Kerry on Israel: An Alternate Universe

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<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/29/kerry-on-israel-an-alternate-universe.html>

For months one of the worst-kept secrets in foreign-policy circles was that [Secretary of State John Kerry would give a speech](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/12/29/will-john-kerry-s-israel-speech-tear-the-democrats-apart.html) about his vision for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, just as soon as the 2016 elections were safely over. Gossip revolved around which staffers were getting pulled in to write, which wonks were being brought in to vet, how far it would go, and so on. A few weeks ago, Kerry even nudge-winked about just how much of an open secret his plans had become, telling an audience in London that he’d be moved to speak on the issue some time “in the next weeks, months, or over the year.”

What few people expected is how totally irrelevant [Kerry’s performance](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/12/28/john-kerry-s-last-gasp-bid-to-revive-the-dying-arab-israeli-peace-process.html) would end up. The secretary’s remarks, which extended for over an hour, have already generated the expected heap of praise and criticism. But the praise feels like writers rationalizing how they wasted a day on what will ultimately become a footnote in American diplomatic history, and some of the criticism is crankiness over the same thing.

Kerry’s speech was already going to be drowned out by the global din around [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, which passed in recent days after the U.S. abstained](https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm), and which among other things lumped Judaism’s holiest sites in East Jerusalem together with the West Bank and declared all of them occupied Palestinian territory. It has been criticized first as a diplomatic gambit that detonated the peace process and, second, as [an abandonment of Israel](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2016/12/18/friedman-as-israeli-ambassador-israel-loses-palestine-loses-putin-wins.html) contrary to decades of U.S. diplomacy aimed at blocking international assaults on the Jewish state.

The resolution presented another rhetorical problem for Kerry: To even get to the parameters, he was going to have to get past those two criticisms. He needed to paint a world in which the UNSCR built on the peace process rather than detonated it, and boosted Israel rather than abandoning it.

He did exactly that, but at the cost of whatever relevance the speech might have had left, because the world he painted has very little in common with the one we live in. He couldn’t even craft a single version in which everything fell into place, but had to leap from one alternate reality to another. Those who work on the Middle East as it actually exists don’t have anything in the speech for them.

To address concerns that UNSCR 2334 blew apart the peace process, Kerry described it as in line with past Middle East-related resolutions. That version might have been a legitimate diplomatic achievement. But it’s not the real Resolution 2334.

The real Resolution 2334 describes all of East Jerusalem and the West Bank as occupied Palestinian territory. Nonetheless Kerry said that a previous resolution built to avoid exactly that conclusion, Resolution 242, was still “enshrined in international law… and remains the basis for an agreement today.” Even the text of the new resolution had settled for only a perfunctory throat-clearing reference to 242, “reaffirming” it in opening line far above the operative part of the text.

The real Resolution 2334 calls for a Palestinian state but not a Jewish state. Nonetheless Kerry said that a previous resolution, which calls for both, Resolution 181, was still “fundamental… [and] incorporated into the foundational documents of both the Israelis and Palestinians.” A little while after Kerry finished speaking Wednesday, Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization executive committee, [reportedly rejected the idea of recognizing Israel as a Jewish state](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/PLO-official-Overall-message-of-Kerry-speech-welcome-but-parameters-unacceptable-476792).

To address concerns that the U.S. abandoned Israel in an unprecedented way by abstaining, Kerry sketched a version of past U.S. diplomacy where the abstention was nothing new. In that alternate timeline, the U.S. would not have made a radical move by reversing past policy, and would be merely upping the volume against Israeli settlements. But that’s not our timeline.

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In our timeline the abstention reversed past U.S. policies on a range of core issue, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in declaring East Jerusalem occupied Palestinian territory. Kerry said on Wednesday “Now you have heard that some criticize this resolution for calling East Jerusalem occupied territory. But to be clear, there was absolutely nothing new in last week’s resolution on that issue.”

In our 1994, Madeline Albright told the United Nations “We are today voting against a resolution in the Commission on the Status of Women precisely because it implies that Jerusalem is ‘occupied Palestinian territory’… We simply do not support the description of the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 war as ‘occupied Palestinian territory’… we oppose the specific reference to Jerusalem in this resolution and will continue to oppose its insertion in future resolutions.”

There were other claims that, had they been true, might have justified the Obama administration’s gambit. Kerry said that “no American administration has done more for Israel’s security than Barack Obama’s,” and maybe in that world it would have been productive to coerce Israel into territorial concessions.

In the real world, the Obama administration legalized Iran’s nuclear program, flooded Iran with billions of dollars, and ceded the Levant to it and its proxies.

Kerry said that the Israelis had started “over 30,000 settlement units” after the U.S. vetoed an anti-settlement resolution in 2011, and maybe in that world it would have been diplomatically necessary to shove the Israelis on settlements. In the real world, that number is misleading, which is exactly why Kerry had to use the strange phrasing “through some stage of the planning process” at the end of that line.

In fairness, that settler unit claim probably counts more as plain semantic dishonesty than anything else.

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[Kerry got to his vision for the Middle East.](http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2015/10/02/john-kerry-squirms-in-colbert-hot-seat.html) He outlined five parameters, and they make the most sense if one imagines the U.S. slipped through a wormhole and landed in the mid-1990s.

The guidelines are mostly indistinguishable from what American diplomats have been pushing in the Middle East for decades: Jewish and Palestinian states, secure Israeli borders and contiguous Palestinian territory, compensation for Palestinian refugees, a Jerusalem that’s not divided but is also a Palestinian capital, and security for everyone.

Kerry had spent an hour listing how American policies had failed for decades, then summed up by advocating functionally those same policies, which would make sense only if those policies hadn’t already failed, except their failure was the premise of the speech.

An appropriately fantastical, head-spinning end.