Incoming UN chief a friend of Israel, but won’t shy away from criticism

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Israeli officials this week described incoming United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as a friend of Israel, though it is unclear what exactly that will mean for his term at the helm of a body often seen as institutionally biased against the Jewish state.

A former prime minister of Portugal and, most recently, the head of the UN’s refugee agency, Guterres has had a distinguished political career. And yet Guterres’s views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are largely a blank slate, as he has rarely publicly commented on the matter.

“There’s no record of him making any remarkable statement against Israel,” former Israeli ambassador to the UN Ron Prosor told Army Radio on Thursday.

“He likes Israel,” a senior official in Jerusalem said, speaking on condition of anonymity since the government has not yet officially commented on Guterres’s appointed, which was unanimously backed by the 15-member UN Security Council on Thursday. (That recommendation now goes to the UN’s 193-member General Assembly, which is expected to vote on incumbent Ban Ki-moon’s successor next week. Ban’s second five-year term ends December 31.) “Like all European socialists, Guterres likes Israel but dislikes the settlements.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem, March 20, 2010. (photo credit: Moshe Milner/GPO/Flash90)

Before serving as the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees, in which position he expressed empathy for the people of Gaza during the 2014 Israel-Hamas war, Guterres headed the Socialist International for six years.

“He loves Israel. But he’s a very objective man, which means that he sees the whole picture,” former Labor MK and diplomat Colette Avital, who served as Israel’s ambassador to Portugal in the 1990s, told The Times of Israel. “He won’t support anti-Israel moves at the UN. But he will try to advance the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. He doesn’t consider that to be anti-Israel.”

The 67-year-old Lisbon native has been to Israel several times and has met with Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak during their respective terms as prime minister.

“I am sure he will be fair,” Barak, who considers Guterres him a close friend, told Army Radio Thursday, commenting on the Portuguese politician’s expected role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, he added, Guterres’s views are closer to those of novelist Amos Oz — who is known for his left-wing views and his [biting criticism of the current government](http://www.timesofisrael.com/amos-oz-where-are-the-brave-leaders-shimon-peress-successors/) — than to those of Netanyahu.

The UN elects as its secretary-general someone who can build bridges and is accessible to all sides, not a troublemaker, Barak added. “He’s supposed to be part of the solution. He represents the position of the world.

“Now what’s worrying me about Guterres is that what we heard from Ban, and what we’ll hear from Guterres — that’s apparently the world’s true view of Israel,” he continued.

The world wants to see a different Israel than what it sees today, elaborated Barak, who has lately become a relentless public critic of Netanyahu and his coalition, referring mainly to Jerusalem’s policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians. “There will always be terrorists and anti-Semites. But most of the world is not against us and is ready to support us if only the government acts in a proper fashion.”

In a statement issued Wednesday night, Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, welcomed Guterres’s election and wished him good luck, but also made several demands of the presumptive new secretary-general. “The State of Israel hopes, and expects, that the UN under his leadership will act in the spirit of its founding principles as a fair body able to differentiate between good and evil and will end its obsession with Israel,” Danon added. “I hope that this change in leadership will bring an end to the organization’s hostility towards the Jewish state.”

Several “organizational personnel changes” are expected to take place at Turtle Bay after Guterres takes office on January 1, 2016, Danon said. He encouraged Guterres to appoint a special envoy to combat anti-Semitism and said he expects the UN to “accept responsibility” for the return of the remains of killed Israeli soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, which are currently held by Hamas in Gaza.

World’s refugee crises ‘pale in comparison to the desperate situation of the Palestinians’

During the 296-day campaign for the job as UN chief, neither Guterres nor his 12 rivals expressed concrete positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During his ten years as UN high commissioner for refugees, he also largely — though not always — steered clear of the issue.

In September 2014, [addressing the Arab League in Cairo](http://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/54201b7b9/remarks-antonio-guterres-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-142supndsup.html), Guterres declared Syria and Iraq home to the world’s “most challenging displacement crises.” He praised Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt for being “extremely generous” in hosting refugees from these countries and also thanked other Arab states for “important contributions” to the effort to stem the refugee crisis. He did not mention the aid Israel extends to people wounded in the Syrian civil war.

In the same speech, however, Guterres also said that the world’s various refugee crises “pale in comparison to the desperate situation of the Palestinians, the largest protracted refugee situation in the world.”

‘No one wants to be a refugee. But for the people of Gaza, not even that was an option’

While he said he was devastated to see Palestinian refugees in Syria “being forced to flee for the second time,” it was even worse — indeed “shocking” — that Gazans “could not even flee to seek safety from the recent conflict,” he said, referring to Operation Protective Edge. “No one wants to be a refugee. But for the people of Gaza, not even that was an option.”

A few weeks later, Guterres’s agency launched a campaign to end statelessness, but [did not include the Palestinians in the effort](http://www.timesofisrael.com/un-kicks-off-stateless-people-campaign-but-omits-palestinians/) since the UN General Assembly in 2012 granted the “State of Palestine” non-member state status.

The problem for many of the 4.5 million of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and the millions more living as refugees around the world is that Palestine has yet to approve its nationality laws, he said, insisting that this “very specific situation” required a “political solution.”

Since Guterres left the position as high commissioner for refugees in December 2015 and started to prepare his run for the secretary-general’s post, he has repeatedly [declared his intention to be an “honest broker.”](http://www.timesofisrael.com/likely-next-un-chief-says-world-needs-new-diplomacy-of-peace/)

“First, we need a surge in diplomacy for peace,” he stated on his campaign website. A good UN secretary-general should “actively, consistently and tirelessly exercise his good offices and mediation capacity as an honest broker, bridge builder and messenger of peace.”

If recent history is any indication, this will likely include not only calls for both Israelis and Palestinians to refrain from provocative action to further inflame the situation on the ground, to paraphrase his predecessor, but also condemnations of Israel’s “excessive use of force” (Ban again) in conflicts with Gaza terrorists, and opposition to the expansions of Israeli housing projects in the settlements over the Green Line.