

EU and Israel: facing the challenges together

I am happy to visit your beautiful country on 3 November for the first time in my capacity of European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, to discuss ways for strengthening the relationship between Israel and the EU.

Both the EU and Israel are relatively young actors on the international scene. We first established relations in the late-fifties, when what is today's the European Union was taking its first steps and Israel was a ten-year old state struggling to establish itself against heavy odds.

Since the '50s, the EU and Israel have both grown stronger and so have our bilateral relations. A set of formal agreements have brought our diplomatic and economic relations to an extremely intense level. In parallel, Europeans and Israelis from various walks of life have discovered that they live in the same neighbourhood and are increasingly enjoying the benefits of our proximity and similarity. Israelis are finding that the EU, with its massive, borderless internal market is an attractive destination for business, tourism and academic studies. Israeli filmmakers, authors, musicians and artists are finding an interested audience in Europe. Europeans for their part are beginning to discover that Israel is a 'Start Up Nation' - a high-tech and entrepreneurial centre of global importance. Last year there were over one million tourist arrivals from the EU to Israel.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has made a huge contribution towards deepening and broadening the EU-Israel relations. This policy has led to increased harmonisation of Israeli standards and business-related legislation with EU practice, thus making it easier for Israeli companies to do business in the EU, which became Israel's largest foreign export market. Last year, our total trade reached €20 billion. New agreements in the fields of trade in agricultural goods and conformity of standards have been signed, with a view of further improving Israel's access to the EU market. A new comprehensive agreement on aviation is being negotiated which, once signed, is bound to bring more Europeans to Israel and more Israelis to Europe. Finally, in the most rewarding field of our co-operation, Research and Development, Israeli scientists are currently involved in some 800 EU-funded scientific research projects worth over 4.3 billion Euros.

Due to the intensity of our relations, in 2008 we decided to 'upgrade' our relations in order to enhance our ability to achieve common goals. This decision remains to be realised. There is an inescapable political element to be taken into account, given that the upgrade is necessarily linked to a decisive breakthrough in the Middle East peace negotiations.

The EU is fully engaged in supporting the Middle East peace process. The EU's commitment to Israel's security is clear and firm, as is the EU's belief that a peaceful resolution of the conflict can only result in two states living side-by-side in peace, security and prosperity, based on the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the capital of two states. There is no alternative to negotiations between the parties and the EU is fully engaged on the ground, as well as at political level, in order to help find a solution. My colleague Catherine Ashton, EU Commission Vice President and High Representative for external relations, has come three times this year to discuss with her Israeli and Palestinian counterparts the EU views on the Peace Process and convey our support for direct negotiations.

Formidable challenges lie ahead of Israel, and the EU is prepared to provide all the necessary support to overcome them. Our cooperation so far has helped us achieve important results, but it has yet to reach its full potential. As European Commissioner to the Neighbourhood Policy, I have started a reflection on how best to enhance our policy tools, and I know that I can count on the co-operation and advice of the Israeli government in this endeavour. It will be a great privilege for me to visit Israel on 3

November and to have the opportunity of discussing thoroughly the challenges and opportunities of our long-standing and vibrant relations with Israel. What matters at the end of the day, is that EU and Israel cooperate in a spirit of mutual trust, for the benefit of their citizens. This is my objective for this visit in particular, and for the EU-Israel relations, in general.

Stefan Füle,

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy