

NATO and Israel: From Cooperation to Partnership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because of its complex political and security interaction with some of its Middle East neighbors, specifically Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, Israel will not become a full member of NATO in the foreseeable future. However, Israel should strive to join the ‘NATO vision’ – adhering to common ideals and being ready to defend shared democratic values and freedom together. As The Israel Survey 2023 shows, 67% of MPs from across Europe support closer cooperation. There are numerous fields, going even beyond those explored in this paper.

It is now time for both NATO and Israel to move from small-scale, individual cooperation schemes to the formulation of a bilateral partnership strategy. Such a strategy should move away from the failed multilateral regional cooperation of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) towards a multi-year NATO+1 program encompassing key issues of mutual benefit. A closer partnership between NATO and Israel will make Europe and the Middle East safer and go a long way towards maintaining NATO’s qualitative advantage and deterrence against Europe’s enemies.

Cooperation between NATO and Israel has been developing slowly and incrementally over several decades. However, the Russo-Ukrainian War and the changing security architecture in Europe makes it imperative to expand this cooperation into a closer partnership across many fields of military and defense needs.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine substantially altered the security situation in Europe. Russia’s surprise attack against Ukraine destroyed the sense of security, stability, and lack of interstate conflict in Europe, which existed for three decades since the end of the Cold War. NATO, which only a few years ago was considered outdated or even unnecessary by many Europeans, suddenly became the central pillar of European security again.

Over the past year, many NATO armies had to retrain and relearn some of the skills of interstate war which were neglected since the 1990s. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) is larger than most European NATO armies, comparable in size to the German Federal Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) and deploys many similar weapon systems used by NATO in the air, on land, and sea. Military power consists of three components: conceptual, moral, and physical. A closer partnership with Israel would make a substantial contribution to reinforcing NATO’s military power and enhancing European security.

NATO was established in 1949 as a ‘North Atlantic’ security organization, bringing together the United States, Canada, and some Western European countries to provide collective security against the Soviet Union. Although primarily a European security organization, over the years NATO expanded its cooperation with countries outside the North Atlantic area. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, NATO was primarily concerned with the protection of Western Europe against a possible Russian invasion, while Israel was immersed in interstate conflicts with its neighboring Arab countries.

However, the increasing military cooperation between the United States and Israel in the 1970s meant that the Israeli armed forces were working closely with the largest army in NATO. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War in June 1967, the German Bundeswehr cooperated closely with the IDF to learn the operational and tactical lessons of Israel’s victory over Arab armies, which were armed with the most modern Russian weapons¹. In 1981, the United States signed a ‘Memorandum of Strategic Agreement’ with Israel to provide help in times of war and established emergency stockpiles of American arms and ammunition in Israel.²

During the 1991 Gulf War, both the US and German armed forces provided defensive missile systems to Israel against the threat of Iraqi SCUD missile attacks. But it was not until 1994 and the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and what became the Palestinian Authority that NATO established a working dialogue with Israel and its neighboring countries.

In 1994, NATO launched the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) initiative. The MD framework includes seven countries – Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania. The main aim of the dialogue was to create a basis for cooperation in the field of security. It was based on the two pillars of political dialogue and practical military cooperation.³ The Dialogue centers on an annual work program which includes military activities and scientific cooperation. However, there are vast differences between the military capabilities, needs, and interests of the seven non-NATO MD member states. These

differences hindered much of the hopes placed in the MD and meant that over time, multilateral activities (NATO+7) were mostly replaced by bilateral activities tailor-made for the needs of each country (NATO+1).

Following the terror attacks of 9/11, much of NATO’s attention was turned to the issue of counterterrorism. Operation ‘Active Endeavour’ was launched in the Mediterranean to monitor shipping activities and deter and disrupt terrorist arms smuggling and attacks. Following the 2004 NATO Istanbul Summit, Israel agreed to take part in this operation and Israeli liaison officers were stationed at NATO’s MARCOM headquarters in Northwood.⁴ At NATO’s 2010 Lisbon Summit, the new Strategic Concept was adopted which includes active involvement of MD partners.⁵ This opened the door for Israeli participation in three NATO initiatives:

- the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC)
- the NATO Training Cooperation Initiative (NTCI)
- and the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) scientific cooperation program

Israel’s participation in these NATO initiatives has been relatively low so far, but it means that for the first time Israeli and NATO officers sit together not only during temporary visits but for long-term defense capacity building and planning.

Lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War for NATO and Israel

Both NATO and the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) follow closely the developments around the Russo-Ukrainian War. The future security of Europe depends on learning the lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War, as well as from other recent interstate conflicts, and implementing them into NATO’s strategy and war plans and into the rejuvenation of the armed forces of NATO’s European member states. Two earlier wars also provide lessons to be incorporated in this learning process: the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and the 2020 second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In both these wars, Russian weapon systems and Russian

tactics were used by one side, while the other was mostly armed with Western technologies.

Learning and analyzing the lessons from these wars is crucial now for European NATO member states, and especially Germany, to make the right decisions on expanding and reinforcing their Armed Forces. The experience of the IDF, through many decades of warfare in every level of conflict, can play a major role in assisting NATO and its members to make the best use of resources now committed to improving Europe's military capabilities.

Three main lessons are relevant to this process:

1. Air power does not win wars

Air power is the single most expensive element in modern armies. At the outbreak of the Ukraine war, Russia possessed the world's largest air force, with several thousand modern fighter and bomber aircraft. However, this vast numerical advantage over the Ukrainians did not give the Russians the victory they were hoping to achieve within a couple of weeks. Instead, Russian air power was decimated by effective Ukrainian tactical use of portable anti-aircraft missiles, simple to use and to train. A similar

lesson was learnt by the IDF in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, where overwhelming Israeli air superiority was not translated into victory on the ground.

Analysis of the future role of airpower is critical for NATO armies to make the correct decisions over spending annually increased budgets. A modern jet fighter, such as the American F-35, can cost up to \$100 million each.⁶ On the other hand, missiles which can shoot down this fighter aircraft cost only a few hundred thousand dollars. Unmanned drones can cost as little as a few thousand dollars each but can conduct many of the military tasks assigned to manned fighter aircraft costing 1,000 times more.⁷ Decisions on the role of airpower will determine much of the use of new budgets provided for the Bundeswehr and other European armies in the coming decade. NATO and Israel should explore together in depth their future requirements in air power to ensure that decisions taken today will provide the most effective solutions for the military threats of the coming decade.

2. Civilian areas as battlefronts and missile defense

The old traditional distinction between a battlefield,

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IRON DOME

The Israeli 'Iron Dome' anti-missile system has provided defense for Israeli cities against short and medium range rocket attacks for almost a decade. This system is so fine-tuned that it concentrates on shooting down rockets which would hit urban areas while giving secondary priority to rockets which would hit empty uninhabited areas, thus preserving critical capabilities to the prevention of civilian casualties.

DAVID'S SLING

The Israeli 'David's Sling' anti-missile system is designed to shoot down medium and long-range missiles fired at Israeli targets at distances of up to 300km. Recently, David's Sling missiles successfully shot down heavy rockets fired from Gaza against Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

ARROW

The Israeli 'Arrow' anti-strategic missile system, now in its third generation (Arrow III), is designed to shoot down long-range strategic missiles in the stratosphere and beyond. The Arrow system is based on massive radars, known as 'Great Pines', capable of detecting missile launches thousands of kilometers away. It has been successfully tested over many years and now serves operationally in the IDF.

where soldiers are fighting, and civilian areas which remain immune from direct impact of the conflict is not existent in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Russia's invasion of Ukraine meant that every city, every town, and every civilian infrastructure facility became a target for long-range missile attacks. In any future NATO conflict in Europe, cities, and the civilian population will be as much a target as military forces.

In this field of protecting civilian areas, commonly referred to as the 'Home Front', Israel has uniquely extensive and very successful experience. For over a decade, Israeli cities are regularly being targeted by massive rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip. Israeli cities in the north were also the target of missile attacks by Hezbollah from Lebanon. In order to counter these threats to the civilian population, Israel developed a multilayer anti-missile defense architecture. This is based on three types of anti-missile systems, covering short, medium, and long-range attacks (see box).

The Israeli 'cake-layer' approach to missile defense, with the most effective and battle tested weapons, can fulfill a major NATO strategic requirement of stopping Russian missile attacks against European cities and key targets.⁸

3. The role of unmanned and autonomous weapon systems

In the early 1980s, the IDF began to deploy a uniquely innovative type of new weapon – the drone. In its most basic form, the drone was developed as a small, simple aircraft piloted electronically from a distance. Eliminating the need for a pilot inside the aircraft not only made the aircraft much smaller but it also meant that the loss of an aircraft did not mean the loss of a highly trained pilot. Instead, the pilots sit in a mobile wagon tens or hundreds of kilometers away, steering the aircraft and performing all combat functions as though they were on board.

Israel is the world leader in unmanned aircraft technology and its drones played a role in every recent war and conflict in the region. Israeli drones were also exported to several NATO armies, including the Bundeswehr, which leases Israeli HERON drones for

its operations in Africa and beyond.⁹ In 2022, the German Bundestag decided, after many years of intense political debates, to upgrade the drones with ammunition.¹⁰

In their attacks against Ukraine, Russian forces use hundreds of drones, many of them provided by Iran. In response, the Ukrainian army is deploying drones, even very small and simple ones, to attack Russian forces from the air.¹¹ More recently, we see the development of tactical drone swarm attacks, involving tens or even hundreds of drones together.¹² Such an attack can overwhelm defensive capabilities because even if some of the drones are shot down or destroyed, others will reach their targets. The field of unmanned autonomous drones is of great concern to both NATO and Israel. Closer cooperation in this field, not only in technological developments but also in tactical planning, training, and countermeasures, would provide great benefits for the future security of Europe and Israel.

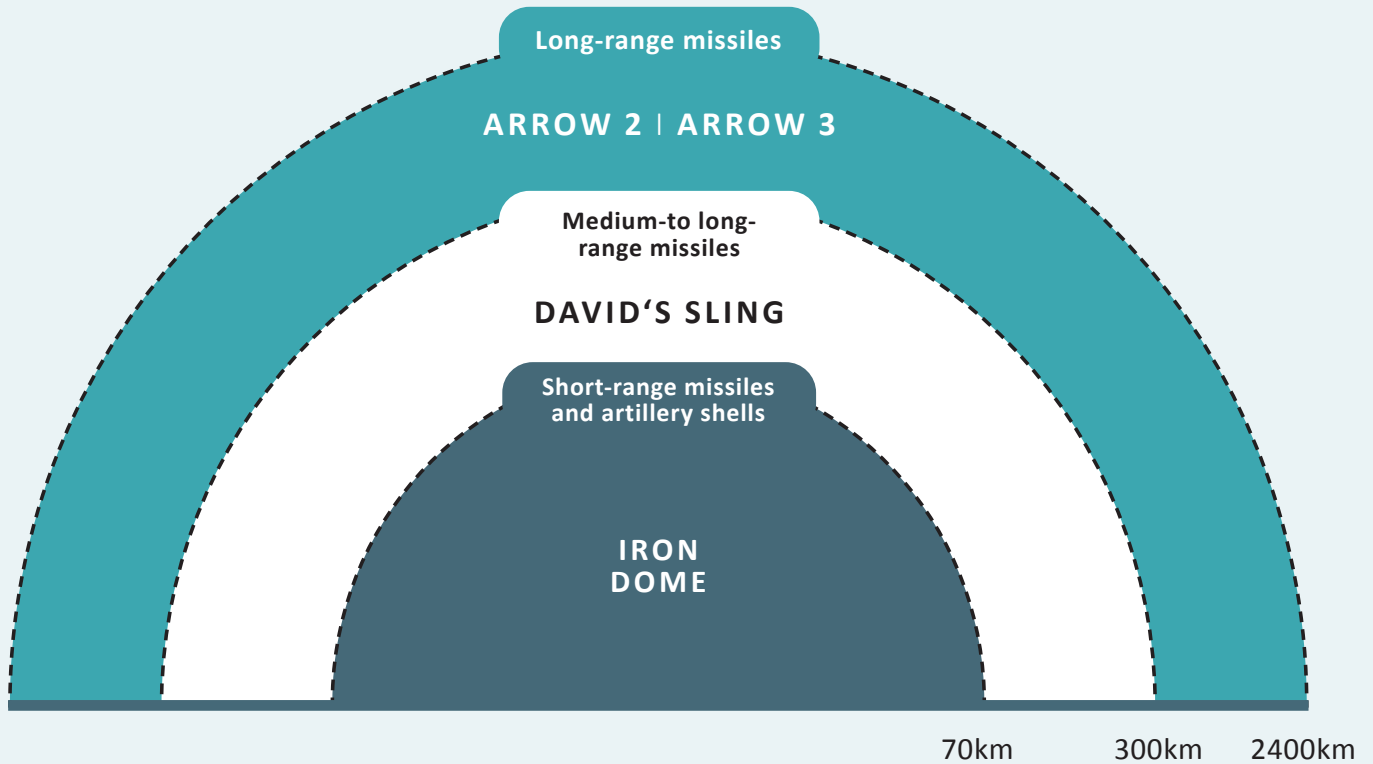
The importance of democracy for security

Wars are fought by people, not only by weapons. The human will to fight, to defend, and even to make the ultimate sacrifice is an essential element in winning wars even when confronted with an overwhelmingly superior enemy. In every interstate war that Israel had to fight, it faced enemies with much larger armies, yet the morale and the sacrifice of soldiers and civilians made the difference between defeat and victory. The same is happening now in Ukraine.

The Russian military had a great superiority in every type of armament when it invaded Ukraine but the soldiers serving these weapons were unmotivated and disheartened. They faced Ukrainians armed with smaller amounts of older and less effective weapons but with a huge motivation to defend their country. The results of the Ukrainian sacrifice are clearly seen each day at the battlefronts pushing the mighty Russian army back. Experience clearly shows that soldiers fighting for democracy and freedom are far more effective than those pressed into service by totalitarian regimes.

NATO is not only a military organization but has also

ISRAELI AIR DEFENSE SYSTEMS



a substantial political dimension and framework. Democracy and democratic principles are as important for security as tanks and aircraft since they provide the moral basis for the men and women fighting to defend their country and freedoms. As Israel shares these democratic values with NATO member states, the alliance should strive for an increased participation of Israel in its political forums and democracy support initiatives as well. Cooperation in this field will also have the added benefit of closer personal interaction between political decision-makers in NATO and in Israel, as well as those in neighboring countries of the Middle East. It is especially important for NATO to push for the resumption of Turkish-Israeli security cooperation, especially in naval matters where both countries have common interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In this way, NATO could play a major role in decreasing

the political tension between Turkey and Israel which has so far hindered some aspects of NATO-Israeli cooperation. In parallel, NATO could use the framework of the Abraham Accords to support close cooperation within the fields of defense and security between Israel and the four Arab signatory states.¹³

Logistics, stockpiling, and war economics

While many experts thought it would be over in weeks, the Russo-Ukrainian War is now well into its second year. To defend their country, the Ukrainian forces use and consume huge amounts of war supplies, ammunition of every type, weapon spare parts, maintenance, and other logistics. Some NATO member states virtually strip their ammunition stocks bare while sending much needed shells and missiles to Ukraine. European defense industries, which scaled down their production in recent decades,

cannot supply ammunition fast enough to fulfill the need of Ukrainian forces. For example, sometimes the Ukrainian army uses as many artillery shells in a few days as are produced in the US in a month.¹⁴

The IDF has extensive experience in wartime logistics, stockpiling of war material, and working with industry to scale up production in times of need, while maintaining a wide ecological and societal safety margin. Climate-controlled emergency storage facilities in Israel provide logistical preparations for a long-term war.¹⁵ Effective maintenance of aircraft, tanks and fighting vehicles, artillery, and especially of reserve weapon systems is crucial in the ability to conduct a protracted war. Working together with Israel, NATO can increase its logistical war preparations based on realistic battle needs and on strict environmental standards.

Conclusion

Over the years, NATO developed several types of partnerships with non-member states all over the world. Some of those are multilateral: the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) which includes both member states and countries in the Balkans and Asia, the Mediterranean Dialogue discussed above, and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) which includes countries in the Arabian Gulf. In addition to that, NATO created individual 'Global Partnerships' with countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Australia, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, and Pakistan. Due to its unique potential, NATO's cooper-

ation with Israel can also be conducted within multilateral initiatives but should have a strong bilateral character.

There is clearly strong political support in Europe for closer NATO-Israel cooperation. The Israel Survey 2023, a study among members of 17 European parliaments, shows that defense is among the top political priorities for closer bilateral cooperation with Israel. In addition, 67 percent of European members of parliaments would support closer cooperation between NATO and Israel.¹⁶ Next to the issues mentioned above, other fields of new potential NATO-Israel partnerships could include:

- Public diplomacy and strategic communication
- Cyber and hybrid warfare
- Climate change and migration
- Officer and leadership training
- Joint maintenance and sharing logistical facilities of expensive to maintain aircraft and land weapon systems

Beyond its tangible value in enhancing NATO military power, closer cooperation with Israel increases the confidence of NATO commanders and soldiers in the effectiveness of their own weapons and tactics, boosting morale and enhancing the human element of defense preparations and training. A new phase in the relations between NATO and Israel should be initiated aiming to formulate a deeper bilateral partnership strategy which would encompass a NATO+1 multi-year agenda.

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