[Flynn Pressured U.N. On Israel Vote Before Taking Office](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/17/logan-trump-israel-flynn-pressured-u-n-on-israel-vote-before-taking-office/)

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Nearly a month before Donald Trump was sworn in as president, Michael Flynn, his national security advisor designate, and other members of the president’s transition team launched a vigorous diplomatic bid to head off a U.N. Security Council vote condemning Israeli settlements.

The effort represented a fitful first foray into global diplomacy by Trump’s transition team, bearing hallmarks that have become familiar in the weeks since he took office. Their efforts were marked by a brusque disregard for diplomatic protocol, and a hasty pressure campaign that changed few, if any, minds.

In the end, the president-elect’s team was unable to persuade a single country to change their vote, including Britain, Egypt and Russia, three countries that have gone out of their way to cultivate better ties with the new American leader.

The episode also suggests that Flynn’s unconventional diplomatic activism in the weeks leading up to the inauguration was part of a highly coordinated effort at the highest ranks of the Trump team, including the president-elect, to shape the course of U.S. foreign relations.

That contrasts with the general portrayal so far of Flynn as a rogue envoy, whose secret talks in late December with Russia about sanctions were supposedly done without the knowledge of his superiors. Fox News [reported](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/02/16/trump-fully-briefed-on-flynns-calls-with-russian-ambassador-source-says.html) Friday that Trump had been briefed on the full contents of Flynn’s discussions with the Russian ambassador.

Several hours before the landmark December 23 vote at the United Nations — which eventually denounced Israeli settlements over a pointed U.S. abstention — the Trump transition team approached the State Department with an urgent request: hand over any cell phone numbers, emails, and other contacts of ambassadors and foreign ministers from the Security Council’s 15 member states. The request, which was described by a former State Department official, was rejected out of fear that it would be used to scuttle American diplomatic aims.

But transition officials pressed ahead. In Washington, Trump aides pressed allies, including Egypt and Britain, who both played critical roles in helping the Palestinians draft the measure, to oppose the resolution.

“We were all under pressure” from either Israel or the Trump administration, said one Security Council diplomat.

Nikki Haley, the president’s pick to serve as U.N. envoy, sought frantically to reach Samantha Power, then still serving as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, calling her office and cell phone number, a U.S. official told Foreign Policy.  Power’s advisors suspected Haley would try persuade Power to veto the resolution, and she did not take the call.

In New York, Flynn himself placed calls to foreign ambassadors on the U.N. Security Council, including those from Uruguay and Malaysia, the latter one of four countries that put the resolution to a vote.

Flynn offered pleasantries to a senior Uruguayan official who took the call, before politely urging the government to vote against the resolution, or to at least abstain, according to a council diplomat familiar with the exchange. Flynn explained that the Trump administration would pursue a different approach to addressing the Middle East conflict once it took office, and that it was not the right moment to adopt the resolution.

A spokesman for the Malaysian mission to the United Nations confirmed Flynn “attempted to reach out to our [permanent representative],” referring to the mission’s most senior ambassador, Ramlan Bin Ibrahim.

But the Malaysian diplomat, a strong supporter of council action on settlements, did not take call. He was “very preoccupied in the hours prior to the tabling of the draft resolution on settlements,” according to the Malaysian spokesman, who spoke on condition that his name not be published.

The U.S. mission to the United Nations, the State Department and the National Security Council did not respond to requests for comment on this story, and the National Security Council did not respond to a separate request to provide a contact information for Flynn. A spokeswoman for Flynn during his tenure at the National Security Council did not respond to a request for comment regarding efforts on the U.N. resolution.

The back channel diplomacy coincided with a more public effort by President-elect Trump to press countries to vote against the measure, which declared Israel’s settlements an illegal threat to the prospects of a Middle East peace. A day before the vote, Trump issued a series of tweets displaying his disdain for the council’s plan.

The resolution, Trump said, “puts Israel in a very poor negotiating position and is extremely unfair to all Israelis.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his top diplomats meanwhile opened a broad lobbying front, pressing the council’s African governments — Angola, Egypt and Senegal — as well as New Zealand’s foreign minister not to support the resolution.

Trump also reached out to an unlikely ally, General Abdel el-Fattah Sisi, an Egyptian general who seized power in a military coup in July, 2013. Egypt, the lone Arab Council member, had announced plans to put the resolution to a vote on December 22.

Trump’s pressure bore some fruit, at first. Egypt initially announced plans to delay the vote, possibly until this year. But Cairo ultimately withdrew the resolution, paving the way for Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela to call for a vote the following day. It passed by a vote of 14-0, with the American abstention. Even Egypt voted in favor.

Critics say the incoming Trump administration’s efforts to derail the resolution ran contrary to a centuries-old American law, the 1799 Logan Act, which bars American private citizens from “relating to controversies or disputes which do or shall exist” between the U.S. and other powers.

Some legal scholars see a breathtaking break with tradition in the United States, but insufficient grounds for prosecution, especially against a president-in-waiting or his team.

“You don’t have to be a historian of American relations to understand the importance of the executive speaking with one voice,” Steve Vladeck, a professor of international law at the University of Texas, told FP. There is a long standing tradition of not undermining a sitting president, even during a transition, a practice known as “one president at a time.”

“It is a remarkably brazen breach of historical norms; but not all such breaches are illegal,” he said.

The passage of the resolution has threatened to poison relations between the new administration and the United Nations.

After the vote, Trump sent out an ominous tweet. Republican leaders, including Sens. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) and Ted Cruz (R-Tex.), threatened to block funding to U.N. programs if the council refused to repeal the settlements resolution. Such an outcome, always unlikely, has grown vanishingly remote as Israel has stepped of the construction of thousands of new housing units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

That has also coincided with a sharp turn in U.S. Middle East policy, with President Trump on Wednesday effectively jettisoning Washington’s (and Turtle Bay’s) long standing preference for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, saying he was fine with a one-state solution. It has all left Washington more isolated than it has been in years on Middle East diplomacy at the U.N.

In her first appearance at a debate on the Middle East, Haley tried to row back the president’s remarks, telling reporters outside the Security Council that the United States “absolutely” supports a two-state solution.

But her remarks made it clear that the administration is still stewing over the settlements Resolution 2334, and her subsequent failure to garner support for a denouncing a recent terrorist attack in Israel. The U.S. withdrew the statement, which requires consent from the entire council, after Bolivia insisted it include a reference to the settlements resolution.

“We will never repeat the terrible mistake of Resolution 2334 and allow one-sided resolutions to condemn Israel,” she told reporters. “Outrageously biased resolutions,” she added, “only make peace harder to attain.”