

While the attempt was being made in Annapolis on November 27, 2007 at the initiative of the USA to breathe new life into efforts to promote peace in the Middle East, high-ranking politicians and experts from Israel, the Palestinian territories and Europe were holding discussions at the FES European Office in Brussels



*Israeli-Palestinian-European Middle East Workshop in Brussels*

about whether the time had come for final status negotiations and under what circumstances the path proposed by the USA might have a chance of succeeding.

The Middle East workshop which took place in Brussels from November 27-29, 2007 forms part of a series of events that have been organized jointly over the last three years by the FES offices in East Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and the European office in Brussels. The November event acted as a forum for an informal dialogue, in particular between decision-makers in the conflict-torn area. Unfortunately, at the moment it is practically impossible to hold such talks in the region itself.

These “Middle East-Brussels talks” also help to promote the exchange of views between Israelis, Palestinians and representatives of the European Union’s think tanks working in Brussels.

The Israeli and Palestinian participants, including former Palestinian foreign minister Nasser Al-Qudwa and Israeli parliamentarian Dani Yatom, agreed on the urgent necessity of finally bringing about peace in the region.

In both camps, extremists and radicals have gained in popularity in the chaotic situation following Hamas’ takeover in the Gaza Strip and the fiasco of Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. There is unveiled skepticism about whether the Annapolis meeting

will be able to result in any positive dynamics. Strategic security considerations in regional Middle East policy, taking account of the threat posed by Iran's desire for a nuclear bomb, crisis-ridden Lebanon, and Syria's ambivalent role, have imparted a new urgency to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, disappointment became obvious during the discussions as it became clear that the declaration made in Annapolis failed to even specifically mention the end-status questions that must be solved. Doubts were expressed as to whether any speedy agreement could be reached in the ambitious schedule, which gives the end of Bush's term of office in 2008 as the deadline for solving the conflict.

Both delegations expressed the desire for the EU to be more closely associated with the region. The European Parliament members participating in the conference, including the vice-president, Marek Siwiec, stated that Brussels was completely aware of its responsibility and that the EU's involvement in the region was undergoing a process of intensification and adaptation.

The EU's financial support continued to be of paramount importance to the Palestinian territories. However, a discussion took place as to how the EU could and should go beyond mere crisis management and providing necessary financial support and gain lasting influence in the region. The EU sees its contribution to implementing the peace initiative set in motion in Annapolis especially as providing even more robust support for the Palestinians in the process of forming their own state. The EU action strategy presented by Javier Solana in the run-up to the conference in the USA was perceived as a positive signal of a long-term strategic involvement.

The workshop framework enabled the participants to communicate with each other in an intensive, no-holds-barred fashion throughout the two days of the conference. Emotive subjects such as the refugees' right of return and the Jewish character of the Israeli State were not swept under the carpet. The dialogue succeeded in drawing the participants from both parties to the conflict closer and achieving networking among them. It helped include European decision-makers in the process and provided important starting points for heightened cooperation.