

## Egypt against Israel FM at Mediterranean forum

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Egypt is opposed to hardline Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman attending a meeting of the Mediterranean Union which it co-chairs with France, diplomats said on Wednesday.

Foreign ministers of the 43-strong grouping, which brings European Union members together with states from north Africa, the Balkans, Arab countries, Israel and Turkey, are due to gather in November in Istanbul.

An Egyptian diplomat told AFP that Cairo "did not want to send an invitation to the Israeli (foreign) minister," but could accept that Lieberman be represented by someone else.

Egyptian officials refused anything to do with Lieberman after he said last year that President Hosni Mubarak could "go to hell" if he continued to refuse to visit Israel.

But earlier this year, Mubarak received hawkish Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for talks on the deadlocked Middle East peace process.

Other Arab members of the Mediterranean Union also have no wish to see the ultra-nationalist Lieberman join the Istanbul forum because of his hardline positions concerning the Palestinians, other diplomats said.

But an Israeli official told AFP in Jerusalem that Lieberman was not the problem.

"The issue from the beginning has been the refusal by Egypt and Arab countries to discuss joint cooperation projects with Israel," the official said on condition of anonymity.

The Mediterranean Union was launched at a summit in Paris last year and is aimed at developing projects for regional integration in one of the most volatile regions of the world.

But like its regional predecessor, the Barcelona Process which stalled in large part over Arab-Israeli disputes, the union got bogged down by Israel's war on the Gaza Strip at the turn of the year in response to Hamas missile strikes.

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