

Jordan offers to host NATO-supported regional Security Cooperation Centre

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(Menafn-JordanTimes) AMMAN ? Jordan has offered to host a NATO-supported regional Security Cooperation Centre dedicated to training and educating officers from countries of the Middle East, NATO officials confirmed.

The centre is part of a new Training Cooperation Initiative, under which NATO will share its training expertise with partners in the Mediterranean and in the broader Middle East region.

NATO sources confirmed over the weekend that so far Jordan and Qatar have offered to host the centre, which is the second phase of the training initiative.

"NATO adds value, the idea is to give your countries some advantages we have. Cooperation for mutual interest," a NATO official who preferred anonymity told The Jordan Times.

For the past year, NATO has been considering launching the education initiative in which training would be expanded through the partnership deal with Mediterranean and Gulf countries.

NATO's ambition is to have joint ownership of the project, whereby the centre is regionally funded and receives NATO assistance.

On the second day of NATO's annual summit, held in Latvia last November, alliance leaders launched the initiative and declared that the organisation was ready to share its training expertise with its Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries.

"Our idea is to have an inclusive action of where we put our people together," NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alessandro Minuto Rizzo told reporters at the end of the summit.

NATO's Mediterranean dialogue was launched in 1994 to contribute to regional security and stability, achieve better mutual understanding between the alliance and its Mediterranean partners ? which over the years grew from five to seven to encompass Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

It was also regarded as part of efforts to dispel misperceptions about the alliance among participating countries and an initiative complementary to other international enterprises such as the EU's Barcelona Process, which seeks to promote good relations and open broader channels of communication.

Upon launching the dialogue, cooperation was focused on exchange of information, civil emergency planning, humanitarian relief and scientific collaboration between NATO and the Mediterranean partners.

But under the growing security problem facing the region and constant threat of international terrorism, NATO felt the need to transform the cooperation into a hardcore partnership.

In 2002, the dialogue was upgraded to security matters of concern and in 2004 NATO elevated its dialogue status to genuine partnerships and an expanded framework of cooperation.

It also launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) ? a separate but complementary programme to promote practical cooperation with Gulf countries.

NATO officials said they were pleased with the progress made in the partnership process, noting that each year witnesses an 80-100 per cent improvement over the previous year in fields such as military activities, exercises, training courses and public diplomacy.

The next step is to increase genuine and practical cooperation and move beyond the point of discussion.

The issue of more training has been suggested for Jordanian officers. Between one to three attend NATO courses each year. Rizzo said the number of participants from partner countries in NATO activities would amount to 1,000.

"Since some time, there is discussion on how to advance our partnership. We move the partnership of peace to the

dialogue and the ICI and onward. We don't know in the end what kind of institutions will be built, but we realise that a series of networks will be created and we know that your countries will be at the heart of the dialogue," Rizzo said.

With regard to the training cooperation initiative, Rizzo said the first phase of the project includes expanding MD and ICI countries' participation in relevant existing NATO training and education programmes, partnership tools to meet the needs of allies and partner countries.

Officials estimate the establishment of a Middle Eastern faculty at the NATO Defence College in Rome as early as this spring.

For the second phase, NATO plans to support the establishment of a Security Cooperation Centre in the region, to be owned by the MD and ICI countries, with regional funding and NATO assistance.

Jordan, which entered NATO's partnership deal in 1995, has also requested NATO for a specific trust fund that is meant to assist the country in special areas like dismantling landmines and destroying dangerous chemicals, NATO officials said.

Trust funds are relatively new instruments, in which NATO's expertise is combined with funding from interested nations to assist certain security related fields. NATO officials said the alliance is considering the trust fund.