Israel Tells Envoys to Act to Avoid Embarrassment at UN Vote on Trump's Jerusalem Move

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The UN General Assembly is set to meet on Thursday at 5 P.M. Israel time (10 A.M. EST) for an emergency discussion on the unilateral American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Turkey and Yemen requested the meeting after an Egyptian draft resolution against the recognition was presented to the Security Council and was vetoed by the United States, although the 14 other members of the council voted for it.

The United States does not have veto power in the General Assembly and therefore it is believed that the resolution will be approved by that body. Although the significance of the vote is mainly symbolic, and is intended to underscore previous UN resolutions supporting a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines and rejecting changes in the status of Jerusalem, Israel’s ambassadors worldwide have been directed to reduce the expected damage to Israel’s image by employing PR efforts and urging more countries to oppose the resolution along with the United States.

In an urgent cable to Israeli diplomatic missions, the ambassadors were asked to seek meetings with high-level officials to persuade them to direct their representatives at the UN to oppose, not to support, or at the very least not to deliver a speech at the General Assembly. Among the reasons ambassadors were told to cite are that Jerusalem was the de facto capital of Israel long before the United States recognized it as such; a resolution of this kind at the United Nations will damage American efforts toward a peace agreement in the region; the resolution will spur terror and violence in the area; and unilateral steps in the United Nations do more harm than good. The envoys will also pledge to maintain freedom of religion and the status quo in the city.

The Foreign Ministry is planning to focus its efforts on Eastern European countries and some African countries with which ties have grown stronger over recent years. However, the ministry also concedes the problematic timing of the meeting: a few days before Christmas, a time when most European capitals members of the diplomatic services are on vacation, which will make things difficult for the ambassadors. The Israeli mission to the United Nations is also working to prevent embarrassment to the United States and Israel and is acting in concert with the American mission, with the main goal of reducing the number of states delivering a speech at the General Assembly.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon said to Haaretz that “these are futile discussions with no chance. We have no doubt that the resolution will pass. However, the resolution holds no implications, and we call upon Palestinians to stop the incitement and return to the negotiating table.”

An emergency meeting of the General Assembly can be called in cases when member states believe that the Security Council has failed in its mission to maintain international peace and security. To call the meeting by means of a regular majority instead of the usual two-thirds majority, the Yemenite and Turkish representatives are using the forum of a regular open meeting, which has taken place since 1997, on the subject of “Illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory.”

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared his intention Tuesday to lead the struggle in the United Nations. “God willing, we will bring the resolution to the United Nations General Assembly, which can lead to the rejection of the resolution in the Security Council,” he said. Earlier this week, Edrogan pledged that Turkey would open an embassy in East Jerusalem. “The day is drawing near when we will open an embassy there,” he said. At present, Turkey has a consulate in East Jerusalem.

Last week Erdogan hosted a summit of leaders from Islamic countries in Istanbul, following U.S. President Donald Trump’s announcement of American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Speaking to the members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Erdogan called the declaration “a slap in the face of all Palestinians and all peace-seekers.” In his remarks, Erdogan showed a photograph of Israeli soldiers surrounding a teen arrested in Hebron earlier this month and said: “Israel is receiving a prize although it committed crimes and [used] excessive force against the Palestinians. Trump’s decision ignores our history and international law.”

The concluding statements of the summit stated: “Trump’s decision is baseless and we utterly reject it because it breaches UN resolutions.”

Even before Trump’s declaration, Turkey warned the United States that recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was a “red line” for Muslims. Erdogan said that such recognition could ignite the region and “throw the region into a ring of fire,” and that it completely ignored a UN resolution from 1980 regarding the city’s status.

The Egyptian draft resolution that failed to pass in the Security Council sought to “reaffirm that that any decisions and actions which purport to have altered, the character, status or demographic composition of the Holy City of Jerusalem have no legal effect, are null and void.” The Egyptians based their draft resolution on UN Security Council Resolution 478 from 1980, "passed in protest against the “Jerusalem Law” that declared Jerusalem to be Israel’s capital and called on member states not to maintain diplomatic missions in the city.

After the Security Council vote, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, said that the sweeping support for the draft resolution was “an insult. It won’t be forgotten. It is one more example of the United Nations doing more harm than good in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Haley added: “This is the first time I have exercised the American right to veto a resolution in the Security Council. The exercise of the veto is not something the United States does often. We have not done it in more than six years. We do it with no joy, but we do it with no reluctance.

The fact that this veto is being done in defense of American sovereignty and in defense of America’s role in the Middle East peace process is not a source of embarrassment for us; it should be an embarrassment to the remainder of the Security Council.”

Haley said that Trump did not harm the chances for negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians because he said the borders and sovereignty would be decided in future talks and also made clear the importance of the status quo in Jerusalem. She noted that the United States had not supported Resolution 478 at the time.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked Haley and Trump for their support. In a Facebook post he wrote to Haley: “On Hanukkah, you spoke like a Maccabi. You lit a candle of truth. You dispel the darkness. One defeated the many. Truth defeated lies.”