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ERIK BRATTBERG AND BERNARDO PIRES DE LIMA

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By Erik Brattberg and Bernardo Pires de Lima

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Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' recent proposal for a NATO-led peacekeeping operation in Palestine is not a novel idea. Similar proposals were floated by both the Clinton and Bush administrations as well as in NATO's 2010 "[Albright report](#)." But Abbas' plan, which calls for NATO troops to be indefinitely deployed to protect the West Bank and Gaza as well as check-points within East Jerusalem, is worth considering.

There are several reasons why NATO should take the idea seriously. First, and most obviously, NATO could make a significant contribution toward facilitating peace between Israel and Palestine. Without doubt, NATO would offer a far more credible, reliable and capable force than, say, U.N. peacekeepers could. Helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would clearly serve both American and European security interests.

NATO also has its own reasons to consider Abbas' proposal. After Afghanistan, the alliance must find a new mission to maintain relevance. Few NATO members, the U.S. included, have the appetite for another long-lasting stabilization effort. Protecting the Israel-Palestine peace, however, would be a very different undertaking, immediately shoring up NATO's standing.

In addition, Palestine would give NATO an opportunity to boost ties with partners in the Middle East and North Africa. So far, NATO has built strong military-to-military links with several Middle Eastern countries under the Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Regional support was also a key component of the 2011 Libya mission. But NATO's inability to get involved in the Israel-Palestine conflict remains a hurdle for closer relations with Middle Eastern countries.

Finally, a Palestine mission would be a way for Washington to continue engaging European capitals post-Afghanistan. Notwithstanding general war-weariness and reluctance to get involved in another Middle Eastern crisis on both sides of the Atlantic, a peacekeeping mission in Palestine under a U.N. mandate might be something the European partners can swallow. If so, such a mission would put pressure on European governments to continue reforming their defense forces into more expeditionary teams, and also help ensure continued interoperability between European and U.S. forces. Announcing tentative support for a Palestine mission would also give NATO leaders another concrete deliverable during the upcoming Wales summit in September.

But a NATO force in Palestine would also come with significant risks. One has to do with Abbas' insistence on replacing Israeli troops with an American-led NATO force "for a long time, and wherever they want." Though Abbas recognizes Israeli security concerns as a major issue in the peace process, his proposal effectively denies Israel the right to assure its own self-defense. Abbas' recognition arguably represents a huge step forward in the negotiations process, but his move has a political goal rather than a security one: to secure Washington's open-ended embrace of the Palestinian cause, and to pressure Israel into signing an agreement no matter what. If Washington or its NATO allies take a side naively, they risk undermining their broker role, reducing the pos-

sibility for diplomatic success.

Employing NATO in the Middle East would also risk enflaming regional tensions. Finding a role for NATO after the long war in Afghanistan, though urgent, should not mean dragging it into a regional crossroads of transnational jihadism, civil wars and chronic instability. A return of Western forces to the Middle East after the mistakes made in Iraq could fuel another generation of terrorists prepared to fight any foreign military presence in the Muslim world. It bears noting that, for the moment, al-Qaida is more interested in the evolving Shiite-Sunni clash than in anti-Western revenge. NATO should, therefore, avoid being the spark that ignites another fire.

A related security risk stems from Hamas, which not only refuses to recognize Israel but also to legitimize the Palestinian Authority as the single representative of Palestinian people. Since Abbas lacks control over Gaza, NATO has no guarantees that its role as peacekeeper will be respected and accepted there. If Hamas' rockets continue to attack Israel or start targeting NATO forces, NATO may be unable to avoid a military response against Hamas. Under this scenario, NATO risks putting itself in the midst of a conflict zone that may attract fighters from all over the region. Perhaps this is precisely what Abbas wants: to recover Gaza with NATO's help—a slippery slope that Western leaders should balk at.

NATO's peacekeeping role in the Balkans in the 1990s is a possible model for a Palestine mission. But there are major differences between these two cases. In the Balkans, NATO initially intervened militarily to end a massive ethnic cleansing campaign and an acute humanitarian crisis with security implications in some allies' territories. That initial military role gave the alliance the responsibility to stay engaged in the post-conflict stabilization process as a peacekeeping force. This path is completely different from the Palestine-Israel case. Second, the peace settlements in the Balkans were accepted by all the parties in the conflict, which helped allies to commit troops on the ground after the war in Bosnia and Kosovo. That guarantee does not exist in the Palestine-Israel context, since Hamas will not sign any peace agreement legitimizing a foreign military presence in the Palestinian territories.

It seems clear that the risks outweigh the potential benefits of Abbas' proposal. That said, NATO can still play a valuable regional role. At the upcoming NATO summit in Wales, allied leaders should discuss the Abbas proposal seriously. There are still things NATO can do in Palestine short of peacekeeping without assuming the same risks. For example, NATO could draw on its extensive experience in Afghanistan to help train and advise Palestinian security forces. Further, the alliance could provide valuable intelligence and other types of operational support to a future U.N. peacekeeping force in the area. There is much NATO can do to help resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, but directly involving its troops in backstopping a final agreement should not be part of that effort. □

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Photo: Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (State Department photo by Matty Stern).

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