

# Israel to negotiate renewal of cooperation with UN Human Rights Council

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A year after former Foreign Minister [Avigdor Lieberman](#)'s decision to [sever all contacts](#) between Israel and the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has decided to launch negotiations with the aim of renewing dialogue and cooperation. According to senior officials at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, an Israeli envoy is scheduled to depart for Geneva in the coming weeks. Late last March, the international body decided to [establish an international investigative committee on the West Bank settlements](#). Israel was enraged by what it called a one-sided move, and claimed it provided further proof that the council is promoting an unabashed anti-Israeli agenda.

A few days later, Lieberman said in a press conference that he had ordered the Foreign Ministry to sever all ties with the Human Rights Council and with its chief commissioner Navi Pillay. Lieberman's decision was his own, and he made it without discussing it in the cabinet or with Netanyahu.

The severing of the ties became especially problematic last January, as the Council was preparing its Universal Periodic Review process, in which the 193 UN member states have their human rights record reviewed every four years. This process is widely viewed as a cornerstone of the global human rights system. After severing its ties with the Council, Israel refused to take part in the process, threatening to set a precedent and become the [first state to boycott it](#). The U.S., Switzerland and other Western countries feared Israel's action would damage the human rights violations monitoring regime around the world, and provide states such as Syria, Iran and North Korea with an excuse not to partake in the process.

After heavy international pressure, Israel decided not to boycott the discussions but instead ask for the process to be postponed until October.

Israel's request was accepted, and the crisis was temporarily averted. However, in order to participate in the process in October, Israel will have to file by mid-June a number of reports on the human rights situation within its territory. Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter visited Israel last week, and the topic of renewing ties between Israel and the rights council dominated much of his discussions in Israel. The Swiss government hosts the Human Rights Council, of which it is a member.

During his meeting with Netanyahu last Thursday Burkhalter raised the subject and stressed that the severing of ties is harming Israel and worsening its isolation. The Swiss minister asked Netanyahu what can be done for Israel to resume cooperation with the council, and asked him not to boycott the Universal Periodic Review. "I myself sat in such a hearing a little while ago and took criticism from different countries over human rights violations in Switzerland," Burkhalter told Netanyahu. "I was mad at first, but in the end any country that wants to make comments gets a minute and a half and I had an hour and a half to defend the human rights situation in Switzerland." Netanyahu listened, then turned to Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin who also attended the meeting, and instructed him to find a solution that will allow for resumption of ties between Israel and the council. On Sunday, Burkhalter and Elkin met in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and discussed the matter at length. Elkin and other senior ministry officials stressed that Israel has had a very negative experience with the Human Rights Council, which it claims is disproportionately focused on Israel compared to other countries such as Syria or Iran. "We want to see a change in attitude toward Israel," Elkin told Burkhalter. Israel has a number of concrete demands, namely the cancellation of the council's "Article 7," which states that every conference will also include a separate discussion on the human rights situation in Israel; no other country is subject to a separate discussion. Moreover, Israel is interested in joining the Western European and Others Group (WEOG). Today, Israel is not a member of any such group, a fact that further isolates it and makes it difficult to garner support. The Swiss minister made clear that his country will assist as much as possible, but stressed that Israel will have to take steps on its own, such as express willingness to take part in the human rights hearing in October. Burkhalter also warned that if Israel fails to show up at the hearing it would create a negative international precedent, and there will be no other option but to declare it as the first country to refuse cooperation since the process began.

Senior officials at the Foreign Ministry have long supported renewing ties with the Human Rights Council, yet they admit that severing ties has had a certain positive influence. "Now Israel could get political rewards in exchange for renewing ties with the Council," a senior official said. The fact that Lieberman is no longer the foreign minister should make mending the ties easier. However, Foreign Ministry officials hope to move swiftly with the matter as Lieberman may return to his old post if acquitted in his graft trial. In the coming days, the head of the Foreign Ministry's department for foreign organizations, Aharon Leshno-Yaar, is scheduled to visit Geneva and hold talks with senior official at the Human Rights Council in an attempt to formulate a memorandum of understanding that would enable the renewal of ties between Israel and the international body.