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Israel-NATO Relations: Developing a New Strategic Concept

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Israel's relations with the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) were never a focal point of its foreign and security policy. In fact, they have weakened since their peak in the 1990s. However, recent geopolitical shifts have highlighted the importance of these relations for Israel, providing a potential foundation for reshaping them. NATO has been undergoing profound reform in recent years, expanding its agenda to deal with additional issues of human security, such as the climate and energy crises, and stressing innovation. The war in Ukraine not only injected renewed vigor and political power into the alliance, it also hastened the processes of organizational renewal and emphasized the alliance's geographical focus northward and eastward. Israel, too, has undergone change, its security enhanced by normalization agreements with Arab states, a strong Hellenic alliance with Greece and Cyprus, and warming relations with Turkey. Its technological capabilities and its business model orientation could turn its posture vis-à-vis NATO from a consumer of security to a supplier. NATO and Israel now have an opportunity to reshape, deepen and improve their relationship.

A. Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a military mutual defense alliance¹ among 30 North American and European countries, including Turkey. The alliance also constitutes a broad framework for security cooperation, standardization of weapons and military working methods, and promotion of security-related technological developments. The cooperation between NATO members and Ukraine (a non-member partner) since the February 2022 Russian invasion has restored the alliance's importance to the forefront of the international stage. Thus, Israel's relations with NATO constitute an important strategic issue, attracting increasing Israeli political, diplomatic and security interest.

Local and regional crises have often stood in Israel's way of deepening its partnership with the North Atlantic Alliance. The ups and downs in Israel's relations with the alliance's other Mediterranean partners (which are not NATO members) affected the alliance's cooperation with Jerusalem. However, the Abraham Accords, the Russia-Ukraine war, the consequences of the climate crisis, and the recent warming of relations between Israel and Turkey have introduced significant geopolitical changes that are now opening doors for

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¹ NATO, [Collective Defence and Article 5](#).

Israel vis-à-vis NATO, too. Attuned to the developments of NATO's evolving strategic concept over the past two years. Israel is now at a critical point that allows it to reshape its relations with the alliance and adapt itself to new geopolitical realities in the Middle East and beyond. Strengthening relations with NATO is an important step in adapting to these new realities.

This paper reviews the history of relations between Israel and NATO, in particular the Mediterranean Dialogue as a framework for managing cooperation, explains the challenges facing Israel and NATO in promoting and deepening cooperation, and presents the recent geopolitical and organizational shifts laying the foundation and providing an opportunity for re-designing this relationship. The paper also discusses the mutual benefit that the parties can derive from deeper cooperation, and the principles that should guide the reshaping of relations in order to take optimal advantage of this opportunity.

B. The history of NATO-Israel relations

Israel has maintained special relations with NATO since 1989, being among the first five countries recognized by the US administration as a preferred partner of the transatlantic alliance. This designation of a "major non-NATO ally", accepted by Congress, does not constitute an officially recognized NATO status nor does it include an obligation of mutual defense. Rather, it serves as US recognition of the strategic importance of cooperation with a non-NATO member (Israel), providing it with a variety of economic and military benefits.

The main foundations for Israel-NATO relations were laid after the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993), when the Alliance established the Mediterranean Dialogue for peace cooperation with partner countries from the Mediterranean Basin. Israel, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan were officially invited to participate in the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995. Algeria was invited a year later. In NATO jargon, the dialogue is dubbed "plus seven."

In the first decade after the Oslo Accords, NATO officials held several meetings with the Mediterranean partners, mainly at professional levels. Israel saw its relations with NATO as an additional platform for formal and informal meetings with neighboring countries, hoping to expand the Oslo agreements, at least de facto. But although meetings did take place, the political framework produced mostly symbolic results. On the military side, the IDF did participate in NATO naval and ground exercises, but Israeli ambitions were limited in this regard. Thus, for example, Israel did not formulate a plan to promote its defense industries vis-a-vis NATO.

In 2010, after the Marmara flotilla affair (where nine Turkish nationals were killed by IDF fire), Turkey vetoed Israel's participation in NATO exercises, only removing its objections in 2016 when the two countries signed a reconciliation agreement. At the same time, in May 2016 the alliance approved of the opening of an Israeli office within NATO headquarters in Brussels. The first Israeli ambassador to NATO, Aharon Leshno-Yaar, submitted his credentials in September of the same year. Two years later, the alliance approved the participation of Israeli companies in NATO tenders. The lifting of the Turkish veto once again opened the door for Israeli military participation in NATO exercises in the region, but did not restore the Mediterranean Dialogue forum to its previous standing. Against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that framework yielded only a handful of meetings in recent years.

The weakening of the Mediterranean Dialogue on the one hand, and the signing of the Abraham Accords (2020) on the other, gave rise to a new Israeli Foreign Ministry approach regarding NATO. Rather than focusing its efforts on the regional multilateral framework within NATO, Israel is now concentrating on direct relations with the alliance.

These efforts include, for example, the expected launch of an Israeli military medicine center where NATO medical personnel will train in the coming years to benefit from Israel's expertise in this field. The training center will mark the first Israeli participation in NATO's Partnership Training and Education Centers (PTEC) program², which includes 17 training centers in NATO member states and 15 centers in non-member partner states. Another example of a new cooperation of its kind is the first joint position paper by Israel and NATO regarding the globally-growing drone threat, issued several weeks ago. Israel is also the most active non-member state of the NATO Science for Peace and Security Program,³ which supports (financially) workshops, research institutes, training, projects and events in these fields.

At the same time, there has been a noticeable step up in NATO's engagement with Israel during this period, as expressed at the political level with a series of high-ranking visits to Israel. Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Threats David Van Weel visited Israel last July; the head of the policy planning division at the NATO Secretary General's office, Benedetta Berti, participated in the annual conference of the Institute for Counter-Terrorism Policy of Reichman University; and Deputy Secretary General for Policy and Security Affairs Bettina Kadenbach traveled to Israel mid-November 2022 to launch talks on the joint bilateral work plan for the next four years.

C. Challenges to deeper Israel-NATO relations

A number of obstacles faced NATO and Israel in the past two decades that hampered the deepening of relations and cooperation. Some are related to Israel's place in the Middle East (up and downs in Israel's bilateral relations with Turkey, the distancing of other NATO partners from the Mediterranean Basin from cooperation that includes Israel due to the Palestinian issue), and some are the result of broad geopolitical changes unrelated to Israel, and of the transformations taking shape within the NATO organization.

Beyond the weaknesses of the Mediterranean Dialogue, which will be discussed later, the Palestinian issue did not constitute a significant obstacle to Israel's bilateral relations with NATO. As with the OECD and several other international organizations, neither the Palestinians nor Arab countries are members of the North Atlantic Alliance. Moreover, unlike the European Union, and beyond the formation of the Mediterranean dialogue, NATO has systematically distanced itself from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even those EU members that systematically support pro-Palestinian policies did not take advantage of the NATO platform to promote this type of agenda.

1. Wide-ranging geopolitical shifts

Inward US turn, focus on east Asia

² NATO, [Partnership Training and Education Centres](#) (PTECs).

³ NATO, [Science for Peace and Security](#), 4 November 2021.

US President Donald Trump made no secret of his reluctance to continue American investment in the alliance, and senior administration officials testified in 2018 that he went as far as to say privately that he wanted to withdraw from NATO. The American president's decisions to withdraw from UNESCO (ostensibly because of the agency's anti-Israel bias) and from the Paris climate agreement strongly suggested this was a serious option, although ultimately it did not materialize. In a 2019 interview with *The Economist*, French President Emmanuel Macron said, "What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO", adding that Europe can no longer rely on the United States to protect its allies.⁴

European leaders hoped that the change of administration in Washington would spell an end to the distancing begun by Trump, but that was not the case. Western diplomats, mainly from France, testified to difficulties in communication with the Biden Administration in its initial months in office. The sense in Paris, Brussels, Berlin and Madrid was that the new administration was adhering to Trump's inward policy shift, at least as far as US relations with its European allies goes. At the same time, the White House began to focus its foreign policy efforts on Asia, bolstering alliances with Japan, Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

This was reflected, for example, in Australia's 2021 decision to award US defense contractors a tender for the construction of nuclear submarines. Washington and Canberra went to extraordinary lengths to keep Paris in the dark as they secretly negotiated a plan to scrap contracts with French manufacturers in favor of deals with American ones. The war in Ukraine relegated NATO's suspicions over this affair to the sidelines, although it still clouds Washington-Paris relations.

As for Israel, the American focus on Asia, concurrent with the geopolitical changes in the Middle East, reduced the relevance of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, which declined on the list of NATO priorities. At the same time, given the reassuring special relationship between Jerusalem and Washington and NATO's apparent decline, Israeli security officials began questioning the need to allocate resources in order to draw closer to NATO and strengthen its partnership with the alliance.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine halted the decline of the alliance. Washington now sees NATO anew as a significant framework for the defense of the Western world against actors such as Russia. The day after the end of the war in Ukraine, the United States will probably return to focus on East Asia, but meanwhile, NATO hopes that the political and financial resources currently being poured into the alliance because of the war in Ukraine will have a positive effect on its strength and standing in the international arena in the long term as well.

The European Union's political-economic weakness

The above-mentioned inward convergence of the United States also weakened the European Union. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan without advance notice to the EU was a concrete example of this trend. At the same time, the rise of Euroskeptic leaders in the European Union area (in Hungary, Poland), and the UK's exit (Brexit), also undermined the European Union politically. The Corona virus crisis, for example, was managed at the state level for many months, until members of the Union reached agreement on a common policy. France and Germany, France and Italy, Sweden and Denmark, cooperated bilaterally in the fight to contain the epidemic, but without a guiding hand from

⁴ ["Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead,"](#) *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

Brussels. The weakness of the European Union and of its pro-European leaders in leading regional-continental moves also affected the strength of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, NATO's decline under the Trump administration, Brexit and the need for new European cohesion formulas led President Macron to seek a framework of security cooperation among EU member states and even to consider forming a European army or at least a European command. Macron reiterated that the common European security vision should not replace NATO. On the other hand, the growing division within the EU between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans undermined Macron's vision. Despite the concerns about Russia, the political incentive to invest in European security policy was simply not there, at least not until Russia invaded Ukraine.

As for Israel, Jerusalem's rapprochement during Benjamin Netanyahu's tenure with Eurosceptic leaders contradicted Jerusalem's ambitions of rapprochement with NATO.

2. Israel vis-à-vis NATO rivals/allies

Turkey as an obstacle and asset

Turkey joined NATO in 1952, three years after its foundation. NATO's Allied Land Command is located in Izmir. Due to NATO's structure, which requires unanimous consent of all 30 member states for all decisions, Israel's relations with Turkey have an almost direct effect on its relationship with the alliance.

The political changes in Turkey since Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise to power have had a profound impact on its relations with NATO. Erdogan's Turkey sees itself as a global player, demanding a proactive role in shaping the region, including military involvement at one level or another. Although the dream of joining the European Union was dashed relatively early under Erdogan's rule, he continued to view Turkey as a leading factor in shaping NATO's agenda, believing that the goals and threats with which the alliance should deal should be in line with those of Turkey, including in the Mediterranean area. This stance has changed relations with NATO.

NATO's central place in Turkish foreign policy obviously affects Ankara's relations with Jerusalem, too. In general, the nature of the relations between Israel and Turkey can be said to have had a direct effect on Israel's position vis-a-vis NATO, and vice versa. In other words, the NATO arena has allowed Ankara to convey messages (positive and negative) to Jerusalem over the years in a different, perhaps simpler, way than those exchanged bilaterally between the capitals. In 2019, even before the normalization (or re-habilitation) of relations, Israel was invited to Ankara, along with the other members of the Mediterranean Dialogue, to mark the forum's 25th anniversary.⁵

Participation of a non-member state in NATO military exercises requires the consent of all member states. As mentioned, between 2010 and 2016, Turkey vetoed Israel's participation in NATO's Mediterranean exercises. The strained relations between Jerusalem and Ankara were manifested at all levels of the organization, including simple technical issues such as Israel's requests to share rooms at NATO headquarters for work meetings. Any increase in Jerusalem-Ankara tensions (stemming from Erdogan's condemnations of Israeli operations in Gaza or its activities in Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, for example) has an almost

⁵ [NATO marks 25th anniversary of Mediterranean Dialogue](#), May 2019.

automatic impact on the working quality of the Israeli delegation to NATO headquarters in Brussels.

On the other hand, signals from Ankara about its willingness to normalize relations with Jerusalem were observed in NATO frameworks two or even three years before this willingness was expressed at the bilateral level. In the years when Israeli diplomats found it difficult to meet with their Turkish counterparts in the bilateral arena, the NATO arena enabled different frameworks for formal and informal meetings between Israelis and Turks.

The formal normalization of relations between Israel and Turkey over the past year is reflected in a pronounced manner in the NATO arena, both at the level of military cooperation and at the political level. Unlike the members of the Mediterranean Dialogue, Turkey is a full member of NATO. Jerusalem is therefore leveraging the normalization of relations with Ankara not in an attempt to rekindle the dialogue, but with the aim of building a new framework for relations with the alliance.

Decline of the Mediterranean Dialogue

Unlike countries such as Switzerland or Ireland, and of course Sweden and Finland, the Mediterranean Dialogue partners are not seeking full membership in NATO (and anyway, they are not geographically located in Europe). This, in turn, affects their motivation and commitment to maintaining the dialogue. The establishment of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994 matched the American and European efforts to provide continuity and regionalism to the Oslo Accords, and to strengthen stability in the Middle East region. Other international frameworks, such as the European Union (Barcelona process) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) launched similar Euro-Mediterranean dialogue initiatives. But over the years, as Israel and the Arab countries distanced themselves politically from the Oslo Accords, the relevance of the NATO dialogue faded. The initially limited ambitions of the dialogue may also have played a role in its decline.

The severing of relations between Israel and Tunisia, Israel and Morocco and Israel and Mauritania following the outbreak of the second intifada (2000-2005) largely rendered the dialogue obsolete. Instead of serving as an alternative arena for informal meetings, the Arab countries preferred to reduce and even avoid multilateral meetings of this type. The change of power in Jerusalem (2009) probably also contributed to the distancing of Tunisia and Algeria from Israel.

Reflecting its identity and *raison d'être*, NATO distances itself from interstate conflicts, which perhaps explains the attitude of top alliance officials to preservation of the Mediterranean Dialogue mechanism. The Mediterranean Dialogue never presumed to become a platform for conflict resolution, nor to advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations or establish joint anti-terrorism mechanisms. It was designed as a framework for confidence building measures. And so, along with the organic weakening of the dialogue on the part of the Middle Eastern partners, the alliance shifted most of its resources (organizational, diplomatic and financial) in other directions.

In Israel's view, another contributing factor to the erosion of the Mediterranean Dialogue, along with the increasing bilateral dialogues between NATO and individual Mediterranean countries, is the forum's heterogeneity. Despite the Oslo and Abraham agreements, Israel does not necessarily see itself as an intrinsic part of the geographic space in which it is located. It's geopolitical positioning is more complex. Unlike Israel, the positioning of

Mauritania, Egypt and Algeria is not distinctly Western. The values' dimension of Israel as a democratic country in the Middle East region simplifies its direct work with NATO. This point is critical in terms of the current view of Israel-NATO relations on the part of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Nor are the technological and strategic capabilities of the countries of the Mediterranean Basin necessarily on par with Israeli capabilities. The cooperation between NATO and most MENA countries focuses on capacity building (governance, technological development, resource management, etc.), that is, countries that are consumers of security, while NATO considers Israel as a provider of security. And in fact, in quite a few areas, Israel is several steps ahead of permanent NATO members.

The DNA of Israel's security establishment

In certain respects, Israel itself also posed an obstacle to deeper ties with NATO. Israel's ambassadors to the European Union and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs periodically recommended expanding cooperation with the alliance over the years, but the security establishment cited more urgent threats facing the country and did not prioritize NATO relations. Israel's security establishment examined these relations almost exclusively through the military prism of joint ground and naval exercises in the Mediterranean area, a perception that also curtailed deeper ties with the alliance.

The more comprehensive concept of Israel's relations with NATO (promotion of its defense industries, opening the NATO market to Israeli entrepreneurship, knowledge exchange on issues such as homeland security, dealing with crises, etc.) only developed within the Israeli security system over the past three-four years, and still depends to a considerable extent on those officials within the security system who recognize the importance of developing the various aspects of cooperation with the alliance.

Israeli military culture also presented an obstacle to closer NATO ties, being unused to multilateral cooperation. One of NATO's major added values is its standardization of military processes and concepts, as well as of military hardware and software, which enable the armies of different countries to work together. Although the Israel Air Force is used to working with the Israel Navy, for example, Israel has not sought to learn from NATO how to incorporate methods and concepts of multilateral work within the IDF and with external parties.

In this context, Israel's relations with its closest allies, i.e., the United States, Germany and Great Britain, should also be considered. The Israeli security system has developed intimate ties with its allies' corresponding security agencies over the years. The IDF is used to working with different branches of the US military, and Israeli intelligence works closely with the Americans, the Germans, the British and the French. Israel's major defense purchases from the United States and Germany have taught the IDF to conduct itself individually vis-a-vis each of these defense industries on standardization and other matters. The investment in these individual collaborations probably also contributed to the neglect of attempts to deepen cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance as a whole.

Israel-US relations

Israel-NATO relations were established in the late 1980s following an Israeli initiative (by then Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin) to equate Israel's position in the United States to that of NATO members in terms of access to US defense development programs and the

improvement of defense procurement, development and research relations between the two countries.

At the strategic level, Israel has benefited over the years from “special relations” with the United States. These relations went up a notch during President Joe Biden's visit to Israel in July 2022, with the signing of the Jerusalem Declaration on a strategic partnership between the two countries.⁶ In September, Israeli and American officials held their first high-level strategic dialogue within this framework to discuss technological cooperation.⁷ However, it is important to note that this is a strategic partnership and not an alliance for mutual defense, an issue that has come up from time to time over the years (Naftali Bennett raised the issue again when he served as prime minister), but never matured into a concrete political plan .

As mentioned in relation to the IDF and the defense establishment, in Israel's view, the intimate security relationship between Jerusalem and Washington made the need for a strategic partnership with NATO redundant. What is more, relations with NATO were not regarded as having a significant contribution to the upgrading of relations with the United States. In other words, Israel's relations with the United States did not constitute an incentive for Jerusalem to deepen its relations with the North Atlantic Alliance. A sharper distinction between Israel's relations with the United States and its relations with NATO. Has only developed in recent years.

D. Geopolitical, organizational changes paving the way for improved relations

In reexamining its relations with NATO, Jerusalem is forced to take into account broad geopolitical shifts, as well as the changes and reforms that the organization itself has been undergoing in recent years. In addition to obstacles, the geopolitical transformations and the changes within the alliance also lay the foundation for new opportunities for Israel in the NATO space.

1. Changes within NATO: operational doctrine, focus, needs, standing

Impact of war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine put to the test President Biden's pledge to repair the rift created by his predecessor with the European continent. Shortly after the invasion, and although Ukraine is not a member but a partner of NATO, Washington adopted a hawkish stance against Russia. The American position, accompanied by large financial means (military aid to Ukraine), essentially restored the relevance of the alliance.

The war in Ukraine also catalyzed a deep change in NATO's perception of itself, not only in terms of the alliance's relevance, or in terms of re-engaging the United States in the organization, but also regarding its political contribution to regional and global developments. For example, in order to promote the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg conducted shuttle diplomacy between Ankara, Stockholm and Helsinki, bolstering the alliance's realization of its ability to advance measures and lead negotiations. That is to say, not only to unite the alliance and create

⁶ [The Jerusalem-US Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration](#), White House, 14 July 2022.

⁷ [FACT SHEET: US-Israel Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology](#), White House, 30 Sept. 2022.

added value, and to move forces and change its security concept, but also the capacity to lead negotiations.

A turn to the north and the east

Along with the significant boost to the alliance, first of all as a strategic actor, but also as a political/diplomatic one, the war in Ukraine may affect the organization in the longer term, as well. The expected accession of Sweden and Finland to the alliance will continue the organization's orientation of the east, against the Russian enemy. This will likely mean a distancing from the Mediterranean Basin, since NATO's financial, security and human resources are ultimately limited. Signaling this long-term agenda, NATO's Stoltenberg traveled to Canada in late August, a visit dedicated to the Arctic region. With the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, seven of the eight Arctic Council members will also be NATO member states (the eighth is Russia, of course).

Sweden and Finland are both very active NATO partners. Even before the war in Ukraine, they were included in a group of six countries (along with Australia, Georgia, Jordan and Ukraine) that cooperated operationally with the alliance for many years, and were therefore awarded a special framework for in-depth cooperation with NATO (Enhanced Opportunity Partners). Sweden, for example, participated operationally in NATO's forces in Kosovo, and in NATO missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finland participated in the NATO forces to Bosnia-Herzegovina, making the expected accession of these two states only natural. Israel's situation is very different in this sense, given the absence of political likelihood or feasibility of its forces joining NATO operations.

NATO reform (Madrid Conference) and recognition of additional security dimensions

In February 2021, the NATO Secretariat published a groundbreaking 10-year blueprint underpinning the alliance's security challenges. The document's various insights include the need to deal with potential technological threats, such as cyber and artificial intelligence, the importance of preparing the civilian frontline for unconventional weapons, confronting the spread of global terrorism, and more. Another important insight was the understanding that all engagement in innovation in the fields of security, in the production of new tools and in understanding technological challenges requires a much more fruitful cooperation with the private sector. That means not only collaborations with military industries par excellence, but building a dialogue with the giants of software and social networks, and also with companies that produce dual-use technologies (civilian/military).

The NATO leadership defined three main anchors for advancing these reforms: redefinition of core missions (deterrence and defense, prevention and crisis management, cooperative security), reassessment of threats (Russia, China, terrorism), and anchoring (strengthening) of the alliance.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine placed the collective security dimension of Europe at the heart of the 2022 Madrid Summit. Alliance leaders attending the conference also focused on the dimensions of crisis management and of security cooperation. This latter dimension essentially means building a security system in partnership with like-minded non-member states to ensure peace and security not only on European soil, but also on NATO's periphery. For Israel, this dimension is particularly critical.

One example of these newly adopted dimensions is the issue of food security in the Middle East, North Africa and Africa. Close NATO partners (Egypt, for example) face the threat of

food insecurity with its inherent risks of developing into a security and social crisis. A second issue is of course mitigation of the global energy crisis, in which partner countries such as Algeria, Egypt and Israel can play a central role.

NATO is now honing and refining its tools for cooperation with partner states based on the reforms it has adopted, which include a significant change in terms of cooperation frameworks with non-member countries, including Israel. One such change involves the extension of Individual Partner Programs from two years to four, and including in them contingencies for adjustment in accordance with the parties' shifting needs. In October 2022, Israel and NATO began formulating their new cooperation program, which will define the parameters of their partnership for the next four years, a sufficiently long period that could offset the effects of political instability in Israel on the program document and on the cooperation itself. The agreement is also expected to simplify processes in the soon-to-be 32-nation NATO, where every decision requires unanimous member consent.

2. Shifts in Israel's geopolitical positioning

The Abraham Accords

The American-sponsored Abraham agreements with the Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan generated a geopolitical earthquake in the Middle East and beyond, which could have further repercussions for the nature and reshaping of relations between Israel and NATO. As a continuation of the agreements, Defense Minister Benny Gantz signed a security cooperation agreement with Morocco in November 2021. In February 2022, Israel signed a security cooperation agreement with Bahrain.

In addition to the bilateral cooperation with the signatories of the Abraham Accords, growing multilateral cooperation may in turn strengthen Israel's equity vis-à-vis NATO. In December 2020, Israel joined the International Security Alliance,⁸ an organization devoted to combatting organized and transnational crime, whose members include the Emirates, France, Bahrain, Morocco, Italy, Senegal, Singapore, Spain and Slovakia. In March 2022, then Foreign Minister Yair Lapid convened the Negev Forum, with the participation of the United States and Egypt in addition to the countries of the Abraham Accords. The I2U2 international forum between Israel, the United States, India and the Emirates was officially inaugurated during President Biden's visit to Israel. The Egyptian-sponsored regional gas forum is also enjoying increasing prosperity in light of the Abraham Accords and the regional legitimacy that Israel now enjoys.

The Abraham Accords also made it possible to shift Israel's security cooperation with the United States from the Pentagon's European Command to its Central Command (Centcom) whose Area of Responsibility (AoR) spans the Gulf region, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. This transition is not only symbolic in nature. It has wide-ranging operational implications for the IDF's participation in a variety of exercises and direct training with American units operating in our area, as well as with other US-allied armies (the Saudi, Pakistani, Indian, Jordanian, Egyptian and Gulf country military forces).

The Hellenic alliance, an important dimension of geographic partnership

The strategic regional alliance forged in recent years between Israel and two NATO members, Greece and Cyprus, is also significant in terms of Jerusalem's relations with the

⁸ "[Groundbreaking security-political cooperation between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Senegal](#)", Ministry of Public Security, 10 Dec. 2020.

organization. Cooperation in the field of energy is of course an important pillar in the tripartite alliance, especially given the current global energy crisis. For example, Israel and Cyprus are nearing a compromise regarding the Aphrodite/Yishai gas field, with high motivation on both sides of the agreement's importance for strategic cooperation. The three countries are deeply involved with the gas forum jointly initiated by Israel and Egypt (The East Mediterranean Gas Forum - EMGF). Despite US opposition, they also continue to promote, a gas pipeline project from the eastern Mediterranean Basin to southern Europe, as well as the less controversial project of connecting the power grids through an electric cable between Israel and Cyprus.

In this context, the tripartite agreement between Israel, Egypt and the European Union to export Israeli gas through Egypt to Europe should also be mentioned. Like Israel, Egypt is also a Major Non-NATO Ally and this regional cooperation with NATO members and allies strengthens Israel's position as a preferred partner of the alliance.

Warming relations with Turkey

The warming/normalizing of relations between Jerusalem and Ankara directly affects Israel's scope of action within NATO, in principle and in practice. Beyond removing barriers to Israeli participation in NATO programs, normalizing relations creates a positive working environment for Israel with all NATO members (instead of a situation where one member systematically opposes Israeli initiatives), and encourages it to expand cooperation initiatives. In other words, it is simpler for Israel to promote its own initiatives within NATO when it enjoys friendly relations with all 30 members.

The previously mentioned joint working paper between Israel and NATO reflects positions agreed upon in a forum consisting of all alliance members. In other words, each such position paper reflects the individual position, by agreement, of all members and therefore, like other NATO members, Turkey is a de facto signatory to the position paper that Israel and NATO recently issued.

Another manifestation of this normalization was the July 2022 visit to Israel of 22 members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly,⁹ who also serve as lawmakers in 12 NATO member countries, including Turkish parliament members whose attitude was described as constructive.

E. New opportunities and potential for change in Israel-NATO relations

The reboot of NATO's goals, accelerated by the war in Ukraine, expands and deepens a reform process that started some two years ago. Israeli diplomats argue that it opens a window of opportunity to deepen and expand cooperation with the alliance. Deepening the relationship on a national basis rather than a regional one and basing it on content rather than geographic scope, suits Israeli ambitions.

The Abraham Accords have opened many doors for Israel. Israel's dialogue with Arab countries has risen to a whole new level, both physically and ideologically, making the added value of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue negligible. The transition from a declining geographic-based framework to a technologically/economically/militarily stronger framework of cooperation could benefit Israel's international standing on a number of levels.

⁹ Rina Bassist, "[Israel redefines ties with NATO as security provider](#)," *Al-Monitor*, 12 July, 2022.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry now prefers to focus its efforts on forging a capacity-based relationship with NATO, detached from geographic frameworks. However, Brussels has been urging the preservation of the Mediterranean Dialogue framework, arguing that it can still offer Israel meetings with countries with which it does not have diplomatic relations, or to strengthen relations with countries with which it has diplomatic relations at one level or another.

For example, improved Israel-Egypt energy relations could also be reflected in their joint activity within NATO and their ability to cooperate with it. Meeting with the Egyptian ambassador in Brussels last July, senior NATO officials congratulated Cairo on its key role in strengthening peace and security in the Middle East and Africa, and emphasized the alliance's interest in continuing to develop cooperative training and capacity building relations with partners in the southern Mediterranean.

What is more, Morocco notwithstanding, the regional cooperation spawned by the Abraham agreements are mainly directed towards the Gulf or East Asia. Beyond the Mediterranean Dialogue, Israel does not yet have solid frameworks for formal or informal meetings with other North African countries.

To sum up, the Israeli-Arab dialogue within the NATO framework is not necessarily made redundant by the Abraham Accords. In fact, the Abraham Accords could be one of the assets that Israel brings with it into NATO, and not just as a replacement for the Mediterranean Dialogue framework.

1. **What can Israel offer NATO?**

NATO's focus on emerging technological threats opens up new opportunities for Israel to present its assets. Israeli diplomacy recognized this trend in NATO's reform from the very beginning. In fact, the reform promoted by NATO can be said to correspond to Jerusalem's new perception of its relations with the alliance and of what Israel has to offer.

In terms of its relations with NATO, Israel considers itself more similar and closer to European partners such as Switzerland, Sweden and Austria, or partners from Asia such as Australia, Japan and New Zealand. The Israeli appetite for technological and strategic cooperation with NATO resembles these countries' perception of their relations with the alliance and of the cooperation they can propose and implement. Israel considers itself a de facto part of the Western European Partners club, even if operational cooperation with NATO (at the level of real participation, not only in exercises) was never on the agenda. These parameters mean that it is a partnership of political importance for both parties.

Integrated inter-sectoral technological/business model. Israel's strength as a technological power does not depend only on Israeli technological developments. It is rooted in the Israeli business/high-tech envelop. NATO, for its part, is highly interested in the Israeli business model, that is, in the symbiotic relationship between start-up companies, academia, government, the financial arena and the security and defense agencies. Working across the board, in constant dialogue among the various systems and sectors in a flexible manner that supports and encourages business entrepreneurship even in areas that may defy imagination at first glance, is unique to Israel and of interest to alliance members.

Innovative security products and services. NATO's new areas of interest closely match Israel's technological strengths. That is, Israel can provide many of the items on NATO's

wide-ranging current and future shopping list that spans innovation in the fields of intelligence gathering and the fight against global terrorism, logistics, cyber defense, extreme climate mitigation, food security (smart agriculture), social resilience, public diplomacy, military and tele-medicine, drone technology, space, mine disposal, joint training, maritime security, and more. In the security field, NATO is highly interested in dual-use technologies and in options for changing the designations of existing weapons through reverse engineering. Dual-use technologies are a typical Israeli specialty.

NATO tends to shop at technology companies from its member states, but Brussels is increasingly aware that the organization also needs the capabilities of advanced partner states such as Switzerland, Japan, Austria and Israel.

Strategic partnership. Israel and NATO can also partner in development, joint training, mutual learning and knowledge exchange of combat and coping doctrines, and even in maneuvers and coordinated diplomatic moves together with other countries. Several delegations from Brussels have visited Israel in recent years to study Israeli strategies in crisis management (including natural crises and rescue operations), infrastructure protection (primarily cyber infrastructure) and home defense. These are issues in which Israel has developed special expertise that could also serve NATO in developing coping doctrines and joint training. Food security is yet another strategic issue of mutual interest and potential benefit.

Unlike the UN arena, for example, Israel maintains full diplomatic relations with all NATO members, and also with a considerable number of non-member partner countries. This provides potential infrastructure for building a strategic partnership in areas that are not within Israel's borders, but in its back yard. Mediterranean shipping routes is one example, although this issue is still fraught with political sensitivities. A more natural area for maneuvers and maybe even for joint diplomatic moves could be the Sahel area and the European struggle against the spread of Islamic Jihad.

Boots on the ground. Israel could serve as a security subcontractor for NATO. To the extent that NATO chooses/is required to shift its focus to the north and east, neglecting the Middle East and the Mediterranean Basin to a certain extent, strengthening cooperation with local actors could provide a good substitute. Cooperative frameworks between Israel, the Emirates, Morocco and Egypt, the channel between Turkey and Israel, the alliance between Israel and the Hellenic countries, are all collaborations that can replace NATO's efforts to promote stability and security in the region, and serve as its coordinated subcontractors (as well as of the US).

2. What can NATO offer Israel?

Israel has traditionally eyed its relationship with NATO from the perspective of the benefit it can bring to the partnership rather than the benefit it can derive from the partnership. But in fact, NATO has a lot to offer Israel, perhaps even more than Israel has to offer NATO. NATO's strengthened position as an international military and strategic player, the organization's enormous experience in the standardization of combat doctrines and equipment, and the advanced level of alliance members' capabilities, as well as those of its non-Western partners (Australia, New Zealand, Japan) in fields that are of interest to Israel, are of almost unlimited political/military/strategic/technological potential.

Diplomatic benefit. The diplomatic benefit of Israel's integration into an international/security body is clear. We have already mentioned the growing relevance of NATO vis-à-vis Russia, and perhaps also vis-à-vis China and Iran. Every NATO member

focuses on the threats it finds most troubling. As a strong NATO partner, Israel can make its voice heard on a wide range of issues and influence policy makers. NATO can serve as an additional framework for Israel to build relationships of trust and cooperation with member states, thereby mobilizing their political support in arenas outside NATO and in international institutions, as well.

Intelligence sharing. The strategic benefit for Israeli lies in expanding the circle of intelligence sharing. Iranian terrorism and its proxies, for example, are of great interest to NATO.

In general, Israel conducts intimate intelligence sharing with the Americans, and has well-established cooperation with several central European countries, but Israel shares only limited intelligence information with other NATO members on a daily basis. Expanding the circle means including Israeli assessments in NATO's assessment papers disseminated to the defense ministries of all member states, providing Israel with an excellent conduit to flood the strategic issues it deems important.

At the same time, Israel can benefit from intelligence assessments of member states that are not necessarily its natural partners. That is, beyond influencing the views of NATO countries on issues it seeks to highlight, Israel can also utilize the intelligence capabilities of NATO member states to expand its own intelligence arsenal. As mentioned, these are also core issues for Israel (Iran, drone threats, maritime security in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea), and also more “peripheral” issues, such as the activity of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Africa.

Operational benefit (Interoperability). Institutional Israel, and especially the defense system, knows how to work well with Israeli defense companies, and is used to working individually with the United States, and also with Germany and the United Kingdom. Trilateral and multilateral cooperation and systemic work with external parties (interoperability) such as NATO are not a strong point of the Israeli systems. Standardization that enables inter-systemic work is a fundamental feature of all NATO operations, operational and otherwise. Learning and including these standardization processes may contribute to the operational flexibility of the Israeli security systems. The Israel Navy, for example, is interested in adapting itself to NATO models, for both integrative domestic cooperation and work with naval forces from allied countries such as Greece and Cyprus.

Industrial-financial benefit. Integrating NATO's standardization processes could also open new markets or expand existing ones for Israel's defense industries. It is important to note that most NATO procurement is limited to the defense industries of member states, and Israel cannot benefit directly from this channel. Still, exposure to Israeli military and paramilitary equipment and technologies that conform to alliance standardization, especially to dual-use equipment (which can be converted from civilian to military use or vice versa), has been of great interest to NATO and a significant number of its members in recent years. Israeli technological developments frequently meet the definition of “dual-use” and senior NATO officials would conceivably consider opening up future procurement to unique technologies that are not developed/sold in member states.

3. Guiding principles for shaping Israel-NATO relations

Israeli proactivity

- **Israeli appetite.** NATO emphasizes that all collaborations with non-member partners are based on the non-member partnership initiative (driven demand). This formula may change to a certain extent in the process of refining the previously mentioned

tools for cooperation in favor of brainstorming between NATO and its (bilateral) partnerships to identify and consolidate areas of cooperation. Formulating one partnership document every four years instead of two is already a first milestone in this process. At the same time, there is no doubt that in order to deepen cooperation with NATO, Israel must be pro-active. The Israeli "appetite" for joint initiatives is already welcomed, and has even amazed senior NATO officials.

- **Expansion of the NATO community in Israel.** Israel's strength lies in the diverse and flexible array of the local hi-tech industry. The inclusion of entrepreneurs, academics, military experts, diplomats and other senior officials in the process of developing proposals and directions for cooperation with the alliance will expand the "NATO community" in Israel, which is currently very limited.

New and renewed arenas

- **Bolstering Western non-members' club.** NATO's evolution from a focus on geographic frameworks to other models (thematic frameworks) opens up an opportunity for Israel to join the West European partnership club or any other grouping that would include, for example, Switzerland, Austria, Ireland, alongside Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Israel considers itself a de facto member of that second club (not geographical) in terms of its capabilities, even if it is not formally recognized as such.

It should be emphasized, however, that the official accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO could weaken and even dismantle the club of non-member Western European states because of declining NATO motivation to bring the members of this group closer. If Israel is able to join this framework, it will have to help reinvent its attractiveness and its members' significant potential for the alliance.

- **Reshaping the Mediterranean dialogue.** Despite the feeling in Jerusalem that the dialogue forum is redundant in light of the other communication channels Israel is developing with Arab states, a "revitalized" forum has serious potential - both at the level of its partnerships and of the issues with which it deals. The deterioration in the Algerian and Mauritanian discourse with Israel, for example, emphasizes the need for such alternative forums. Matters such as confronting desertification and natural disasters, and water resource management, which previously did not fall under NATO's purview, are becoming priority issues in its dialogue with partner countries.
- **Highlighting potential of Abraham Accords and regional geopolitical changes for redesigning relationship.** NATO appears to have a blind spot regarding the Abraham Accords and the potential to integrate it into the geopolitical and strategic changes generated by the normalization between Israel and Arab states. The four signatories of the normalization agreements - Israel, the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco - are all non-member partners of NATO. Israel has also signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Morocco, and is promoting strategic cooperation with the Emirates and Bahrain. Still, NATO has not engaged with this process, nor has it considered these developments in shaping its policy and activity in the region. Israel should strive to establish a close synergy between NATO and the normalization countries.

The synergy can take the form of a permanent political consultation mechanism, or of cooperation in areas that are of interest to all the normalizing countries (maritime security, intelligence sharing against extremist actors, and climate change are just a few of the suggestions that come to mind).

Another example is the quadrilateral framework of Israel, the Emirates, the United States and India (I2U2). The conflict between Russia and Ukraine impacts India because of its high energy consumption. Here again, NATO is not connected to this growing cooperation framework. The Negev Forum also consists of non-member NATO partners (in addition to the US), and its goals of promoting clean energy, climate and innovation initiatives are in keeping with the alliance's new goals, too.

Adopting NATO policy

- **Alignment with NATO's position on the conflict in Ukraine.** Despite the statements about the need to stand on the right side of history, Jerusalem has stopped at a red line that is far from the NATO position led by Washington. As is the case with American policy on China, Israel must place itself clearly in the NATO camp. More generally, there is a lack of political commitment on the part of the Israeli leadership to NATO's evolving relationships – for example, no Israeli defense minister and prime minister has visited NATO headquarters in at least two decades.
- **Building an agreed mechanism for intelligence sharing within NATO.** Even before the war in Ukraine has ended, it is clear that the intelligence provided to Kiev by the Americans, the British and the French was a decisive element in the military victories against the Russians. On the other hand, there is a great thirst among the allied and partner states for intelligence assessments regarding the activity of terrorist groups on European soil and abroad, the use of remote activation technologies, and a shared dialogue based on different positions and perceptions in order to deepen the understanding of varied issues. Developing an intelligence sharing mechanism must, of course, be carried out in close coordination with the United States.

F. Summary

The 2020 presidential elections in the United States, the reform that the NATO alliance is undergoing, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the regional legitimacy that Israel now enjoys open up an exceptional opportunity for Israel to reshape its strategic relations with the North Atlantic Alliance. The NATO appetite for Israeli innovation, in addition to the benefits stemming from the Abraham Accords, allow Jerusalem to build a unique strategic relationship not only with Washington, but also with Brussels, with most EU member states and Turkey.

It is incumbent on Israel's new government to view this challenge as a high priority. Designing a closer relationship between Israel and NATO will be a significant political and security asset for Israel in dealing with the challenges it faces, including the climate and energy crises, Iran, terrorism and regional instability.