Mischief at the U.N.: Obama Toys with Cutting Israel Adrift in the Security Council.

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Immediately after Israel’s March 17 election, Obama administration officials threatened to allow (or even encourage) the U.N. Security Council to recognize a Palestinian state and confine Israel to its pre-1967 borders. Within days, the president himself joined in, publicly criticizing not just Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom Obama has had notoriously bad relations, but sectors of Israeli opinion and even Israel itself.

The administration leaks suggesting that Israel be cut adrift in the Security Council in effect threatened “collective punishment” as a weapon in U.S.-Israel relations. This is especially ironic coming from “progressives” who have repeatedly accused Israel of “collective punishment” by forcefully retaliating against terrorist attacks. But more important, exposing Israel to the tender mercies of its Security Council opponents harms not only Israel’s interests, but America’s in equal measure. Roughly half of Washington’s Security Council vetoes have been cast against draft resolutions contrary to our Middle East interests.

America’s consistent view since Council Resolution 242 concluded the 1967 Arab-Israeli war is that only the parties themselves can structure a lasting peace. Deviating from that formula would be a radical departure by Obama from a bipartisan Middle East policy nearly half a century old.  
  
In fact, Israel’s “1967 borders” are basically only the 1949 cease-fire lines, but its critics shrink from admitting this tedious reality. The indeterminate status of Israel’s borders from its 1948 creation is in fact a powerful argument why only negotiation with relevant Arab parties can ultimately fix the lines with certainty.

That is why Resolution 242’s “land for peace” formula, vague and elastic though it is, was acceptable to everyone in 1967: There were no hard and fast boundaries to fall back on, no longstanding historical precedents. Prior U.N. resolutions from the 1940s, for example, had all been overtaken by events. Only negotiation, if anything, could leave the parties content; externally imposed terms could only sow future conflicts. Hence, Resolution 242 does not call for a return to the prewar boundaries, but instead affirms the right of “every State in the area” to “secure and recognized boundaries.” Ignoring this fundamental reality is fantasy.  
  
So what drives Obama to conjure his Security Council threat? Obviously, deep antipathy for Netanyahu is one reason. Obama didn’t like Netanyahu before Israel’s recent election, and liked him even less after Bibi’s speech to a joint session of Congress. Hoping to motivate lukewarm or indifferent Likud voters to pump up his election-day support, Netanyahu emphasized his opponents’ efforts to turn out anti-Likud Arab voters, and Obama flayed him for it. Obama also opposed Netanyahu’s preelection criticism of the “two-state solution” and disdained Netanyahu’s efforts to clarify his comments after he won.

So Obama’s list of complaints about Netanyahu is long and getting longer. But if the criticisms were really about Netanyahu’s campaign tactics, threatening to let slip the dogs of political war in the Security Council would hardly be an appropriate response. Obama’s punishment would simply not fit Netanyahu’s crime.

Far more disturbing, Obama’s postelection statements demonstrate something much deeper than just animosity toward Netanyahu. Obama said that “Israeli democracy has been premised on everybody in the country being treated equally and fairly. If that is lost, then I think that not only does it give ammunition to folks who don’t believe in a Jewish state, but it also, I think, starts to erode the meaning of democracy in the country.”

With these comments, Obama is criticizing not just Netanyahu, but the very legitimacy of Israel’s democracy, giving an implicit green light to those prepared to act violently against it. Obama’s remarks are substantially more egregious than Secretary of State John Kerry’s 2014 criticism that Israel’s unwillingness to follow the White House lead in the Palestinian negotiations made it understandable if there were another Palestinian intifada or further efforts by the international “boycotts, sanctions, and divestiture” movement against Israel.

Obama is thus going well beyond acting unpresidential or even immature. Whether one takes his or Netanyahu’s side, the administration’s approach is now squarely contrary to America’s larger strategic interests. And the global harm that will be done to common U.S. and Israeli interests through Security Council resolutions if Washington stands aside (or worse, joins in) will extend far beyond the terms of one prime minister and one president.

Consider the inevitable damage merely from the sort of council resolution threatened by Obama’s leakers. Declaring that a Palestinian state exists outside of Israel’s 1967 boundaries would instantly terminate all bilateral Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy on these central issues. What else would there be to talk about? Resolution 242’s basic premise would be upended; rather than enhancing the role of diplomacy between Israel and the relevant Arab parties, a Palestinian statehood resolution would eliminate it.

The reverberations would echo even wider. Already, Obama’s representatives on the U.N. Human Rights Council declined to defend Israel during the HRC’s annual festival of Israel-bashing, another first from our transformative president.

More seriously, Israel’s “occupation” of West Bank lands would immediately render it in violation of the statehood resolution, thus exposing it to international sanctions, including from the Security Council if Obama continued to stand aside. Prosecutions of Israeli officials in the International Criminal Court would instantly have a jurisdictional basis, and those officials would also be exposed to “universal jurisdiction” statutes that have become all the rage with the international left in recent decades. And won’t the White House be surprised when “Palestine” gains admission to the entire U.N. system, triggering a statutorily required cut-off of U.S. contributions to each agency that admits the new state!

No end of mischief will flow from even one undisciplined Security Council resolution, let alone whatever else Obama is prepared to allow. Obama’s criticisms, with the implied charge of racism not far beneath their surface, have once again brought Israel’s very legitimacy into question. We are all too close to resurrecting the U.N.’s 1975 “Zionism is racism” resolution. Daniel Patrick Moynihan would not recognize Obama as a president from the Democratic party.  
  
Obama needs reminding that petulance is for teenagers, not presidents. U.S. interests extend beyond personalities and temporary frustrations. As in many other policy areas, Obama’s “l’état, c’est moi” approach is laying foundations for enormous problems both today and long after he leaves office. If anyone wants a convincing argument why national security must be at the very center of America’s 2016 presidential contest, Obama has surely supplied it.