Strategic Talks Between Israel, France Deteriorate into Serious Dispute

May 14, 2015

By [Barak Ravid](http://www.haaretz.com/misc/writers/barak-ravid-1.325)

Haaretz

http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.656362

Strategic consultations between Israel and France last week deteriorated into an argument over French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius’ initiative to advance a resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the United Nations Security Council, with Israel arguing that Paris was operating behind Israel’s back.

The strategic dialogue meetings take place annually and are attended by Foreign Ministry officials of both countries. Israel’s delegation was led by Foreign Ministry Director General Nissim Ben-Sheetrit, while French Foreign Ministry Secretary General Christian Masset led his country’s large delegation to Jerusalem.

The objective is to consult on diplomatic and security issues, but it is also meant to symbolize the close coordination between the two countries. Israeli diplomats say that this is a forum in which the two sides generally stress what they have in common, and that even if there are disagreements, confrontations and arguments are generally avoided.

The meeting that took place last week at Foreign Ministry headquarters was therefore quite exceptional. From the first moments it became clear to participants that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to smooth over the disagreements between the two sides, particularly with regard to the Palestinian issue. Both Israeli and French diplomats said that the harsh exchanges were evidence of the depth of the tension between the two countries, and that the frustration building on both sides over the past few months erupted in full force.

What specifically led to the blowup is Fabius’ attempt to revive [a UN Security Council resolution](http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.649244) on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The French tried to advance such a resolution a few months ago, but it failed when the Palestinians rejected Paris’ draft.

The resolution is expected to call for basing the borders of the Palestinian state along the 1967 lines with territorial exchanges, making Jerusalem the capital of both states, some formulation that recognizes Israel as a Jewish state, setting a timetable for finishing negotiations and the convening of an international peace conference.

Fabius recently agreed to an [American request](http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.654215) to put off advancing the resolution until a nuclear agreement is reached with Iran, which is supposed to take place by June 30, but he is determined to bring the resolution to a Security Council vote by no later than the end of September, when the UN General Assembly meets in New York.

Israeli diplomats said that in recent weeks the Foreign Ministry had received information indicating that the French had started discussing the wording of a draft resolution in both Paris and New York with the Palestinians, the Arab states and several members of the Security Council. By contrast, the French had not held similar consultations with Israel and never gave Israel a draft of the resolution or at least an outline of its main points.

Ben-Sheetrit protested this behavior at last week’s meeting, according to two Israeli diplomats familiar with the details of the discussions. “You are speaking with the whole world about your initiative, just not with us,” the diplomats quoted him as saying. “You seem to have forgotten that we are also a party to this and that you ought to involve us, too.”

The Israeli diplomats said that the French delegates became defensive and denied having presented a draft or detailed principles to the Palestinians or the Arab states. “They said that things were at a preliminary stage and that when there was something drawn up, they’d show it to us,” one of the diplomats said. “They said the whole process in the Security Council was for our benefit and that they are trying to arrive at a formula that will be acceptable to both sides and would allow the resumption of the peace process.”

The Israelis, however, refused to be convinced, and the discussion became increasingly confrontational and deteriorated into mutual recriminations. “At a certain point the strategic dialogue became a dialogue of the deaf,” an Israeli diplomat said.

Both Israeli and French diplomats agreed that the discordant tones and great tension during the discussion represent the current state of relations between Israel and France. The stalemate in the peace process, the feeling in Europe that Israel plans to continue expanding the settlements, and the increasing number of international initiatives at the UN and elsewhere are overshadowing broad agreement on larger issues like the Iranian nukes, Syria and Hezbollah.

“We’re at a difficult moment in this relationship,” a French diplomat said. “On the Palestinian issue there is a real lack of agreement. There is increasing frustration in Europe, and that’s what we tried to explain.”