

The NATO continues dialogue with GCC
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- ***Dialogue to continue with all GCC states within the framework of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative***
- ***Key areas of cooperation with Arab states focus on bilateral relations and cooperation in security and training***
- ***Mediterranean Dialogue includes six Arab countries and Israel***
- ***Middle East issue not on the NATO agenda***

By Ibrahim al Hamdani

BRUSSELS, NATO headquarters – Foreign Ministers of NATO and the Mediterranean Dialogue held a meeting here yesterday, with the participation of some Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) and Israel. The Arab states are participating as part of the Mediterranean Dialogue.

In addition to bilateral cooperation with NATO, the Arab states seek to raise a number of issues, including the activation of the Middle East peace process, which is not on the NATO's agenda.

The NATO ministers discussed the situation in Afghanistan (both the military and political aspects), the Kosovo issue, the expansion of NATO and preparation for a NATO summit in Bucharest next year.

NATO spokesman, in a statement, confirmed a long-term commitment in Afghanistan, noting that efforts to empower Afghan forces yield positive results enabling these forces to play an effective role.

Speaking about Kosovo, the spokesman said that there is consensus on the issue among allies. He underlined the need to maintain and reinforce the KFOR.

On the prospects of taking in new members, the spokesman confirmed plans for expansion, but the names of the new countries have not been discussed.

In a separate statement, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had called upon Russia to revise its stand concerning the halting of the (Strategic) Arms Treaty at the stage of the post cold-war. (Russia's stand was in retaliation to the western-Europe Missile Shield.)

NATO spokesman said that the missiles in Europe are there for a defence purpose, considering a spread and increase in weapons of mass destruction in a number of countries in the world.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who was also present at the NATO headquarters, said that disputed issues, like the missile shield, are still pending and failure to reach a solution to these, returned the situation back to cold-war times. Yet, he underlined the need to continue dialogue.

In reply to a question by the Oman Daily Observer about NATO-GCC cooperation, Spain's permanent representative in the North Atlantic Council, Pablo Benavides Orgoz, stressed the significance of contact with this vital region of the world, particularly within the framework of the Istanbul

Cooperation Initiative. Four GCC states have confirmed their participation and acceptance of the initiative and dialogue is under way with other GCC states.

Meanwhile, Nicola De Santis, Head of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, told the Observer that it is not a matter of rejection of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative by the other GCC states as much as it is a procedural formality, because each country has its way of managing things. He stressed that there is an exchange of visits and meetings with GCC states on this issue.

It is worth noting that the Mediterranean Dialogue dates back to 1994 and it was initiated by NATO. So far, it comprises seven non-member states, which are Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Israel. The Mediterranean Dialogue seeks to contribute to regional stability and security and to make known the role of the NATO for better understanding.

The relatively new Istanbul Cooperation Initiative emerged in 2004 with the aim of reinforcing bilateral cooperation among the countries wishing to participate in it and accept it. The objectives of this initiative include efforts to combat terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Issues are settled bilaterally within the framework of this initiative.

It is noted that Istanbul Cooperation Initiative focuses primarily on GCC states, four of which confirmed their acceptance of the initiative in 2005, while contact is going on with the other GCC states, as confirmed to the Observer by several NATO officials. – Ends