

NATO chief: Israel not a candidate

By Amir Oren

TAORMINA, Sicily - Israel is not currently a candidate for membership in NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the organization's secretary-general, said last night.

Scheffer, who termed the question "virtual" at a press conference yesterday, was responding to a proposal by Italian Defense Minister Antonio Martino that Israel be invited to join.

However, Martino himself later backtracked from this idea, saying that while Israel's security was "vital to all of us," and it was the only country whose very existence was currently threatened, a precondition for inviting Israel to join would be for its government to demonstrate interest in joining.

Martino, who raised the idea in a radio interview last week, said that he did so mainly as a means of expressing support for Israel in light of Iran's threats.

The defense ministers of NATO's 26 member-states are currently meeting in Taormina, Sicily.

For the first time, however, the organization also invited the defense ministers of Russia and the seven Mediterranean nations with which it maintains a dialogue, including Israel.

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz is leading the Israeli delegation. Today, he will present Israel's positions to the assembled ministers, and he has also scheduled one-on-one meetings with individual ministers, including his counterpart from Tunisia. Yesterday, he met with his counterparts from Turkey, France and Italy. All of these meetings focused on the Iranian threat.

Egypt's defense minister, Mohammed Tantawi, did not attend, and Western sources said that this was due mainly to the opposition of Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit.