

ENGLISH only

**Address of H.E. Mark Sofer
Deputy Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry**

OSCE Ministerial Council – Brussels, 5 December 2006

Chairman in Office, Your Excellencies the Ministers, distinguished guests,
I would like first of all to congratulate the Government of Belgium for their superb organization of this event and to commend the leadership you provided the organization during the course of your presidency.

Permit me also to wish the best of luck to the Government of Spain, the new Chairman of the OSCE for 2007, and thank them for their leadership of the Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation in the past year.

Distinguished Guests,

Over the past thirty years the OSCE has gained a well-earned reputation for dealing with the different aspects of security, and has shown its determination to build confidence in conflict areas. Israel enthusiastically adheres to the principles and values of the OSCE and within these parameters; it participates in the various activities that are open to the Mediterranean Partners. We believe that there is much to learn from this organisation. One of the important lessons to be learnt is to keep on going DESPITE existing conflicts.

Israel views the Partnership as an obligation as well as a privilege. Simultaneously with the need to enhance cooperation and CBMs within the MPC framework, all of the member states of the MPC should contribute their part to the OSCE as a whole.

Israel is eager to share its expertise in education, economic and social development, science, and other areas, as part of the work of the OSCE. Our international cooperation programme within the Foreign Ministry stands ready to promote joint projects within the organization. We look forward to identifying specific projects on which to start our work.

Israel also welcomes cooperation with the OSCE in the economic field. We attach great importance to the economic forum as an additional tool that will

increase stability and cooperation. Next year's forum on land degradation and water management is of great importance to all MPCs.

Dear Colleagues,

The prime example of cooperation between the MPC is the annual Mediterranean Seminar, held this year in Egypt, for the 4th time (out of the 12 times it was held). We propose to host the 2007 Mediterranean Seminar that would concentrate on subjects of prime importance to the Mediterranean region, to all the members of MPC as well as most of the member states of OSCE – namely, water and desertification. We join suggestions from OSCE Members and would like to finally institutionalize the hosting of the Mediterranean Seminar on a rotational basis between the MPC, and between them alone.

Honoured guests,

Anti-Semitism has continued to rear its ugly head over the last few years. We are heartened that the OSCE and many of its member states recognize this and have begun to take steps to counter it. In April 2004, the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism in Berlin adopted the "Berlin Declaration" an important milestone in the fight against Anti-Semitism. The Paris and Cordoba Conferences that followed reflected the readiness of the OSCE and the ODIHR to maintain the struggle against this scourge. We support the intention to hold every two years, from 2006, an expert meeting on anti-Semitism and other forms of related intolerance and every alternate year, from 2007 onwards, to hold a general conference on these crucial issues. We are glad to note that this form is indeed taking shape as was seen in the expert level meetings this year in Almaty, Dubrovnik and Vienna. We welcome Romania's offer to host the Conference in 2007, in the certainty that the conference will promote our common goals.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the three Special Representatives for their important work in combating Anti-Semitism and, crucially, the growing intolerance especially towards Islam but also towards Christianity. There must be a coordinated effort in the fields of education, law enforcement and legislation, to combat these ethnic and religious hatreds including in the Middle East itself.

For indeed, Mr. Chairman, tragically anti-Semitism in its most vicious form is sadly still highly prevalent in our region, exemplified especially by the

President of Iran, a leader who is not only a rabid anti-Semite but also, amazingly in this day and age, a Holocaust denier dedicated to the destruction of the world's only Jewish State. I use this platform to call upon all the representatives of all the forward-looking states of the region to publicly denounce the hatred espoused by him.

Distinguished delegates,

The Middle East remains sadly a hotbed of conflict. Israel has a clear interest in solving its conflict with the Palestinians. Yet it must be borne in mind that the dangers facing the region are not a result of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This conflict is no more than an excuse used by some for the travails in Lebanon, the Iranian issue, Iraq or the attack on moderation by fundamentalist elements within the Moslem world, who in effect abuse the religion to which they adhere. It is certainly not the reason.

Israel urges the pragmatic countries of the region to ask themselves what is the greatest threat to their future. Is it Israel, which has no designs on any of them, or is it the hatred and viciousness propounded by those who strive to drag them into a backward world order. The time has come to cease using international forums to vilify Israel and to indulge in point-scoring which merely serves to postpone confidence-building in the region, and to publicly condemn those forces of hatred and violence which, ultimately, undermine everything they stand for, especially Iran and its proxies such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Hamas.

Despite the horrific events of the past year, I believe there is room for optimism in the Middle East. The establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel is not only a Palestinian interest but an Israeli interest too. We believe in direct negotiation and dialogue with the Palestinians and we understand the sensitivities involved in Mahmoud Abbas's internal difficulties. Yet no dialogue can take place, without the Palestinians accepting the three basic demands of the international community, namely the acceptance of past agreements, the cessation of terror and the acceptance of Israel's right to exist. A peace process can only occur if there is a Palestinian partner that believes in resolving political disputes through negotiation. It is therefore incumbent upon organizations such as the OSCE, the moderate Arab world and indeed Israel, to support those pragmatic elements within Palestinian society, headed by Mahmoud Abbas. Israel stands ready to play its role and hopes that this will be the approach of those

Arab states interested in bringing an end to the conflict. Such readiness includes the release of numerous Palestinian prisoners, including ones sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their role in terror. Yet any move forward must be precluded by the release of the abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

For indeed, in a framework of a peace process in the Middle East, and in accordance with the Roadmap, the Palestinians will be able to establish an independent and viable Palestinian State with territorial contiguity between the West Bank and Gaza and put an end to the misery their society has suffered as a result of the Hamas Government. Within the framework of this process, Israel will make concessions which will surprise you all, and will assist in every way to create economic well-being for Palestinians.

So the ball is very much in the Palestinian court. Should they manage to extricate themselves from the shackles of the Hamas intransigency, spearheaded by Syria, they can look forward to an assured future. It is time for them, and for those regional forces interested in promoting peace in the Middle East to enter a process of self-examination and objective questioning, and to put aside the Israel-bashing which brings no results at all.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The unfolding events in Lebanon must cause much concern to all civilized people in the Middle East and the world at large. The blatant interference of Syria and Iran in Lebanese internal affairs, both directly and through their local proxy the Hizbollah continue to foment instability with the view of replacing PM Seniora's legitimate government with an extremist leadership which will undermine the pragmatic forces of peace in the region. The international community has shown in the example of the Hamas that when it is steadfast in its resolve it can achieve results. We call on the member states of the OSCE to prevent Syria and Iran from wreaking havoc on Lebanon, for only a concerted international effort can avert this challenge and danger. Similarly, we call upon you here to bring about the release of the two abducted Israelis in Lebanon, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev without delay. To date their families have not even been given any sign of life by their kidnappers.

Mr. Chairman,

I hope, therefore, that should the international determination continue, next year's OSCE Ministerial Council will take place in an atmosphere of reconciliation in the Middle East and that confrontation will find itself wending its way to the dust heap of history.

Finally, I would like to thank the Secretary General and the Secretariat of OSCE for their good work in facilitating the dialogue between OSCE and its Mediterranean Partners and we look forward to working closely with Finland, the new Chair of the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation.

Thank You