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Arab Israeli lawmakers accuse Lieberman of racism Sarkozy urged Israel to "get rid of" Lieberman



Arabs consider Lieberman racist

Occupied Jerusalem (Al Arabiya, Agencies)

Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman issued a tough rebuke following remarks in which France's president urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "to get rid of" the ultranationalist Israeli official, Israeli media reports said on Tuesday.

Sarkozy's office had no immediate comment on the remarks Israeli newspapers and Channel 2 television attributed to him from his talks last Wednesday in Paris with Netanyahu in which the French president suggested that Lieberman should be fired.

"You must get rid of this person," the Haaretz newspaper and Ynet website quoted Sarkozy as telling Netanyahu.

"If this report is correct then this is an unacceptable interference in internal Israeli affairs," Lieberman's office said.

A spokesman for Lieberman, leader of the ultranationalist Yisrael Beitenu party, said that if Sarkozy made the comments, they would amount to "intolerable" meddling in Israeli affairs.

Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying "in light of the latest media reports", the prime minister voiced his "full confidence" in Lieberman during a meeting with ambassadors from European Union countries.

The reports said Sarkozy compared Lieberman, accused of racism by Israeli Arab lawmakers, with French far-rightist Jean Marie Le Pen, but retracted the remark after Netanyahu countered that the foreign minister left a different impression in private conversations.

Netanyahu reportedly defended his minister, saying that "in private he is pragmatic," to which Sarkozy is said to have responded that controversial far-right French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen is very pleasant in private.

Arabs call him racist

Lieberman has angered Israel's Arab minority by questioning their loyalty to the Jewish state and suggesting some of their towns be ceded to Palestinian jurisdiction in exchange for Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

He has been called a "racist" by critics over his anti-Arab diatribes.

In May Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Avigdor Lieberman was still not welcome in Egypt after the fire band official threatened to bomb the Suez Canal and told Mubarak to "go to hell" if he continued to refuse to visit Israel.

The reports about Sarkozy's purported remarks put a spotlight on a rift between Israel and the West over Netanyahu's rejection of calls for a total halt to Jewish settlement building.

Lieberman, himself a settler, has said settlements are no obstacle to peace and is a staunch defender of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.