

European Friends of Israel (EFI)
Policy Conference, Paris, 6/7th November 2008

With ten days notice ICEJ UK was invited to send representatives to the EFI Policy conference in Paris. This was the inaugural meeting for European Allies of Israel and was presented from a Judeo/Christian Biblical perspective. Alan Chester and Len Grates from ICEJ UK were amongst the delegates. The ICEJ was invited to attend by Benny Elon, a Member of the Knesset (MK), as part of the International Israel Caucus Alliance Foundation (IICAF). MP's, MEP's. Senior Government Leaders, past Presidents and Prime Ministers from all European Countries attended. About 400 were present. EFI was founded two years ago to harness political support for Israel across Europe. This support is varied and not always Biblical. The majority believe in a two state solution as the means of peace. There were a few brave MP's/MEP's who clearly stated that the solution was in the Bible. Nevertheless, hundreds of parliamentarians from 42 nations, either as members of national parliaments (MP's) or the European parliament (MEP's) attended, as well as members of Israel's Knesset and representatives of ICEJ national boards from across Europe. ICEJ Executive Director Malcolm Hedding and International Director Jürgen Bühler had the opportunity to address the conference.

The politicians included such distinguished people as the President of the Croatian parliament, the vice-president of the German Bundestag, the speaker of the Knesset, the deputy foreign minister of Bulgaria and ministers or former ministers from across Europe. Men and women of experience and influence who love Israel - some Christian, some not. It was particularly pleasing to meet Alistair Burt MP of Conservative Friends of Israel, Andrew Gwynne MP of Labour Friends of Israel, and Lord Mitchell, a peer in the House of Lords.

The main reason for the ICEJ being present was to give a presentation alongside Benny Elon, representing the IICAF, on a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. The major objectives include building stronger bridges between Israel and Europe in such areas as the environment, business, science, technology, democratic institutions, and the all-important search for a real and sustainable peace in the Middle East. The 60 year Palestinian refugee question was never effectively addressed but was highlighted and a positive way forward presented, as were Israel's security concerns, the threat from Iran, and murderous terrorist activities. The MEP's and MP's and other participants were challenged, and indeed mandated, to pursue these matters and concerns in their spheres of influence and policy making. Whilst a two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and her neighbours seems the majority view, this remains a controversial proposition.

Benny Elon invited Malcolm Hedding, ICEJ Executive Director, to give an introduction to the work of ICEJ. Dr Jürgen Bühler, ICEJ International Director, gave a powerpoint presentation on a suggested solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. This was informative and well presented, with positive and practical suggestions.

Whilst this was by its nature a mainly political/social conference, there was a spiritual/biblical content also, with Knesset member Benny Elon of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, the ICEJ representatives, and several Christian MP's and MEP's bringing this vital aspect into the presentations and discussions.

The conference was an amazing opportunity for the ICEJ to present some answers to big questions. The partnership between IICAF and the ICEJ is very significant and we should be

praying for Malcolm Hedding and Jürgen Bühler that they will know God's wisdom in progressing this alliance, and for the part ICEJ UK will play.

Mention must be made of the moving appearance of Mr Noam Shalit, father of the abducted (into Gaza) Israeli soldier Gilad. He was totally endorsed in his call for the EU to influence national governments to do far more to bring pressure on Hamas for Gilad's release. He gave an impassioned plea for his son's release. Please remember this is your prayers.

Was the conference a success? Only time will tell. One thing is obvious – the ICEJ has the respect and trust of Benny Elon and the IICAF. As believers in the God of Israel we need to be praying for these sincere politicians who attended the event that God will give them understanding and wisdom as they seek to stand Elongside Israel in these momentous days. The peace plan God has in His heart will be revealed when the Sar Shalom (Prince of Peace) returns in all His Glory.

Pray earnestly about all these matters. Ascertain who YOUR MEP and MP are. pray for them, write to them, meet up with them, lobby for Israel; get resources from ICEJ to help you state the case. The time for Godly action is **now**.

Alan Chester, Len Grates
ICEJ UK Board

Following is more detail about the summit from Alan Chester:-

On the first day of the conference, there were two plenary sessions. The first, entitled "*Promoting Europe-Israel dialogue and Partnership*" emphasised how Europe-Israel relations have, over the last few years, moved to a new level. The aim now is to deepen existing economic ties, to develop closer cooperation in fields like energy and transport, and to share more information and experience between businessmen, academics, local authorities and young people. The presentations and discussions focussed on how to create new opportunities to promote an even more effective partnership between Israel and Europe. Distinguished speakers included Mrs Dalia Itzik MK, speaker of the Knesset, Israel; Mr Luis Maria de Puig, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; and Mr Luka Bebi, President of the Parliament of Croatia. Some common themes emerged, such as the democratic ideals and rule of law espoused by Israel and the members of the European Union, not a feature of many states in the Middle East, and the common heritage factors, not least the Biblical ones.

Support for Israel's continued and secure existence; encouragement of investment and trade; addressing practical realities; engaging constructively with all parties of goodwill; and taking seriously and responsibly the threat from Iran. These were some of the matters clearly stated and to be resolutely pursued.

The second plenary session noted that during the 8th. Israel-Europe Association Council in Luxembourg (June 2007) it was decided to launch a new process of upgrading bilateral relations between the two. Amongst the speakers were Mr Vladimir Sloutsker, a Senator from Russia; Mr Marko Mihkelson, Chairman, foreign affairs Committee, Estonia; and MPs from Poland, Latvia Portugal, and other states. Existing cultural, diplomatic and commercial relations all need to be enhanced, upgraded and made more effective. The PARIS DECLARATION was launched at this session and is reproduced in full below. The reference to a two-state solution to the Arab-Israel conflict was and remains a matter of ongoing discussion and indeed disagreement.

THE PARIS DECLARATION

“We parliamentarians from the European Parliament and national parliaments of the European Union and the Council of Europe, having assembled here in Paris under the banner of EFI- European Friends of Israel in a spirit of trust and cooperation –

- Committed to supporting permanent peace and reconciliation in the Middle East and to strengthening democracy in the region.*
- Recognizing that the state of Israel is a genuine pluralistic democratic country, embracing freedom of speech, association and religion under the rule of law and a country committed to equal rights, a respect for minorities and religious diversity.*
- Recognizing that Israel has developed a successful market economy and a vibrant political and cultural society despite the burdens of military attacks, terrorism and even economic boycotts against it.*
- Recognizing that Israel is one of the global leaders in the high-tech industry and is at the forefront of research and development in the fields of energy conservation and medicine, and continues to make a significant contribution to the improvement of humanity.*
- Recognizing that successive Israeli governments have sought peace and have established good relations with Egypt and Jordan, and today continue to seek peaceful relations with its neighbours including the Palestinian people to create two states living in peace side by side.*
- Recognizing the common values that bind Europe and Israel and a shared cultural heritage reinforced by interests based upon friendship and mutual respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality; the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities,*

HEREBY AFFIRM:

Our full support for all those seeking to contribute to peace in the Middle East and for the establishment of a responsible, vibrant and functioning Palestinian state that will live aside Israel in peace and security.

Our commitment to Israel’s security and our rejection of all forms of aggression, terrorism, incitement against - and de-legitimization of - Israel and its people.

Our call to the states of the region to support the aim of peaceful coexistence including denying any support to those engaged in extremism and terrorism, as well as advancing normalization and peaceful relations with Israel.

Our determination to deepen the already close ties of friendship and cooperation between Europe and Israel particularly through a significant upgrading of relations between Israel and the European Union, both in terms of form and substance.”

On the second day of the conference, there was a plenary session dealing with recommendations on how to create a closer partnership between Israel and Europe, and build a framework to achieve mutual goals. Again there were excellent presentations by friends of Israel from across the whole of Europe, highlighting existing liaisons and relationships, across the spectrum of economic, political, scientific and cultural spheres, and projects and initiatives to improve and deepen them. An interesting development could be to see Israel’s “special arrangement” with the EU up-graded even as far as full membership. This is being promoted to some extent in the light of Turkey’s application to join the European club.

Later there were two workshops available to delegates. One was looking at environmental challenges, to do with nature, health and growth. What is a green environment? What are the common challenges that the EU and Israel face to achieve it? A closer partnership in this field would assist in the efforts to make the world greener. The EU and Israel have much to learn from each other, and cooperation in this whole subject exists and is growing.

The second workshop dealt with life science and high-tech challenges. Both Israel and Europe have much to offer in these fields, and cooperation and a closer partnership will strengthen worldwide innovation. Israel is very much at the cutting edge of scientific research and technology, not least in medical and surgical advancements. Third world and developing countries are amongst the beneficiaries, and EU/Israel joint collaboration are providing great benefits to mankind.

A final session looked at how to promote democracy, peace and dialogue, particularly in the Middle East region, and including the whole issue of refugees. Dr. Jürgen Bühler of the ICEJ has produced a paper addressing this issue, titled "*European Aid to Palestinian refugees. Horizons of hope for a new Middle East*". A copy can be obtained through the ICEJ UK office.

A final note:- Mr Benyamin Elon MK, chairman of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, met with Malcolm Hedding, Jürgen Bühler, and ICEJ representatives from across Europe, including the United Kingdom, as an extra to the scheduled conference agenda. This gave an opportunity for brief but telling reports from the different nations. We are mindful of the challenges we face and the work we have to do, but are greatly encouraged - in each other certainly, but especially in the Lord, whose word is true and who will never fail.