Kerry’s Rage Against Israel

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John Kerry delivered a marathon speech Wednesday excoriating Israel for its settlements policy, and we hear Israeli TV stations dropped the live broadcast after the first half-hour. Who can blame them? If Israelis don’t feel the need to sit through another verbal assault from the soon to be former Secretary of State, it’s because they live in a reality he shows no evidence of comprehending.

Mr. Kerry has made the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace a major goal of his tenure, conducting intensive negotiations for nearly a year until they collapsed in spring 2014. That collapse came after the Palestinian Authority announced the creation of a unity government with Hamas, the terrorist group sworn to Israel’s destruction. Shortly thereafter, Hamas started a war with Israel from its Gaza stronghold, the third such war since Israel vacated Gaza of all settlements in 2005.

We recite this history to show that it’s not for lack of U.S. diplomacy that there is no peace—and that mishandled diplomacy has a way of encouraging Palestinian violence. In 2000 then-President Bill Clinton brought Israeli and Palestinian leaders to Camp David to negotiate a final peace agreement, only to watch Palestinians walk away from an offer that would have granted them a state on nearly all of Gaza and the West Bank. That failure was followed by another Palestinian terror campaign.

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Israelis remember this. They remember that they elected leaders—Yitzhak Rabin in 1992, Ehud Barak in 1999, Ehud Olmert in 2006—who made repeated peace overtures to the Palestinians only to be met with violence and rejection.

In his speech, Mr. Kerry went out of his way to personalize his differences with current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, claiming he leads the “most right-wing” coalition in Israeli history. But Israelis also remember that Mr. Netanyahu ordered a settlement freeze, and that also brought peace no closer.

The lesson is that Jewish settlements are not the main obstacle to peace. If they were, Gaza would be on its way to becoming the Costa Rica of the Mediterranean. The obstacle is Palestinian rejection of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state in any borders. A Secretary of State who wishes to resolve the conflict could have started from that premise, while admonishing the Palestinians that they will never get a state so long as its primary purpose is the destruction of its neighbor.

But that Secretary isn’t Mr. Kerry. Though he made passing references to Palestinian terror and incitement, the most he would say against it was that it “must stop.” If the Administration has last-minute plans to back this hollow exhortation with a diplomatic effort at the U.N., we haven’t heard about it.

Contrast this with last week’s Security Council resolution, which the Obama Administration refused to veto and which substantively changes diplomatic understandings stretching to 1967. Mr. Kerry claimed Wednesday that Resolution 2334 “does not break new ground.”

The reality is that the resolution denies Israel legal claims to the land—including Jewish holy sites such as the Western Wall—while reversing the traditional land-for-peace formula that has been a cornerstone of U.S. diplomacy for almost 50 years. In the world of Resolution 2334, the land is no longer Israel’s to trade for peace. Mr. Kerry also called East Jerusalem “occupied” territory, which contradicts Administration claims in the 2015 Supreme Court case, *Zivotofsky v. Kerry*, that the U.S. does not recognize any sovereignty over Jerusalem.

The larger question is what all this means for the prospects of an eventual settlement. Mr. Kerry made a passionate plea in his speech for preserving the possibility of a two-state solution for Jews and Palestinians. That’s a worthy goal in theory, assuming a Palestinian state doesn’t become another Yemen or South Sudan.

But the effect of Mr. Kerry’s efforts will be to put it further out of reach. Palestinians will now be emboldened to believe they can get what they want at the U.N. and through public campaigns to boycott Israel without making concessions. Israelis will be convinced that Western assurances of support are insincere and reversible.

Mr. Kerry’s speech was preceded by a tweet from Donald Trump telling Israel to “stay strong” until he becomes President in 23 days. That’s an encouraging sign that Mr. Trump understands that the first rule of diplomacy is to do right by your friends, especially when they are embattled and bullied democracies. We hope Rex Tillerson is taking notes.