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Speech

by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at an event jointly organized by the Institute for National Security Studies and the Atlantic Forum of Israel

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of my wife and my delegation, let me first of all give a warm thank the Institute of National Strategic Studies and the Atlantic Forum of Israel for co-hosting this event, as it was said, in cooperation with NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. Both institutions have been instrumental in bringing NATO and Israel closer together, and I am very grateful for this opportunity to address you here today.

As you know next April NATO will celebrate its 60th anniversary. And that makes NATO almost exactly one year younger than the state of Israel.

Now, if a state turns 60, that is considered to be a rather young age. By contrast, if an Alliance of states turns 60, people consider this to be a very old age. And it easy to see why. Classical alliances were forged to deal with a specific threat, and once that threat had been overcome or defeated, they dissolved again. Alliances were short-term marriages of convenience, without a long life-expectancy.

NATO is different. First, it is a permanent Alliance.

When NATO was founded just four years after the Second World War, it encapsulated a fundamental lesson of that war: the lesson that Europe and North America not only shared a common heritage and common values, but also a common future.

Second, NATO was never just a military Alliance to deal with a singular threat. Of course, the shadow of Soviet military power loomed large at NATO's founding in 1949. But the logic of alliance went beyond the logic of immediate military protection.

NATO gave a politically, economically and morally devastated Europe the necessary reassurance to cope with the many challenges that it faced. And it created the security framework that allowed former wartime enemies to become friends, and to get on with the new project of European integration.

But there is a third, and perhaps even more important, difference between NATO and traditional military alliances: NATO is a framework for political change – indeed, it is an instrument to shape change.

In the Cold War, that role was severely constrained. Today, however, NATO's role as a political agenda-setter has become obvious.

It has become obvious in the way in which NATO has helped the consolidation of Europe as an undivided, democratic security space. It has become obvious in its missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, where NATO is changing realities on the ground in order to give these regions a new lease of life.

It has become obvious in the humanitarian roles that NATO has performed after a major earthquake had hit Pakistan some years ago, and in our ongoing logistical support for the African Union in the crisis over Darfur and in Somalia.

And it has become obvious here in the Middle East. During the Cold War, a Secretary General of the Atlantic Alliance could not say anything about this region. The Middle East, as many of you might remember, was considered “out-of-area” for NATO – a region far beyond the collective interest of the NATO Allies. Indeed, I am exaggerating only slightly when I say that – for the Cold War NATO – Tel Aviv or Amman were as far away as Tokyo or Beijing.

This started to change in the mid-1990s, when NATO launched its Mediterranean Dialogue – an effort to build trust and understanding with seven North African and Middle Eastern countries, including Israel. And I reveal no secret when I say that, from the outset, Israel has been and still is a most enthusiastic Dialogue partner.

But I also hasten to add that this Dialogue has had considerable growing pains. On the one hand, NATO Allies had different views of what to expect from the Dialogue. And on the other hand, some Mediterranean Dialogue partners found it difficult to figure out what they could gain from engaging in this process. And, thirdly, the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process made some Dialogue countries hesitant to commit to a NATO initiative.

In short, for a decade or more, the Mediterranean Dialogue did not achieve its full potential. In the regions to NATO’s East, from the Caucasus to Central Asia, NATO’s policy of partnership was able to change the security dynamic for the better. In the regions to NATO’s south, however, a similar success remained out of our reach.

Now a pessimist may argue that the current turmoil in Gaza is just another indication that NATO’s notions of dialogue, partnership and cooperation are simply not applicable to this region.

According to that pessimistic view, the Middle East is condemned to an endless cycle of mistrust, violence, and counter-violence – a cycle that no one can break for good.

Indeed, there is a risk that the current developments threaten to set us back – they risk sowing the seeds of future conflict. That is why I call on all parties to implement the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolution.

Hamas should realise that, through its constant rocket attacks on Israel, it has brought tremendous suffering upon the very people it claims to represent. And I doubt that this is the kind of representation that the people in Gaza had in mind when they elected Hamas into office.

Israel, in turn, should accept a ceasefire to allow for the necessary humanitarian aid to be delivered into Gaza constantly.

And all the parties concerned should make all possible efforts to ensure the successful conclusion of the Egyptian lead talks to help create the conditions for an enduring end of the violence.

It goes without saying that recent events in and around Gaza are certainly most worrying. And if you add the international community’s unsuccessful attempts to halt the Iranian nuclear programme, it is easy to see why the pessimists on the Middle East find so much resonance.

But I think that we must never let our future be decided by the pessimists. Continuing to work for opportunities to build new patterns of security cooperation across the Mediterranean and throughout the Middle East is not a sign of naivety. Given the pivotal importance of this region, fostering cooperation is an investment in regional and indeed global security. It is an investment that promises a return – even if that return may come in trickles only, rather than in waves.

In an age of globalisation – in an age that is characterised by religious fundamentalism, terrorism, and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction – the interdependence between the Northern, Eastern, and Southern shores of the Mediterranean has become simply too obvious to ignore. Accordingly, cooperation in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue has accelerated. And the Dialogue is increasingly accepted as a viable framework that serves the interests of all partners.

I am not going to bore you with statistics on the Mediterranean Dialogue. As I mentioned before, Israel has been a most enthusiastic Dialogue partner, and that tells me that this country knows full well about the Dialogue and about the benefits that it brings. Israel was the first country to develop an Individual Cooperation Programme with NATO, followed by Egypt and, hopefully soon, by Jordan. I just came from Jordan: it was my previous stop. This should encourage other Dialogue partners to embark on a similar process.

Israel's forward-looking approach is also visible in its contribution to the so called Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean, and by its steady increase in other areas of the Dialogue, notably in science, public diplomacy, and armaments cooperation.

So, clearly, there is no need for a load of statistics to demonstrate Israel's interest in the Med Dialogue process. But there are still a few facts that deserve to be highlighted. For one thing, the Dialogue is increasingly turning into a framework that engages all Dialogue Partners, and not just a few.

This does not change the logic of self-differentiation, according to which it is largely up to our Dialogue Partners to determine the pace and the scope of our cooperation. But it does suggest that there is a growing awareness among all Dialogue Partners that this framework can become more than the mere sum of its parts. Indeed, if our Partners today refer to the "acquis" of the Dialogue, they say as much.

A second development that I want to highlight is the growing depth both of our practical cooperation and of our political dialogue – a fact that Foreign Minister Livni explicitly welcomed when she participated in the meeting of NATO and Mediterranean Dialogue Foreign Ministers last December in Brussels. The Dialogue now offers us the opportunity to conduct open and frank discussions on regional security, including with countries with which Israel does not have diplomatic relations. We have joint exercises, as well.

And, as I mentioned earlier, we even have Israeli participation in NATO's naval anti-terrorist Operation Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean.

To me, this clearly shows that the security dynamic here in the region can be changed, slowly but surely. And that is why we need to continue to generate new ideas to sustain this cooperative momentum. And for example, two years ago, we launched the NATO Training Cooperation Initiative.

It is rooted in a simple fact: after 60 years of multinational cooperation, NATO has more know-how in the area of military training and education than any other institution in the world. At our NATO Defense College in Rome, in Italy, which now includes a dedicated Middle Eastern Faculty, we have held several courses in the framework of this Initiative, and I would like to encourage you to continue to participate in this endeavour.

When you consider, ladies and gentlemen, the many serious and unresolved issues in the Middle East, from the issue of Palestine all the way to the Iranian nuclear programme, NATO-Israeli cooperation in the Med Dialogue may appear small and insignificant. It is therefore not surprising that some observers call for bolder steps, for example a NATO-led force for the region. Since I was the first Secretary General of NATO who has broached this possibility in public, I am certainly not opposed to such an idea in principle.

The international community is working towards an end to the violence in Gaza where, let me underline that, a role for NATO is not foreseen. Let me, however, use this opportunity to reiterate the three conditions for NATO to play a role: first a comprehensive peace agreement; second, of course, consent of the parties and third a UN mandate. If these conditions were met, I could imagine that NATO would find it hard to say "no" if the Allies were asked to make a contribution to Middle East peace. But we are unfortunately a long way from meeting those conditions.

That is why we need to focus on NATO's current contributions. I realise that NATO is not the solution, but it can make solutions easier to attain. And that is why we should work towards a more structured NATO role in the Middle East, notably in the area of training and capacity building. Such a role will force the Allies – Europe and North America – to develop coherent, long-term policies for this region. And it will also help to dispel mistrust that still exists in some parts of the region vis-à-vis NATO.

And it will help, I think, to develop a common security agenda not just between the individual partner countries and NATO, but – ideally – also among the individual countries in

the region.

Excellencies, ladies and Gentlemen,

At the age of 60, NATO can look back at a very successful track record. Not only has it successfully protected the security of its member states, that is its core business and that business will continue, it has also been able to shape its strategic environment in ways that the founding fathers of this Alliance never dared to dream of back in 1949.

Can this success story be extended to regions outside of Europe? Specifically, can the formula of partnership, dialogue and cooperation be applied to the Middle East – and offer us a similar promise of success?