Delegation for relations with Israel

REPORT

37th Interparliamentary Meeting between the European Parliament and the Knesset

Wednesday 23 November 2011

Brussels

by Bastiaan Belder, Delegation Chair
This 37th meeting between the delegations of the Knesset and the European Parliament took place against a particularly eventful background.
Internally, this summer, apolitical popular protest movements had marked the concern for the future of those from the least privileged backgrounds.
Externally, the Palestinians' 'unilateral' initiative at the UN to call for recognition as a state had been strongly opposed by the Israeli authorities, while peace talks had stalled. Moreover, the Israelis did not see the initial impact of the 'Arab spring' as very reassuring and considered the transition towards moderate Islamic democracies to be a destabilising factor. The growing perception of the Iranian nuclear threat completed an alarming picture.
At the same time, while relations between Israel and the EU remained at a particularly high level, there were still some unsatisfactory aspects.

This meeting had been preceded by the EP delegation's visit to Israel from 24 to 26 May 2011 and by the Knesset Speaker's visit to Brussels on 10 and 11 October 2011.

OPENING OF THE 37th MEETING BETWEEN THE EP AND KNESSET

Bastiaan Belder, Chair of the EP delegation for relations with Israel, officially opened the 37th interparliamentary meeting and welcomed the Knesset delegation: Nachman Shai, Chair (Kadima), Yacov Hedery, Vice-Speaker of the Knesset (Kadima), Annastasia Mikhaeli (Israel Beteinou) and Daniel Ben Simon (Labour).

He recalled the recent meetings in Israel in May, and in Brussels on the occasion of the Knesset Speaker's visit, and outlined the programme for the day.

Nachman Shai thanked his host and joined him in hoping for a fruitful dialogue.

1. EXCHANGE OF VIEWS WITH DR EMANUEL OTTOLENGI OF THE 'FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES', ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR THREAT.

Dr Emanuele Ottolenghi, of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, gave a presentation on the Iranian nuclear threat.
Dr Ottolenghi highlighted the worsening perception of the threat, which had been clearly confirmed in the recent IAEA report of 8 November. In his view, the UN and the IAEA had to seek tougher sanctions in order to halt, or at least curb, any further nuclear work by Iran for military purposes. To that end, the entire technical, material and financial arsenal should be used. In particular, for want of a total boycott, Iranian oil products should become cheaper, thus reducing the country's revenue.
A firm attitude was needed, showing that no response option had been ruled out, including military strikes. Cohesion within the UN was not perfect – only 74 countries had said they had taken measures pursuant to UN Resolution 1929. Mr Ziljstra expressed concern over the weakness of the Europeans, which Iran could take advantage of, while Mr Belder expressed interest in the Iran opposition and wondered whether the Iranian people did actually support the nuclear project. The answer was clear: if the Europeans appeared weakened, Iran, too, was weakened due to a loss of popular support.
The Israeli delegation stressed the need for firmness in view of the growing threat which was of increasing concern to them. Nachman Shai said that the threat did not concern Israelis alone, but all the states of the 'free world'. In this regard, Israel needed to show it was ready for anything, with the firm support of its friends.

The Chair, Mr Belder, thanked the speaker.

2. EXCHANGE OF VIEWS WITH PIER ANTONIO PANZERI, CHAIR OF THE DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH THE MAGHREB COUNTRIES, ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ARAB SPRING.

Pier Antonio Panzeri, Chair of the EP delegation for relations with the Maghreb countries and Co-chair of the Monitoring Group on the situation in the Southern Mediterranean outlined the specific features of the 'Arab Spring'. First he spoke of the causes of these events – the economic and financial crisis, the uprising of young people and civil society and unequal wealth distribution. He stressed the specificity of the Arab movements and called on the international community to immediately propose partnerships that were carefully tailored to individual countries. He encouraged Europe to review its neighborhood policy against this background while considering the changes in geopolitical balances that were under way in the greater region. It would take a long time to establish democratic awareness. To that end, all methods were worth considering: controlled immigration, social justice, mobility, support for democracy, etc.

Daniel Ben Simon (Knesset) expressed the doubts that were widespread in Israel and questioned the advisability of replacing military dictatorships with Islamic dictatorships.

Pier Antonio Panzeri called for moderation and realism.

The Chair, Mr Belder, thanked the speaker.

3. EXCHANGE OF VIEWS WITH LEONELLO GABRICI, EEAS, ON RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND ISRAEL.

Leonello Gabrici, for the EEAS, outlined the relations between the EU and Israel. He focused first of all on the new guiding principles of the Treaty of Lisbon in relation to the EU's presence on the international scene and explained the mission of the new EEAS as an 'honest broker' between Member States and partner countries. The new action plan, as part of the Neighbourhood Policy, sought to offer an à la carte menu based on areas of common interest. The following sectors were thus covered: transport, energy, justice, home affairs, environment, services, research/technology. An agreement on agriculture had been signed in 2010 and political dialogue would resume: a meeting had been scheduled for 5 December.

However, Mr Gabrici stressed that the Member States were preponderant as far as foreign policy was concerned, which was why bilateral relations were being maintained with the 27.

While economic relations between the EU and Israel were in good health, some improvements could still be made. This had been the subject of draft agreements
between Israel and the EU, two of which were currently at a standstill in the EP under procedures that required Parliament's consent.

Mr Belder reviewed the 'non-progress' of these issues which directly concerned Israel: Israel's participation in certain EU programmes, which had been at a standstill in the AFET committee for over three years, in addition to the Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAA), which the INTA committee, in its work programme, had considered including on the agenda for the June 2012 part-session, at the earliest.

With regard to the peace process, the Chair of the Knesset delegation pointed out that his party (in opposition) was ready to resume negotiations, but the ruling coalition did not agree with that position. He, together with his Labour colleague, believed that 98% of the problems had been solved and that the remaining 2% had to be considered 'the price to pay' for an issue that had been insoluble for 20 years and that had regularly caused governments to fall. Some voices loudly pointed out that a prerequisite for any negotiation was two parties that were willing to negotiate. This was not the case with the divided Palestinians, some of whom (Hamas) were impossible to deal with and who had not officially renounced the disappearance of Israel.

On a different note, Margrete Auken recalled the terms of the EP resolution of 23 September 2011 for the two-state solution and expressed her support for internal Palestinian reconciliation. She was concerned about the Israeli government bills which sought to make the work of associations receiving financial support from overseas, including the EU, more difficult.

The recent agreement between Israel and Hamas, resulting in the exchange of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit for 1027 Palestinian prisoners, showed, however, that pragmatism was still the order of the day. There was one subject, however, on which the entire 'non-Arab' part of Israeli society was standing together – the preservation of the City of Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the Jewish state of Israel.

**CLOSURE OF THE MEETING**

The Chair, Mr Belder, thanked all participants, Members and guests. He welcomed the high quality of the discussions and said he looked forward to meeting the members of the Knesset delegation at the next meetings in 2012.

Mr Nachman Shai, on behalf of his delegation, thanked the EP for the welcome received.

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The two delegations and their guests had the opportunity to extend their discussions during two meals: a lunch, on behalf of the EP President, hosted by Gianni Pittella, Vice-President of the EP, and a dinner hosted by Bastiaan Belder, Chair of the EP delegation.