

# EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

## Delegation for relations with Israel

*28th European Parliament-Israel Interparliamentary Meeting*  
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Report by Mr Willi Görlach, Chairman of the Delegation

### **I. Introduction**

The working party was headed by Mr Willi Görlach, Chairman of the Delegation for relations with Israel. The other members were Mr Jan Dhaene (Vice-Chairman), Mr van Dam, Mr Pannella and Mr van den Bos.

The discussions took place in an atmosphere of openness and the choice of speakers corresponded with the Delegation's expectations. The visit, which was of great importance given the current situation, was overshadowed by a suicide bomb attack. Shortly after the Delegation arrived on 14 March, there was an attack at Ashdod Port (south of Tel Aviv), killing several people. The EP Delegation, representatives of the EU diplomatic corps and the head of the Commission delegation laid a wreath at the site of the attack.

A visit to the Supreme Court was added to the agenda at short notice to familiarise the Delegation with its work.

A press conference was held at the end of the visit.

### **II. Discussions with EU representatives**

This meeting, which included contributions from representatives of the Irish Presidency, the Italian, Dutch and Hungarian diplomatic representations, and the heads of the Commission delegations for Israel and for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, focused on the EU's relations with Israel and on the Road Map.

It was made clear at the outset that some things had changed in Israel since the Delegation's previous visit almost a year before: the economic situation had worsened and there had been a change of direction in the political sphere. Prime Minister Sharon had acknowledged that an enlarged Europe was of increased importance to Israel. Furthermore, with his move to relinquish the settlements in Gaza, he had shown initiative that no one had expected of him.

Israel's relations with the autonomous Palestinian Authority were characterised as problematic. There were signs of hope, however: in the area of scientific cooperation between the EU and Israel, Palestinian representatives had also been included, at Israel's request. Trilateral

discussions on water management had been held. If Israel were to be subjected to an EU boycott, the Delegation heard, this would affect Palestine too.

Relations between the EU and Israel had improved recently. There had been highly promising advances in science, examples of which included the Galileo Project and cooperation on energy matters. This was a sign of Israel's growing trust in the EU. The problem of the origin clause for agriculture products originating in the occupied territories would also be resolved before long.

Despite this progress, the EU also had to work within the quartet to move the peace process forward.

One topic that had been prominent in many previous discussions was the question of possible EU membership for Israel. A recent survey of the Israeli population had revealed a majority in favour of such a proposal. A note of caution was sounded, however, in that it was felt that if this survey had concerned membership of the USA, it would have returned a similarly positive result.

### **III. Discussions with non-governmental organisations**

#### **1. Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families for Peace**

Founded in 1995 and with over 500 members, this organisation, which has to date received EUR 1 million from the Commission in financial support, and whose members have lost dependants in the longstanding conflict between Palestine and Israel, aims to achieve a peaceful solution to the conflict. This involves the following activities:

- visits to Israeli and Palestinian schools;
- the telephone campaign 'Hello Peace' involving 250 000 telephone calls between Palestinians and Israelis;
- blood donations from members of both peoples.

The Delegation heard that one-sided activities supporting only the Palestinians or the Israelis would not contribute to resolving the conflict: indeed, they would have the opposite effect.

In order to boost the organisation's standing, highly prominent personalities were being enlisted as members, such as Prince Hassan of Jordan and the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

#### **2. The Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs**

Professor Steinberg, representing the Centre, did not hold back in his criticism of the EU: he stated that it should employ stricter standards regarding the choice of organisations for which it provided funding. Too much money was being spent on the wrong institutions, he said. He also criticised the representative of the organisation that had just addressed the Delegation. That organisation was not representative, he said, and was pursuing the wrong goals.

### **3. Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies**

Professor Asher Susser strongly criticised the situation in the Arab world: Arab countries were losing interest in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, he said, because they were too concerned with themselves. The agenda in the Middle East was being set by the USA, Iran, Israel and Turkey. Arab summit meetings were also proving fruitless. Even the new initiative to set up an Arab parliament would not meet with success. He felt that democracy and Islam were compatible, provided that there was a strict separation between state and religion.

However, he was pessimistic about the future of Israel: in the long term, Israel could not hold out against the Arabs' superior numbers, due not least to demographic development. While the immigration of Russian Jews in the early 1990s had maintained the balance, there would need to be an influx of 250 000 immigrants a year to prevent the Jewish people becoming a minority in their own country, he said.

While Sharon's initiative to evacuate the Gaza Strip was to be welcomed, the speaker felt it questionable whether the settlers themselves would accept a democratic decision approved by the Knesset because, for them, only God could make such a decision.

### **4. Physicians for Human Rights**

Set up in 1988, this EU-funded NGO has split into Israeli and Palestinian sections and seeks to confront the following problems:

- 70 % of ambulances in the occupied territories were unable to reach patients. Patients had to come to checkpoints, 90 % of which were not on the 'green line' but within the occupied territories. In the meantime, mobile clinics had been set up.
- 100 000 of the 300 000 foreign workers in Israel were there illegally and received treatment from this organisation in public clinics.
- 76 000 people lived in 'unrecognised villages' and received treatment from this organisation.

The Israeli representative of the organisation underlined the level of cooperation with his Palestinian colleagues and emphatically condemned both the suicide attacks and the Israeli military occupation.

### **5. Yesh Gvul**

This movement—described explicitly as such, rather than as an organisation, by its representatives—was set up in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and condemns any occupation of a foreign country, whether Lebanon, Palestine or other territories in the world. Their goal was to raise awareness among soldiers of their situation and to apply scrutiny to military orders as a tool of democracy. The movement's representatives stated that they did not view themselves as pacifists, but that they refused to attack civilians. In order to avoid military service, there was the theoretical possibility of civilian service, but in practice this only applied to women. Since 2001, 1 300 men had refused to serve, 250 of whom were sent to prison.

## **6. Representatives of the Peoples' Voice: two states for two peoples**

Representatives of both communities were satisfied with the way in which people had reacted to their activities: 170 000 Jewish citizens and 7 000 Israeli Arabs supported these initiatives in Israel, while in the Palestinian territories they had been supported by 135 000 people on the West Bank and 45 000 in Gaza. Representatives of the US Administration Colin Powell and Paul Wolfowitz also supported this campaign, which aimed at achieving peaceful equality between the two peoples. The Palestinian side added that, in fact, it had nothing against the constructions separating the two communities, but they believed that these should have been built along the green line.

### **IV. Discussions with representatives of official institutions**

#### **1. Jeremy Issacharoff, Head of Department at the Foreign Ministry**

The first topic of discussion was the security situation in Israel: 900 Israeli citizens had lost their lives since the beginning of the second *intifada*. Mr Issacharoff stated that Hezbollah had 10 000 rockets in southern Lebanon with a range of around 40 km. There were 200 rockets located in Syria whose range had been increased with North Korean help. Arms were being supplied to Lebanon from Iran via Syria, the Delegation heard.

This showed the importance of a militarily strong Israel and the vital need for it to have an atomic weapons programme, Mr Issacharoff said, particularly given that Israel could not call on either Nato or even on the USA, as there were no permanent treaties between them. In contrast to Iran, Israel had never signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and had never been asked to.

- **Israeli-Palestinian conflict**  
Mr Issacharoff regretted that the Israeli Government had no reliable counterpart on the Palestinian side with whom to conduct talks. The only credible political organisation, Fatah, was moving ever closer to terrorism. Hamas received half its funding from Saudi Arabia, the other half coming from foundations and similar sources.
- **Syria**  
Unfortunately, the talks on the question of the Golan Heights, held in Geneva some years previously, had not led to a breakthrough. The Syrian delegation had not been prepared to discuss the question at that time and had left the negotiating room after five minutes.
- **Lebanon**  
This country could be viewed as Syria's backyard. As long as Syrian troops remained in the country, the Lebanese Government could not exert any influence on Hezbollah.
- **Iraq**  
Mr Issacharoff found it hard to believe that Iraq possessed no weapons of mass destruction. Iraq's downfall made it possible for Israel to form positive relations with its neighbours.

- Iran  
Iran had developed a secret atomic weapons programme and made sure that the programme was not monitored by the atomic authorities in Vienna. Iran remained a major exporter of arms and thereby exerted a negative influence on the region.

## **2. Discussion with the Foreign Minister**

The Minister focused on the security situation and the role of the Hamas organisation. He felt that the EU should place this organisation on the list of terrorist organisations in order to cut off as much of its financial support as possible. The Government was still committed to the Road Map, he said, although there was no reliable partner on the Palestinian side.

Regarding the Syrian Government, he expressed his disappointment at Assad's rejection of President Katzav's clear invitation. He made the following demands to the Syrian Government:

- to close all terrorist bodies in Damascus;
- not to provide help of any kind for Hezbollah;
- to put an end to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon (1 million Syrians were working in Lebanon; corruption, the drugs trade and the economy were dominated by Syria).

## **3. Discussions in the Knesset**

The Speaker of the Knesset and the head of the Knesset delegation for relations with the European Parliament began by highlighting the good relations between the two delegations.

In the discussions that followed, representatives of individual parties set out their positions on various important topics:

### *(a) Likud Party*

- Gaza withdrawal plan  
The Likud Party was a broad, popular party in which there were various opinions on this plan. The Delegation heard that much depended on support from the USA, particularly given that there was no reliable partner on the Palestinian side.
- Separation fence  
The fence had been built for security reasons only, corresponding to Israel's security needs, and it did not anticipate the political drawing of borders.

### *(b) Workers' Party*

- Gaza withdrawal plan  
This party supported a withdrawal from Gaza, but felt it was necessary to overcome the following obstacles: the plan was not yet ready, the discussions within the Likud Party not yet over, the USA's reaction was not known and it was questionable whether Sharon would survive this plan, politically speaking.

- Separation fence  
A two-state solution with separation was unavoidable, but the current course of the fence was unacceptable.
- Arafat  
The fact that Arafat was President of the Palestinians should not give the Israeli Government a pretext not to negotiate with the Palestinians.
- Israel-EU relations  
The majority of Israelis felt an affinity with Europe. Israel could not survive in the long term as a small state. The idea of a special partnership for Israel and Palestine with the EU could be considered.

*(c) Shinui Party*

As a liberal party, it stood for human rights, civil marriage, religious freedom and rights for homosexuals. However, it rejected a civilian form of national service, as called for by the refuseniks, in times of war. It was also in favour of military service for orthodox Jews, thanks to whom, the Delegation heard, the Shinui Party had had its funding reduced.

Sharon had developed into a more moderate politician who was increasingly following the Shinui Party line.

- Separation fence  
Israel was not building a wall but a barrier. However, this party was also critical of the course of the wall.

*(d) Orthodox representatives*

- Separation fence  
The representatives of this Party also viewed the fence as a security barrier.

*(e) Arab List*

This party was against terrorism, but was of the opinion that the Palestinians had a right to defend themselves. There were plenty of negotiators on the Palestinian side but the Israeli Government was not interested in negotiating. The separation line was described as an occupation line.

#### **4. Discussion with the leader of the Workers' Party, Shimon Peres**

Mr Peres responded positively to the Gaza withdrawal plan. If a decision were not taken soon, he stated, Sharon would lose control of the situation, particularly in view of the fact that Israel's demographic development was unfavourable.

He supported the separation fence, but said that its course had to be amended. He felt that the overall situation had reached an impasse: the Palestinians were not dealing with the problem of terrorist groups, and there were no signs of a solution on the Israeli side regarding the settlers.

Both sides had to rely on outside help, he said. A special partnership with the EU would certainly be helpful.

Regarding Iran, he supported a step-by-step approach: after political and economic pressure, military intervention could not be ruled out if Iran did not step into line. Economic pressure could be useful, as had been the case with South Africa and Libya.

## **5. Discussion with the President**

In his opening words, the President emphasised that the situation had worsened since the previous meeting with the EP Delegation a year before. This was partly due to the fact that the destructive elements in Palestinian society were gaining the upper hand, he said. If the terror were to stop, negotiations could begin, the building of the separation fence would be halted immediately and thousands of Palestinian workers could again work in Israel.

The separation fence, erected for security reasons, was provisional, he said, and its course was the subject of political discussions that must be coming to an end. He was convinced that the Palestinian Authority (PA) could stop terrorism, particularly given that it had 40 000 available soldiers, compared with the 1 000 militia available to Hamas.

The EU had to apply greater political and economic pressure on the PA. Moreover, Hamas and Hezbollah listened to the EU, he said.

On the question of Israeli membership of the EU, President Katzav was very positive.

### *Assessment*

Most discussions included references to the increasing importance of the EU for Israel. This found practical expression in the ever-increasing levels of trade, in cooperation agreements in technical and scientific areas and not least in cooperation on the Galileo Project. Enlargement of the EU, specifically the membership of Cyprus, was bringing the EU closer to Israel.

It was proposed that Parliament promote more active exchanges involving schoolchildren and students.

On the subject of the search for peace, it was proposed that only those organisations that carry out joint action on both sides in the search for peace should be supported by the Commission.

On the basis of experience, in particular of the recent intensification of parliamentary relations with the Knesset and the dialogue with Israeli civil society, attention should be paid to maintaining contact with our partners through regular and reciprocal exchange in the future. Not only the Delegation but also specialised committees with points of contact with the Middle Eastern region should make greater use of their contacts with Israel to create a broad basis for relations.