

(EU) EU/ISRAEL: EU INVITED TO UPGRADE RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL

Brussels, 23/10/2009 (Agence Europe) – The EU and Israel have completed their negotiations on liberalising agricultural trade with one or two restrictions. Details have not been given at this stage but a Community source has revealed that agreement was reached among the 27 member states on 20 October and should be signed in the near future. Another agreement has been announced and is likely to be finalised very shortly putting in place a framework for the certification of pharmaceutical products. It can be seen in Brussels, then, that relations with Israel are becoming warmer, despite an apparent political distancing and even though Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said at the end of September that he was very unhappy about the pace of bilateral relations. He felt that the EU was “*not responding*” and that there should be no “*conditionality*”.

The decision by member states, over a year ago, to upgrade EU-Israel relations, still stands, said Commission Vice-President Günter Verheugen in Jerusalem, when delivering a speech to Israeli business leaders, politicians and the media on 15 October, at a conference on “Israel and EU enlargement” organised by the Commission delegation to Israel.

The EU gives high priority to its relations with Israel, its “*natural partner*”, Verheugen said. Even among the “*circle of friends*” (Ed: the countries that form part of the neighbourhood policy), it is an “*atypical*” country which deserves a special status because it is close to the EU in terms of economic development and the stability of its democracy and institutions, he went on. Relations to be developed will be tailored in order to be as close as possible, similar to those with Norway and Iceland, members of the European Economic Area, he said. Verheugen called for a “*positive agenda*”, within the framework of the association agreement, new and interesting prospects for the future development of EU-Israel relations, since the EU and Israel already work together on a wide range of issues. He mentioned the environment, energy, trans-European networks, broadband internet connections, science and technology, Galileo, and combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism. Verheugen did, however, make reference to the political situation, saying that it was to be hoped that, in time, there would be the same peace, stability and prosperity in the Middle East as had been brought to Europe.

The “*positive agenda*” he spoke of has to be put alongside the calls from European civil society associations for increased pressure on Israel and even for boycotts. According to Verheugen, calls for boycotts of Israeli goods could not be justified and were just an “*easy*” option which would do nothing to resolve the conflict. This reassuring sentence was repeated widely in the press in Israel and across various electronic media (Israeli and European associations) that carry the points of view in Israeli politics – a sign that the threat of boycotts is being taken seriously. The Israeli government has already said it hoped to get the support of the EU to redress the tarnished image of the country. Unable to explain to the world the reasons for its operation in Gaza; condemned in a report drafted by a South African Jew; Israel has been permanently in the dock for 40 years, according to Foreign Ministry communications specialist Ido Aharoni, quoted in the electronic press. The *Jerusalem Post* quotes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as saying continuous efforts to demolish the legitimacy of the state of Israel had to be countered. “*The most important battle we have to fight is for public opinion,*” he said.

At a meeting in mid-September, between Deputy Director General at the Foreign Ministry Rafi Barak and a European representative, Israel called for more high level visits, such as the one by Commissioner Verheugen, described as a “*good friend of the country*” and explicitly spoke of visits by Commissioners Rehn and De Gucht (unconfirmed by Brussels for the moment). Israel has also called for greater commitment from the EU which it wants to be less ambiguous when giving its viewpoint on the two states solution, freedom of movement in the occupied territories, security and recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. (F.B./transl.rt)

(EU) EU/EUROMED: ANNUAL MEETING OF FOREIGN MINISTERS OFFICIALLY POSTPONED

Brussels, 23/10/2009 (Agence Europe) – “*After consulting stakeholders*”, the Joint-Presidency of the Union for the Mediterranean has decided to postpone the meeting of foreign ministers, scheduled to take place in Istanbul on 24 October, until a later date. The Joint-Presidency quoted is France. Egypt, the second Joint-President, was the most vocal in calling for this unsurprising postponement. (F.B./transl.rt)