Palestinians Circulating Draft UN Resolution Condemning Israeli Settlements

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The Palestinian Authority distributed a draft resolution this week condemning construction in the settlements to a number of members of the UN Security Council, according to Western diplomats and senior Palestinian officials. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas would like to bring the resolution to a vote during his visit to UN Headquarters in New York in about two weeks.

The Palestinian move to condemn settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem has been moving ahead low profile since the beginning of this year. The Palestinians have held consultations over the past few months with a number of Security Council members, such as France, Spain and Egypt, to gage the extent of support. A senior Palestinian official said Abbas will be arriving in New York on April 22, Passover eve, to be present personally for the planned vote.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu condemned the proposal Thursday, saying that it would make peace less, not more likely.

"The Palestinians teach their children everyday that the settlements are Tel Aviv, Haifa and Acre," said Netanyahu. "Abu Mazen's actions will push peace talks further away. The only way to advance peace is through direct talks and Abu Mazen is hiding from that."

The official reason for Abbas coming to New York is to take part in a UN conference on the climate. The Palestinians want to take advantage of Abbas’ presence at the UN Headquarters to promote the vote on the resolution. Abbas will make a round of diplomatic visits to Paris, Berlin and Moscow to garner support for the Palestinian move before arriving in New York.

The last time the Security Council voted on a resolution condemning the settlements was in February 2011. At that time, the Palestinians garnered the massive support of 14 out of 15 Security Council members, including Britain, France and Germany. The United States opposed the resolution and after failing to get the Palestinians to withdraw it, cast a veto. This was the only time in the past seven years that U.S. President Barack Obama used his veto.

Diplomats from two Western countries who are Security Council members confirmed that the Palestinians had distributed the draft. They said the resolution was relatively moderate and resembled the one presented in February 2011. The draft states that the settlements are an obstacle to peace and Israel must cease construction. One of the Western diplomats said that one of the only innovations in the text this time was the addition of a paragraph condemning settler violence against Palestinians.

According to a senior Palestinian official, talks are underway over the past few days with Arab countries, especially Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to move the draft resolution forward, as well as with Security Council members.

The foreign ministers of the Arab League are to convene a special meeting on April 20 to discuss the final draft of the resolution. One of the Western diplomats said that some of the Arab countries were concerned over the draft resolution and have warned the Palestinians not to promote it. However, the Palestinian leadership is determined to move ahead, and has even pressured Egypt, which represents the Arab countries on the Security Council, to push hard for it.

A senior Palestinian official said that the PA wants to present a resolution for a vote that does not meet all the Palestinian demands, but is closer to the positions of the international community, so as to soften opposition of countries like Britain and the United States. Nevertheless, the senior official said that as in February 2011, the Palestinians had obtained no promise from the American that it would not torpedo the resolution or veto it.

However, the Palestinians believe that the fact that over the past five years there have been a number of unsuccessful American attempts to move ahead the peace process and the fact that the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem continue to flourish, might lead the Americans to refrain from vetoing the resolution.

The senior Palestinian official said that the timing of the resolution is also linked to the U.S. presidential elections, because a vote on the resolution on the eve of the elections could harm the democratic process and therefore increase the chance of a veto by Obama.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon declined to answer questions about the planned Palestinian move. A source in the Foreign Ministry said that the Israeli delegation to the UN has noticed marked Palestinian activity over the past few days on the matter, and had reported it, but so far Israel has not obtained a copy of the draft resolution.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is very concerned over a move in the UN Security Council on the settlements. At a meeting of the Likud faction in the Knesset in late February, Netanyahu said such a resolution could result in international sanctions against Israel. According to the Hebrew weekly Makor Rishon, Netanyahu said at the time that he feared that Obama would not veto a resolution on the settlements.

“The question of whether it reaches the Security Council will be decided in the end by one man. I want you to understand this,” Netanyahu told the MKs.