Obama’s UN Engagement Brought Modest Returns, Voting Patterns Show

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By [Patrick Goodenough](https://www.cnsnews.com/author/patrick-goodenough)

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Despite eight years of enthusiastic engagement with the United Nations, the last year of the Obama administration saw Washington’s positions supported less than 55 percent of the time by other member-states, according to a congressionally-mandated State Department report.

During President Obama’s tenure, the average voting coincidence with the U.S. in recorded U.N. General Assembly votes in New York fluctuated each year, but never reached higher than the 54.8 percent documented in 2016.

Although considerably higher than the equivalent numbers for the Bush years, which were characterized by an often chilly atmosphere at the U.N., the recently-released report’s figures illustrate the uphill battle U.S. diplomats continued to face in New York.

On the total 99 occasions where the U.S. voted either “yes” or “no” for a General Assembly resolution, the report shows that only one-third (63 countries, or 32.8 percent) of the other 192 member-states voted the same way as the U.S. did more than 50 times, and only seven (3.6 percent) did so more than 70 times.

The seven countries whose votes matched those of the U.S. most often were Israel and Canada (83 of the 99 times), Britain (73 times), Palau (72 times) and Australia, Marshall Islands and Micronesia (71 times).

Not surprisingly, member-states whose votes coincided with those of the U.S. least often included North Korea (11.1 percent of the time), Syria (16.7 percent), Iran (18.6 percent) and Cuba (26.4 percent).

But some of the biggest recipients of U.S. foreign aid also frequently vote differently to the U.S. position at the U.N., the report shows.  Of the ten biggest aid beneficiaries in this fiscal year’s budget request, nine voted the same way as the U.S. less than half of the time in 2016.

They are Egypt (33.8 percent), Tanzania (38.5 percent), Iraq (39.3 percent), Pakistan (40.5 percent), Jordan (42.9 percent), Kenya (44.7 percent), Nigeria (47.2 percent), Ethiopia (47.7 percent) and Afghanistan (47.8 percent).

Israel was the exception among the ten big recipients of U.S. assistance; its votes matched those of the U.S. 94.3 percent of the time last year.

Under longstanding U.S. law the State Department is required to compile a report each year on U.N. voting practices, to determine the extent to which U.S. positions enjoy support.

U.S. taxpayers account for 22 percent of the U.N. regular budget and provide billions of dollars more each year in “voluntary contributions” to U.N. agencies. Together, the funding in recent years has exceeded $7 billion annually.

**Slanted against Israel**

Nowhere is the gap between U.S. positions and those of other U.N. member-states more evident than in resolutions dealing with Israel.

During 2016 the General Assembly adopted 18 Israel-related resolutions which the U.S. opposed, arguing that they were repetitive, biased, singled the Jewish state out for criticism, or sought to compel Israel to take steps which the U.S. says should be settled in negotiations between the parties to the Mideast conflict

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All 18 resolutions were adopted by overwhelming majorities, with the U.S. and Israel joined by only a small handful of countries in voting “no.”

The only countries that did join the U.S. and Israel were Canada and Palau (in all 18 resolutions), Marshall Islands and Micronesia (in 17 resolutions), Nauru  (in eight resolutions) and Australia (in seven resolutions). Guatemala and South Sudan voted with the U.S. and Israel on two resolutions, and Britain, the Czech Republic, Germany and Honduras did so once each.

The most lopsided vote of the 18 in 2016 was the one for an annual resolution on “the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.”

The U.S. position was that it does not object to Palestinian self-determination, but believes renewing the resolution each year is “unhelpful” in resolving the conflict and does not facilitate the “two-state solution,” which “can only be achieved through direct negotiations between the parties, not by U.N. resolutions.”

The text passed last December by a 177-7 vote, with the U.S. and Israel joined in voting “no” by Canada, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau and Micronesia.

The other 17 resolutions passed by similarly large margins – 100-9, 99-9, 153-7, 153-7, 103-6, 149-7, 157-5, 166-6, 167-6, 165-7, 91-11, 168-6, 165-6, 162-7, 133-9, 166-8 and 168-7.

Those patterns at the General Assembly are mirrored at the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, where Israel has been targeted far more often than has any other country: Of the 193 U.N. member-states, 13 have been on the receiving end of a total 239 condemnatory resolutions since the HRC was created in 2006, and 67 of those have targeted Israel, according to data compiled by the NGO Human Rights Voices.

The Trump administration has [put the U.N. and its HRC “on notice”](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/trump-administration-puts-un-human-rights-council-notice-obsession) over several issues, including its treatment of Israel.

Its FY 2018 budget request for the account that funds the U.N. regular budget and major U.N. agencies is for $996.4 million – more than 30 percent down from the FY 2017 estimate level of $1.444 billion.

**Priority issues**

Each year’s U.N. voting practices report also tallies voting coincidence with the U.S. on a small number of resolutions on “issues which directly affected United States interests and on which the United States lobbied extensively.”

The report covering 2016, identifies 14 texts falling into that category. The issues covered included the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Arms Trade Treaty, nuclear weapons-related resolutions, the chemical weapons ban, extrajudicial executions, and human rights in Iran, Syria and Russian-annexed Crimea.

(For the first time, the priority issues identified in the annual report did not include the U.S. embargo on Cuba, since the Obama administration last year for the first time controversially [chose to abstain](http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/castro-critics-flay-administration-decision-not-oppose-un-cuba).)

The 2016 report finds that, on the 14 identified high priority issues, other member-states’ votes coincided with those of the U.S. 65.4 percent of the time.

Looking back over the eight Obama years, that was the highest score recorded, while the lowest was 35.4 percent, in 2012. Other years’ voting coincidence fluctuated between the early 50s and the early 60s.