



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

NATO 2030 and the “South”

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,909, January 31, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel is a key partner in NATO’s effort to strengthen its presence in the so-called “South.” As the alliance tries to find ways to remain relevant and better respond to security challenges, its relationship with Jerusalem is growing closer than ever. In December 2020, the Greek-led task group for the NATO operation Sea Guardian conducted training with the Israeli Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean. More importantly, the Abraham Accords have created new dynamics with the potential to allow closer collaboration between NATO and regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Ten years after a [group of experts chaired by Madeleine K. Albright](#) laid the groundwork for what would be called NATO’s Active Engagement, Modern Defense strategic concept, another study group has offered its analysis and recommendations to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg for his 2030 [vision](#). Thomas de Maizière and Wess Mitchell led the initiative, which culminated in the publication of a special report on November 25, 2020. [As Stoltenberg stated a few days later](#), NATO’s priorities are to remain a strong military alliance, enhance its political capital, and employ a more global approach. NATO’s Ministers of Foreign Affairs discussed the NATO 2030 project on December 1-2, 2020, and it is expected that the [new strategic concept](#) will be adopted at the 2021 summit.

The [NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#) report includes several proposals on a variety of themes, including Russia, China, outer space, pandemics, green defense, energy security, terrorism, and more. Some pages are devoted to the so-called “South.”

The phrase “Southern Flank” is of historical significance. At the beginning of the 1950s, NATO formulated a strategy involving Greece, Italy, and Turkey to

integrate them into the Western defense system and contain the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era the phrase is still in use, but is often replaced by the "South," which encompasses the Mediterranean Basin along with Portugal and Mauritania. Developments in Africa and the Middle East are of interest to the alliance due their proximity to the southern region.

NATO's strategy vis-à-vis the South has been facilitated by instruments like the Mediterranean Dialogue, which was launched in 1994. Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia are engaging in discussions with the alliance to cement security in the Mediterranean. In 2017, NATO intensified its effort by establishing the Hub for the South in Naples, and the following year it announced [a package to project stability](#).

However, while NATO has managed to consolidate its presence in the Balkans with the membership of countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia, it has not scored similar successes in other parts of the South. The efficiency of NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya, for instance, [is debatable](#), and it is represented in Syria only via the Turkish military involvement there. Spats among member states, notably Greece and France on the one hand and Turkey on the other, have caused serious cohesion problems.

The NATO 2030: United for a New Era report envisages a holistic understanding of security for both the East and the South to address "the growing presence of Russia, and to a lesser extent China" in parallel with traditional threats and new risks. In so doing, it advises the careful management of differences among allies and a better definition of the relationship between multiple frameworks and activities. It considers collaboration with NATO partners crucial.

In that regard, the role of Israel is highly significant. Cooperation ranges from cyber defense, efforts to counter the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction, and intelligence related to the fight against terrorism. A few weeks ago, Commander of NATO Maritime Command Vice Admiral Keith Blount [said](#), "Israel has been an important partner to NATO for more than 20 years as well as an active member of [the] Mediterranean Dialogue." He made the remarks after the completion of a training exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean between Israel and a Greek-led task group for the current NATO operation Sea Guardian. The Greek frigate Spetsai and the Bulgarian Smeli linked up with Israeli maritime units Lahav and Romah to go through challenging medical evacuation and search and rescue scenarios. As part of the scenario, air units transported personnel simulating injury to a local Israeli hospital.

Above all, the new political dynamics in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean will have to be carefully assessed by NATO if it is to promote a stable South in the coming years. The normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain creates new possibilities for the alliance's engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council. This is also true of NATO's coordination with the African Union following the recognition of Israel by Sudan and Morocco. The Abraham Accords have the potential to usher in a new period that goes beyond benefits for the signatories themselves to the future interaction between NATO and regional organizations.

Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos is a BESA Research Associate and Lecturer at the European Institute of Nice and the Democritus University of Thrace.