

Explaining a U.S. Veto at the Security Council: The Imperative of Avoiding a Mixed Message

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Feb 17, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

With the UN Security Council scheduled to meet tomorrow to discuss Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank, the Obama administration should consider carefully in what framework a veto to a possible resolution on settlements would be cast.

With the world focused on the political earthquake reverberating from Egypt and Tunisia to Libya, Yemen, and even to Iran, it is only fitting that the UN Security Council is scheduled to meet tomorrow to discuss a topic that appears in virtually none of the protest banners waving over Middle East capitals -- Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. In light of current events, the mere convening of a Security Council meeting on this topic underscores the psychological, let alone geographic, distance between Turtle Bay and the Middle East.

So far, the Obama administration has maintained the correct position -- that the Security Council is not the proper forum to debate matters that are on the agenda for the eventual resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. As Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg told the House Foreign Affairs Committee last week, "We have made very clear that we do not think the Security Council is the right place to engage on these issues." Given that the administration has a track record of inflating the centrality of settlements to Middle East diplomacy, it is to its credit that it has not acceded to Palestinian, Arab, or even some allied entreaties to join in this refocusing of international attention toward a condemnation of Israeli settlement policy. Indeed, the administration knows that passage of a resolution on settlements would only whet the appetite for further internationalization of the conflict, perhaps even leading either to an effort to win a UN-imposed prescription for a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement or a UN resolution recognizing a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood. If Washington believes this conflict will ultimately be resolved through direct negotiations, then the administration is on firm ground by resorting to a veto of the proposed resolution.

In this context, the Obama administration needs to avoid the trap of trying to soften the political impact of veto by

sending mixed messages about its rationale. Specifically, as reported in the media, the administration has sought to avoid a Security Council face-off by offering Arab parties the alternative of a UNSC "presidential statement" on the illegitimacy of Israeli settlement activity. Preferring to have the United States isolated in the council, the Arab side has reportedly rejected this offer.

Whatever the wisdom of that private effort by U.S. diplomats, the worst of all possible scenarios would be the Obama administration attempting to explain away its veto by essentially repeating the very language that the Arabs rejected -- that the United States condemns Israeli settlement activity but disagrees with the resolution. In that case, Arab advocates of "internationalization" -- who mostly represent repressive regimes under severe pressure by their public for domestic political reform -- would have succeeded both in embarrassing Washington AND in maneuvering Washington into a position where it helps change the topic from one focused on internal issues to the old standby, damning Israel. Instead, if the settlements resolution does come to a vote and Washington does cast a veto, the wise course of action for the administration would be to issue a simple statement affirming the idea of direct negotiations and then remain silent. After all, the demonstrators on the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Benghazi, and elsewhere are speaking loudly enough.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)