

Israel steps up diplomatic action as fears grow over FIFA suspension

Two weeks before FIFA vote orchestrated by Palestinians, Israeli Foreign Ministry has been in talks with more than 100 governments and soccer heads.

By [Barak Ravid](#) | May 13, 2015 | 6:17 PM



The Israeli soccer team before its Euro 2016 qualifier against Wales in Haifa, March, 2015. Photo by AFP

Israel's Foreign Ministry has been waging a worldwide campaign in recent weeks aimed at foiling a Palestinian attempt to get Israel suspended from FIFA, soccer's international governing body.

The Israeli campaign has included talks with sports ministers and heads of soccer federations in more than 100 countries, supplying incriminating information on Palestinian soccer players who have supposedly been involved in terrorist activity, and attempts to blacken the name of the Palestinian soccer federation's chairman, Jibril Rajoub.

Crunch time comes on May 29, when representatives of soccer federations from more than 200 countries will gather in Zurich for the annual FIFA Congress. Item 15.1 on the agenda is the "Proposal by the Palestinian Football Association for the suspension of the Israel Football Association," the culmination of a two-year drive spearheaded by Rajoub.

A senior official at the Foreign Ministry, who wished to remain anonymous due to the diplomatic sensitivity of the issue, noted that Rajoub's campaign, which was formalized on March 19, came after two years during which the Palestinians had complained of various actions by Israel that were hampering Palestinian soccer teams in the West Bank and Gaza.

The official noted that at the 2013 FIFA Congress, it was decided that the federation's long-serving president, Sepp Blatter, would personally take action and try to mediate between the two sides. Blatter and his aides formulated a memorandum designed to regulate relations between Israel and the Palestinians in matters relating to soccer. Israel accepted the conditions laid down, but the Palestinians refused to sign it.

Last year, the Palestinians tried to pass a resolution calling for Israel's suspension from FIFA. This was blocked after a compromise resolution was introduced, according to which the head of the Cypriot soccer federation, Costakis Koutsokoumnis, would be appointed as a monitor to mediate between the two sides. Koutsokoumnis submitted a report early in 2015, stating that most of the Palestinians' claims were political in nature and should be discussed by the two governments rather than by FIFA.

Not much has changed in the intervening months. Rajoub will arrive in Zurich with an unequivocal demand for a vote to suspend Israel, or at the very least the imposition of sanctions. He brings a list of complaints with him.

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FIFA President Sepp Blatter. Visiting Israel on May 19. Photo by Reuters

First, he alleges that Israel is restricting the travel of Palestinian soccer players abroad and between the West Bank and Gaza. It also limits the entry of soccer teams from Arab countries into the West Bank, damages Palestinian soccer facilities and imposes limitations on the transfer of equipment from overseas to Palestinian teams, he claims.

Secondly, Israel allows five teams from its settlements to play as part of its soccer federation, despite Palestinian arguments that they come from occupied territory over which the federation has no authority. Rajoub demands that these teams stop playing.

Thirdly, Rajoub demands that Israel take significant action against displays of racism at soccer matches held in Israel, especially at games played by Beitar Jerusalem. His fourth argument is that the Teddy Stadium, in which Beitar plays, is beyond the 1967 “green line,” so that international games played there should be prohibited. (The final of the European Under-21 tournament was held there in 2013.)

A senior Palestinian official stated that Rajoub decided to advance his attempts to suspend Israel only after all other efforts to resolve the issue came to nothing. He said Israel’s restrictions against Palestinian soccer teams have only worsened in the last two years.

In contrast, a Foreign Ministry source said Rajoub is proceeding only out of internal political considerations, which have nothing to do with soccer: “For Rajoub, soccer is only a political platform,” the official says. “He wants to replace Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas when the time comes, and action against Israel over soccer issues is the ticket he is riding.”

According to the Israeli official, suspension from FIFA requires a 75 percent majority among members. The Palestinians will have a hard time garnering such massive support from all of the soccer federations. However, the voting process is opaque and voting details are not divulged, a situation that is causing some concern in Jerusalem.

The official added that suspension from FIFA could have grave implications that would extend far beyond the damage caused to the country’s soccer teams. Such a move could set a precedent that might encourage similar moves at other international organizations, accelerating the imposition of boycotts on Israel.

On March 31, the Foreign Ministry’s director general, Nissim Ben-Shetrit, convened a meeting attended by the president of Israel’s soccer federation, Ofer Eini, representatives of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), and others. They sought ways to thwart the Palestinian efforts, or to ensure victory if things came to a vote.

After the meeting a classified message was sent to all Israeli ambassadors, calling for total mobilization. Israeli diplomats were asked to “use their connections, and personal and professional skills in order to draw a line in the sand.”

Since then, hundreds of diplomats at the ministry’s headquarters in Jerusalem and abroad have devoted time to the Palestinians’ FIFA campaign. Every week, a team headed by Yuval Rotem, the ministry’s deputy director general, meets to review progress.

On April 2, a second classified message was sent to Israeli missions abroad, directing ambassadors and general consuls to meet with or talk by phone to government sports ministers and the respective heads of soccer federations. Diplomats were requested to deliver a message stating that the Palestinian move was political and unrelated to sport, designed to create confrontation and dispute rather than fostering joint sporting events, and so soccer federations around the world should reject the attempt.

A senior ministry official said the request to suspend Israel due to a political conflict is unprecedented in FIFA’s history. “There was never such a demand by any country that was in the midst of a violent conflict. We’ve clarified that there is no reason to make a special case for Israel by supporting such a move against it.”

Along with diplomatic efforts to recruit countries to oppose the Palestinian proposal, the Foreign Ministry and COGAT have also started addressing Rajoub’s complaints, in order to make them irrelevant by the time FIFA convenes at the end of the month. Thus, it was decided to ease – as much as possible – the travel of players between Gaza and the West Bank, and to permit the arrival of teams from Iraq, Bahrain and Malaysia in the coming weeks.

Furthermore, contrary to Rajoub’s claims, it was determined that Teddy Stadium was sited within the 1967 boundary lines. This information was relayed to FIFA. In addition, soccer federations and FIFA received a survey that outlined steps Israel has taken to combat racism at sporting events. “We even told them how Beitar Jerusalem was punished with a points reduction because of its [fans’] racist behavior,” said a Foreign Ministry official.

The Foreign Ministry also distributed intelligence reports to Israeli missions, detailing the reasons that led the security services to prevent travel by Palestinian players due to their involvement in terrorist activity, as well as pointing out the use of sporting facilities in Gaza for launching rockets and storage of war matériel.

In the course of the efforts to foil the Palestinian move, a document meant to tarnish Rajoub’s image was prepared. It contained information relating to his anti-Israel statements, and actions he took that bordered on incitement to commit violent acts. It was decided not to launch a personal campaign against him at this stage, although that will be pursued if no solution to the crisis is found in coming days.

An argument that’s proving harder to defuse is the one about teams from the settlements. A senior ministry official noted that it was a delicate topic, and diplomats were being asked to clarify that this particular issue will be resolved as part of a future peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

A meeting held a few days ago in Zurich, attended by FIFA President Blatter, Rajoub and Eini, ended in stalemate. It was then decided that Blatter would visit Israel and the Palestinian Authority on May 19. He will meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas in an attempt to resolve the crisis, ahead of the FIFA Congress.

Officials at the Foreign Ministry noted that reports from Israeli missions around the world, relating to their meetings with heads of soccer federations, suggest that the Palestinians will not be able to recruit the required majority. A common response was opposition to mixing politics with FIFA’s activities. “We believe that Rajoub will ride this issue to the very last moment and then step back,” said a senior official. “He won’t want to lose a vote, so he’ll declare that his demands were met and that Israel capitulated.”