The Only Thing He Didn’t Say Was ‘Apartheid’

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About half an hour into [John Kerry’s valedictory lecture](http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-john-kerrys-speech-on-middle-east-peace-december-28-2016/) from the State Department on Wednesday evening, Israel’s most popular television station, Channel 2, stopped broadcasting it live and switched to other programming. The country’s two other main TV stations, Channels 1 and 10, had already electronically left the building. Given that Kerry’s anti-settlement and anti-occupation address was primarily directed at the Israeli public, the ratings-conscious schedulers’ impatient transition to other material rather encapsulates the climate in which the secretary’s extensive remarks were being received here.

In 1999, Israelis threw out first-term prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, after three largely terror-free years, because many of them believed that an opportunity existed for dramatic progress toward a peace accord with the Palestinians, and that Netanyahu, far from seizing it, was standing in the way. They elected, in his stead, the ex-IDF chief of staff Ehud Barak, who quickly journeyed to Camp David. There, under president Bill Clinton’s informed aegis, a very serious effort to forge a permanent deal was doomed by PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s intransigence, as Clinton would acknowledge in his memoirs, and specifically by Arafat’s refusal to legitimate Jewish statehood.

Many in the Israel of 2016 would share some of the arguments they largely didn’t hear Kerry deliver on Wednesday evening. Many recognize the dangers of being permanently intertwined with millions of hostile Palestinians, and fear that the expansion especially of those settlements and outposts that lie to the east of the security barrier increases that risk, and thus puts a two-state solution in danger, threatening Israel’s Jewish character, or its democracy, or both. Kerry’s was a fiery critique, indeed, marked by the allegation that the settlement movement is driving the agenda of the Israeli government, and that Netanyahu has been allowing some of the most extreme voices to draw Israel closer to the Zionist nightmare of a single bi-national state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Just about the only charge Kerry didn’t lob, [this time](http://www.timesofisrael.com/kerry-israel-could-become-apartheid-state/), was apartheid.

But the secretary and his president long ago lost much of the Israeli public, even many of the settlement critics, by underestimating the depth of Palestinian opposition to the very fact of the Jewish state’s existence. The president and his secretary have underestimated, too, the consequent scarring — physical and psychological — that the Israeli public has accumulated over decades of war, terrorism, and demonization as the Palestinians and those who championed their cause have sought Israel’s obliteration.

Kerry mouthed words on Wednesday about the Arab world in the late 1940s rejecting the revival of the Jewish state, and going to war against it. He said out loud that Israel had to fight for its survival again in 1967. He mentioned terrorism and incitement. But the Obama administration never truly internalized the impact of these endless decades fighting off attempted destruction. And Kerry has self-evidently never been willing to internalize that in the vicious Middle East of the past few years, talking up the possibility of relinquishing control over adjacent West Bank history — with its recent history of suicide bomb factories, with Hamas angling to take control, with a hostile Iran emboldened to the east by the Obama Administration’s own nuclear deal — is just that for most Israelis: talk.

We left south Lebanon. Hezbollah took over. We left Gaza. Now it’s ruled by Hamas. When the secretary expresses his “total confidence” that Israel’s security requirements in the West Bank can be met via sophisticated multi-layered border defenses and such, he quite simply loses Israel.

Benjamin Netanyahu will fall from power one day. Presumably. But, in contrast to 1999, and notwithstanding widespread concern in Israel over building beyond the security barrier, it is unlikely to be because Israelis feel he is blocking what would otherwise be an open path to peace.

Kerry spent very little of his speech dealing with Palestinian violence and terrorism against Israel, and much of it assailing the settlements — continuing the assault he had begun at the Saban Center earlier this month. He also defended that resonant American abstention at the Security Council last Friday. He appeared to have realized that the resolution the US could not “in good conscience” veto has determined all parts of Jerusalem captured in 1967 — including, that is, the Western Wall and the Temple Mount — to be “occupied Palestinian territory.” In contrast to Samantha Power’s post-vote explanation, Kerry highlighted Israel’s profound religious and historic ties to the holy city, and asserted that the resolution “in no way prejudges the outcome of negotiations on East Jerusalem.” He also appeared to indicate that the US would make no attempt to take the principles he set out at the end of his address and enshrine them in a further UN resolution designed to impose terms.

But few Israelis will take much comfort in that, after the damage latterly inflicted on Israel by the outgoing administration on the international stage. And who’s to say what use other countries and groups will make of that resolution, or of those new-old Kerry principles which, among other features, do set out terms for the future of Jerusalem?

Ultimately, as he himself acknowledged in everything but the word, Kerry’s speech on Wednesday was an admission of failure: his failure to advance peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. At the end of a term in which he tried indefatigably to strong-arm Israelis and Palestinians into an accord, he finally concluded that it cannot be done now, and may not be possible for quite some time.

He would have had more chance of success — or at least of creating a climate in which prospects of progress would be brighter — had he focused more of his attentions on the toxic climate among Palestinians. They are relentlessly educated on the illegitimacy of Israel, with that narrative hammered home over social media, by their political and spiritual leadership, sometimes in their schools. He never strategically attempted to tackle that process of indoctrination.

Easier to place overwhelming blame on the settlers rather than the Palestinians. Or, heaven forbid, on yourself.

It’s been a difficult road, these past eight years. And in these final days, the depths of frustration and anger between Washington and Jerusalem have been laid bare.

Last Friday’s vote at the UN represented the most glaring instance in eight years of the president putting “daylight” between the United States and Israel, [as he reportedly warned that he would back in 2009](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-searches-for-middle-east-peace/2012/07/14/gJQAQQiKlW_story.html?utm_term=.251fe7eda05f). Kerry’s speech on Wednesday pulled back the curtains all the way.