

Future Partnership?



Flags of NATO member countries
Photo: AP

Is Israel headed for NATO?

There are increasing signs that NATO is interested in upgrading relations with Israel

Uzi Arad

Italian Defense Minister Antonio Martino recently announced that in his opinion, the time has come to include Israel in NATO as a regular member, and he intends to raise the issue at the meeting of NATO defense ministers next week.

Martino emphasized further that any future aggression against Israel would be considered an act of aggression against all the NATO states, and such recognition would undoubtedly contribute to the stability in the region.

The idea itself is not new. It has been considered for some time by diplomatic and security circles in Europe and the United States, mainly with regard to the status of “partnership” in NATO—in other words, without the collective defense guarantee that accompanies full membership.

Building cooperation

For the past two years, cooperation between Israel and NATO has become closer, to a certain degree – both on a multilateral level, within the Mediterranean Dialogue, and on a bilateral level, directly with NATO.

Last year, Israeli Ambassador Oded Eran submitted an official proposal for increasing cooperation, and since the visit of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to Israel last June, NATO and Israel have been negotiating over completing the multilateral cooperation plan.

Within this framework, Israel has been asked to examine the possibility of “bearing the burden” similarly to the rest of the members and partners, and placing resources at the disposal of the alliance.

Israel consented, and announced its willingness to participate in Operation Active Endeavor, which is being conducted in the Mediterranean Sea as part of the alliance’s counter- terrorism effort. It also took part in three military exercises and hosted a conference of air force commanders from NATO and its partners.

Joint interests

NATO’s interest in including Israel stems from the heightened involvement of the alliance in the greater Middle East, and recognition of Israel’s potential contribution, due to its experience and capabilities.

Back in December 2004, NATO representatives at the Herzliya Conference called upon Israel to strengthen its relations with the alliance. The announcement of the Italian defense minister, however, refers to a higher degree of inclusion, which also calls for an application of the alliance’s collective defense guarantee to Israel, as required by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Structural shift

Former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar also called for a structural and conceptual change in NATO that would lead to the inclusion of additional countries, including Israel, Australia and Japan. This is in light of the current strategic tasks— coping with Islamic terror and proliferation of non-conventional weapons.

These lines of thinking have recently been reinforced in Atlantic community circles, but the Israeli attitude towards upgrading ties with NATO is ambivalent: Along with willingness for further cooperation, there is ongoing skepticism as to the benefits of institutionalizing the relationship in a member status.

This is based on the fear that a multilateral defense pact will limit Israel’s freedom of action. In addition, some officials in