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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Obama's Israel Surprise?

Fears grow of a final days presidential ambush at the U.N.

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The Middle East has few bright spots these days, but one is the budding rapprochement between Israel and its Sunni Arab neighbors, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, thanks to shared threats from Iran and Islamic State. Now the Obama Administration may have plans to wreck even that.

Israeli diplomats gird for the possibility that President Obama may try to force a diplomatic resolution for Israel and the Palestinians at the United Nations. The White House has been unusually tight-lipped about what, if anything, it might have in mind. But our sources say the White House has asked the State Department to develop an options menu for the President's final weeks.

One possibility would be to sponsor, or at least allow, a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement construction, perhaps alongside new IRS regulations revoking the tax-exempt status of people or entities involved in settlement building. The Administration vetoed such a resolution in 2011 on grounds that it "risks hardening the position of both sides," which remains true.

But condemning the settlements has always been a popular way of scoring points against the Jewish state, not least at the State Department, and an antisettlement resolution might burnish Mr. Obama's progressive brand for his postpresidency.

Mr. Obama may also seek formal recognition of a Palestinian state at the Security Council. This would run afoul of Congress's longstanding view that "Palestine" does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood, including a defined territory and effective government, though Mr. Obama could overcome the objection through his usual expedient of an executive action, thereby daring the next President to reverse him.

Both actions would be a boon to the bullies in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, while also subjecting Israeli citizens and supporters abroad to new and more aggressive forms of legal harassment. It could even criminalize the Israeli army—and every reservist who serves in it—on the theory that it is illegally occupying a foreign state. Does Mr. Obama want to be remembered as the President who criminalized Israeli citizenship?

The worst option would be an effort to introduce a resolution at the U.N. Security Council setting "parameters" for a final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. The French have been eager to do this for some time, and one option for the Administration would be to let the resolution pass simply by refusing to veto it. Or the U.S. could introduce the resolution itself, all the better to take credit for it.

As the old line has it, this would be worse than a crime—it would be a blunder. U.S. policy has long and wisely been that only Israelis and Palestinians can work out a peace agreement between themselves, and that efforts to impose one would be counterproductive. Whatever parameters the U.N. established would be unacceptable to any Israeli government, left or right, thereby destroying whatever is left of a peace camp in Israel.

The Palestinians would seize on those parameters as their birthright, making it impossible for any future Palestinian leader to bargain part of them away in a serious negotiation. Arab states would find their diplomatic hands tied, making it impossible to

serve as useful intermediaries between Jerusalem and Ramallah. It could refreeze relations with Israel even as they finally seem to have thawed.

President Obama may be the last man on earth to get the memo, but after decades of fruitless efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it might be wiser for the U.S. to step back until the Palestinians recognize that peace cannot be imposed from the outside. If Mr. Obama is still seeking a Middle East legacy at this late stage in his presidency, his best move is do nothing to make it worse.

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