

Obama's team / Positive, for the most part

By [Amir Oren](#) – Haaretz 02/12/2008

BRUSSELS - At NATO headquarters, the announcement of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama's foreign and defense team was warmly welcomed. Two of the choices aroused particular enthusiasm: James Jones, who will be Obama's national security adviser, and Robert Gates, who will be staying on as secretary of defense.

"Jones is one of the most impressive people who ever worked behind these doors," said one senior NATO official, referring to the former general's role as commander of the organization's forces until two years ago. "He's an American, of course, and represents his country well, but he also knows how to achieve dialogue and cooperation with allies. And Gates calmed relations that had grown tense under Donald Rumsfeld [his predecessor]. Both are outspoken supporters of NATO's centrality and of switching the emphasis of military intervention from Iraq to Afghanistan."

But despite their enthusiasm for Jones, NATO officials hastened to dissent from one of his alleged positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: his willingness to station NATO forces in the territories to further a peace agreement.

"Jones understands the importance of mobilizing European countries to support the process, and the real meaning of stationing NATO forces [there] is positioning Europe behind American leadership," the senior official said. "There's no chance of Europe agreeing to that now."

Today, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer will preside over a meeting of foreign ministers from the organization's 26 member states. Topics of discussion will include Afghanistan, efforts to improve relations with Russia, the dispute over membership for Georgia and Ukraine, and even NATO's relationship with Israel and six Arab countries. But according to NATO sources, Scheffer has no intention of softening his conditions for sending NATO troops into the Israeli-Palestinian theater: an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, an explicit invitation to NATO and an authorizing resolution from the UN Security Council.

During his stint as America's security envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian process, Jones had a very good relationship with the Israeli Foreign Ministry and its chief, Tzipi Livni. In contrast, the defense establishment had numerous complaints about the former general. Recently, Jones has become particularly involved in trying to encourage investment in the Palestinian economy.

In contrast to NATO's enthusiasm over Jones and Gates, its response to Hillary Clinton's planned appointment as secretary of state was positive but skeptical. Not since Edmund Muskie in the Carter Administration has the U.S. had a politician as secretary of state. Like Muskie, another senator who failed to become his party's candidate for president, Clinton will bring a political power base and connections in Congress to the job. But NATO officials are waiting to see who she chooses to appoint to her team.

"Hillary is not an expert in foreign and defense policy like Jones and Gates," said one. "But as someone who was there beside President [Bill] Clinton, she also experienced NATO operations, in Bosnia in the 1990s, and she understands just as well as her colleagues in the administration's top ranks - first and foremost Obama himself - how essential it is to lead the alliance with moderation rather than force."

Obama's announcement of his team will cast a shadow over Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's appearance here today. Her record of achievement in this post has not been impressive, even in her area of expertise. After Russia invaded Georgia this summer, Gates noted wryly that for the first time, America's secretaries of defense and state (he and Rice) both had doctorates in Sovietology, and the results did not necessarily justify the investment in their education. But Rice is going home in disappointment, whereas Gates will not only remain, but has even made it seem as if he were doing Obama a favor by retracting his initial decision to retire.