



Delegation for relations with Israel

31st European Parliament-Israel meeting

Strasbourg, 25 and 26 April 2007

Draft report by Jana Hybášková, Chairwoman of the delegation

I. Introduction

The interparliamentary meeting between the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Israel and a delegation from the Knesset was held on 25 and 26 April 2007 in Strasbourg.

The Israeli delegation consisted of four Members of the Knesset: Amira Dotan (Kadima Party), Matan Vilnai (Labour-Meimad Party), Alex Miller (Yisrael Beitenu), and Avraham Michel (Shas Party).

The discussions took place in a friendly and open atmosphere. In the first instance they focused on relations between the European Union and Israel, including the EU-Israeli action plan on the EU's new neighbourhood policy, the fight against terrorism and means of tackling it, immigration, education, the rights of Arab citizens and problems of returning Palestinian citizens who hold foreign passports.

During the second part, there was a more specific exchange of views on Israel's regional policy and the situation in the Middle East. Here it was possible to give an overview of the state of relations between Israel and its neighbours.

The 31st interparliamentary meeting concluded with bilateral meetings between the Knesset delegation and political group representatives in the European Parliament.

II. Programme of the Delegation for relations with Israel on 25 April 2007

The Chairwoman of the European Parliament delegation welcomed the participants, then Amira Dotan, head of the Israeli delegation, opened the discussion with a reference to the 59th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. She described her Knesset colleagues as examples of integration because of their varied origins.

She wanted the meeting to be based on close relations and solid cooperation, so people could get along together better and move forward. She concluded by saying that Israel was fighting for survival in a hostile climate, but pointed out that Israel was a welcoming country and had taken in immigrants from the four corners of the world since its creation.

1. Cooperation with the European Union

The European delegation had commented that Israel had taken a very active part in the seventh research and technological development framework programme, which had a total budget of € 50 billion.

The European delegation wanted to work very closely with Israel on aviation security. The European Parliament's Committee on Transport and Tourism had just adopted an important decision on aviation security, authorising the presence of security agents on board aircraft. The European Parliament party wanted full aviation security and counted on Israel, which was one of the countries with the tightest airport checks. The Members of Parliament proposed that the EU and Israel should exchange information in the field of air transport.

Amira Dotan stressed the climate of cooperation between the two parties. She thought this favourable climate would help to improve the situation for everyone and to obtain a different viewpoint on the Middle East region.

She raised environmental and development issues and proposed specific measures to protect the environment.

Matan Vilnai (Israeli MP) mentioned the difficult conditions in which his country found itself, which made daily life hard for the Israelis. His country was the only one in the world where there were attempted attacks every day; Israel was threatened by terrorism.

He concluded by saying that he would continue to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms and that peace was the only way of settling the conflict.

Bastiaan Belder, Vice-Chairman of the European Parliament delegation, asked why emigration from Israel was higher than immigration. He also asked what the State of Israel was doing to eliminate honour crimes, which were very widespread in the Arab community, and asked about the status of mixed marriages between Jewish men and Muslim women.

The Israeli delegation explained that Muslim Druze women were the most affected and Christian women were hardly or not at all affected by honour crimes. The Israeli delegation announced that a Knesset committee would consider the matter and would propose meetings between women of all religions. In this way women would have a better understanding and perception of the world in which they lived.

On the question of immigration, the Israeli delegation said the world was changing and mentalities with it. Matan Vilnai said that nevertheless this was the first time that there were more emigrants than immigrants.

The problem of mixed marriages would be discussed by a committee set up for the purpose; this was necessary because there was nothing in the constitution to deal with the matter.

2. Neighbourhood police and issues relating to the tense situation in Israel

According to the Commission representative, the Commission had great expectations of the EU-Israel neighbourhood policy action plan. She outlined the preparation of a technical information exchange programme under the TAEIX programme. This made provision for financial aid of € 14 billion over the next seven years. This aid would permit increased cooperation with Israel within the framework of the action plan. A reflection group would be set up during the German Presidency, to improve intergovernmental relations and separate national and international problems.

The European delegation mentioned that there was a need to give a new dimension to relations between the EU and Israel, giving Arab citizens the option of playing an active part in cooperation.

David Hammerstein Mintz said that Arab citizens were four times more likely to be unemployed than Jewish citizens and that they suffered poverty and inequalities. He feared the gap was likely to increase if the Israeli authorities did not take stock of these inequalities. The situation was likely to hold back the peace process. He asked Israel, as a friend of the EU, to combat these social injustices and apply human rights everywhere in the country to ensure its internal security and to show itself a model of respect for human rights.

Gunnar Hökmark recommended firmness with regard to all human rights violations and said both Jewish and Arab citizens should in fairness have open access to the EU's proposed framework programmes.

Finally Edith Mastenbroek spoke of the difficult living conditions in Israel, in Tel Aviv in particular, and hoped for improved administrative procedures that would simplify transit between the Palestinian territories and Israel.

Mr Dimitrov said that Israel was a model of tolerance and had to face an environment that was hostile to its existence and Islamic fundamentalism. Avraham Michaeli said that Israel was aware of the problems and was willing to resolve them. Israel was obliged to curtail certain liberties in order to ensure its security. He asked the EU to invest in the fight against terrorism, alongside Israel.

He said there was no problem of injustice or human rights violations with regard to Arab citizens but, in view of the daily threat, human rights sometimes had to be restricted if the State of Israel was to survive. Socially there were problems because Arab citizens were more affected by unemployment and their living conditions were more precarious.

3. Situation in the Middle East and Israel's relations with neighbouring Arab countries

Resolution 242, the existence of two separate States, good neighbourhood relations resulting from the introduction of democracy in countries adjacent to Israel, and Palestinian refugees were discussed under this item.

Ulrich Stockmann said that the EU was concerned by the weakening of Fatah to the advantage of Hamas, the way in which Israel had left the Gaza Strip and the consequences of Israel's war against Lebanon in 2006. The European delegation wondered whether the EU should enter into a process of dialogue with Hamas and Syria.

David Hammerstein Mintz proposed acting as in Lebanon, pointing out that the UNIFIL mission had been a success, and the same type of mission should be carried out for Israel. He invited Israel no longer to act by force but more pragmatically. There were at present considerable opportunities to achieve peace. Unfortunately the Israeli Government did not react and was more concerned with the internal situation. Israel had to leave the Shebaa Farms and put them under UN control as the influence of Hezbollah and Syria would thus be weakened. He mentioned the Arab peace initiative in 2002 and asked the State of Israel to show greater openness towards its neighbours.

Matan Vilnai said that the Hamas members in the of the Unity Government were still refusing to recognise Israel. It was not possible to grant Palestinian Arabs the right of return to Israel.

He finished by saying that there were bases for negotiation and discussion in the Arab peace initiative. The opportunity for dialogue therefore had to be seized upon in the hope that peace would finally be established. Some Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt were aware that only a peace treaty would make it possible to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Avraham Michael said that on three occasions since 1967 Israel had handed back territories that she had conquered and the situation had not evolved despite Israeli concessions. Hamas was rejecting peace and was continuing to shell Sderot. He said there was a certain Middle Eastern mentality: if one party made concessions, the other saw it as a sign of weakness. That was why there was no real progress in the region.

Amira Dotan thought they had to continue to be firm and clear, like the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon. She welcomed the fact that a European Parliament delegation had visited Lebanon, which had allowed it to take stock of application of resolution 1701. She thought the situation in the Palestinian territories was an internal matter. Palestinian society had become more radical, particularly after the 2006 elections. She thought Mahmoud Abbas favoured peace in Palestine and most Palestinians followed him. She proposed helping these people combat religious radicalisation and arms trafficking in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas received arms from Iran, via Syria and southern Lebanon, with Hezbollah as intermediary.

She ended by saying that the opportunity for dialogue had to be seized and the dialogue had to be strengthened by uniting forces in favour of peace with the Arab countries. She thought the Arab initiative offered a good opportunity, which should be taken.

III. Conclusions and action by the delegations

The following four main topics were predominant in the discussion:

1. The geopolitical positioning of Israel in the wider Middle East, including the Israeli perspective on contemporary events such as the Saudi Peace Initiative;
2. The continuing prominence of the unfolding of events in Lebanon, including the rearming and redeployment of Hezbollah, and the presence and importance of the multinational force in the south of the country;
3. Israeli-Palestinian relations, in the light of the formation of the Palestinian Unity Government;
4. Bilateral relations between Israel and the European Union, with a special emphasis on matters relating to the upcoming renewal and improvement of the action plan, and the newly-proposed Reflection Group. Both such issues will represent significant steps forward in the advancement of the positive spirit of communication, cooperation and mutual assistance being fostered between our two entities.

The two delegations hoped to be able to continue the interparliamentary dialogue. The Israeli delegation said they were in favour of an open, free and frank discussion, where any topic could be raised. This sustained and ongoing dialogue would make it possible to deal with fundamental problems. Amira Dotan invited the EU to play an active part in the peace and democracy process in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the Israeli delegation said that Israel set store by the development of economic relations with the EU.