

PRESS RELEASE

MEPs visiting Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories welcomed the launch of proximity talks, and stressed that negotiations should lead to a solution based on two viable and autonomous states. The delegation deplored the recent mortar attacks against Israel and the fact that Israel's retaliatory air strikes led to civilian casualties.

A delegation of members of the EP foreign affairs, budgets and development committees is visiting Israel and the Palestinian Territories from 24 to 27 May. It is focusing on the peace process, the humanitarian situation and the monitoring of EU financial assistance in the Palestinian Territories.

The delegation met Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor and Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon. MEPs held further meetings with members of the Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council and also met representatives of Israeli and Palestinian NGOs and international organizations.

Two states in peace and security

During its political meetings, the delegation warmly welcomed the start of proximity talks, as a first step towards resuming direct negotiations. "These negotiations must lead to a solution based on two viable and autonomous states, living side by side in peace and security", stressed MEPs.

Settlements and the status of Jerusalem

MEPs were concerned that the continued building of Jewish settlements and the route of the separation barrier de facto pre-empt efforts towards a viable peace. "The status of Jerusalem is an essential part of the negotiations and the international community should stand ready to help implement the agreement to be reached by the two sides", members underlined after their visit to East Jerusalem.

Concerns about the NGO law

MEPs expressed concern about the bill currently being discussed at the Knesset on the status of NGOs in Israel. "The promotion of human rights and freedom of opinion is an integral part of democracy. Israel, as a truly democratic country in the Middle East, should continue to uphold these values and refrain from adopting laws or taking actions which might undermine them", members added.

The delegation also underscored that criticism of some of the policies of the Israeli government towards Palestinians or local NGOs should not be seen as hostile towards the State of Israel the security of which was also an EU priority.

The future of EU financial assistance

In meetings with their counterparts in the Palestinian Legislative Council, MEPs dismissed rumours that they intended to cut EU financial assistance to the Palestinian Territories. "What we want to see is that our efforts to promote a viable Palestinian state are recognised by both parties. The spending of EU taxpayers' money must be accompanied by a firm and unequivocal commitment by both sides to a two-state solution", underlined MEPs after their field visit to assess EU financed projects in the area of Palestinian institution building.

The delegation was impressed by the Fayyad government's efforts to create functioning institutions as an important step towards Palestinian statehood.

MEPs' visit to Gaza

On Thursday, part of the delegation travelled to Gaza, via Egypt and the Rafah border crossing, as a result of the Israeli authorities' refusal to grant access through the Erez crossing. The purpose of this field visit, organized under the auspices of UNRWA, was to assess the reconstruction and humanitarian needs resulting from the current blockade of the Gaza strip. The delegation deplored "the recent mortar attacks against Israel and the fact that retaliatory air strikes by the Israeli Air Forces led to civilian casualties".