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Israel, US sign homeland security pact

By REBECCA ANNA STOIL



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Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter and his US counterpart, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, signed a joint memorandum in Washington DC on Wednesday evening, setting a series of goals and terms for security collaboration between the two nations.

The joint understanding included partnership on flight security, including passenger and cargo inspection and information sharing on the topic of emergency planning, response, recovery and damage control. The understanding also encompassed sharing of research and development progress in the field of explosives detection.

In addition, Israel and the US will share information about steps taken to neutralize, respond to and reduce terror and criminal activities in specific fields and will also hold joint training and staff exchanges.

Dichter had previously described the agreement as "a breakthrough signing of an understandings agreement [with the US] for the war on terror and establishing cooperation between the Internal Security Ministry and the Department of Homeland Security."

Dichter, who is on a four-day diplomatic visit to North America, was recently officially appointed as Israel's diplomatic counterpart to Chertoff. The former Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) head is widely recognized in Washington as an expert in counter-terrorism, particularly following a nine-month stint as a fellow at the D.C. Brookings Institute think tank.

A preliminary document signed by both Dichter and Chertoff took pains to describe that "the meeting was held in a friendly and constructive atmosphere and with a spirit of mutual understanding" and with complete agreement "that there exists a vital need to promote operational, scientific and technological cooperation between the parties in the field of homeland security."

The two parties agreed that a Homeland Security Steering Committee will meet at least once a year in order to make sure that the clauses of the memorandum are carried out. The committee, which will be led by Public Security Ministry Director Ronny Falk, was also tasked with defining, setting forth and ratifying "broad, substantive priority areas for the joint activities within the framework of the memorandum." Specific desks will be set up at the nations' respective embassies to make sure that the cooperation and information flows freely.



Former Shin Bet chief and current Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter.
Photo: Ariel Jerozolimski

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The agreement builds on an earlier agreement signed in 1996 which outlined cooperation in preventing terror attacks, as well as an agreement between the Defense Ministry and its US counterpart discussing research and development in the war on terror.

"Iran is the largest terrorist state in the world" Dichter said late Tuesday night to members of the public security committee of the Canadian parliament. Moving from discussing geopolitics to talking shop with the Canadian lawmakers, Dichter laid out what he believes to be the guidelines for Canadian-Israeli security cooperation in the future, possibly similar to the agreement that the minister signed a day later in Washington DC.

The Canadian MPs echoed their American compatriots in addressing the former Shin Bet head as a world expert in the field of terror rather than as a visiting minister of a foreign government, asking him at one point what specific steps the parliament could take to prevent terror attacks on Canadian soil.

In his answer, Dichter reiterated the importance of strengthening border security and use of proper investigative methods with suspects. But the minister, who spent almost a year as a research fellow in the US, also emphasized that democratic countries - Israel among them - had to work hard to find the appropriate balance between respect for human rights and investigative procedures. He cited the example of transparency of the investigation as dependent on oversight of the judicial system, as well as the oversight of groups such as the Red Cross.

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