

Senior MEP quits Israel trip in 'propaganda' row

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - The EU parliament's most senior foreign relations personality has quit an official trip to Israel next week because he said his fellow deputies are plotting "anti-Israeli propaganda."

Italian centre-right MEP Gabriele Albertini, the head of the parliament's foreign affairs committee, outlined the reasons for his decision in a private email to Silvio Gonzato, an EU official, dated 13 May, and seen by this website.

Mr Albertini said most of his fellow deputies on the delegation are biased against Israel and that their plans to visit Gaza could undermine peace talks.

"Out of the 25 deputies who are to take part in the mission, there are fewer colleagues than the fingers on one hand whom you could define as pro-Israeli, or even neutral!" he said. "Rather than a peacekeeping mission, it looks like an anti-Israeli propaganda mission is being prepared!"

The email was written one day after a "stormy" internal meeting on 12 May in which MEPs learned that Israel had refused them permission to enter Gaza and to meet with senior Palestinian diplomats and NGOs in occupied East Jerusalem.

Mr Albertini said the delegation should "rebalance" its itinerary in line with Israeli demands. But the MEPs voted to ask Egypt to enter Gaza through its crossing point instead.

Mr Albertini singled out German centre-right MEP and former European Parliament president Hans-Gert Poettering for criticism. "The honorable Mr Poettering wanted to convene a press conference to censure the conduct of the Israeli government before we start our journey, to the applause of those present [at the meeting]!" the Italian deputy said.

A member of Mr Poettering's office told EUobserver that he is "very pro-Israeli" but also "critical ... as far as the settlements are concerned." He added the German MEP "is of the opinion that the Israeli government cannot tell the members of the European Parliament whom they should see or not."

The parliament has long acted as a forum for outspoken EU critics of Israeli policy. The criticism intensified after Israel's assault on Gaza last year killed 1,400 Palestinians and its right-wing government gave the green light to further colonisation of occupied land.

The Israeli embassy to the EU said MEPs' visits to Gaza give moral support to Hamas, the militant Palestinian group which holds sway in the strip.



Mr Albertini: 'it looks like an anti-Israeli propaganda mission' (Photo: europarl.europa.eu)

"It is discouraging to learn that a distinguished delegation, representing one of the symbols of European democracy, chooses to concentrate its programme around interlocutors representing the views of only one side of the conflict," it said in a statement on Tuesday.

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