U.S. Diplomat Accuses U.N. of Bias Against Israel

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The Trump administration is strongly condemning what it calls a systemic anti-Israel bias at the United Nations, arguing Friday that U.N. monitoring of West Bank settlement activity allowed by the Obama administration is the latest example.

Michele Sison, the No. 2 U.S. diplomat at the United Nations, spoke against what the United States says is the unfair singling out of Israel during a closed session of the U.N. Security Council on Friday. There and elsewhere, the Trump administration is arguing that the United Nations has allowed valuable time and attention to be hijacked for bashing Israel.

Sison spoke during the session to hear the first U.N. report issued under a resolution condemning settlements that the Obama administration allowed to take effect in December. In a pointed and highly unusual critique of Israeli actions, the United States had abstained, allowing the resolution to pass, instead of vetoing it as U.S. envoys have done in the past.

The change in U.S. administrations, and the shift in positions on Israeli settlements flavored the discussion Friday.

“It is clear from what the U.S. representative said today that the U.S. administration is continuing to develop its thinking on some of the points of detail” about settlements and a peace negotiation, British U.N. Ambassador Matthew Rycroft told reporters.

In presenting the report, U.N. Middle East peace envoy Nickolay Mladenov told the U.N. Security Council that Israel has vastly accelerated the pace of housing announcements for Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, endangering the territorial viability of a potential sovereign Palestine.

The spike demonstrates that Israel has “a clear intent to continue expanding the settlement enterprise in the occupied West Bank,” Mladenov said.

“Such actions are in breach of international law and they must stop.”

The United Nations, European Union and many individual countries call Israel’s settlement activity illegal under international law. The United States has long sought not to use that terminology, instead calling settlements illegitimate and unhelpful to peace.

“There can be no moral equivalency between the building of homes and murderous terrorism,” Israel’s U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon said Friday. “The only impediment to peace is Palestinian violence and incitement. This obsessive focus on Israel must end.”

For years, successive U.S. administrations have vetoed Security Council condemnations of Israel over its treatment of Palestinians.

The Trump administration strongly disagrees with the December resolution and the Obama administration’s rebuke but cannot quickly undo the U.N. action. Instead, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley and other U.S. officials are taking every opportunity to point out what they say is institutional mistreatment of Israel at the United Nations and its member bodies, and the United States is expected to use its presidency of the U.N. Security Council next month as a megaphone.

Earlier Friday, the United States voted against five resolutions it calls anti-Israel at the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva. The Trump administration lobbied allies to also vote no. No major U.S. ally did so, but Britain issued a warning that it would follow the United States’ suit if the U.N. body continues to single out Israel for opprobrium.

“Today we are putting the Human Rights Council on notice,” British Ambassador Julian Braithwaite said. “If things do not change, in the future we will adopt a policy of voting against all resolutions concerning Israel’s conduct in the occupied Syrian and Palestinian territories.”

The human rights body approved four resolutions condemning Israeli actions against the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and one calling on Israel to return the Golan Heights to Syria.

Haley had warned ahead of the vote that the United States would boycott discussions of what she called “outrageous, one-sided, ­anti-Israel resolutions.”

The U.S. denunciation of the U.N. focus on Israel comes even as the Trump administration is seeking curbs on Israeli settlement building as part of its effort to resume Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The White House expressed its “concerns” with settlement construction after talks with senior Israeli officials in Washington ended Thursday night with a joint statement showing the two governments were unable to agree on a settlement policy that could pave the way to peace talks resuming.

As the Israelis left Washington after four days of talks, the White House released a statement saying they had discussed “concrete, near-term measures to improve the overall climate” to improve prospects for peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians. Among the topics were ways to improve the reliability of water and electricity in the West Bank and Gaza.

But the most closely watched part of talks between the Trump administration and the Israeli government concerned settlement activity. In two sentences, the statement laid out positions that made it clear that issue was unresolved.

“The United States delegation reiterated President Trump’s concerns regarding settlement activity in the context of moving toward a peace agreement,” it said. “The Israeli delegation made clear that Israel’s intent going forward is to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that takes those concerns into consideration.”

The wording may be politically useful to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is under unrelenting pressure from his right-wing coalition to forge ahead expanding settlements. Many Jewish settlers and their advocates in Netanyahu’s government cheered Trump’s election as a green light for rapid building that could functionally doom a contiguous, economically viable Palestinian state alongside Israel. While he does not welcome criticism from his most powerful ally, Netanyahu has in the past used U.S. objection to settlement activity to rein in his own coalition members.

The new Trump White House has sent mixed signals on settlements. Trump publicly endorsed a hiatus on settlement building during Netanyahu’s visit to Washington last month, but the White House has also said it does not necessarily see the issue as a hindrance to peace. Trump’s newly confirmed ambassador to Israel, David M. Friedman, is a longtime advocate of settlements and headed a U.S. organization that supports education and other activities in a walled Israeli enclave built deep in the West Bank.

Trump plans a push toward a peace settlement, an elusive goal of many past U.S. presidents. The Trump effort is focused on Arab states that support the Palestinian cause applying pressure on leadership in the West Bank to make a deal. Trump has said the deal may not include a separate sovereign Palestinian state as sought by the past three U.S. presidents.

Israel’s Channel Two television reported that to set the ground for talks, the Trump administration has demanded Israel not build outside the major settlement blocs and proposed placing a yearly cap on the volume of other construction projects.

Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported that Trump’s demand that Netanyahu declare a construction freeze was a precondition for having Saudi Arabia join a regional peace process. Officials said Trump believes in enlisting the Saudis to play a role in a regional process and thinks that they will bring other moderate Arab states to the table as well.