

## **New Challenges for EU-Israel relations after the Gaza War**

A high ranking seminar in Berlin during 22.4.2009 in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

### **Session I – The scientific dimension**

Following a formal welcoming of all participants at the IEPN workshop by the Head of the Department for Near/Middle East and North Africa of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Mr Hajo Lanz, Professor Stephan Stetter in his capacity as the European coordinator of the IEPN gave a short overview on the history of the IEPN and its main activities since its inception in 2003. The session then turned to the presentation and discussion of the new IEPN working papers which were written by key experts working on EU-Israeli relations. Key experts working on EU-Israeli relations presented their points of view during the first session. Among them were Dr. Oded Eran, the Director of the Institute for National Security Studies (NISS) in Tel Aviv and a former Israeli ambassador to the EU, Nina Obermaier, who is the Israeli desk officer in DG RELEX at the European Commission and Dr. Claire Spencer, the Head of the Middle East Department at Chatham House, the Royal Institute for International Affairs in London.

One speaker argued the point that in its first phase Operation Cast Lead only met mild criticism but that as the campaign continued the effects on EU-Israeli relations became more visible and that bilateral relations seem to return to the pre-2004 ‘frozen’ status, not least due to public pressure on European governments.

The second statement proclaimed that since 2004 EU-Israeli relations have intensified so much, not least on the societal/business-level, that bilateral relations have in the meantime a very robust and solid fundament. However, the Gaza War is likely to have an impact on the higher political level of cooperation, e.g. in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy. For the EU an explicit acknowledgment of the need for a two-state solution will remain a must for its continued support of the peace process, i.e. financial support for the Palestinians. The EU and Israel should start talking more openly – and to understand better – why pursuing settlement activities has been a ‘constant’ of various Israeli governments independently of their political persuasion and how this affects the long-term strategies of Israeli officials for regional politics. Discussing these long-term options – and also the views the EU has in that regard – will require to more actively connect EU foreign policies to the real changes on the ground but can also serve as a basis to set the parameters for a long-term integration of Israeli with Europe in whatever institutional format.

As a response to these statements one participant confirmed the view that EU-Israeli relations have greatly advanced and intensified throughout the last few years. The ensuing open discussion focused on these arguments from the two papers, in particular debates about the current status of EU-Israeli relations on all societal levels, the future of contractual relations, such as the ‘upgrading’ negotiations which currently take place as well as on the linkages of EU-Israeli relations with the Gaza War, in particular, and the wider regional setting including settlement policies, in specific.

## **Session II - The political dimension**

The key note speaker of this session was our guest MK Isaac Herzog who is the minister of Welfare and Social Services of the State of Israel. Additionally Minister Herzog was responsible to coordinate on behalf of the Israeli government the humanitarian aid to the Gaza strip, which is the function he holds also in his present position. According to Herzog the region is facing a major clash between fundamentalist and moderate forces while the War in Gaza was only a part of a global confrontation. Consequently the war is only an outcome of continuous provocations which persist against Israel for more than 8 years. Also the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 did not change the situation when the Palestinians have got an option to run their own independency. From his point of view to join the Netanyahu/Barak government was supported by him after long thoughts and only after he was convinced that Netanyahu will not abandon the option to negotiate an agreement with the Palestinian Authority on the ground of the two-state solution. However the way these negotiations will take place will be different. Therefore the present government needs time to elaborate a new approach which should be presented in the next couple of weeks. Regarding EU /Israeli relations Herzog emphasizes the need of the EU to be less ambiguous towards Hamas and Iran. More work and efforts should be done to explain the Israeli position among the European public opinion.

Following the speech of Minister Herzog the European/German perspective was presented by MP Walter Kolbow who is Vice-Chairman of the SPD Parliamentary Group. Kolbow emphasized the unconditional support of German foreign policies to Israel. However Europe is undergoing a major economic crisis which might be reflected into its relations to third countries. Peace in the Middle East is for Europe of strategic importance meaning that the EU should play a major role to achieve it.

Following the presentation the participants of the round debate the various aspects of the situation suggesting that a change might take place in the region but only after Israel will clarify its position and after the visit of Netanyahu in the US by mid May.

The debate was concluded by the moderator Dr. Roby Nathanson who expressed the need to do more efforts in order to improve the perceptions of EU Israel relations in public opinion.

The seminar was concluded by Prof. Stephan Stetter who summarised the main aspects of both sessions. He also informed participants about the next steps of the IEPN whose active engagement for open, constructive, friendly and critical dialogue between key European and Israeli decision-makers, officials, academics and public figures will continue in the future.