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Divided they stand

By [Amir Oren](#)

RIGA - A large U.S. Air Force transport plane landed in the small airport in the Latvian capital last week. "Bush's armored car," a foreign journalist guessed mistakenly. The president's aerial fleet, with all its chariots and riders, arrived only the following day.

The transport plane, a C-17, also known as the Globemaster II, served to display the aerial transport capability necessary for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit. According to the script, the leaders of NATO member states decided to approve the joint plan to invest in four C-17s, which would meet their goals for NATO's Response Force and its 25,000 soldiers. The planes will be like time-share apartments: Shareholders will contribute a down payment and then pay based on use. The C-17s will arrive in the second half of 2007. Until then, NATO is leasing Russian Antonovs.

These are the main issues now preoccupying NATO: how to reach conflict zones far from Europe (Afghanistan is more than 3,200 kilometers away), who will fight, and who will pay. Too many missions; too few forces. And what exactly is NATO at the moment? The European Union plus the United States and Canada? The UN minus? An accessible military force that awaits UN Security Council agreements? And if so, what are the chances of seeing it patrolling the Philadelphi Strip in Gaza, or between Rafah and Beit Hanun?

After a peace agreement is signed, and subject to Israeli and Palestinian consent, a 2,500- to 7,000-person U.S.-led peacekeeping force should be deployed along Palestinian borders with Israel, Jordan and Egypt, including in Jerusalem. This was proposed by Robert Hunter in a Rand Corporation study this year, before the Hamas election victory, when he discussed the conditions necessary for the success of an independent Palestinian state. Hunter was a member of the Carter administration's team at the autonomy talks 25 years ago, and served as an ambassador to NATO during the Clinton administration. This joint background led him to propose that "if Israel and Palestine agree, the force led by America should be based on NATO."

It is not certain whether a Democrat president would adopt Hunter's proposal; however, the Bush administration and the present NATO leadership are not free to do so. They are busy with commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq ; meanwhile, Iran lurks in the background. In a briefing prior to the Riga conference, Nick Burns, U.S. under secretary of state for political affairs - Condoleezza Rice's deputy and a former ambassador to NATO - said that in baseball terms, the bargaining of the great powers with Iran has passed the ninth inning and gone into overtime. "We're in the 13th or 14th inning," said Burns, promising that Bush does not intend to break the league record of 26 innings.

Bush will handle the cause - Iran, between Iraq and Afghanistan, with a direct link to Hezbollah and Hamas - before he gets involved in the effect - Gaza. If he recalled two days ago, when he presented the decision on previously formulated declarations, that the date was November 29 - the date of the 1947 UN decision in favor of partitioning Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state - there was no sign of it. The eternal clashes between Israelis and Arabs are exhausting the NATO leaders. The dialogue with the Mediterranean countries has declined from the pretense of progress to the dullness of maintenance. The Amman college for training Arabs and Israelis has been shelved; they will make do with joint in-service courses in Rome, if they even bother to attend. When given the opportunity to operate in Lebanon this summer, NATO reacted by evading responsibility.

Wanted: A goal

Since they stopped preparing for the great armored war against the Soviets and the Warsaw Pact in Europe, or in Germany to be more exact, NATO planners have been seeking another goal. They found it in calming internal flare-ups in the Balkans - first in Bosnia and then in Kosovo - and in Asia, the continent of the Taliban, Al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein. The NATO secretary general and the leaders of the senior member countries frequently declare that they are not, God forbid, the world's policemen, but the army the alliance does not have - because with the exception of the Response Force, to which the countries must contribute new units for every crisis, for six-month rotations - NATO is essentially the West's expeditionary force. NATO soldiers are for the West what the Marines were for the Americans every time the country needed to send an intervention force overseas.

NATO's main problem is that those who are willing are not able, and those who are able are not willing: The wealthy countries are spoiled or stretched to their limits; the poor nations would be happy to send infantry if sponsors could be found. The Romanians, the Bulgarians, the Latvians would all be happy to fill the vacuum left by Germany or Spain, which fear an entanglement that would upset public opinion. Latvia, the host of this week's summit, is a good example of this. What has been said about its well-known university can to some extent be applied to its army as well: It is called an army, it dresses like an army and salutes like an army, but it is not the kind of army we know in Israel. Latvia's air force has a frightening fleet of eight planes, one transport plane and seven helicopters. It has no warplanes. In order to defend Latvian airspace from its not clear whom, a quartet of NATO F-16s, on loan from Germany or other countries, run relaxed aerial patrols.

After thousands of years of foreign occupation - Germans, Swedes, Russians, Nazis, Soviets - with very short breaks of independence, we could have assumed that the Latvians would be happy their security burden has disappeared; they spend only about \$100 million on defense annually, and this year compulsory military service was abolished. But life here is wearisome, it's hard to earn a living, and the absence of terror attacks and wars does not cover up for other problems. In Latvia, a country three times the size of Israel with a third of its population, the life expectancy is lower (by eight months) than that in the Gaza Strip. Latvian men die particularly early, at an average age of 66. "It's true," sighs Roman, an officer in a guard unit. "It's hard here,

so we drink and smoke."

It turns out that were a Latvian battalion to be sent to Gaza, that would be a refreshing improvement in the soldiers' living conditions. But the Latvians, who are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, do not have to prepare their backpacks for Gaza yet. NATO's immediate challenge is against the Taliban (as well as those who grow poppies for the drug trade, who are worried about their business). And meanwhile, the Afghans are not crazy about those there to protect them, who sometimes accidentally kill them - albeit with expressions of regret (take the case of 13 civilians who were shot from the air in October). The battles take place in southern Afghanistan, where Americans, Canadians and the Dutch fight and suffer casualties, and there is an internal debate in NATO, against countries such as Germany that tie the hands of their officers in northern Afghanistan, such that the commander of the ISAF (International Security and Assistance Force) cannot activate their units.

These are national caveats, based on the political considerations of the countries that contribute army units, which have already caused NATO to fail in previous operations, like in 1999 Kosovo. To provide an example in the Israeli context, it would be like rabbis forbidding religious Israel Defense Forces companies from operating on specific days or in order to evacuate settlements. When tested, NATO's command is not unified. It's every country for itself, and the Americans as usual rely on only A, B and C: Australia (which is not a NATO member), Britain and Canada.

Cold-War NATO wanted to deter. NATO of the Riga summit does not believe the alliance of extremists, which is worthy of the name "Fanato," can be deterred. The international jihad will continue to operate. It has outposts in Europe, and the operational question is where the fighting will take place. Bush's rule is that the war should be conducted in enemy territory, because severing contact is impossible: The enemy will chase retreaters into their homes.

The evasive Al-Qaida infiltrators have already chalked up one success: The idiotic enslavement of America and Europe to preventing only the previous terror attack, as seen in the airport inspection lines. Long live equality: Out of a self-righteous desire to avoid targeted security checks based on a composite portrait of members of high-risk groups, they drive everyone crazy.