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NATO Spe

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Speech

by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO Secretary General
 at the ICI Seminar

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last May, this college hosted a seminar on the Mediterranean Dialogue, which stimulated the significant progress that we have seen recently in that relationship. So I am optimistic that today's seminar, here in Rome, will help to lay out the path for another most successful and mutually beneficial relationship: the relationship between NATO and the states involved in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

This seminar brings together representatives from NATO and from the Gulf States participating in the ICI, as well as highly distinguished academics and parliamentarians. Your interest and participation are testimony to the importance of this new relationship. When deciding on the format for today, I wanted to promote a not too formal setting. In this way, I hope that we can have a broad discussion, and maximise the opportunity to draw on the expertise and the knowledge present in this hall.

But let me start today's proceedings by placing the ICI in context. The Initiative is not something that appeared out of thin air. Quite the opposite. The decision taken by NATO Heads of State and Government in Istanbul last summer was a logical outcome of the changed security environment. It is the changing security landscape that spawned NATO's evolving outreach policy, and it also led to NATO being deployed on operations in countries that are of particular importance to the states of the Gulf Region.

The threats we face in today's security environment are not unique to NATO Allies – they are common across the globe. Terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and failed states, pose challenges that require change in the way we view defence and security.

First and foremost, dealing successfully with these new threats requires widespread international cooperation and collective effort. That is why NATO has developed, and continues to develop, a network of partnerships. Indeed, I am reminded of an Arab proverb that states "In the desert of life, the wise person travels by caravan, whereas the fool prefers to travel alone".

NATO's partnership network – its "caravan", if you will - started with what we now call the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. This partnership gradually expanded and today it consists of 20 countries from Scandinavia, the Balkans,

the Caucasus and Central Asia. It also includes NATO's important partner Russia and Ukraine. And the success and rationale of this partnership prompt the further development of links with non-NATO countries, through the establishment of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue.

Seven countries from North Africa and the broader Middle East now participate and the Mediterranean Dialogue has been moving steadily forward during its year existence. Last December there was a first-ever, joint meeting of NATO and Mediterranean Dialogue countries' Foreign Ministers in Brussels. This meeting was very positive and, coupled with the initiatives identified at last year's seminar here in Rome, has allowed us to take the Dialogue to a new level. We are now embarking on a much more ambitious work programme with our Mediterranean Dialogue partners.

It was therefore a natural step to seek a cooperative relationship with the states of the Gulf Region. And so I would describe the first driver behind the ICI as the progressive evolution of NATO's partnership policy.

NATO's new operational commitments were a second good reason to establish this relationship.

It is clear that in the face of the new threats, it is important to address them and where they arise. We cannot allow them to go unhindered, otherwise they will end up on our doorstep. And that is why the Alliance is now engaged in a number of important military commitments. We have a major maritime operation in the Mediterranean. And we are also engaged under United Nations mandate in a security assistance operation in Afghanistan, in a peacekeeping operation in Kosovo, and in a training mission in Iraq. And it is encouraging to see that our partners often participate in these NATO-led deployments.

Afghanistan and Iraq are countries that are of a particular interest to the states of the Gulf Region, and so are the issues of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It therefore makes eminent sense for NATO and the states of the Gulf Region to discuss these common interests.

In light of these two factors – the progressive evolution of NATO's partnership policy and NATO's operational commitments – the rationale for NATO and the states of the Gulf Region to seek closer cooperation becomes clear. But we are still at the very early stages of our relationship. So far, three states, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have already formally joined the initiative, and I am optimistic that the three other Gulf States (Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) will join shortly. And of course, other states in the broader region that subscribe to the aims and content of the Initiative would also be welcome to join.

So, where are we exactly at the moment? Well, we have agreed on a number of key principles. Firstly, joint ownership. The relationship is very much a two-way street, and it should be. The Initiative will be flexible to allow for the different needs and requests of the individual participating states.

Secondly, complementarity. There is important work being undertaken by

Gulf States within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council. They are enhancing their cooperation in a number of fields, including in the political, economic and security domains. And it is in the latter area that NATO's efforts should assist the individual states, while supporting and building on their own efforts.

We also acknowledge that there are a number of other actors in the region, so NATO's efforts should also be complementary to the other international initiatives, such as those of the European Union. In addition, some individual NATO Allies have existing bilateral or multilateral arrangements in place.

It is important, therefore, that NATO's work with the ICI participating states should focus on those areas where NATO has added value. In essence, what we are seeking with this Initiative, is to promote security and regional stability through bilateral cooperation between NATO and the individual states in a number of specific areas where the Alliance can add value.

We have already proposed twelve broad areas for potential practical cooperation this year. The programme includes, for example, cooperation in the fight against terrorism and against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It also includes cooperation in defence reform, in crisis management and civil emergency planning, as well as in military-to-military contacts, exercises and education. And within each broad area, there is a menu of specific activities.

We have decided to take a gradual approach, and one that promotes transparency. For that reason, it is intended initially to focus on activities that will promote mutual understanding. But naturally there is an aspiration to expand the menu of activities over time as that mutual understanding grows.

A key feature of all our early work, will be the need to underpin what we are doing with a clear public diplomacy effort in the region, both by NATO and the ICI states. We need to emphasise that this is a relationship that is beneficial to all concerned. And to achieve this, we must do better at explaining what we are doing, what we do, and most importantly, why we do it. We have to overcome prejudices, correct misconceptions, share experiences and build trust.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

By promoting mutual understanding, and by adding value to the existing bilateral, multilateral and regional mechanisms, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative offers the opportunity to make a positive contribution to security and stability in the Broader Middle East Region. Today's seminar is taking place against the backdrop of change in that region. Of course, tremendous challenges remain. But there does appear to be a genuine feeling of cautious optimism, particularly with regard to settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And we are now looking into ways to respond to the wish expressed by the Palestinians to also enter a dialogue with NATO. In Iraq, we saw the courageous action of the voters which should form a milestone towards the durable stabilisation of that country. And, in close cooperation with the United States, the European Union is leading the International Community's efforts to address the serious concern raised by Iran's nuclear programme.

These are positive signs – and it is absolutely vital that this positive momentum now be maintained. NATO and its partners in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative have a role to play in maintaining it. And so I am looking forward to hearing your ideas and views during the course of the day on how we should take the Initiative forward.

I encourage you all to make the most of the opportunities that this seminar provides - to share thoughts, to prompt debate and discussion, and to give additional substance to maintaining the momentum I've just described. Thank you.

