US Envoy Seems to Confirm No Last-Minute UN Moves on Israel

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The US ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, said Thursday that Washington would oppose one-sided initiatives for a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians, amid fears in Jerusalem that President Barack Obama would make a last-ditch effort for a peace push, possibly at the United Nations, in the last weeks of his administration.

“We will always oppose one-sided initiatives,” Shapiro told Army Radio, adding that this “is a long-term policy. Whenever there were one-sided initiatives, we opposed them in the past and we will always oppose them.”

Earlier Thursday, US officials sought to allay Israel’s concerns, indicating that Obama has nearly ruled out any major last-ditch effort to put pressure on Israel over the stalled peace negotiations, in order to avoid another conflict with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government as he leaves office and before he hands over to President-elect Donald Trump.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, Obama for more than a year had considered giving a major speech describing his vision for a future peace deal or, in a more aggressive step, supporting a United Nations resolution laying out parameters for such a deal. Although the goal would be to impart fresh urgency to the moribund peace process, either step would have been perceived as constraining Israel’s negotiating hand while strengthening the Palestinians’ argument on the world stage.

Discussions about those potential maneuvers, underway before the US election, have fallen off since Trump’s surprise victory, officials said. Obama is now highly unlikely to approve either of those options presented to him by US diplomats, said the officials, who weren’t authorized to discuss internal deliberations and requested anonymity.

Officials have left open the possibility that Obama would address the Mideast issue in a more limited way, short of weighing in on the contours of a future peace accord, before leaving office.

Obama’s reluctance to upset the status quo in his final months in part reflects his desire to protect his legacy of support for the Jewish state. Though he and Netanyahu have disagreed sharply on Israeli settlements and the Iran nuclear deal, Obama recently signed an unprecedented military aid deal worth $38 billion over the next decade.

Avoiding a last-minute fight also allows Obama’s successor to approach the Israeli-Palestinian issue unencumbered by a diplomatic hangover.

Anticipating that Democrat Hillary Clinton would win the White House race, the Obama administration had examined ways for Obama to more explicitly detail what he sees as obstacles to a breakthrough — such as continued Israeli settlement-building in West Bank lands claimed by the Palestinians for a future state. Clinton, who ran on a pledge to strongly support Israel, could have softened the tone upon taking office, potentially enough to lure both parties back to the table.

Trump’s election dramatically changed the calculus.

The Republican Party and many Trump supporters are vehemently opposed to UN actions targeting Israel. So any action by Obama would put Trump on the defensive, potentially aggravating him and forcing him to respond publicly.

That could lead Trump to stake out a hard-line stance in opposition to Obama, in turn making it difficult for him to play a neutral arbiter between Israelis and Palestinians in the future. Trump has voiced interest in being the president to finally solve the Mideast conflict and has suggested his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, could be the one to broker a deal.

Netanyahu has said little about Trump’s victory beyond congratulating him — possibly in an attempt to avoid antagonizing Obama while he is still in office. He has ordered his cabinet not to comment on the election results and told his ministers not to speak to Trump’s transition team.