SECRETARY GENERAL'S INTERVIEW TO

ISRAELI NEWSPAPER HAARETZ

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1) Mr. Secretary General, welcome to Israel. You have been here before, if memory serves, in another capacity, as the Dutch Foreign Minister, and there were visits by other NATO officials, such as the Chairman of the Military Committee, but this is the first visit by a NATO Secretary-general. Why has it taken NATO 56 years to send its highest office-holder to Israel? What are your impressions from your earlier contacts with Israeli officials and visit to Israel, and what are your expectations this time?

I am very pleased to come to Israel and look forward to meeting Prime Minister Sharon, Foreign Minister Shalom, Defense Minister Mofaz and General Yaalon. It is the first visit of a NATO Secretary General to Israel since the establishment of the Mediterranean Dialogue in December 1994. It follows the successful first ever meeting of ministers from NATO and Mediterranean Dialogue countries on 8 December 2004 in Brussels. My visit takes place in the context of the enhancement of the political and practical dimensions of the Mediterranean Dialogue, decided by NATO leaders at their Istanbul Summit, last June. The aim of my visit to Israel is to have a frank and open discussion with your government leaders on the perspectives for such an increased relationship. The Alliance attaches great importance to the very active role played by Israel in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, since its inception, and looks forward to developing further cooperative activities with your country.

2) You have just finished a two-day long meeting with the most informed leaders of the western alliance and must be extremely well-briefed and up-to-date on current security threats. How serious and urgent is the Iranian nuclear and missile threat, to Europe, American and NATO forces in the Middle East and Israel? How serious and urgent are Jihad organizations threats to NATO countries and Israel? Do you fear a conflagration between the United States and Iran or Syria, which might suck in NATO as well as Israel?

The situation in the Middle East has indeed been high on the agenda of NATO Heads of State and Government, when they met on 22 February in Brussels. I welcome this discussion, which is fully in line with the increased political role I am advocating for NATO. Allies are very concerned by threats emanating from terrorism or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. They keep the issue under constant review and also try to address those threats together with their partners from the Mediterranean Dialogue.

3) What is your position on the designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization? This seems to be a bone of contention between Washington and some of the major European capitals. If either Syria or Hezbollah were proven to have been behind the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, what should NATO do about it?

We of course strongly condemn any act of terrorism such as the assassination of Rafiq Hariri. But NATO is not the global policeman. NATO does not automatically act when a terrorist attack is perpetrated anywhere in the world. This is not NATO's role. NATO is a multilateral international security organisation where the decision to act is taken by the government of the Alliance by consensus, when our initial interests are at stake.

4) Over the last year, which happened to be your first on this job, NATO has shown a new interest in the Middle East. Notable events have been the Istanbul summit and the initiative emanating from it, your Munich speech the other week announcing a "fresh look", your summit this week and now this visit. However, for Israelis at this point in time, the over-riding issue is disengagement from Gaza and the northern sector of Samaria. Do you envisage a concrete role for NATO in facilitating this move, including troops along the Palestinian-Israeli boundary, or the "Philadelphia" Egyptian-Israeli-Palestinian line, whether as a buffer or a monitoring force?

As you say correctly NATO adopted two important initiatives at the Istanbul Summit: to enhance its ten year Mediterranean Dialogue, offering to transform it into a genuine partnership; and to launch the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to countries in the broader Middle East region, starting with individual members of the GCC. The Peace Process as such is not currently on the NATO agenda. The Allies believe that the lead for that process rests with the Quartet and they attach the utmost importance to reaching a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to achieve a two-state solution, in which Israel and Palestine live side by side in peace and security. But I believe that should one day the two parties in conflict come to an agreement and should they request some sort of NATO assistance to help them achieve the objectives of that agreement, with a UN mandate, then NATO would certainly need to discuss such a request.

5) On that point, considering General Ward's experience as the commanding general of SFOR, what are the lessons of NATO's peacekeeping in Bosnia and Kosovo which are applicable to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and particularly to the Israeli-Palestinian relationship?

I think that developments in Bosnia and Kosovo are very different from those between Arabs and Israeli, and between Israeli and Palestinians. I do not think that a comparison is applicable. That said, General Ward is a very capable man, who did a great job as Commander of the SFOR.

7) What message do you bring to Prime Minister Sharon and to the Israeli public? To what extent is this message in line with the leaders of all NATO member states, including President Bush, with whom you met over the last two days?

The message I bring to Israel is that NATO looks very much forward to work with Israel towards an increased political and practical relation, in the framework of the reinforced Mediterranean Dialogue decided in Istanbul. We need to deepen the political dimension of the Dialogue in order to better explain NATO's transformation and avoid misunderstandings about NATO's role and commitments. But we also need to focus on practical areas of cooperation where NATO can represent an added value in the security field. In areas such as: the military to military cooperation, to achieve a better inter-operability between our forces, the fight against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

8) Should Israel apply for membership in NATO? What are the benefits for it in a somewhat upgraded status of "partner", and how long would it be consigned to this position, considering that while some Partnership for Peace countries were elevated to full membership within a few short years, others have been waiting in vain?

Your question underscores how important it is to avoid misunderstandings on the objectives of the Mediterranean Dialogue. I do not think it has been designed as a first step to a future membership for current or future participants. The dialogue should be judged on its own merits, its contribution to the security and stability of the broader Middle East. And we can do a lot more in that respect, within the framework agreed upon in Istanbul.

9) Israel has historically preferred bi-lateral relations over ones with international, multi-member bodies, where the need for consensus tends to push decisions towards a pro-Arab stance. Why should it expect a better treatment from a 26-member alliance, some of whose prominent countries adhere to a markedly cool position towards Israel than does the United States?

Allies attach the greatest importance to two principles guiding our Mediterranean Dialogue. The first one is the respect for each partner's specificity. Each participant should be in a position to move its bilateral relation with NATO at its own rhythm. This is also true of course for Israel, with whom we are currently discussing an individual action programme. In doing so, however, and this is the second principle, we must make sure, given the sensitivities in the region, to keep everybody on board in this dialogue and to take account of the overall even handedness of the process at large.

10) Even if Israel reaches a policy decision to get closer to a heavily-European organization, why should it prefer NATO to the European Union, which can sweeten the deal by important economic benefits? One of your predecessors, who turned into something of a competitor, Javier Solana, challenged you at the Munich Security Policy conference by claiming that the EU should be the vehicle through which European countries deepen their engagement in the Middle East.

The first part of your question should perhaps be addressed to Israel. For my part, I believe that NATO has a specificity: it brings together Europe and North America, in a partnership among equals. There is a clear added value in this and therefore there can be no competition with the EU but only a good complementarity. I think there is enough work for everybody, NATO, the EU, the G8 and others, to contribute to the Middle East stability, each bringing in its own added value.

11) In your order of priorities, and given the limit on your resources as well as your need for consensus, does not the Israeli account rank lower than Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran?

I do not think you can compare the two. NATO attaches the same importance to its operations and missions and to its partnerships. Both are essential to promote our common goal for a safer world.

12) How can NATO and Israel cooperate in the fight against terror? Are we not going to get bogged down in the old argument about semantics, such as "terror" versus "war of liberation"? Does NATO need Israel's expertise in tactics and technology, for example in foiling suicide bombers?

NATO seeks and needs the active participation and contribution of Israel for the success of the Mediterranean partnership. Our offer to Israel for increased cooperation, through the Dialogue, underlines the fact that in today's inter-dependent world security cooperation requires a two way-street, in order to tackle successfully new challenges and threats emanating from terrorism, proliferation and failed states. One of the main objectives is clearly the fight against terrorism, through effective intelligence sharing, border security, curbing illicit trafficking particularly of small arms and light weapons, as well as through maritime cooperation and we value Israel's expertise in that regard.

13) Does NATO want the Israel Defense Forces to take part in its exercises, beyond the maritime Operations Active Endeavour? When will it be invited to participate in peace-keeping forces and operations, keeping in mind that another Med Dialogue country, Jordan, has been doing it in the Balkans as well as now in training Iraqi security personnel?

We are currently discussing with Israel the modalities of a possible contribution to OAE, as we do with other interested partners. Beyond this, part of the Istanbul decision was to give partners a larger access to our military cooperation programme, including Exercises. I think Israel, like other Mediterranean Dialogue partners, should definitively benefit from these opportunities.

14) In addition to the 26-vote consensus needed for NATO decisions, the Mediterranean Dialogue with Israel and seven Arab and Moslem countries seemed to have fallen hostage to Egypt's reluctance to push it forward, whether because it did not want Israel's status to be upgraded or feared its own penetration by Western "Broader Middle East" and Democratisation ideas. The Istanbul imitative added other six Arab countries, this time from the Gulf, to this equation. How could Israel be assured that its relations with NATO be decided on a 26+1 basis, rather than in a detrimental 26+7 or even a 26+13 setting?

As I said, the necessity of preserving an overall balance to our initiatives does not imply any veto right on our relations with Israel. Allies want to bring their relations with Israel forward, as they want to progress with other partners, in full transparency. In that regard, I do think that further progress in the peace process will provide increased opportunities for cooperation with NATO for all partners, through bilateral and regional channels.

15) Ambassador Oded Eran has presented you, and the North Atlantic Council, a proposal regarding the NATO-Israel relationship. The early reaction to this paper seems to have been very positive. In concrete terms, would Israel benefit from intelligence sharing, Research and Development funds and access to NAMSA's spare part network in a way which will bolster its military readiness?

Indeed, Allies are looking favourably at Israel’s proposals. The exact scope of our future cooperation programme has of course still to be worked out in detail, as many areas, including those you mention, require careful consideration.

16) Is the Israel Air Force going to be represented on NATO's multi-national crews of the AWACS squadron, which has already sent one of its planes to visit Israel last year?

Port visits by NATO vessels and visits by AWACS to MD countries are part of increased military-to-military contacts, in the context of the MD annual military cooperation programme. The NATO AWACS are one of the NATO assets comprising crews from NATO member countries, it does not include crews from partner countries.

17) Finally, is a closer relationship with NATO, in its various manifestations, going to improve Israel's security and diplomatic positions, or conversely put added constrains on its room for manoeuvre?

It is primarily for each country in the Mediterranean Dialogue to assess whether this endeavour brings an added value to its security needs. For my part, I am convinced that cooperative outreach programmes, like NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, contribute to everybody's security, by fostering confidence and mutual understanding in the region.