President Obama Misreads Israeli/Palestinian Conflict — Again

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Who could have imagined that the final weeks of President Obama’s tenure would bring a flurry of mutual recriminations between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Obama administration?

Who? Anyone who was paying attention.

For months we have been hearing that Obama planned a parting shot, perhaps allowing an anti-Israel resolution to pass without a U.S. veto at the U.N. Security Council. I heard about it as far back as last summer.

But as Obama wounded feelings in Israel and enraged Netanyahu, the paradox behind this unseemly quarrel between two good friends, the United States and Israel, is that the biggest losers here are the Palestinian people and their hopes for the establishment of a Palestinian State.

That’s how misguided and harmful Obama’s move at the U.N. was.

The resolution, as was utterly predictable, pushed both sides closer to the extremes.

The U.N. resolution condemning Jewish settlements in occupied lands, which calls even East Jerusalem occupied territory, does everything the United States has vowed never to do, particularly regarding the status of Jerusalem. In fact, the U.S. Embassy is not in Jerusalem because, Washington argues, the status of the city should be decided by negotiations. But this resolution calls the part of the city that includes the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City “occupied Palestinian territory.” Never mind that before Israel controlled it, the area was occupied by Jordan. It includes the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, on the edge of the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site.

Did Obama think allowing this kind of resolution would lead Netanyahu to suddenly turn more moderate? Did he think Palestinians would suddenly decide to rush to negotiate with Israel after seeing this apparent success at an international forum?

No, the immediate and totally predictable result of this resolution is quite the opposite. And the Obama administration knew it would be.

In 2011, when a similar draft resolution was brought to the Security Council, then-U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice explained America’s veto: “Every potential action must be measured against one overriding standard: Will it move the parties closer to negotiations and an agreement?” she correctly explained, adding, “Unfortunately, this draft resolution risks hardening the positions of both sides. It could encourage the parties to stay out of negotiations.”

Exactly. The Obama administration knew what would happen. And it has.

As soon as the vote concluded, the radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist group committed to the destruction of Israel, posted a tweet rejoicing in the event. The Israeli ambassador declared that Israel will “proudly reclaim the land of our forefathers.” There it was, in mere minutes, the prospect for a Palestinian State growing even more distant thanks to the decision by Obama to shoot one more dart at Netanyahu.

It’s hard to understand why the outgoing president decided to take an action so patently counterproductive. His aide, Ben Rhodes, told journalists that “We tried everything. It didn’t work.” The move seemed aimed at exacting revenge against Netanyahu. It pained Israelis, but it hurt Palestinians more, even if for them it felt like a victory.

What it did was entrench the positions that have kept the people of both sides trapped in the suspended animation of enmity.

From the start of his administration Obama mishandled the issue of settlements. Sure, settlements are a problem, an obstacle to peace. But Obama treated them as if they were the only issue, when in reality they are one of many. By focusing solely on settlements and treating east Jerusalem as if it were identical to any dusty Jewish outpost on a West Bank hill, Obama missed the fundamental nuances of the conflict. Just as this resolution demanded nothing of Palestinians, Obama’s position on the conflict, his very public pressure on Israel solely, struck the Israelis as one-sided. It put them in a defensive crouch, and it freed Palestinians to harden their positions.

I believe Obama had good intentions coming in. But his overconfidence blinded him to how much he didn’t know about a complex, deeply emotional conflict. As time passed, his coolness turned to irritation against Netanyahu. Now Netanyahu, too, has fallen into a self-laid trap. He is responding to the latest challenge in the all the wrong ways, worsening a bad situation.

As president, Obama made many good decisions on the domestic front. On foreign policy, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he was ham-handed. On this issue, his presidency ends as it began, with a focus on settlements, and with ill-conceived, counterproductive moves.