Kerry, in Stinging Rebuke of Settlements, Doesn’t Rule out UN Action

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Secretary of State John Kerry excoriated the Israeli right, claiming that support for settlement construction stems from a desire to subvert Israeli-Palestinian peace, during a speech before the Brookings Institution’s Saban Forum on Sunday afternoon.

A subdued Kerry, wearing reading glasses and referring to extensive notes, notably refrained from committing to veto any UN resolution intended to establish a Palestinian state, only promising a veto “if it is a biased, unfair resolution calculated to delegitimize Israel.”

US officials [last week indicated](http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-officials-obama-has-nearly-ruled-out-un-action-on-israel/) that US President Barack Obama had nearly ruled out any major last-ditch effort to put pressure on Israel over stalled peace negotiations with the Palestinians, including at the United Nations.

Kerry, who will end his tenure as secretary of state in January, warned the audience that “you can fight about where we are in this process, but I’ll tell you this: There is no status quo. It is getting worse. It is moving in the wrong direction.”

In his lengthy appearance, Kerry accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government of suffering from a lack of leadership, and explicitly cited Education Minister Naftali Bennett’s recent comments lauding the demise of the two-state solution as “profoundly disturbing.”

Hours after Netanyahu emphasized in his video address before the forum that settlements are not the cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kerry challenged Netanyahu’s broader claim that failure to recognize Israel as a Jewish state is at the heart of the failure to reach an agreement.

Settlements, Kerry said, “are not the cause of this conflict. But…if you have a whole bunch of people who are strategically locating outposts and settlements in an area so that there will not be a contiguous Palestinian state, they are doing it to be an obstacle to peace.”

Kerry said that he was certain that settlement construction was intended to serve as just such an obstacle.

 “I cannot accept the notion that [settlements] don’t affect the peace process, that they aren’t a barrier to the ability to create peace,” Kerry argued. “The left in Israel is telling everyone that it is a barrier to peace and the right, which supports it, is openly telling people that they support it because they don’t want peace. They believe in Greater Israel.”

Kerry singled out Bennett as one such voice. “Out of the mouths of ministers in the current government have come profoundly disturbing sentiments,” he admonished, citing the minister’s claim that Israel has reached “the end of the two-state solution.”

“We have not passed (the tipping point) but we’re getting there,” Kerry warned.

During his video address earlier, Netanyahu was asked whether Donald Trump’s incoming administration will allow Israel to do whatever it wants regarding settlement building in the West Bank.

“Well, I think we have been doing what we want,” Netanyahu told host Haim Saban.

Right-wing politicians have contended that settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has nearly ground to a halt under the Obama administration, which forcefully condemns any building over the Green Line. Kerry, by contrast, said settler numbers had grown by 20,000 since President Barack Obama first took office.

The secretary of state also strongly disavowed proposals voiced by a series of Israeli legislators to first negotiate an agreement with neighboring Arab states, and only then to sit at the table with the Palestinians.

“There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world. Let me make that clear to you,” Kerry insisted, saying that his conclusion had been reaffirmed in recent weeks through talks with Arab leaders. “There will be no advance or separate peace in the Arab world without advancing the Palestinian issue. Everybody needs to understand that. That is a hard reality.”

Kerry acknowledged that while every American administration in the past four decades has opposed settlement construction, the United States had not managed to effectively use its leverage to get Israel to cease construction.

Alongside his critique of what Kerry described as a “continued settlement process that narrows the capacity for peace,” the secretary of state also noted that “there has simultaneously been a process of demolition of Palestinian homes.” Kerry cited 11,000 standing demolition orders against Palestinian-constructed buildings in the West Bank, while noting that only one Palestinian building was granted official construction approval in Area C between 2014-2015.

Kerry repeated warnings commonly heard over the past four years that if a two-state solution is not achieved, Israel will be untenable as a Jewish and democratic state.

“So how does this work?” Kerry probed. “How do you have a one state that is Jewish and democratic and also has provisions in place for Israel’s security?”

“What’s your vision of a unitary state?” he continued. “If Palestinians are majority, will there be a Palestinian prime minister of Israel?