France to Push for UN Security Council Resolution on West Bank Settlements

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The French government intends to advance a United Nations Security Council resolution on Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, according to senior officials in Jerusalem and Western diplomats.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius made a comment to that effect 10 days ago, at a meeting in New York of the foreign ministers of the Middle East Quartet. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made use of the comment to convince right-wing members of his cabinet that new construction in the settlements in response to the recent wave of terrorism would cause Israel severe diplomatic damage.

The September 30 meeting in New York was due to include the foreign ministers of the Quartet countries — the United States, European Union, Russia and the United Nations — as well as those from Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The French foreign minister had other plans, however. Two Western diplomats and two senior officials in Jerusalem said Fabius demanded to participate in the meeting as well and exerted strong pressure on the Americans and on EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini.

In the wake of the pressure, it was decided initially that France, Britain and China, all of which are permanent members of the Security Council, would also be invited, even though they are not direct members of the Quartet. The prospect of their participation, however, led other countries, such as Germany, Norway, Japan, Italy, Spain and others, to demand a place at the table as well. It turned into a conference of 30 foreign ministers from around the world, discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without a single Israeli or Palestinian representative.

A statement in summation of the meeting — mainly ceremonial and with short statements by each of the participants — was agreed upon in advance. Fabius again surprised the gathering by presenting a French diplomatic plan with steps that he said would break the deadlock in the peace process.

According to Western diplomats present and the meeting as well as senior Israel officials briefed on the details, Fabius said he was interested in convening a follow-up conference in Paris to which countries interested in advancing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be invited, but not the two sides themselves.

Immediately afterwards, he uttered a sentence which has caused a lot of nervousness in Jerusalem over the past ten days. According to the diplomats, Fabius said there were many parties pressing for a vote on a Security Council resolution on the settlements and the subject was being explored. Reports of Fabius’ statement reached Israeli diplomats and Netanyahu, who was in New York at the time, within a few hours.

Like most of the participants at the Quartet meeting, Netanyahu and his advisers were surprised by the process Fabius proposed in his remarks. The Israeli leader’s advisers were quick to speak to associates of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and others who were present at the Quartet parley.

The following day, Netanyahu raised the issue at a meeting with Kerry and expressed great concern. The Americans said they do not know what Fabius intends and had no additional information on the subject. A senior Israeli official noted that from inquiries made in subsequent days, it turned out that it was apparently a process that was only in its initial stages.

Fabius’ short, vague sentence regarding a Security Council resolution on Jewish settlements became a central element of a meeting of the Israeli inner cabinet last Monday, a day after Netanyahu’s return from New York. In the face of pressure that was applied by Education Minister Naftali Bennett, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and Immigrant Absorption Minister Ze’ev Elkin to announce construction in settlements in response to the wave of terrorist attacks, Netanyahu and his adviser Isaac Molho presented information about the French plans.

Despite the fact that there is no draft or proposed text of a French resolution, Netanyahu, Molho and other participants at the meeting contended that it would state that the settlements are not legal. They presented Fabius’ initial idea as a highly dangerous process that could bring about a wave of boycotts and withdrawal of investment from any Israeli entity operating directly or indirectly in the settlements; serious international isolation; and a risk of a trial at the International Court in The Hague against any entity connected to the settlements. They argued that construction in the settlements at this time would provide backing for Fabius’ initiative and cause Israeli serious diplomatic damage.

Channel 2 reported that Netanyahu and Molho also told the ministers that they had received an American ultimatum that an announcement of new construction in the settlement would cause President Barack Obama to refrain from vetoing the French resolution if it would come to a UN Security Council vote. According to several ministers who attended the inner cabinet meeting, Molho said that Kerry had left him threatening voice-mail messages. Senior American officials denied both the existence of an ultimatum and Molho’s story about Kerry’s threatening messages.

Even if Fabius’ plan does take shape, it would not be the first time that the Security Council adopted a resolution on the settlements. Resolution 465 in 1980, which was passed unanimously without an American veto, stated that the settlements built beyond the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem, were not legal. The resolution also called for all countries to refrain from providing any form of assistance to construction in the settlements.