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TEXT

TAGS: PREL, AU, IS
SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT KLESTIL'S VISIT TO ISRAEL: A
SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARD NORMALIZING RELATIONS

- 1. (C - ENTIRE TEXT)

SUMMARY

2. AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT KLESTIL'S NOVEMBER 13-15 VISIT TO ISRAEL, THE FIRST EVER BY AN AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT, MARKED A HIGH POINT IN TWO-YEAR OLD EFFORTS BY BOTH COUNTRIES TO NORMALIZE AND IMPROVE THEIR RELATIONS. ISRAEL VIEWS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF BETTER RELATIONS WITH AUSTRIA AS VALUABLE BOTH FROM A BILATERAL STANDPOINT, WITH THE POTENTIAL OF INCREASED TRADE AND OTHER COOPERATION, AS WELL AS FROM THE STANDPOINT OF STRENGTHENING ISRAEL'S TIES WITH EUROPE. END SUMMARY.

GETTING RELATIONS ON TRACK

- 3. AUSTRIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS WERE VIRTUALLY FROZEN DURING THE

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1980'S BECAUSE OF REVELATIONS ABOUT FORMER PRESIDENT **KURT WALDHEIM'S** PAST AS WELL AS THE LINGERING ISSUE OF AUSTRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS UNWILLINGNESS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OPENLY. WITH WALDHEIM'S DEPARTURE FROM THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENCY TWO YEARS AGO, BOTH COUNTRIES HAVE BEEN ACTIVELY SEEKING TO PLACE THEIR BILATERAL RELATIONS ON A NORMAL FOOTING. ISRAEL REOPENED ITS EMBASSY IN VIENNA (FOLLOWING ITS DOWNGRADING OF RELATIONS DURING WALDHEIM'S TENURE), AND NUMEROUS OFFICIAL VISITS -- INCLUDING THOSE OF THE AUSTRIAN CHANCELLOR, PRESIDENT OF PARLIAMENT, AND MINISTERS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND OF EDUCATION -- HAVE NOW TAKEN PLACE. (THE ISRAELI MINISTER OF TRADE WILL VISIT AUSTRIA LATER THIS MONTH.)

4. IN HIS SPEECH BEFORE THE ISRAELI KNESSET, KLESTIL REPEATED WHAT CHANCELLOR VRANITSKY DECLARED LAST YEAR: THAT NUMEROUS AUSTRIANS, AS INDIVIDUALS, BEAR RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOME OF THE WORST ATROCITIES COMMITTED DURING THE HOLOCAUST. WHEN VRANITSKY MADE THIS STATEMENT, HE BROKE SHARPLY WITH AUSTRIA'S TRADITIONAL CLAIM OF SIMPLY HAVING BEEN A VICTIM OF NAZISM. THE GOI DOES NOT CONSIDER THAT KLESTIL WENT BEYOND VRANITSKY'S REMARKS, SINCE HE MADE NO REFERENCE TO ANY AUSTRIAN COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY. AS MANY WERE EXPECTING A DIRECT APOLOGY, KLESTIL CAME CLOSE: "MANY OF THE WORST HENCHMEN IN THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP WERE AUSTRIANS. NO WORD OF REGRET CAN EVER UNDO THE AGONY OF THE HOLOCAUST. ON BEHALF OF THE REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA, I AM BOWING TO THE VICTIMS IN DEEP RESPECT." WHILE THE ISRAELI MEDIA FOCUSED ON KLESTIL'S REMARKS ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST, THE MFA APPEARED MORE CONCERNED ABOUT MAINTAINING THE POSITIVE MOMENTUM IN ISRAELI-AUSTRIAN RELATIONS.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS: SUPPORT FOR ISRAELI IN EUROPE

5. THE GOI DID NOT CONSIDER KLESTIL'S VISIT, THE CULMINATION OF ONGOING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE BILATERAL RELATIONS, AS A PRIMARILY SYMBOLIC VISIT. ACCORDING TO MFA OFFICIAL MORDECHAI RODGOLD, AUSTRIA WAS VERY HELPFUL IN GETTING EFTA TO SIGN A FREE TRADE AGREEMENT WITH ISRAEL AND BOTH OF AUSTRIA'S LEADING COALITION PARTIES SUPPORT STRENGTHENING ISRAEL'S TIES WITH EUROPE. RODGOLD ALSO NOTED THAT ISRAEL SEES SIGNIFICANT AND UNTAPPED COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL BETWEEN BOTH COUNTRIES. GIVEN THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE, BOTH POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY, OF EUROPE IN GOI THINKING, AND IN LIGHT OF AUSTRIA'S UPCOMING ENTRY INTO THE EU, RODGOLD'S STATEMENT THAT "WE HAVE NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST WITH AUSTRIA ON EUROPEAN ISSUES" INDICATES THE IMPORTANCE THE GOI ATTACHES TO IMPROVING ITS RELATIONS WITH AUSTRIA IN ORDER TO FURTHER ITS GOALS OF ESTABLISHING CLOSER LINKS TO THE EU.

6. ACCORDING TO RODGOLD, KLESTIL'S VISIT MET GOI EXPECTATIONS AND THE MOOD OF THE VISIT WAS POSITIVE. REGARDING IRAN, RODGOLD SUMMARIZED THE SITUATION BY SAYING THE GOI AND GOA AGREED TO DISAGREE. ISRAEL OPPOSES AUSTRIA'S DEBT RELIEF TO IRAN AND ITS ONGOING RELATIONS, DESCRIBED AS "CRITICAL DIALOGUE" BY THE GOA. THE GOI DOES APPRECIATE, HOWEVER, AUSTRIAN ASSISTANCE IN PRESSING IRAN FOR INFORMATION ABOUT AND THE RELEASE OF ISRAELI MIA'S. ACCORDING TO RODGOLD, KLESTIL'S DECISION NOT TO MEET WITH ARAFAT

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WAS IN DEFERENCE TO THE WISHES OF HIS HOST, ISRAELI PRESIDENT WEIZMAN. OTHER ISRAELI OFFICIALS (PRESUMABLY FOREIGN MINISTER PERES), ACCORDING TO RODGOLD, FAVORED A MEETING BETWEEN KLESTIL AND ARAFAT AS A WAY OF STRENGTHENING ARAFAT'S STANDING. WEIZMAN APPARENTLY DID NOT WANT SUCH A MEETING TO DETRACT FROM THE FIRST VISIT BY AN AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL, NOR DID HE WANT A REPEAT OF THE RECENT BROUHAHA SURROUNDING PM CILLER'S VISIT TO "ORIENT HOUSE." LAROCCO

ADMIN
END OF MESSAGE

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