UN Chief Names Palestinian to Libya Post, Risking U.S. Objection

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UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has told the Security Council that he intends to appoint former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad as his special representative for Libya, risking a clash with the U.S. over a Palestinian holding such a senior position at the world body.

Guterres sent a letter to Ukraine’s United Nations ambassador, who holds the presidency of the Security Council this month, saying Fayyad was his choice to replace Martin Kobler as special representative and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya. UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said he couldn’t confirm the appointment disclosed in the letter, which was obtained by Bloomberg News.

The choice of a Palestinian for a senior UN position may bring objections from U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration, which has already denounced the UN as siding with the Palestinians by passing a resolution in December condemning Israel’s expanding settlements in the West Bank.

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“It is highly unusual for a non-member state to have such a high-profile position, especially when you’re talking about an environment which is pretty volatile like Libya,” said Brett Schaefer, a senior research fellow in international regulatory affairs at the Heritage Foundation. “One interpretation would be that Guterres is trying to normalize Palestine throughout the UN system, which is something the Palestinians would like to see.”

### ‘Terrible Mistake’

Trump has criticized his predecessor Barack Obama for abstaining rather than exercising the U.S. veto in the Security Council to block the resolution on settlements. Nikki Haley, the new U.S. ambassador to the world body, said during [her confirmation hearing](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-01-18/trump-s-un-pick-haley-to-relay-congress-s-fury-over-israel-vote) last month that the resolution was “a terrible mistake.”

“Nowhere has the UN’s failure been more consistent and more outrageous than in its bias against our close ally Israel,” she said.

Guterres may have turned to Fayyad because “a strong qualified Arab-speaking diplomat” is needed as “the situation in Libya is quite urgent,” said Eric Pelofsky, a former special assistant to Obama who is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The Palestinians have observer status at the UN and have long advocated for full membership, which the U.S. and Israel have opposed absent a peace treaty that would recognize a two-state solution.

The U.S. State Department and the Israeli Embassy in Washington didn’t immediately respond to e-mails sent after business hours.

Fayyad was prime minister under Mahmoud Abbas from 2007 to 2013 and won accolades for his work straightening out the Palestinian Authority’s finances during a stint as finance minister from 2002 to 2005. He was also the International Monetary Fund’s resident representative in the West Bank and Gaza from 1996 to 2001.

That resume may make Fayyad acceptable to many Americans, according to David Makovsky of the Washington Institute.

“Fayyad is a heroic figure in the U.S. to Democrats and Republicans alike -- championing the idea of Palestinian accountability,” he said.