

## Political

**update:**– Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman tours Europe to secure an upgrade in EU-Israel relations – 7 May

### Key points:

- Israeli foreign minister urges his European counterparts to upgrade EU-Israel relations, vowing that the Israeli government will seek peace with the Palestinians
  - Italian foreign minister backed Israeli calls for an upgrade in EU-Israel relations, saying that it is essential to influence the peace process
  - The Czech prime minister, whose country holds the EU presidency, dismissed calls from the EU Commission for the EU's relations to Israel to be linked to the peace process
  - The EU-Israel Association Council is due to meet on 15 June to decide whether to implement the upgrade in relations.
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### Latest developments

- Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman began a tour of Europe on Monday (4 May) to promote the upgrading of Israel's relations with the EU under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The EU-Israel Association Council, comprised of the EU member states' foreign ministers and their Israeli counterpart, is due to meet to discuss implementing an upgrade in relations on 15 June. This is Lieberman's first official overseas visit since being appointed foreign minister on 31 March.
- In a joint news conference with Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini in Rome on Monday (4 May), Lieberman vowed that Tel Aviv would seek to achieve a "secure and definitive" peace with the Palestinians. He refused to give explicit support for a two state solution, saying "this government's goal is not to produce slogans or make pompous declarations, but to reach concrete results." Frattini argued that the upgrading of EU-Israel relations must continue so that "Europe can play a major role [in the Middle East peace process]."
- Visiting France on Tuesday (5 May), French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner told Lieberman that in order to achieve the desired upgrade in EU-Israel relations, Israel had to halt settlement construction in the West Bank. He also said that negotiations with the Palestinian Authority should be immediately restarted.
- Lieberman arrived in the Czech Republic on Wednesday (6 May) for talks with his outgoing counterpart Karel Schwarzenberg as well as the EU High Representative, Javier Solana. Solana told Lieberman that the EU will make its decision on the proposed upgrade once Israel unveils its Palestinian strategy. Lieberman travelled to Germany for the final leg of his tour on Thursday (7 May).

- Whilst Europe's foreign ministers have expressed differences over whether the EU's relations with Israel should be strengthened, the main split appears to be between the EU's political leadership, the European Council – currently under Czech leadership – and the EU's bureaucratic institution, the European Commission. EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said on Sunday (3 May) that it was too early for the EU to strengthen ties with Israel:

“On the one hand, the upgrading was an offer that in principle still stands. But for it to be taken up and pursued, we need to be sure... [Israel is working] for a prosperous, secure and peaceful Middle East...[ including] an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living peacefully beside Israel with East Jerusalem as its capital.”  
(03/05/09)

- In response to a similar statement by Ferrero-Waldner on 23 April, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek travelled to Israel on 24 April to meet with Israeli President Shimon Peres. He told the president that his country would fight calls within Europe to suspend the upgrade of relations. At the conclusion of his visit, having described Ferrero-Waldner's comments as “just a statement by a Commissioner,” Topolánek said that the peace process “should not be linked to relations between the EU and Israel.”
- Furthermore, the Czech government wants to host a comprehensive EU-Israel summit before its six month presidency of the EU comes to an end on 30 June.

## Background

- The EU-Israel Association Council announced on 16 June 2008 that relations between the EU and Israel would be upgraded. This followed a concerted Israeli campaign to improve EU-Israel ties, an effort that was spearheaded by the then Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.
- In December 2008, the EU's foreign ministers approved a significant upgrade in the organisation's diplomatic relationship with Israel. However, the EU Commission stalled the process on 14 January 2009 under the instruction of Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner.
- Referring to Israel's military operation in Gaza, Ramiro Cibrian-Uzal, the Head of the European Commission Delegation to Israel, explained on 15 January that “business can't continue as usual” during a period of war. He stressed, however, that the decision to take a “time-out” was a mutual one, with Israeli Foreign Ministry officials being too busy dealing with various aspects of the Gaza crisis to delve into the upgrade discussions.
- The EU Commission's decision was preceded by a non-binding debate in the European Parliament on 13 December, in which the parliament voted to delay upgrading EU-Israel relations due to a lack of progress on the peace process.
- The new Israeli government is currently formulating its foreign policy. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will present his government's proposals for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to US President Barack Obama on 18 May.
- In their speeches to the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference (held from 3-5 May) in Washington DC, the Israeli President and the Israeli Prime Minister (the latter via video-link) both called for peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians to resume. President Peres told the conference on Monday (4 May) that making peace is a

priority for new Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. After a meeting with US President Barack Obama on Tuesday (5 May), Peres added that Netanyahu will back a two state solution. On Monday (4 May), Prime Minister Netanyahu said that he wants peace with the Palestinians and the wider Arab world.

- The upgrade that remains to be implemented would see ad hoc summit meetings three times a year between the Israeli prime minister and all EU heads of state, as well as meetings between the Israeli foreign minister and all 27 EU foreign ministers. Israel and the EU would also pursue a strategic dialogue to discuss pertinent regional issues such as Iran and Syria. In addition, Israel could be included in EU peacekeeping forces and the EU would help Israel to become better integrated into UN agencies.