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U.S. Abstains From UN Vote Criticizing Israeli Settlements

Schumer: Kerry 'emboldened extremists on both sides'

Incoming Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said Secretary of State John Kerry inflamed tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians with his speech in which Kerry fiercely criticized the Israeli government for its settlement policy regarding disputed territories occupied by Israel.

"While Secretary Kerry mentioned Gaza in his speech, he seems to have forgotten the history of the settlements in Gaza, where the Israeli government forced settlers to withdraw from all settlements and the Palestinians responded by sending rockets into Israel," Schumer said. "While he may not have intended it, I fear Secretary Kerry, in his speech and action at the [United Nations], has emboldened extremists on both sides."

"Friends need to tell each other the hard truths, and friendships require mutual respect," Kerry said at the State Department. "If the choice is one state, Israel can either be Jewish or democratic. It cannot be both, and it won't ever really be at peace."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded by calling Kerry's remarks "a great disappointment" that undermined the Jewish state. "Israelis do not need to be lectured about the importance of peace by foreign leaders," he said in Jerusalem.

The U.N. Security Council passed a Dec. 23 resolution 14-0 demanding an end to Israeli settlement building in occupied territories. The U.S. could have vetoed the measure but abstained instead, ending a longstanding policy of shielding Israel from U.N. reproaches. [thehill.com]

On December 23, 2016, the Obama administration abstained from voting on UN Security Council resolution 2334 that was critical of Israel's settlements in the West Bank, drawing accusations from the Israeli government that Washington had abandoned its closest Middle East ally and dealt a blow to the chances of peace talks with the Palestinians.

The resolution, which could have been vetoed by the U.S., declared Israeli settlements illegal under international law and demanded that the country cease construction in the West Bank and other territories captured in the 1967 Middle East war. Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, defended the move to abstain, saying "one cannot champion" both settlements and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The settlement problem has gotten so much worse," Power said after the vote. She added that "our vote today does not diminish" the country's "steadfast" commitment to Israel.

The decision to abstain highlighted the increasingly frayed relationship between the Obama administration and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. Netanyahu's office, in a statement after the vote, rejected the resolution and said the Obama administration secretly plotted to undermine Israel by not vetoing the proposal. The White House rejected the accusation.

"The Obama administration not only failed to protect Israel against this gang-up at the UN, it colluded with it behind the scenes," Netanyahu's office said in the statement.

Following the vote, Israel recalled its ambassadors to New Zealand and Senegal -- two of the co-sponsors of the resolution -- for consultation and canceled aid programs to Senegal, Netanyahu's office said in a text message. A planned visit to Israel by the Senegalese foreign minister also was canceled.

Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser, said the continued expansion of Israeli settlements gave the U.S. little choice.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu had the opportunity to pursue policies that would've led to a different outcome today," Rhodes told reporters on a conference call. "We hear the words about a two-state solution, and then we see the actions that are making the two-state solution out of reach."

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House Speaker Paul Ryan called the U.S. abstention “shameful” in a statement issued after the vote. Ryan, President-elect Donald Trump, and Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer had all called on the Obama administration to veto the resolution before the vote.

“Today’s vote is a blow to peace that sets a dangerous precedent for further diplomatic efforts to isolate and demonize Israel,” Ryan said. “Our unified Republican government will work to reverse the damage done by this administration and rebuild our alliance with Israel.”

In a tweet following the vote, Trump said: “As to the U.N., things will be different after Jan. 20th.”

Palestinian leaders, meanwhile, welcomed the resolution’s passage. The office of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said in a statement issued in Arabic that the move is “a big blow for the Israeli political policy, a condemnation for settlements and consensus by the international community and a support for the two-state solution.”

Ruling party Fatah spokesman Osama Qowasma called the vote a “historic victory for the Palestinian people, and it inaugurates a new stage in the conflict.”

“This is a core change in the position of the UN Security Council, and it shows the dangers of the policy of the Israeli government, which will undermine the two-state solution and encourage terrorism in the region,” Qowasma said.

The Security Council vote came in the waning weeks of Obama’s presidency, as Israel looks to warmer relations with Trump when he takes office. Netanyahu clashed publicly with Obama over the Iran nuclear deal, denouncing it in a speech to Congress last year that wasn’t coordinated with the White House. Relations never recovered.

Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. Middle East peace negotiator and vice president at the Wilson Center in Washington, called the utility of the Obama administration’s move “highly questionable.” It likely will prompt Trump to take a harder line and protect Israel if the country escalates settlement construction, Miller said. “If you want to leave a legacy, this strikes me as way to leave a legacy that’s going to be immediately overturned,” he said. “It’s a fraught enterprise going down this road at five to midnight when you know the new administration is going to disavow this.”

Some left-leaning American Jewish groups supported the administration’s action. “The resolution is consistent with longstanding bipartisan American policy, which includes strong support for the two-state solution, and clear opposition to irresponsible and damaging actions, including Palestinian incitement and terror and Israeli settlement expansion and home demolitions,” the Washington-based

group J Street said in a statement.

Trump has taken a very public stance on U.S.-Israel ties, vowing to move the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv to the contested city of Jerusalem, a shift Palestinians say would effectively end the peace process. He’s also nominated David Friedman, a staunch supporter of settlements who opposes a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, as his ambassador to Israel.

“Israel looks forward to working with President-elect Trump and with all our friends in Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, to negate the harmful effects of this absurd resolution,” Netanyahu’s office said in its statement. [bloomberg.com]

Netanyahu slams Kerry's speech after thanking Trump for 'warm friendship'

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took a parting swipe at the Obama administration, calling Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech criticizing Israeli settlements “unbalanced” but saying he had “no doubt” the alliance between the countries would endure despite disagreements.

Earlier, Secretary of State John Kerry defended the Obama administration’s decision to abstain from voting on a U.N. resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity in areas Palestinians seek for a state. Allowing it to pass was seen by some as a slap to Israel. He questioned Netanyahu’s commitment to Palestinian statehood, which has been the basis for serious peace talks.

Kerry’s speech came amid the final days of an administration that has had tense relations with Israel. President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to repair the relationship. Trump has condemned Obama for allowing the resolution to pass and said Wednesday that the current president has put up “roadblocks” for Trump’s transition.

Netanyahu thanked Trump for his “warm friendship” and “clear-cut support for Israel” after the president-elect tweeted that Israel should “stay strong” as his administration approaches.

Netanyahu said Kerry’s speech was “almost as unbalanced” as the U.N. resolution, which he harshly criticized. He said that peace will not be achieved through speeches or U.N. resolutions but through direct talks.

In his speech, Kerry stressed that Obama’s commitment to Israel has been as strong as previous presidents, giving assurances that the Obama administration is not planning any other parting shots at Israel and saying it would not recognize Palestinian statehood.

Obama has expressed frustration about the growth of Israeli settlements, and Israel’s government has argued that curbing them should not be a precondition to peace talks. [cnbc.com]