Obama's Betrayal of Israel at the UN Must Not Stand

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President Barack Obama’s ill-advised decision to order the U.S. to [abstain](https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-12-23/u-s-abstains-from-un-vote-declaring-israeli-settlements-illegal) on a United Nations resolution condemning Israeli settlements breaks with past U.S. policy, undermines a vital ally and sets back the cause of Middle East peace. Yet it also offers Democrats and Republicans a chance to unite around a more realistic approach to resolving one of the world’s most intractable conflicts.

The [resolution](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/23/world/middleeast/document-security-council-draft-resolution-israel.html?_r=0), passed last week, says Israeli settlements built on land occupied since the 1967 war have “no legal validity.” It thus brands the one-tenth of Israel’s Jews who live in East Jerusalem and the West Bank as residential outlaws, and could thereby [strengthen](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-24/obama-staged-shameful-ambush-against-israel-netanyahu-says) the effort to sanction or boycott Israel, or even sue it in international bodies.

Previous U.S. administrations have vetoed such resolutions for just that reason, and for undermining the course of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. As Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer correctly noted in [condemning](http://thehill.com/policy/defense/311712-obama-faces-widespread-backlash-after-abstaining-from-un-israel-vote) the administration’s decision, the “fervently anti-Israel” UN is “the wrong forum” for Israel and the Palestinians to settle their differences.

By abandoning past U.S. practice, Obama is encouraging the Palestinians in their belief that they can leverage the UN in their effort to achieve statehood. If anything, his decision is a failure of diplomacy and is likely to backfire. It runs the risk of increasing domestic pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, thereby fortifying his resolve to move ahead with settlements. Indeed, the wind is already blowing in this direction, with the Israeli government [signaling](https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-12-27/israel-to-build-in-jerusalem-mulls-more-steps-against-un-bodies) Tuesday that it may escalate construction projects.

If the Palestinians want a lasting peace based on a two-state solution, they must accept that Israel, not the UN or the “international community,” is their negotiating partner. That means negotiating in good faith, not embracing empty resolutions that ignore agreements they have [already reached](http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/05/everything-you-know-about-israeli-settlements-is-wrong/) to redraw Israel’s borders. It also means ending the “stabbing intifada,” condemning and fighting terrorism, and upholding their security obligations. Netanyahu, in turn, must be willing to uproot settlements that even Israeli law [deems illegal](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/even-israel-says-this-jewish-settlement-is-illegal-now-comes-the-showdown/2016/11/19/04f06d62-ac24-11e6-8f19-21a1c65d2043_story.html?utm_term=.f1b8ce008e47), to trade land for peace, as Israel has done in the past, and to meet its security and economic obligations to Palestinians if they meet theirs.

The U.S., as the world's only superpower, has already walked away from its responsibility to save hundreds of thousands of Syrian lives, and it permitted a refugee exodus that is destabilizing Europe and may lead to the end of the European Union. To walk away from an ally critical both to U.S. security and to that of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates is ill-advised. To abandon a friend -- a lawful, stable democracy with a dynamic, innovative, outward-looking economy -- is inconceivable.

Fortunately, the [bipartisan uproar](http://thehill.com/policy/defense/311712-obama-faces-widespread-backlash-after-abstaining-from-un-israel-vote) sparked by Obama’s UN decision provides an opportunity for Democrats and Republicans to rally around a more constructive policy. They should start by agreeing to President-elect Donald Trump’s plans to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem -- a step envisioned but never taken by presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. That would provide a powerful reaffirmation to Israel –- a nation born after the slaughter of six million Jews, and under siege since its birth -- of the U.S.’s enduring commitment, and to the world of Israel’s right to exist. That reaffirmation, in turn, is essential in providing Israel with the confidence to move ahead with a two-state solution.

The U.S. will continue to play a crucial role in helping both sides choose the best way forward. In the choice between terror and peace, and democracy and repression, there can be no room for impartiality, let alone abstention.