow political solutions to pending conflicts to be more easily found.

Closer ties with the Alliance could allow Israel to benefit from research and development services in the area of military technology, thereby further enhancing the capacities of its armed forces (Israel Defense Force, IDF). Additionally, Israel could gain access to information from the intelligence services which would be of use to the country in the war against terror. By participating in NATO-led missions, the Israeli armed forces could, for example, acquire information concerning the deployment and conduct of coalition forces in large-scale operations, which would in turn improve Israel’s capability of forming alliances as well as the proficiency of the IDF in combined and joint operations.

Overall, a stronger rapprochement to NATO appears to be of use to Israel primarily in the fields of diplomacy and military technology.

NATO’s Views

Just as there is a divergence of opinions in Israel concerning closer ties to the Alliance, there is no consensus on the matter in Brussels. Most NATO member states can only narrowly agree to bind Israel closer to the western community of values. However,

if the concrete formulation of a future NATO-Israel relationship is at issue, the relationship of several countries to the Arab states will play an important role; so too will the question as to what benefit the Alliance would gain from turning its attention further to Israel. NATO could certainly profit from Israel’s experience in combating terrorism as well as from its insight into the political framework and military capabilities of the states in the region.

For NATO there are two central questions. Can closer cooperation with Israel contribute to the stabilization of the region and the de-escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict? What repercussions would such cooperation have for relations between individual NATO states and the other countries in the region? There are no clear-cut answers to these questions. It is not the fact of rapprochement, but rather the form such an approach would take which would decide if such action has a stabilizing or destabilizing effect and whether or not relations with Arab states would be damaged.

Which of the three options mentioned above is best suited to fully exploit the benefits of rapprochement while at the same time minimizing any possible drawbacks?

Option 1 The Development of Relations within the Framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue

Israel has maintained official contact with NATO primarily via the Mediterranean Dialogue, which was created in 1994. Seven countries have hitherto participated in the Dialogue: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia. The goals of the Dialogue are to contribute to regional security and stability, to promote mutual understanding and to obviate misinterpretations of NATO’s goals and ambitions in the region. Within the Dialogue, Israel primarily focuses on practical and concrete actions such as, for

example, the exchange of information in the war against terror, access to NATO's decision-making process with regards to crisis management, and the development of a better understanding of NATO procedure concerning civil and military emergency-planning.

From Israel's perspective, the advantage of the Dialogue-option is that the bilateral format of the consultations within the framework of the ten-year Dialogue has been firmly established. Furthermore, talks with Dialogue countries can take place in the presence of NATO representatives. From the Alliance's point of view, the latter is preferable as it strengthens the multilateral character of the Dialogue, which in turn serves the development of a regional security architecture. As the Alliance has consistently ensured that no Dialogue partner is granted special privileges, Israel may not be treated differently or, most importantly, "better" within the framework of the Dialogue. Were this to happen, the character of the Dialogue and, ultimately, the goals of Israel's rapprochement could be thwarted.

Option 2 The Partnership for Peace and the "Swedish Model"

The advantage of the PFP lies in the graduated and diverse possibilities offered by the program. Each participant can, in coordination with the Alliance, determine exactly how far such cooperation should progress—beginning with visits to smaller seminars and individual offers of cooperation and culminating with full membership. The prerequisites for membership are, on the one hand, an invitation extended by the North Atlantic Council and, on the other hand, the signing of the Framework Document by Israel's government representative. An Israeli proposal concerning the expansion of cooperation presented to NATO at the beginning of the year envisages a relationship to the Alliance on a basis which can be compared to the PFP program. Specifically, Israel would like to

participate in consultations and meetings held within the framework of the PFP/Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). Moreover, it desires a working plan which caters to Israel's interests and needs.

Should Israel participate in PFP, the country must be offered an individual package of program points differing from the original "Eastern European package," which was designated for the countries of the former Warsaw Pact and aimed at bringing them into NATO. The "Eastern European package" primarily supported the development of democratic defense-structures. Israel, however, is much further developed, both politically and economically, than the Eastern European states were or, for the most part, are today. Israel is a sound democratic state with substantial military capacities which are no less formidable than those of most NATO member states.

Advocates of Israeli involvement in PFP favor the so-called "Swedish Model": participation without membership. Here it must be borne in mind that the primary military incentive for Sweden's participation in the PFP, despite its rejection of full NATO membership, lies in the fact that the program offers a framework within which Sweden's armed forces can be developed to function interoperably with those of NATO. This allows Sweden to participate in Alliance-led operations under the mandate of the United Nations. Should Israel have an interest in greater interoperability between its armed forces and those of NATO, Israeli governments will still maintain the option of unilateral action.

Option 3 Deepened Bilateral Relations

A possible rapprochement between Israel and NATO could of course take on a bilateral form. This would, however, bring allegations of a lack of transparency in its wake. A straightforward approach on the behalf of all actors is essential in this sensitive geopolitical region. In the Arab world,

NATO is more often seen as a security risk rather than as a guarantor of security. Were NATO to maintain extensive bilateral contacts with Israel outside of the larger consultation framework, doubt and skepticism would increase in the Arab world. This would in turn hamper the creation of a regional security network or the development of international contacts based on partnership.

Perspectives

It seems the most sensible approach would be to proceed with a two-step program of further mutual rapprochement. First, relations with Israel should be deepened both bilaterally and multilaterally via the Mediterranean Dialogue. This would draw the Arab states into the process and allow for any possible reservations to be aired. Second, Israel should be admitted to the PfP in the medium-term. The first step could take place immediately. Israel's admittance to the PfP program must naturally take Arab needs and interests into account alongside those of Israel. It cannot only serve to extend Israel's dominant military position in the region, as this would counteract NATO's fundamental offer of partnership to all countries in the region. It is a matter of offering Israel recourse to the Euro-Atlantic community while at the same time emphasizing that this offer is not directed against the Arab states, but rather at making it easier to persuade Israel to make concessions should possibilities of solving the Arab-Israeli conflict arise. As an integrating step, the invitation could be directed towards all Dialogue countries or the Mediterranean Dialogue could be transformed into a true Mediterranean partnership.

Existing hindrances can be removed through increased interaction between NATO and (Arab) Dialogue countries. NATO could come substantially closer to its goal of entering into a sincere partnership with all of the countries of the wider Near and Middle East. In this context, the lack of a

joint American-European approach to the entire region is a handicap. There is no NATO strategy referring to the entire Mediterranean region and the Near and Middle East. Nevertheless, governments on both sides of the Atlantic are contemplating further approaches toward the region, including Israel. Pertinent considerations vary from bilateral relations of NATO members with the respective countries of the Near and Middle East to the search for a common approach to the region. National interests have so far prevailed—NATO policy only takes place at the level of the lowest common denominator. What remains is the hopeful expectation that the increased engagement on the behalf of NATO, in effect since the Istanbul Summit in 2004, will be maintained and will result in a transatlantic policy which will be recognized and welcomed by the countries of the region.

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