Days After Netanyahu-Putin Meeting, Russia Threatened to Veto anti-Hezbollah Move Led by Israel and U.S. at UN

September 5, 2017

By Barak Ravid

Haaretz

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.810605>

Russia worked behind the scenes to protect Hezbollah during last week's discussions in the UN Security Council on a resolution to renew the mandate of the UN peacekeeping forces (UNIFIL) in southern Lebanon, talks with Israeli officials indicated. A classified cable sent from the Israeli UN delegation to Foreign Ministry headquarters in Jerusalem reinforces that view.

Unlike in previous years, last week’s decision to renew UNIFIL’s mandate was not just a technical matter. Under American and Israeli pressure, several paragraphs were added to the text saying that the UN forces must increase their presence in the area south of the Litani River in southern Lebanon, and explicitly stating that UNIFIL forces have full authority to act to prevent violations of UN Resolution 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War.

However, during the negotiations over the wording of the resolution, significant portions endorsed sought by the United States and Israel were removed, chiefly the direct reference to Hezbollah as conducting prohibited military activity in southern Lebanon that is in violation of Resolution 1701. It was Russia that ensured all mention of Hezbollah was omitted.

Two Israeli officials said that during the talks over the wording of the decision, the American delegation inserted several paragraphs relating to Hezbollah’s illicit activity in southern Lebanon. One referred to the press tour that several armed Hezbollah men conducted along the Israeli border – an action that violated Resolution 1701.

The Israeli officials say the Russian diplomats who took part in the discussions about the wording of the decision opposed the American version and said that if the final version included any mention of Hezbollah, Russia would exercise its veto. Israel’s UN delegation described the Russians’ stance in a cable sent to the Foreign Ministry last Friday. “The Russians watched from the side and their red line was that they would not consent to Hezbollah being named in the resolution,” said the cable.

One Israeli official said the Russians’ conduct attests to the closeness between Russia and Hezbollah as a result of the coalition they formed with Iran to help Bashar Assad’s regime survive in Syria. The official also said that because of Russian interests in Syria and its joint military activity with Hezbollah against ISIS and Syrian rebels, the Russians gave Hezbollah diplomatic cover in the UN.

The Russian demand to omit all mention of Hezbollah in the UN resolution came just days after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. Iran and Hezbollah’s activity in Syria and Lebanon, especially once the Syrian civil war ends, was one of the main topics of discussion that Netanyahu raised with the Russian leader. At the same meeting, Netanyahu also brought up Israel’s concerns that sophisticated weaponry, some of it Russian-made, is being transferred from Iran and Syria to the Shi’ite organization.

In addition to the Russian move in the Security Council on Hezbollah’s behalf, statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov last Thursday reflected some of the areas of dispute that remain between Israel and Russia concerning the Iranian presence in Syria. At a press conference with the Qatari foreign minister, Lavrov rejected Netanyahu’s assertion that an Iranian presence in Syria after the civil war could lead to a military confrontation. “We have no information that anyone [of the warring factions in Syria] is planning to attack Israel,” Lavrov said.

The next day, at a meeting with students in Moscow, Lavrov again rejected Israel’s claims that its security interests were not taken into account in the contacts between Russia and the U.S. regarding the cease-fire in southern Syria, as part of which buffer zones were set up on the Syria-Jordan border and Syria-Israel border.

“We did not ignore Israel’s security interests,” said Lavrov. “The Israelis were kept informed about the direction in which the contacts were progressing During the meeting between Netanyahu and President Putin, we heard that the Israelis are still concerned about their security. We completely understand this. We told the Israelis that if they have any worries about their security being impacted, there is no reason to worry, since we are committed to ensuring that this doesn’t happen.”

Israeli officials familiar with the details of the Putin-Netanyahu meeting say the atmosphere was positive, but stress that further diplomatic efforts are needed vis-à-vis the Kremlin as well as the Russian defense and intelligence establishments to convince Moscow to accept, at least in part, the Israeli position regarding the accord in Syria.

Ksenia Svetlova, a Zionist Union lawmaker and member of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, released a statement criticizing Russia. “Russia’s decision to threaten a veto when a UN Security Council resolution needs to be passed condemning the Hezbollah terrorist organization unequivocally indicates very serious differences of opinion between Jerusalem and Moscow on security matters,” the statement reads in part. “The personal, good relations with Putin of which Netanyahu boasts are not being translated into political reality.”