

When Israel joins NATO

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If Israel succeeds in joining NATO, its regional belligerency would be backed by the collective strength of the entire alliance. Before that happens, will the Arabs react?

Israel wants to be a member of NATO. It no longer looks down its nose at military alliances. It no longer wants to stay away from Western military arrangements. It wants in.

A majority of Israelis believe NATO membership would boost Israel's security as well as NATO's strategic power. Interestingly enough, there has been no Arab reaction to Israel's desire to join NATO, no Arab attempt to block the move, and no preparations to deal with its consequences.

Israel and NATO have grown closer over the past decade or so. In 2000, NATO expanded its Mediterranean Dialogue through talks with seven countries from the Middle East and North Africa; namely, Egypt, Israel, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania. In 2004, NATO- Mediterranean talks were held under the name "Partnership for Peace". Six new countries were included in the new dialogue: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Israel, in particular, was eager to use every opportunity the Partnership for Peace had to offer.

On 24 February 2005, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer became NATO's first secretary-general to visit Israel. In the following month, NATO and Israel held their first joint military drills in the Red Sea. Within weeks, a flotilla of six NATO ships called on the Israeli port of Eilat. Israel (and Jordan) also took part for the first time in joint military drills held within the Partnership for Peace programme in Macedonia in the former Yugoslavia in February 2005.

According to the UK-based Jane's military magazine, Israel's "geopolitical position" provided NATO with a foreign base to defend the West, while NATO's military and economic might enhanced the security and economic potential of the "host country".

In June 2005, Israel participated in submarine manoeuvres off the coast of Taranto, Italy. At the time, US sources said that Israel was seeking to widen the "scope of its strategic alliance" with NATO in preparation for full membership in NATO. Israeli ground forces also took part in NATO drills lasting two weeks and a half in Ukraine. In 2006, Israel told NATO that it wanted to participate in "active operational efforts" conducted by NATO in the Mediterranean as part of the campaign to "confront terrorism".

Soon after, Israel hosted and took part in three military drills with NATO and attended a conference for NATO air force commanders. The Wall Street Journal reported closer links between NATO and Israel. It cited Uzi Arad, founder of the Atlantic Forum of Israel, as saying that Israel would benefit from NATO's membership. The Washington Post, meanwhile,

argued that many countries in Europe supported Israel's membership but were waiting for Washington to suggest such a move.

Washington's view on the matter became clear in March 2006 when James Jones, then chief NATO commander in Europe, said that the deployment of NATO AWACS aircraft in Israel was a "clear signal to Iran". In May 2006, eight NATO navy pieces arrived in Haifa to demonstrate "the growing cooperation" between Israel and NATO.

In late June 2006, the House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs unanimously passed a decision calling for closer Israeli-NATO ties. Consequently, Israel and NATO agreed on a long-term plan to cooperate in 27 spots around the world. Israel thus became the first non-European country and the first Middle Eastern country to cooperate with NATO on that a crucial level.

Two months after the end of the 2006 war in Lebanon, a seminar on NATO-Israel relations was held in Herzliya. Attending the seminar was then Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni who said that Israel would have preferred NATO to "do the job that Israel did in Lebanon". She added that Israel wished to take part in NATO's regional and local initiatives. NATO Deputy Secretary-General Alessandro Risso responded by noting that the stationing of an Israeli liaison officer at the NATO headquarters in Naples was a sign of the "vital cooperation" between NATO and Israel.

By the end of 2006, Israel was granted a "partnership agreement" with NATO that had more substance than any agreement NATO had held so far with a non-European country. Still, many in Israel and the West kept calling for full Israeli membership in NATO. One Russian political analyst, Eduard Sorokin, warned that Washington was using Israel's potential membership of NATO as a way of keeping Arab countries on their toes. According to the NATO Charter, any attack on a NATO member is considered as an attack on all members. Thus any future conflict between Israel and its neighbours may trigger a broader regional conflict and potentially a world war, Sorokin concluded.

The Jerusalem Post said that Israel's closer links with NATO were crucial in the case of "future confrontation with Iran" (1 April 2008). In fact, Netanyahu wanted Israel to join NATO even before coming into office for a second time as prime minister. He has since made Israel's membership of NATO a central piece in his policy.

On 13 January 2009, the Jerusalem Post reported that Israel was launching a "diplomatic initiative" aimed to influence former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright's review of NATO's policy. In January 2009, Israeli officials met with Albright in Oslo to discuss NATO's new strategy. During the meeting, the Israelis expressed a desire for closer links with NATO and asked for a place at top-level NATO meetings.

In Washington, some have said that once Israel is accepted as a full NATO member, NATO should take over security missions in the West Bank and Gaza. This view is not so far fetched considering the fact that President Mahmoud Abbas once said that it wouldn't be a bad idea if the Americans were to negotiate with Israel on behalf of the Palestinians.

James Jones, the US national security adviser who had been NATO commander in Europe from 2003 to 2005, is said to be busy putting together a plan for controlling the occupied Palestinian territories on behalf of Israel. The plan is said to involve actual policing of Palestinian areas.

Before Operation Cast Lead was launched in Gaza, NATO was already exchanging intelligence with Israel, sharing security expertise, and organising military drills. Israel and NATO also cooperated in non-proliferation programmes. Former NATO chief Scheffer visited Israel in the midst of Israel's offensive on Gaza. And NATO officials were at the time of the opinion that cooperation with Israel was essential for their organisation.

We know everything we need to know about NATO-Israel cooperation. What we don't know is what Arab leaders intend to do about it.

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