The War on Israel Never Ends

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Last week’s United Nations Security Council resolution on Israel is a weapon of war pretending to be a plea for peace. Israel’s enemies say it has no right to exist. They claim the whole state was built on Arab land and it’s an injustice for Jews to exercise sovereignty there. Palestinians still widely promote this untruth in their official television and newspapers, whether from the PLO-controlled West Bank or Hamas-controlled Gaza. That is the unmistakable subtext of Friday’s U.N. Resolution 2334, despite the lip service paid to peace and the “two-state solution.”

The resolution describes Israel’s West Bank towns and East Jerusalem neighborhoods as settlements that are a “major obstacle” to peace. But there was a life-or-death Arab-Israeli conflict before those areas were built, and before Israel acquired the West Bank in the 1967 war.

Arab opposition to Israel’s existence predated—indeed caused—that war. It even predated Israel’s birth in 1948, which is why the 1948-49 war occurred. Before World War I, when Britain ended the Turks’ 400-year ownership of Palestine, Arab anti-Zionists denied the right of Jews to a state anywhere in Palestine.

Officials of Egypt (in 1979) and Jordan (in 1994) signed peace treaties with Israel, but anti-Zionist hostility remains strong. The Palestinian Authority signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 but continues to exhort its children in summer camps and schools to liberate all of Palestine through violence.

Arab efforts to damage Israel have been persistent and various, including conventional war, boycotts, diplomatic isolation, terrorism, lower-intensity violence such as rock-throwing, and missile and rocket attacks. Israel’s defensive successes, however, have constrained Palestinian leaders to rely now chiefly on ideological war to de-legitimate the Jewish State.

Highlighting the “occupied territories”—in U.N. resolutions, for example—implies moderation. It suggests an interest only in the lands Israel won in 1967. But the relatively “moderate” Palestinian Authority, in its official daily newspaper, Al-Hayat Al-Jadida, continually refers to Israeli cities as “occupied Haifa” or “occupied Jaffa,” for example. In other words, even pre-1967 Israel is “occupied territory” and all Israeli towns are “settlements.”

When David Ben-Gurion declared Israel’s independence in 1948, he invoked the “historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine,” as recognized in the Palestine Mandate approved in 1922 by the League of Nations. That connection applied to what’s now called the West Bank as it did to the rest of Palestine. Because no nation has exercised generally recognized sovereignty over the West Bank since the Turkish era, the mandate supports the legality of Jewish settlement there. That’s why attacking the settlements’ legality—as opposed to questioning whether they’re prudent—is so insidious. Arguing that it is illegal for Jews to live in the West Bank is tantamount to rejecting Israel’s right to have come into existence.

Friday’s U.N. resolution is full of illogic and anti-Israel hostility. It says disputed issues should be “agreed by the parties through negotiations.” Among the key open issues is who should control the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Yet the resolution calls these areas “Palestinian territory.” So much for negotiations.

The resolution says that Jewish West Bank and Jerusalem “settlements” have “no legal validity.” On the basis of a skewed legal analysis that ignored pre-1967 Jewish claims, President Jimmy Carter called the settlements illegal. Knowing that Mr. Carter’s conclusion was wrong and hostile to Israel, President Ronald Reagan repudiated it, and all U.S. administrations since were careful to avoid it.

Until now. By reviving Mr. Carter’s legal attack on the settlements, President Obama breaks with good sense and decades of U.S. policy.

The resolution exhorts all countries to distinguish between the territories on either side of the 1949 armistice lines. When Israel, before 1967, was confined within those lines, none of its Arab neighbors respected them as Israel’s legal borders. In each of the 1949 armistice agreements, at the Arab side’s insistence, there is language denying that the lines signify any party’s rights to any land. When the lines might have protected Israel, its neighbors, without U.N. protest, deprecated and violated them. Now that those armistice lines are long gone, the U.N. pretends that they are sacred.

The pretense has a purpose. It is to aid anti-Israel activists who call for boycotting Israeli settlement products. Boycotts have a grim place in Jewish historical memory similar to that of nooses for African-Americans. They have long been a favored weapon of the Jews’ most hateful enemies—in late 19th and early 20th-century France at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, for instance, and in Germany in the Nazi era. The U.N. and the U.S. delegation in particular should have been sensitive to the vicious connotations of cheering on the boycott movement. Perhaps they were.

The cause of peace is not served by Israel’s appearing vulnerable. Harmonious U.S.-Israel relations are the best hope for convincing Israel’s enemies that their costly efforts to destroy the Jewish state will be fruitless. They won’t compromise if they believe they have another option.

That’s why President-elect Trump can do something constructive by fulfilling his pledge to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. While he’s at it, perhaps he should insist on moving the U.N. to a more suitable location—maybe Aleppo.