White House Puts Palestinians, United Nations in Crosshairs

February 13, 2017

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The Washington Free Beacon

<http://freebeacon.com/national-security/white-house-puts-palestinians-united-nations-crosshairs/>

The White House is sending a strong signal that it will no longer tolerate Palestinian intransigence at the United Nations or the international body’s long record of anti-Israel action, according to White House officials and sources in Congress who told the Washington Free Beacon that the Trump administration will "unabashedly support Israel" in the months and years ahead.

The Trump administration sent shockwaves through the U.N. late last week when it took a stance against the appointment of a senior Palestinian official to serve in a top post overseeing Libya.

Senior officials at Turtle Bay expressed outrage over the Trump administration's move to block the appointment of former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad as a special U.N. representative for Libya. The move was widely supported by U.N. members, and, for a time, the Trump administration.

Sources inside the White House told the Free Beacon that the move was meant to send a signal to the Palestinians that they can no longer manipulate the U.N. system in order to bolster their international clout. This type of action, the sources said, undermines Israel and the ongoing peace process.

White House officials, as well as senior sources in Congress, told the Free Beacon that the move is part of a larger effort to solidify U.S. support for Israel and counter a range of last-minute moves by the former Obama administration aimed at severing U.S.-Israel ties.

The Free Beacon first reported earlier this year that the Trump administration and Congress had already been working on a range of measures meant to boost U.S. support for Israel at the U.N.

"The United States was disappointed to see a letter indicating the intention to appoint the former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister to lead the U.N. Mission in Libya," Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said in a statement opposing the selection of Fayyad. "For too long the U.N. has been unfairly biased in favor of the Palestinian Authority to the detriment of our allies in Israel."

"The United States does not currently recognize a Palestinian state or support the signal this appointment would send within the United Nations, however, we encourage the two sides to come together directly on a solution," Haley said in a vast departure from Obama administration rhetoric. "Going forward the United States will act, not just talk, in support of our allies."

A senior White House official familiar with the move told the Free Beacon that the Palestinians will no longer get a free pass to push their anti-Israel agenda and win statehood outside the parameters of the peace process.

"It is so refreshing to have an American ambassador to the United Nations who will unabashedly support our ally Israel," one senior member of the White House's National Security Council told the Free Beacon. "The appointment of Salam Fayyad as the official U.N. envoy to Libya would be an incremental step towards unilateral recognition of Palestinian statehood by the U.N. absent an agreement with Israel."

"Ambassador Haley took the only appropriate action and we are looking to supporting her actions any way we can," the source said.

One senior congressional aide who works on Middle East issues told the Free Beacon that Trump’s approach to the U.N. is centered on backing Israel from any action that could harm its interests.

"The U.N. is not a friend of Israel. After the Obama administration's eleventh-hour attack on the Jewish state, President Trump is attempting to turn the page,"  the source said. "Our new administration is already pushing back against the U.N.'s rampant bias and reasserting America's strong support for Israel. This is a good step in the right direction."

Fayyad, who is widely viewed as a reformer in Palestinian society, appears to have been caught up in a larger battle between the White House and U.N. over the international body's efforts to delegitimize Israel.

While Fayyad was seen as an acceptable pick for the Libya post, his ties to the Palestinian Authority and its rogue efforts to achieve statehood via the U.N. provoked ire in the White House, sources said.

The White House is determined to keep what it views as the U.N.'s anti-Israel bias in check, particularly after the Obama administration's last-minute efforts to secure a resolution condemning Israel.

One senior official at a national pro-Israel organization said the Trump administration's moves would help preserve international agreements barring the Palestinians from seeking statehood outside of the peace process.

"Pro-Palestinian officials at the U.N. thought they had found a clever way to mainstream the Palestinians as legitimate state actors, which is contrary to American policy and violates two decades of signed agreements between the Palestinians and Israel," said the source, who was not authorized to speak on record. "They figured that the Trump White House would be too worried about optics to take a stand on behalf of our Israeli allies. The White House refused to be intimidated."

Regional experts tracking the issue think Fayyad could become a lighting rod in a larger matter surrounding U.S. opposition to any U.N. action meant to elevate the Palestinians on the international stage.

Jonathan Schanzer, vice president of research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told the Free Beacon that the controversy surrounding Fayyad unintentionally pleases Palestinian leaders such as Mahmoud Abbas, who fought against Fayyad's efforts to eradicate corruption.

"The thing people are not asking is why Fayyad was even considering working the Libya file instead of trying to reform the Palestinian Authority at home,” Schanzer said. "The answer is, Fayyad was pushed out by Mahmoud Abbas in 2013. He and Abbas were in an epic battle over corruption and clean governance and reform. Fayyad lost that battle, as Abbas went full dictator."

The Obama administration is responsible for allowing Fayyad to be pushed out of the Palestinian Authority, Schanzer said.

"The U.S. refused to come to Fayyad's defense. I lay this at the feet of the Obama administration," he said. "Fayyad's reform and clean governance program was gutted, and when Fayyad created an NGO it was raided by Abbas' forces—and still the Obama admin refused to lift a finger to help him."