

# Gabi Ashkenazi: Assessing the legacy of Israel's foreign minister

DIPLOMATIC AFFAIRS: Despite being kept in the dark by Netanyahu about the Abraham Accords, the former IDF chief of staff was able to make an impact at the Foreign Ministry

By LAHAV HARKOV JANUARY 14, 2021 21:08



FOREIGN MINISTER Gabi Ashkenazi greets his Bahraini counterpart at Ben-Gurion Airport in November. (photo credit: MIRI SHIMONOVICH/FOREIGN MINISTRY)

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Before he became foreign minister, [Gabi Ashkenazi](#) was best known as the IDF chief of staff who rehabilitated the army after the Second Lebanon War.

Ashkenazi brought in a new fighting spirit, with the motto of upping the quality of military training and the quantity of military exercises, investing in much-needed supplies and instituting new courses for senior officers.

All of these reforms earned Ashkenazi a good reputation as the chief of staff who restored the IDF's morale after its less-than-stellar performance in the Second Lebanon War.

That was somewhat marred by the Harpaz Affair, a convoluted corruption case in which Ashkenazi was not charged, but he was still very popular with the general public.

How Ashkenazi will be remembered as foreign minister remains to be seen.

Ashkenazi was IDF chief of staff for four years, while, if a government is formed in a timely manner after the March election, he will likely have been foreign minister for just over a year. Still, Ashkenazi's associates pointed to several areas in which he made an impact in a short time.

When Ashkenazi entered office in May 2020, the Trump peace plan that would allow Israel to extend its sovereignty to up to 30% of the West Bank, including all settlements, was the top item on the agenda.

Senior Foreign Ministry officials credited Ashkenazi with "drawing a line that led to the [Abraham Accords](#)," in which the United Arab Emirates, and then Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, normalized relations with Israel, but Jerusalem had to shelve its sovereignty plans.

"As long as annexation was on the table, we expected threats from Europe," one of the officials explained. "Ashkenazi came and said his added value would be to ensure that if it happens, we will do it responsibly."

Together with Defense Minister Benny Gantz, Ashkenazi set out to meet with the top American figures involved in the issue – Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, Special Representative Avi Berkowitz, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Ambassador to Israel David Friedman – when they were in town, and often spoke to them on the phone.

"They realized that Ashkenazi is a central figure [in the government] and there is a problem going forward with this move.... Until then, there was only one place they went to talk, the Prime Minister's Office. With Ashkenazi, they understood there is another, significant player," the official argued. "This was one of his biggest achievements. When the Americans realized it would be difficult [to proceed with annexation under the political circumstances], they went to plan B, the Abraham Accords."

Still, the official admitted that when Ashkenazi worked to block annexation, he thought it would mostly improve Israel's ties with Egypt, Jordan and Europe. He didn't realize it would lead to the Abraham Accords, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hid from Ashkenazi and Gantz until the announcement. The credit for normalization goes to the Trump administration, Netanyahu and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the official acknowledged.

Emmanuel Navon, a political scientist and author of *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, was skeptical about Ashkenazi's influence in the matter.

"He was indeed active in trying to block the annexation project, and the whole normalization... would not have happened had Israel moved ahead with annexation, but at the end of the day the decision [whether or not to annex] belonged to Netanyahu.... Ashkenazi could not have blocked it if Netanyahu had decided to go ahead with it," Navon said.

Ashkenazi's associates taking part of the credit for blocking sovereignty moves is "convenient for Netanyahu," Navon added, "but he [Ashkenazi] didn't really have any power."

Nimrod Goren, head of Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policy, said Ashkenazi's efforts to block annexation through dialogue with Washington were "effective and successful" but not necessarily tied to the Abraham Accords.

"The question of how much that decision was influenced by the Abraham Accords is open. [Annexation] might not have happened even without the UAE. It was comfortable for all sides to back down from a step they realized might be harmful with a positive context" of normalization between Israel and Gulf states, Goren said.

Once normalization happened, the Foreign Ministry played an important role turning them into reality, and Ashkenazi has worked quickly to appoint envoys to the UAE and Morocco and open missions in their capitals. Bahrain already had a secret Israeli mission, which became public.

Ashkenazi set a goal of opening missions in Abraham Accord countries – two in the UAE, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai – within three months, and worked on an organized plan to do so.

ONE AREA where both analysts acknowledged Ashkenazi made a big change was in emphasizing and enhancing relations with Europe.

Goren said the Foreign Ministry was "even somewhat hostile to Brussels" before Ashkenazi arrived, and his change in attitude "paid off on the matter

of annexation. Once they saw he didn't support it, he was seen differently in Europe."

Navon said that in previous years, when Netanyahu was foreign minister, he "focused only on governments in Eastern Europe so they could block Foreign Affairs Council decisions," which need to be made unanimously.

"The EU is our main trading partner, and I don't think Netanyahu handled it very carefully. He went too far.... You don't need all these photo ops with these guys [like Hungarian President Viktor Orban] unless you want to poke Germany and France in the eye," he said.

Navon added: "It may be useful to appeal to Orban, but Hungary is not going to send warships against Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. France is leading that."

Ashkenazi's approach was "more balanced" and appealed to leading EU countries like France and Germany, Navon said.

Israel's diplomatic situation in Europe was "terrible" when Ashkenazi entered office, a senior Foreign Ministry official said. "Ashkenazi came and said Europe is very important and he wants to improve relations with them."

The foreign minister began his efforts with Europe while sovereignty was on the table, meeting and speaking to many officials on the continent.

Within days of annexation being suspended due to the Abraham Accords, Ashkenazi's German counterpart, Heiko Maas, invited him to a meeting of all EU foreign ministers in Berlin, marking the first time an Israeli foreign minister was present at such a meeting in at least a decade, the official said.

The official joked about the unlikely friendship between the tough IDF chief of staff and the more cerebral German foreign minister, and said that they have a great working relationship. Maas sent an official German plane to Israel to bring Ashkenazi to Berlin for a meeting with Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed in October.

It was important for Berlin to play a role in the burgeoning relationship between Israel and the UAE, the official said. That visit included the first official visit by a senior representative of an Arab state to a Holocaust memorial or museum – in this case the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin – since Egyptian president Anwar Sadat went to Yad Vashem 1977.

Ashkenazi tried to be friends with other foreign ministers; he would meet with them one-on-one, exchange phone numbers and then contact them directly. One example of the positive effect of this practice was Spain

abstaining on a vote in the UN Human Rights Council after Ashkenazi contacted its foreign minister.

The foreign minister also created a “traffic light” system of analyzing countries in Europe, first reported exclusively by The Jerusalem Post earlier this month, which the official expanded on this week. Supportive countries are green, medium countries are yellow and red countries are the challenging ones. The countries get more points in the system by voting with Israel in the UN.

Then, if a country would come to Israel with a request, such as agricultural cooperation, Ashkenazi would ask – delicately, the official emphasized – if their country would vote with Israel at the UN.

“He realized [that] in some countries, the bureaucracy keeps doing what it always did, even if it doesn’t align with the ministers’ policies, and he pointed that out to them,” the official said.

Ashkenazi’s policies toward Europe have also been effective in convincing more countries to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. In 2019 and early 2020, six countries banned the Iran-backed terrorist group, and since Ashkenazi entered office, eight more countries followed suit.

Ashkenazi views this as a concrete way the Foreign Ministry helping the efforts to fight the Iranian threat, the official said.

Navon called Ashkenazi’s push to ban Hezbollah an achievement, which he said he reached by being in touch with European governments and NGOs that worked toward that end.

Goren said that Ashkenazi’s “ability to hold a more positive, open discourse with partners in Europe increased willingness to listen to these messages from Israel.”

NAVON ARGUED that Ashkenazi should have appointed more ambassadors, pointing out that there are none in Paris, Tokyo and Ottawa.

“Netanyahu has been doing photo-op diplomacy, traveling to Africa and meeting leaders, but on the ground we don’t have much Israeli representation.... You can’t do foreign policy with just trips and photo-ops. We need Israeli representatives on the ground to really follow up,” Navon said.

At the same time, Navon said he can’t blame Ashkenazi for not being able to secure enough funding to open a lot of embassies in the year of the coronavirus pandemic.

Goren credited Ashkenazi with filling dozens of diplomatic posts with professional, not political, appointees, and noted especially that he “neutralized Netanyahu’s opposition” to diplomat Amira Oron being appointed ambassador to Egypt.

Ashkenazi has, to some extent, tried to bring his success as the chief of staff who restored the IDF’s professionalism and morale to the Foreign Ministry.

“When he reached the ministry, one of the problems was that it wasn’t relevant for years because of the period in which the prime minister was also foreign minister,” a senior Foreign Ministry official said.

Now-Finance Minister Israel Katz was briefly foreign minister in an interim government after Netanyahu left the ministry, and didn’t display great motivation in the job.

At that time, Netanyahu ran foreign policy mostly through the National Security Council (NSC).

Ashkenazi became aware of this issue as chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and then the state comptroller released a report on the Foreign Ministry soon after he came into office.

He composed a strategic plan to improve the ministry’s professionalism and policy. He also managed to bring in increased funds to the ministry for things like Mashav, Israel’s international development agency, and to open the largest cadets course since the 1990s, with 40 participants.

The senior Foreign Ministry official said Ashkenazi instituted a way of working where everything is planned and documented, and for goals to be written out and quantified: “It’s as close as you can get to the army.”

“Six months later, the ministry is in a totally different place,” the official said, “not just because of a higher budget, but also because [ministry workers] are part of the discussions and know that someone is supporting them. The NSC isn’t leading us.... Our ability to influence is dramatically increased.”

Other Foreign Ministry officials remarked to the Post about the positive change within the ministry over the months of Ashkenazi’s tenure, as well.

And Navon said that his contacts in the ministry were also “very happy to have him, after they had Netanyahu... run foreign policy through the NSC and leaving them in the dark, and breaking up the Foreign Ministry and creating fake ministries to give jobs to cabinet members.”

“It’s important to have a full-time minister who sees this as a significant position,” Goren said. “It gave a good feeling in the ministry that there is

someone who cares and works to bring in budgets and make professional appointments.”

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