UN Erupts in an Uproar After Trump Vetoes High Post For Ex-Premier of ‘Palestine’

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By Benny Avni

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A new administration in disarray botches one of its first big moves, gets overruled, and then cries foul. Sounds familiar? Welcome to the United Nations under Secretary General Antonio Guterres.

On Thursday, Mr. Guterres nominated a former Palestinian Authority prime minister, Salam Fayyad, to be the United Nations’ envoy in Libya. He asked for Security Council approval. On Friday, America’s new permanent representative at the UN, Ambassador Nikki Haley, unceremoniously declined to approve.

Much of the commentariat rushed to criticize Ms. Haley, contending she, rather than Mr. Guterres, didn’t think through the ramifications of the affair. The Trump administration, which Mrs. Haley represents, has botched a few operations of late.

This one, though, is on Mr. Guterres, who assumed office January 1 and has yet to get administration in order. “You don’t send a nomination for Security Council approval before making sure all involved are on board, especially when it’s so full of obvious sensitivities,” said a veteran United Nations official.

Three UN-based diplomats told The New York Sun that the world body’s Undersecretary General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, was the main force behind the botched nomination. It was, these diplomats maintain, Mr. Feltman who pushed Mr. Fayyad to the plum post.

Mr. Feltman, a former career State Department diplomat, was named to his position at the United Nations in 2012. That was done by Mr. Guterres’s predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, on recommendation of Secretary of State Clinton and the American envoy here, Susan Rice. (UN Spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, declined to comment on Mr. Feltman’s role in Mr. Fayyad’s nomination.)

Mr. Guterres evidently assumed that consulting his UN aides would suffice. Why, he even had one American on board. What could go wrong? Surely, the Security Council would rubber-stamp the nomination.

“Following the usual consultations, I would like to inform you of my intention to appoint Mr. Salam Fayyad (Palestine)” for the Libya post, Mr. Guterres wrote to the president of the Security Council Thursday. Mr. Fayyad, he added, would “succeed Mr. Martin Kobler (Germany).”

Naming “Palestine” as Mr. Fayyad’s state of origin is crucial. Never before had a person from a country that is not a full United Nations member been named to such high post. American law forbids, moreover, funding any international organization that recognizes “Palestine” as its full member.

That’s a context in which the American refusal to approve of elevation of the Palestinian to a key UN job takes on a certain logic. American officials, as well as their Israeli counterparts, sensed that Mr. Guterres' move was yet another step in the Palestinian Authority’s strategy of gaining world recognition through creeping UN acceptance.

“The United States does not currently recognize a Palestinian state or support the signal this appointment would send within the United Nations,” Ambassador Haley wrote in a statement Friday night, adding she was “disappointed” to see Mr. Guterres’ letter.

An uproar followed. “Amateur hour” was the cry from long-timers at the U.N. and State Department types. They denounced Ms. Haley’s statement and accused her of ignoring Mr. Fayyad’s contribution to peace and Palestinian prosperity.

“They have smart career folks at State & NSC who could educate them about Fayyad before a statement goes out. Ask them,” tweeted Daniel Shapiro, President Obama’s former ambassador in Israel.

A former International Monetary Fund official, Mr. Fayyad is indeed well liked by diplomats, including many in Israel. As finance minister and prime minister, he was one of the only Palestinian Authority officials actually attempting to build state institutions and promote financial viability on the road to full-fledged statehood. His superiors, instead, believed fighting Israel and gaining membership in international organizations would get them there.

Lacking a political base, Mr. Fayyad was pushed aside by the Palestinian Authority’s president, Mahmoud Abbas, and some of his allies tried to accuse him of corruption. Mr. Fayyad soon disappeared from Ramallah politics.

Yet the UN nomination was not about Mr. Fayyad, but about the claim to statehood that his nomination represents. Mr. Dujarric, the spokesman, argued in a statement Saturday that Mr. Fayyad’s nomination was “solely based on Mr. Fayyad’s recognized personal qualities and his competence.” UN officials, he contended, “do not represent any government or country.”

Yet, the UN is obviously aware that country of origin counts for much more than that statement let on. Mr. Dujarric’s statement itself noted that “no Israeli and no Palestinian have served in a post of high responsibility at the United Nations. This is a situation that the Secretary-General feels should be corrected.”

Yet there are those here who wonder about the logic of correcting Turtle Bay’s long-held bias against assigning top jobs to citizens of Israel, a member of the United Nations since 1949, by naming to a top post an individual from a non-member state.

Trying to explain it by conflating these two as if they were one entity smacks of annulment of the UN's opposition to a “one state solution.” Doing all this without first getting the nod from America, or any other key government, is what is amateurish.