

Triple threat to NATO

Islamic terrorist attacks on both sides of the Atlantic, Iran's nuclear program and the clear trend toward Muslim population increase in Europe have given NATO a new lease on life

By Amir Oren

TAORMINA, Sicily – They bet on the losing side, aiding Pyrrhus (“One more victory like this and we’re lost”), the king of Epirus, in his wars. And after surviving wave upon wave of invaders and conquests, they understood that it would be best for them to make a living from the spectacular landscape of the Sicilian coast – a kind of local version of Safed with narrow alleys, if it were ensconced atop Mount Carmel. Now they take pride in the resort town of Taormina. This is where D.H. Lawrence, who observed an unknown English woman cavorting with a local peasant, conceived “Lady Chatterley’s Lover.”

So much for the hosts. But this week the guests – headed by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld – quoted a different Lawrence – he of Arabia – whose exploits in stirring up the Arab revolt against the Turks in World War I are worthy of emulation. The U.S. Army quotes Lawrence’s letters and especially likes his recommendation to Westerners not to eat soup with a knife. Rumsfeld, on whose behalf the Pentagon last week published a four-year plan to manage the current campaign “in a long war,” incorporated in it another citation connected with the Lawrence fad.

The Americans, it is becoming gradually clear, will not leave Iraq as long as George Bush is their president, and certainly as long as Rumsfeld is the viceroy in the Pentagon. Along with the French and Russian and British and German defense ministers, and dozens of their counterparts, Rumsfeld descended on Taormina yesterday and today

for a periodic gathering. They are not the decision-makers – the presidents and prime ministers take care of that. Furthermore, in the diplomatic sphere the foreign ministers have seniority, and NATO also has a “board of directors” with the participation of the ambassadors accredited to the organization in Brussels and led by the secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

The defense ministers do not lack opportunities to speak out. Rumsfeld, who testified twice before Congressional committees in the past few days, flew back and forth to Europe. The most important of his colleagues there had heard the defense minister speak at the beginning of the week at an annual event in Munich. Rumsfeld stood out there – in comparison to others from the Bush administration, too – in that he listed Israel as being a victim of terrorist attacks perpetrated by world Islam, and even mentioned the athletes killed at the Munich Olympics.

From Israel’s point of view, the main innovation lay not in the official declarations whose drafts awaited approval and publication at the end of the Taormina discussions, but in the very fact that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz was invited to participate alongside the chiefs of the defense establishments of Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt. Not everyone showed up – Egypt announced that its chief of staff would represent the defense minister – and Mofaz received only seven minutes for a concise, quite simplistic talk on Israel’s position (“in favor of the Palestinian peace forces and against Hamas,” for example). Similar meetings at the level of foreign minister

and chief of staff have been held in the past, but this was Israel’s debut in this club.

Embarrassing stain

One after another the planes carrying the defense ministers landed at Sigonella air base. The entourages, in their protected convoys, escorted by motorcyclists of the Carabinieri, headed east, to Taormina. The political base of the host, Italian Defense Minister Antonio Martino, is in nearby Messina. For Martino, a member of the government of Silvio Berlusconi, which will be up for election in two months, this is a chance to play up his membership in the big boys’ club. In all the fuss, an embarrassing stain on the past of the Sigonella base was forgotten – a detail that attests to the long way Italy, NATO and Israel, too, have come in the past two decades.

In October 1985 the government of Bettino Craxi capitulated to the hijackers of the cruise ship “Achille Lauro,” the Palestinian murderer of Leon Klinghoffer, and refused to help the U.S. administration capture them. Egypt, under the leadership of Hosni Mubarak, granted the murderers protection. Israel, through the channels of then-director of Military Intelligence Ehud Barak, and the military attaché in Washington, Uri Simhoni, gave the United States the number on the tail of the Egyptian transport plane on which the Palestinians were to be flown to safety. U.S. warplanes intercepted the plane and forced the pilot to land at Sigonella. U.S. Special Forces soldiers, under the command of General Carl Steiner, surrounded the plane and were about to arrest the passengers when to their surprise, they were confronted by Italian orders, claimed Italian sovereignty over the air base and quickly released the hijackers.

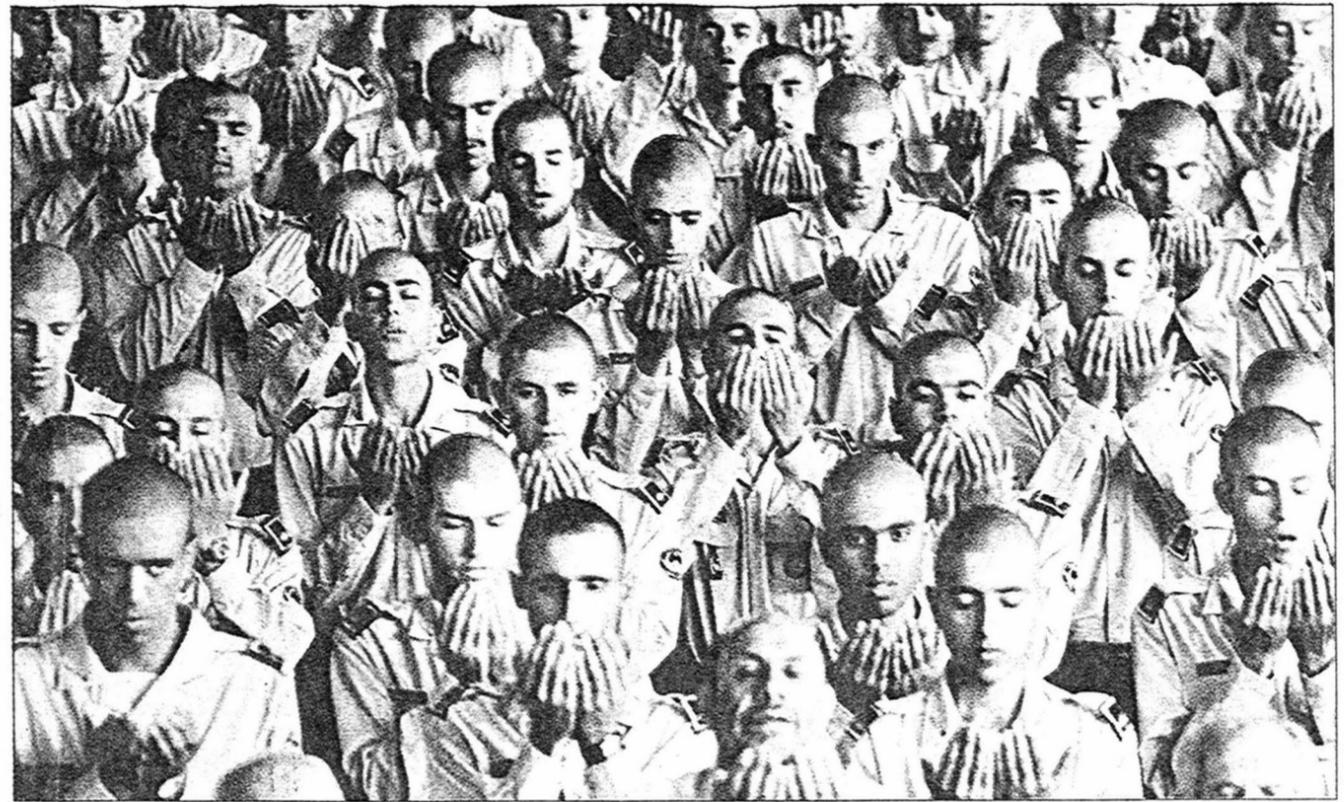
Taormina 2006 is almost the opposite of Sigonella 1985.

The reason is that the terrorist attacks by Muslims in major cities on both sides of the Atlantic, the Iranian nuclear program and the clear trend of Muslim population increase in Europe – after the cartoon riots, no one is guffawing anymore – have given NATO a new lease on life, a replacement for the previous life that was lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union, for this had been an organization whose original purpose was to contain the Soviets.

Last week Martino took Israel and NATO by surprise when he announced that at Taormina he would propose inviting Israel to become a member of the alliance. Martino is well aware that this proposal stands no real chance at present. For it to be accepted, the agreement of all 26 members is needed and none of them, including Martino’s government, is ready for this yet. The Israeli government has yet to discuss the proposal, and when it does get around to it, the arguments against the idea – loss of an independent area of operation, payment of a price with respect to Israel’s good bilateral relations with important alliance countries – might overcome the arguments in favor.

Martino’s proposal is more important symbolically than concretely, but it reflects Israel’s new status according to the perception of NATO. Israel is no longer a chronic and troublesome headache that is interfering with Western unity. Increasingly the recognition is taking root, especially within the security and intelligence establishments, that Europe’s problems with fanatic Islam do not stem from Palestinian frustration under Israeli occupation. The Israel Defense Forces, Military Intelligence, the Shin Bet security service, the Mossad espionage agency and even the Israel Police’s anti-terror units are considered essential centers of knowledge.

NATO wants to receive from Israel no less than to



Reuters

Members of the Iranian Air Force. Iran is the new monster that is threatening the West.

give. Accordingly, the alliance is ready to release Israel from its linkage to the Egyptians, who put Secretary General Scheffer through much agony before agreeing to host him, months after similar visits to Israel and Jordan. The NATO suit that has been custom tailored for Israel will fit its participation in military exercises, in discussions at NATO headquarters, in the naval-intercept exercise Operation Active Endeavor, and in the intelligence liaison unit in Naples (to which an Israel Navy commander – equivalent to the rank of major in the land and air forces – will soon be posted). All the NATO members, as well as their partners in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Persian Gulf also, are eager to extract from Israel deterrent and other information about terrorism.

New monster

The former prime minister of Spain, Jose Maria Aznar, who is ideologically close to George Bush, is trying to transform Rumsfeld’s slogan,

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the “coalition of the willing” (to fight terrorism, in Iraq and on all other fronts) into a network of systems – a weave of regional alliances. Aznar maintains that the threat is worldwide and therefore the response must be commensurate.

Iran is the new monster that is threatening the West, with missiles capable of striking European capitals. The more the fanatic regime in Tehran is pushed against the wall, the greater will be its incentive to loosen the weakest link in the alignment against it. This would appear to be Egypt. The assassination of Mubarak, a coup against his regime – in his lifetime or during his successor’s rule – and the takeover of the Muslim Brothers based on the Hamas model – would shift the ayatollahs from inferiority to superiority.

The Shah of Iran was the foe of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the ally of Anwar Sadat for a brief moment, ending with the Khomeini revolution and the exile and death of the Shah. Sadat’s security services did not prevent the president’s as-

sassination, and the thin film of security suppression in the Mubarak era is liable to conceal additional assassins. If Iran’s supreme religious leader, Ali Khamenei, succeeds in helping put a new Nasser into power in Egypt, and this time of the uncompromising Islamic type, the shift there might carry the entire region into an anti-West posture.

Twice in the past month the IDF’s GOC Southern Command, Major General Yoav Galant, has utilized internal forums to warn against cuts in the armored forces in general and in his sector in particular. Galant convened senior officers, many of them reservists, for a seminar on Egypt at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be’er Sheva. The experts who addressed the officers mentioned a series of dangers – political, economic, demographic. If there is “an iota of an iota of risk” that Egyptian policy will change along with the regime, Galant warned in his summation, Israel must be prepared for this.

Galant is currently in the minority. Mofaz, as the political figure whose task it is to give the defense establishment directives, did not adopt Galant’s view; nor would it have been polite to do so on the eve of meetings with senior officials from Egypt and other Arab states in Taormina. But it is wrong simply to shrug off the apprehension that after three decades of peace with Egypt, with its strategic advantages, the strongest Arab army is liable to fall under the influence of fanatic Islam. When NATO officials speak – very guardedly – about the looming need to take action against the Tehran regime, as distinct from the Iranian nation, they are referring also to these kinds of gloomy scenarios.

In order to avoid them, the Americans, if pressed, are capable of doing what is contrary to their declarations and, it would seem, to their principles as well: to reach a practical compromise with Tehran. As described by Peter Robb in his book “Midnight in Sicily,” which skirts Taormina and focuses on Palermo in the northwest of the island, the U.S. Armed Forces drew on the aid of the Mafia against Hitler and Mussolini, and against the Soviets was assisted by Italy’s right wing, which also hooked up with the Mafia. The Americans are not against a deal with the devil, as long as he keeps his word and does his part.