

Israel refuses to open talks with Lebanon over Shaba Farms

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By Barak Ravid, Haaretz Correspondent

Israel has refused a recommendation by a United Nations ambassador to begin negotiations with Lebanon over the disputed Shaba Farms area. According to the envoy, Geir Pedersen, the United Nations is becoming increasingly convinced that Shaba Farms belongs to Lebanon.

During a meeting recently with Amos Gilad, the head of the Political-Military Bureau at the Defense Ministry, Pedersen said that "the UN believes that there is merit in the Lebanese claims of sovereignty over Shaba Farms."

The Norwegian diplomat stressed it would be beneficial if Israel initiated negotiations over this issue.

During the coming weeks the UN Security Council is expected to receive another report on the implementation of its Resolution 1701, which brought the Second Lebanon War to an end.

Pedersen authored the first report, which made no mention of Shaba Farms following intense Israeli pressure.

However, the several months hiatus this pressure bought Israel may be coming to an end following a series of meetings Pedersen held here recently with senior officials at the foreign and defense ministries and with the Israel Defense Forces.

The Shaba Farms, situated in a sensitive spot where the borders of Syria, Israel and Lebanon meet, has long been a point of contention but assumed added significance after Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, because Hezbollah insists it is Lebanese territory still under Israeli occupation.

The farms are part of what was the French Mandate over the territory that today are Syria and Lebanon. The border was established in a 1923 agreement between Britain and France and was not precisely marked on the ground.

Following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the Lebanese argued that Shaba Farms is part of their sovereign territory. However, after the IDF pulled out of Lebanon in May 2002 the UN maintained that the territory was part of the Golan Heights (part of Syria) and its future would be decided in negotiations between Damascus and Jerusalem.

After last year's war the efforts to clearly mark the border between Syria and Lebanon began. The two countries claim sovereignty over several border areas, including Shaba Farms. Since the border marking process began, Israel's position was that it would not discuss the sovereignty of Shaba Farms until a decision was made whether the area was Lebanese or Syrian.

In recent months, both Lebanon and Syria proposed that the disputed land temporarily be placed under UN control, until the demarcation of the border is completed. Israel refused.

During his meeting with Gilad, the UN envoy noted that the evidence boosts the Lebanese claims. Pedersen said it may be advisable for Israel to agree to separate negotiations with the government of Lebanon on the Shaba Farms to resolve the issue.

Gilad turned down the proposal, saying "we will not agree to resolving this issue separately. Every agreement with Lebanon will be part of a single package."

In recent months, Miklos Pinter, a UN cartographer, has been working on determining the size of the Shaba Farms area. His report has still not been completed.

However, it may be that in the upcoming report on Resolution 1701, some of the findings of Pinter's report will be included.

In a report to UN headquarters, Pedersen wrote that Israeli officials, including Gilad, were critical of Pinter's work claiming "there are technical mistakes in the UN work on the Shaba Farms issue."

Nonetheless, in Israel officials are confident that Pedersen's upcoming report to the Security Council will not require Israel to carry out significant steps in the matter.

"From our point of view this issue is off the agenda for good," senior political sources said. "There is no point in talking about this any more. We have no room to show flexibility on this matter because that only strengthens Hezbollah and does not serve [Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad] Siniora."

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