

Key role for NATO in Middle East?

COMMENTARY

By ANASTOLOS TZAMPRIS¹

NATO can play a key role in the stabilization and transformation of the Middle East. The longstanding agenda should in particular address the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. It is worth exploring not only the use of NATO training options, or dispatching NATO troops to police a full agreement, but also the possibility that Israel and a Palestinian state could simultaneously join NATO. Such an eventuality, presupposing the signature of a comprehensive peace agreement, would confer considerable benefits to all involved and have positive international and regional repercussions.

NATO has undergone substantial changes since the end of the Cold War. It has expanded its membership, promoting unconditional security and political reforms in former Soviet bloc states. It has also undertaken post-conflict peacekeeping operations in the western Balkans and Afghanistan—and a much more limited role in Iraq. No longer merely a defensive alliance, it operates under a new strategic doctrine that essentially permits action anywhere in the world. NATO's contemporary objective is to provide security, reform, democracy and post-conflict stabilization (the 1999 crisis in Kosovo probably being the last offensive action for a long time to come). In this sense, it is an organization adequately prepared to deal with Israel and Palestine, following an agreement.

Impartial international advantages would ensue from NATO's active presence in the Middle East. Although the United States retains the leading role within NATO, the alliance also includes most European Union states on its list of members. Thus, whenever NATO decides to act, transatlantic cooperation is guaranteed within an institutionalized framework, with all its concomitant benefits. US-European cooperation within the NATO framework can help pave the way for a broader EU-US role in the Middle East, based on the principle of complementarity: the Europeans focusing on their soft power capabilities and the Americans on laying their regional political and military presence.

For Israel, joining NATO would offer additional security guarantees and anchor the state



A Palestinian man gestures in front of an Israeli border policeman yesterday during a protest against Israel's barrier in the West Bank village of Beit Sufik. A key NATO role in the Middle East could help establish greater stability and improve prospects for peace.

within a military alliance that espouses similar values and principles. Furthermore, regional enemies would be warned that hostile actions (involving terrorism, conventional or even nuclear threats) will inevitably be confronted by NATO's collective political power and awesome military might. An additional (but crucial) deterrent would thus be created, helping ensure Israel's survival and safety.

For a future Palestinian state, NATO membership would be even more significant. The promise of such an outcome could act as a powerful incentive for the Palestinians to sign a comprehensive peace agreement and successfully confront extremist groups. Furthermore, joining NATO would enhance the reform and modernization processes of the new state's military forces, providing them with a new raison d'être and added prestige.

With its security effectively guaranteed and its relations with Israel improved, Palestine

should be able to concentrate its efforts on the more challenging of building a prosperous, democratic society.

A safe and stable Palestinian state, allied through NATO with Israel, should also contribute to the defusing of tensions, complications and hatreds emanating from the single conflict that is at the very heart of contemporary Middle Eastern politics.

If Israel and Palestine are invited to join NATO, a clear message would be sent to the entire Arab world. It would say that given serious commitment to regional peace, military reform and democracy, security can be guaranteed by the most powerful alliance in the history of humankind. In fact, it might become possible to envision a democratic and stabilized Iraq also knocking on NATO's door in the near future.

NATO's expansion in the Middle East will not be easy, automatic or quick. Membership is

not tantamount to a political gift, but haste to be earned. Fortunately, intermediate steps, such as Partnership for Peace and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, do exist, allowing for the gradual incorporation of Israel and Palestine into the alliance. Of course, a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement (exclusive for decades) is required for NATO to begin playing a significant regional role. However, the importance of precisely such a prospect must not be underestimated as a factor that would facilitate the peace process itself.

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