

**Israel and the Challenge of
Multilateral Security Governance:
From Resistance to Cautious
Engagement**

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Changing Multilateralism: the EU as a Global-regional Actor in Security and Peace, or EU-GRASP in short, is an EU funded FP7 Programme. EU-GRASP aims to contribute to the analysis and articulation of the current and future role of the EU as a global actor in multilateral security governance, in a context of challenged multilateralism, where the EU aims at “effective multilateralism”. This project therefore examines the notion and practice of multilateralism in order to provide the required theoretical background for assessing the linkages between the EU’s current security activities with multi-polarism, international law, regional integration processes and the United Nations system.

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Understanding Israeli Approaches to Multilateral Security Governance.....	2
Israel's Security Doctrine	2
Negative Experience of Multilateralism within the United Nations	5
Regional Experience	5
The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks 1991-1996	6
The Barcelona Process	7
Changing views on Multilateral Security Governance - The Emerging Israeli Debate	8
Israel and NATO	10
Conclusion	12
References	12

Israel and the Challenge of Multilateral Security Governance: From Resistance to Cautious Engagement¹

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Introduction

The challenges to peace and security today are predominantly global. While these challenges are not new, they are taking place within a changing geo-political and geo-strategic context and have far-reaching effects. Security is no longer defined as simply military threats to the territorial integrity of the state. In an age marked by an increasing interconnectedness across multiple dimensions, security challenges are now seen as encompassing a wider range of potential threats, ranging from economic and environmental issues to human rights and migration, and leading to a single conceptual framework to approaching global security – the idea of human security.

These new security threats require complex and collective responses. Our changing understanding of security has resulted in the development of new encompassing strategies that need to be undertaken by international actors. States do not possess the capacity to manage alone these new challenges that increasingly transcend their sovereignty. They are increasingly forced to cooperate through the development of multilateral institutions and regional cooperative security structures. The development of global and regional cooperative security structures has enabled states to meet common threats by fostering a political dialogue of shared concerns, through the sharing of information, and the coordination of common strategies and policies.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at an EU-GRASP workshop in July 2009 hosted by UNU-CRIS.

Multilateral security governance has increasingly become a central pillar in the security doctrine of states. States work within multilateral structures to advance their national interests. Israel, however, has limited diplomatic and policy experience with multilateralism. Israel remains rooted in its traditional approach of managing its foreign and security relations on a bilateral basis. There is a deep-seated belief that bilateralism ensures greater opportunities and freedom of action. Its foreign security relations have focused on developing close cooperation with the United States, in particular, and with key European states, especially the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Israel, however, is largely absent from the multilateral security frameworks within which those states operate.

The political and security establishment in Israel maintains a largely negative and skeptical outlook on multilateral security governance. Israeli officials point to the shortcomings and limitations of multilateral cooperation and multilateral governance. It is only in recent years that a limited debate has emerged in Israeli policy making circles on the importance and necessity of engaging with multilateral security structures.

This paper has two aims. First, it will outline the factors behind Israeli thinking and its approach to multilateral security governance. Second, it discusses the emerging debate within Israel on the importance of multilateral security governance, focusing in particular on the increasing interest within the security establishment on fostering closer ties with NATO. At a later stage, a number of ideas will be developed about how the value of multilateral security governance can be promoted within Israel, and on the potential role of the European Union in supporting such efforts.

Understanding Israeli Approaches to Multilateral Security Governance

Israel's Security Doctrine

Robert Kagan, in the widely publicized essay *Power and Weakness*, wrote:

On the all-important question of power — the efficacy of power, the morality of power, the desirability of power — American and European perspectives are diverging. Europe is turning away from power, or to put it a little differently, it is moving beyond power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and

transnational negotiation and cooperation. It is entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Kant's "Perpetual Peace." The United States, meanwhile, remains mired in history, exercising power in the anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable and where true security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might. That is why on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus (Kagan, 2002).

Kagan could well have been referring to the differing perspectives between Israel and Europe on the management of power in international relations. In the competition over the use of material power and pre-emptive practices, and the utility of normative power and cooperative practices, Israel places itself firmly within Kagan's description of the American school of thought. For many in Israel the projection of normative power and cooperative practices is dismissed as an expression of weakness. In particular, the European emphasis on multilateral security governance is seen in Israel as resulting from Europe's lack of will and capacity to act on the global stage.

Israel's security doctrine is based on three core principles, which have guided its policies since the founding years of the state: the focus on self-reliance and autonomy over the use of military force; the importance of maintaining a qualitative military superiority over the Arab states; and the principle of cumulative deterrence.²

Self-reliance: Israel is highly dependent on the outside world. The continuously high level of American foreign and military aid is critical to ensuring Israel's economic prosperity, and in maintaining the strength of its armed forces. At the same time, Israel is untrusting of the international community. Israel places little faith on pledges of political or military support from other states. The experience of the Holocaust and Balaam's prophecy of '*a people that dwells alone*' (Numbers 23:9) are central components of Israeli security discourse and the construction of a Jewish national identity. The experience of the Yom Kippur War, when European states blocked the resupply of essential military equipment, and the unwillingness of many states to acknowledge the policy dilemmas Israel faces in seeking to protect its citizens from Palestinian terrorism, only reinforce the dominant Israeli security discourse that it can only rely on itself to ensure its survival.

The pursuit of strategic partners has always been an important element of Israel's security policy. But this desire has been tempered by concerns that any binding alliances might constrain its decision-making and limit its freedom of military action. Discussions on the upgrading of the

² For an overall discussion of Israel's security doctrine see Maoz (2006) and Yaniv (1987).

strategic understandings with the United States and the idea of a US-Israel defense pact have been countered by concerns over the potential constraints over Israeli independence to embark on military operations. For Israel, such potential constraints have always outweighed the benefits of an alliance. The prevailing view is that Israel gains more from informal ties and defense cooperation, and that it would only lose from entering into binding alliance obligations with other states.

Qualitative superiority:

A Nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice core values if it wishes to avoid war and, is able, if challenged to maintain them by victory in such a war (Walter Lippmann)

Israel sees itself living in a hostile environment surrounded by enemies possessing larger populations, greater natural resources and material wealth. For Israel, the Arab states have never accepted its legitimacy and reconciled themselves to its right to exist. Given the opportunity, the Arab states would seek to destroy Israel. For Israelis, security is an existential threat.

Accordingly, Israel has sought a qualitative military advantage to offset the quantitative advantages of the Arab states and to enhance its deterrent position. This has demanded the maintenance of a highly trained, well-equipped military. The need to acquire, upgrade and to develop its own sophisticated weapon systems has guided much of Israel's foreign relations over the past sixty years. Lippmann's classic, though narrow, definition of security reflects the view of most Israelis, who have been socialized to think of security primarily in military terms. Israel is a highly militarized society. Defense expenditure comprises a significant proportion of the state budget. Israel maintains a conscript army with a large, active reserve component and its political leaders are validated in Israeli society by their military credentials.

Cumulative Deterrence: at the heart of Israel's military doctrine is the idea of deterrence and of affecting the cost-benefit calculations of Arab states from attacking Israel. Cumulative deterrence requires both *capacity*, i.e. the maintenance of a qualitative military superiority, combined with the *will* to use overwhelming force against neighboring Arab states in limited operations and in massive military encounters. The centrality of deterrence in Israel's security doctrine necessitates that Israel maintains its autonomy in decisions over the use of military force.

Negative Experience of Multilateralism within the United Nations

Israeli views on multilateral institutions have been clouded by its experience within the United Nations. The almost automatic majority that the Arab states have been able to muster has turned the United Nations into little more than a diplomatic battleground for Israel. The 1975 UN General Assembly resolution denouncing 'Zionism as Racism' remains a defining moment for Israel. United Nations meetings and conferences such as the 2001 Durban World Conference against Racism and the follow-up Review Conference (held in April 2009) have become stages for the launching of anti-Zionist, if not anti-Semitic, rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing Israel's very existence.

The Arab states have also acted to ensure that Israel was the only member state consistently denied admission into a regional group by preventing Israel's membership into its natural geopolitical grouping, the Asian Regional Group. Israel was only accepted into the Western and Others Group (WEOG) in 2000. Israel was only granted admission to WEOG in New York, but remained excluded from the UN regional group systems outside of New York. As a result, Israel is unable to participate in UN Geneva-based activities and at the UN centers in Vienna and Nairobi. In June 2007, Rony Adam, the head of the Israeli foreign ministry's U.N department, was elected to head the UN Committee for Program and Coordination, the first time in the organization's history that an Israeli official had been selected to lead a committee. The cumulative effect of the exploitation by Arab states of UN meetings to launch attacks on Israel and the exclusion of Israel from UN activities has contributed significantly to the prevailing negative views on multilateralism. It has also left Israeli officials and policy-makers bereft of any real professional experience of the dynamics and the workings of multilateral governance within the United Nations.

Regional Experience

The bedrock of multilateralism is regional based multilateral institutions. Israel's experiences in the two regional initiatives to which it has been a partner have impacted upon Israeli thinking as to the value and potential contribution of multilateral governance.

The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Peace Talks 1991-1996³

The 1991 Madrid Conference created a set of multilateral talks designed to bring together Israel, its immediate Arab neighbors, and the wider circle of Arab states in the Gulf and Maghreb to discuss issues of mutual concern. The multilateral talks comprised five working groups: arms control and regional security (ACRS); regional and economic development (REDWG); water resources; the environment; and refugees. These multilateral talks provided Israel and the Arab world with a diplomatic environment to engage in low-risk communication and develop new forms of cooperation, and to think collectively about new regional cooperative security structures.

Through the multilateral process, the states of the Middle East began to develop a set of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures to govern the nature of their future relations. The Working Group on the Environment drew up the Bahrain Environmental Code of Conduct for the Middle East, while the efforts of the parties in the 'conceptual basket' of the ACRS working group were engaged in drafting a Declaration of Principles to cover regional security issues.

The multilaterals also began to lay the foundations for a new set of regional institutions, such as a desalinization research center in Oman, environmental training centers in Jordan and Bahrain, and a proposed regional security center in Amman. Of particular significance was the establishment of the REDWG secretariat in Amman. The creation of this secretariat placed responsibility for driving the process of regional cooperation in the hands of the regional parties themselves. Although embryonic in its nature and functioning, the REDWG secretariat in Amman reflected the first tentative steps towards the fashioning of new common structures of cooperation, coordination, and decision-making in the Middle East, and a regional institution in which officials worked together on a daily basis. Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian officials worked together in drawing up the blueprint for a new Middle East Development Bank.

The multilaterals were short lived and, despite the achievements highlighted above, were subject to a number of shortcomings. They were not truly regional and the participation of many Arab states was more symbolic than substantive. They were reluctant to engage fully with Israel in developing new cooperative regional security structures. The multilaterals also became the arena for an intense rivalry between Israel and Egypt, with the Egyptians intent on slowing the speed of Israel's integration and normalization of its relations in the region. The meetings ran into a number of

³ For a full discussion of the multilateral talks see: Peters (1996).

difficulties and were suspended at the end of 1996 when the Arab countries refused to further participate in protest over the impasse in negotiations on the redeployment of Israeli troops from Hebron, and were never resumed.

The demise of the multilaterals cannot be attributed solely to Arab reluctance to engage with Israel. Israel was more interested in utilizing the multilaterals as a means of developing bilateral ties with the Arab world rather than truly developing new multilateral cooperative ventures. It also overplayed the issue of normalization by sending large, high-profile delegations to the plenary sessions hosted by Gulf and Maghreb states, intended for domestic consumption. With the election of Binyamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister in May 1996, Israel lost all interest in the multilaterals. Netanyahu ridiculed Shimon Peres' vision of a New Middle East as naïve and illusory and saw little Israeli interest in maintaining these talks.

The multilaterals also suffered from a failure of political leadership. The United States provided little leadership or commitment to these talks. From the outset the European Union saw its participation in the multilaterals as a way of being sidelined by the Americans and Israel from any substantive engagement in the bilateral negotiations and the peace process. With the suspension of the multilaterals in 1996, it concentrated its regional initiatives within the Barcelona Process (The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) and saw little reason to encourage the Arab states to re-engage in the multilateral talks.

The Barcelona Process

Israel's negative experience in the multilateral talks quickly spilled over into the meetings of the Barcelona Process. From the outset difficulties emerged in determining the agenda for the meetings on political and security cooperation. All proposals put forward by the Europeans were immediately vetoed by the Arab states, which, despite putting their signatures to the Barcelona Declaration, were unwilling to cooperate with Israel on matters related to security and confidence building measures (Heller, 2003). Furthermore the Arab states were unwilling to host any of the meetings in this area because of the participation of Israel. Just as many of the Arab countries had agreed to participate in the multilateral talks at the behest of the United States, so Arab participation in the Barcelona process was related more to the furthering of their bilateral interests with Europe than their eagerness to engage with Israel in cooperative ventures at the regional level.

The hopes that Israel and the Arab world would be prepared to engage in regional dialogue within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership did not constitute part of the strategic thinking of the Arab partner states to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Nor did it comprise part of Israel's strategic calculations.

Israel greeted the Barcelona Process with a large degree of skepticism and indifference. Israel initially saw the Barcelona Process as a forum that might contribute to the development of its bilateral relations with the countries of the Maghreb. But the broader security concerns of the European Union within the Mediterranean region were of little interest to Israel. Israel viewed Europe's agenda in the Mediterranean, namely the fear of instability in North Africa and illegal migration, as of little concern. Above all, there was a worry in Israeli policy circles that despite its assertions to the contrary, Europe would exploit the Barcelona Process to gain influence in the Middle East process. With its long-standing suspicions about Europe's neutrality and its pro-Arab tendencies, there was concern in Jerusalem that the Euro-Mediterranean meetings would develop into a forum where Israel would be outnumbered and besieged. Israel's fears were soon realized. With the collapse of the peace process in 2000, meetings within the Barcelona framework began to focus more on the immediate diplomatic efforts to contain the violence and restart negotiations than on the long-term aims of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The meetings became a forum in which the Arab states sought to attack Israel and garner the support of the Europeans (Peters, 2006).

Changing views on Multilateral Security Governance - The Emerging Israeli Debate

Recent years have witnessed a shift in Israeli thinking of the importance of multilateral security governance and of engaging with the international community, and especially with NATO and the European Union, and of enhancing Israel's participation in cooperative security ventures. Several factors account for this change.

1. Changing conceptions of Israeli security and the utility of force: Eight years of fighting Palestinian insurgency, the seemingly endless cycle of action and reaction, the degeneration of the Palestinian political environment and the recent military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza have led to a rethinking in Israeli policy circles. It has led to a questioning of the utility of military force, by itself, to meet the security challenges Israel faces, and the need to look for the support of the international community to help meet those challenges. A debate is developing in Israel as to the possible advantages of international force as part of future efforts to bring about an end to the violence, and to secure any agreement reached with the Palestinians (Gal and Peters, 2009). A recent poll conducted by the Centre for Study of European Politics and Society at Ben Gurion University revealed a growing willingness among the Israeli public to consider such options and that almost two-thirds of Israeli Jews support sending NATO troops to the West Bank in a peacekeeping capacity.

2. Awareness of the importance of multilateralism: There is growing realization within Israel that multilateralism has become an essential, if not an inescapable, component of international life, and that multilateral cooperation provides domestic and international legitimacy, burden sharing and access to knowledge and information. The argument of Charles Krauthammer, that there are situations in which '*even the most ardent unilateralist*' would opt for multilateral solutions, has found a resonance in Israeli thinking. The election of President Obama has resulted in renewed emphasis on promoting multilateralism and multilateral institutions in American foreign policy, thereby making the distinctions between America and Europe, as described by Kagan, now appear irrelevant. Israeli policy makers are aware that they need to adapt to this changing reality.

The emerging focus on multilateral security governance is driven by the promotion of Israeli national self-interest, especially with respect to influencing international policies towards the Middle East. There is a growing awareness in Israel that international actions towards Iran will be conducted within a multilateral framework and that Israel needs to engage directly so as to influence that process. Multilateralism, and the promotion of new regional cooperative frameworks, are also likely to feature prominently in renewed efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The creation of the Quartet and the central role played by European states in the aftermath of the 2006 war in Lebanon, and endorsed by the U.S., further reflects the burgeoning relationship of close EU-

U.S. cooperation, consultation and coordination on the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is a process that will only be strengthened in the coming years.

Israel and NATO

The clearest sign of the change in Israeli thinking about multilateral security governance can be gleaned from the growing interest in developing ties with NATO. Cooperation between NATO and Israel was first developed within the framework of the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Algeria). But the potentially developing cooperation was limited by the cautious approach adopted by the Arab partners who dictated the overall pace of the collective dialogue. At the 2004 Istanbul Summit NATO leaders called for upgrading the Mediterranean Dialogue into a 'genuine partnership'. Israel was quick to meet this call. It immediately opened discussions with NATO with the intent of a developing an international cooperation program (ICP), which Israel and NATO finalized in October 2006. The ICP essentially institutionalized the emerging bilateral cooperation in a number of areas following the Istanbul Summit. This cooperation consisted of, *inter alia*:

- Israeli participation in NATO naval maneuvers in the Black Sea and NATO infantry exercises in Ukraine;
- NATO and Israel had reached an agreement on the modalities for Israel's contribution to NATO's naval counter-terrorism operation in the Mediterranean Sea (Operation Active Endeavour), stationing an Israeli naval officer at the Operation's headquarters in Naples, Italy;
- Israel had previously announced its intentions to place its Home Front Command Search and Rescue unit at NATO's disposal for civilian emergencies;
- Israel joined the NATO cataloguing system. The agreement, signed in June 2006, granted Israel associate membership in the system and the possibility of full membership within three years.

Yet, at the meeting marking the signing of the ICP, Oded Eran, Israel's representative to NATO, revealed that the final outcome fell short of Israel's expectations, noting that the potential for Israeli-NATO cooperation was vast and that Israel sought *'an upgrade that will enable a more robust*

realization of this potential' (my italics).

In recent years, a number of high profile conferences on Israeli-NATO ties have been hosted at Israeli universities (at the Centre for the Study of European Politics and Society at Ben Gurion University, the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel-Aviv University and Institute for Policy and Strategy, IDC Herzelia). Israeli-NATO relations have featured prominently at the annual Herzelia security conference, a conference that has taken center stage for the articulation of Israel's national security policy. In 2004 the Atlantic Forum of Israel, comprising politicians, former security officials, representatives of the business community and academics, was established. The Atlantic Forum acts as a quasi-lobbying group for promoting Israeli-NATO ties in Israel and in Brussels.

Advocates of closer Israeli-NATO ties cut across party lines. A number of leading public figures have lent their support to fostering Israeli-NATO ties. In October 2007, Tzipi Livni, Israel's former foreign minister and leader of the Kadima Party, speaking at a seminar organized by the Atlantic Forum of Israel, announced that Israel wanted to be included in NATO's Partnership for Peace framework. For Livni, Israel's efforts to upgrade relations with NATO were part of its broader foreign policy to *bolster Israel's multilateral diplomacy* (my italics).⁴ Moreover, Israel's current foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, is on record calling for Israel to join both NATO and the European Union.

Two of most influential advocates of fostering ties with NATO are Uzi Arad, a long-time strategic advisor to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and recently appointed to head Israel's National Security Council, and Oded Eran, a veteran Israeli diplomat who now heads the Institute for National Security Studies, Israel's leading security think-tank. In a paper delivered to the Herzelia security conference in 2007, Arad and Eran presented 'a broad conceptual framework that sets out a new and explicit strategic direction for Israel's foreign relations – *deepening both Israel's association with the Atlantic community and its multilateral diplomacy.*' They argued forcefully that Israel needs to recognize the emerging global multilateral order and that multilateralism should become a 'serious and carefully considered option for Israel'. For Arad, Eran and Steiner, 'the

⁴ <http://www.nato.int/med-dial/2007/071022-nato-israel.pdf>

importance of further expanding and institutionalizing NATO-Israel relations cannot be exaggerated' (Arad, Eran and Steiner, 2007).

Conclusion

The impact of the debate over Israel's membership of NATO should not be over exaggerated. Israeli policy-makers have yet to articulate any comprehensive strategy in this respect. Self-reliance, deterrence and the use of military force remain the dominant themes in Israel's security discourse. At the same time, that Israeli decision-makers and senior policy analysts are becoming more actively interested in multilateral security governance reflects a sea change in Israeli thinking. It mirrors a more developed thinking about deepening Israel's relations with the European Union (Pardo and Peters, 2009).

Discussions on the value and importance of multilateral security governance are gaining increasing attention in Israel. Proponents of these ideas need to be supported by members of the international community. Here the European Union has a critical role to play. It should open up avenues for a strategic dialogue with Israel about ideas of multilateral governance and new regional cooperative security arrangements. Those discussions should be part of a broader regional framework in the context of a renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Peters, 2009). It also requires the Europeans to press the Arab world to engage with Israel in thinking about new cooperative security frameworks. Without such a dialogue, multilateral security governance will remain on the margins of Israeli security thinking.

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