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## EMPA plenary focuses on Middle East

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The situation in the Middle East was the main focus of debate at the fifth plenary session of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) held from 15 to 17 March at the European Parliament in Brussels. EMPA could also be given observer status on the executive bodies of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

In a recommendation addressed to the ministers of the UfM, on the situation in the Middle East, EMPA backs the Arab Peace Initiative and the efforts to achieve intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Parliamentarians from both shores of the Mediterranean also called for a freeze on all settlements, including those already in existence. They issued a fresh appeal for the liberation of the members of the Palestinian Legislative Council as well as the soldier Gilad Shalit.

On the Gaza conflict, the delegates took the view that violations of international humanitarian law and the use in civilian areas of banned weapons should be the subject of an independent inquiry and they called on Israel to shoulder its responsibilities and contribute to the reconstruction of Gaza. They condemned the fact that the civilian population in the Gaza strip had been targeted. EMPA also condemned the continued rocket attacks on southern Israel.

The recommendation was adopted unanimously with the exception of the representative of the Israeli Knesset, who voted against.

### Recommendations on the economy, energy and women's rights

The Assembly also adopted, by consensus, recommendations drafted by its economic and financial affairs committee on the Mediterranean response to the global financial crisis, the economic and social impact of micro-finance in the Mediterranean region and the development of sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean region.

In addition it adopted recommendations on the Mediterranean Solar Plan, a flagship project of the UfM seeking to increase the use of renewable energy in the region, and on the links between women, development, peace and security in the Mediterranean.

### EMPA to be observer at UfM?

In reply to Rodi Kratsa (EPP-ED, GR), who restated EMPA's request to be an observer at all stages of the planning of EU policies for the Mediterranean, French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner said he supported the idea of giving the Assembly observer status on the executive bodies of the UfM. He made this statement at an extraordinary meeting of the EMPA political affairs committee held separately from the plenary session.

### Jordan at the head of EMPA

"We want 2009 to be the year of solutions for the Middle East", said Abdel Hadi al-Majali, Speaker of the Jordanian Parliament, who becomes the Assembly's leader for one year until March 2010.

Winding up the plenary session, Hans-Gert Pöttering, outgoing President of EMPA and current President of the European Parliament, announced that he had been invited to attend the annual summit of heads of state and government of the Arab League scheduled for 30-31 March in Doha. "In the speech I give in Doha, I am determined to put the emphasis clearly on a two-state solution", he said.

### EMPA to grow from 260 to 280 members

Albania, Mauritania and Monaco were welcomed as new members of EMPA. Mauritania will have 10 representatives and be considered part of the southern Mediterranean delegation. Albania, Monaco and the other Balkan countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro), which hope to join EMPA in the near future, will have two seats each and be grouped with the countries of the northern Mediterranean. The total number of EMPA members will rise to 280.

EMPA currently has 260 members. Of these, 130 represent the European Union (49 MEPs and 81 MPs from the parliaments of the 27 EU Member States) and 130 represent the national parliaments of the Mediterranean partner countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey.

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