Palestinians Hope for Obama Change of Heart with UN Vote

April 10, 2016

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The Times of Israel

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With President Barack Obama in his last year in office, the Palestinians are hoping he will follow up his historic breakthroughs with Iran and Cuba with a push for their cause as well.

The first step is reintroducing a United Nations Security Council resolution the US vetoed back in 2011 seeking “accountability” for Israeli West Bank settlement building.

In an interview, Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki said the hope is that Obama, freed of reelection concerns, will break with American protocol and refrain from vetoing it this time around.

“There are indications that President Barack Obama may try to put a basis for a new era regarding the Palestinian-Israeli issue before leaving the White House after his achievements in Iran and Cuba,” Malki said. “Thus the US administration may surprise Israel by voting in favor of a Palestinian resolution or at least not to use the veto against it.”

The draft, which, Malki said, stresses the “violence and terrorism of the settlers,” still needs approval from Arab nations before the Palestinians would consider presenting it. But the move signals a renewed effort to get back on the agenda.

The last round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks broke down some two years ago, and the Palestinians have struggled to attract international attention as the world focuses on the Syrian civil war, the migrant crisis in Europe and the US election.

The Palestinians have long sought to press their case in the United Nations, where they enjoy widespread support. In 2012, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly accepted the Palestinians as a nonmember state, giving them upgraded status that, among other things, has allowed them to push for war crimes charges against Israel.

A Security Council resolution is generally considered legally binding and would add even more pressure on Israel.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War. It withdrew from Gaza in 2005, but nearly 600,000 Israelis live over the pre-1967 lines in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Palestinians claim all three areas for a future state, a position that has wide global support. Similarly, the international community widely sees Israeli settlements as illegal or illegitimate, and a major obstacle to peace.

Israel’s closest ally, the United States, also opposes new settlements, but has consistently opposed moves in the Security Council against Israel, arguing it would complicate peace negotiations.

Asked last week about the latest Palestinian proposal, US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Washington had no position, saying the draft is still at a “very early stage.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dismissed the Palestinian efforts at the UN as an attempt to impose a solution on Israel and circumvent negotiations.

Last week, he accused Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas of “taking a step that will push negotiations away. The only way to advance peace is by direct negotiations.”