Haley Wants Iran, Not Israel, at Core of UN's Middle East Agenda

April 20, 2017

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Bloomberg News

<https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-20/haley-wants-iran-not-israel-at-core-of-un-s-middle-east-agenda>

After her first UN Security Council meeting on the Middle East in February, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley knocked the organization’s “anti-Israel bias.” On Thursday, Haley will try to turn the spotlight from Israel to Iran, the latest target of the Trump administration’s tough talk.

Haley, who holds the rotating presidency of the United Nations’ top decision-making body for April, wants to use a monthly meeting on “the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question” to tackle Tehran’s role in Yemen and Syria and its support for Hezbollah, topics she sees as more central to the theme of Middle East peace.

“Incredibly, the UN Department of Political Affairs has an entire department devoted to Palestinian affairs,” Haley said after the February meeting. “There is no division devoted to the world’s No. 1 state sponsor of terror, Iran.”

It would be a timely shift in a week when the Trump administration has aimed sharp criticism at Iran, after earlier warnings to Syria and North Korea. On Wednesday, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson tore into the Islamic Republic’s 2015 agreement with world powers that curbed its nuclear program, saying it only delayed the day when Iran will get a nuclear weapon and “completely ignored” its other actions.

But getting the 15-member Security Council to change its focus will be tough. Iran joined the U.S. and five other world powers in signing the 2015 deal, and Tillerson acknowledged in a message to Congress late Tuesday that Iran has delivered so far on its end of the deal. Nonetheless, he said, the U.S. will review whether to reimpose economic sanctions that were eased under the accord.

The Security Council has kept an often critical focus on Israel for years, and Arab nations -- including U.S. allies in the region -- would resist shifting that emphasis.

The council has been receiving monthly reports highlighting the “Palestinian question” since 2000 and holding a debate on the topic each quarter since 2010. Plus, quarterly reports on Israel’s expansion of housing settlements are now required under a resolution critical of the U.S. ally. Former President Barack Obama allowed the council to pass that measure in the closing weeks of his administration by having the U.S. abstain rather than exercise its veto power.

Thursday’s report will be presented by Nickolay Mladenov of Bulgaria, the UN’s special coordinator for the Middle East peace process. While Mladenov, who declined to comment when contacted, is expected to focus again on Israel and the Palestinians, Haley can prod the discussion toward other issues. But her message may be undercut by continuing questions about President Donald Trump’s approach to Iran.

“The Trump administration needs a grand plan on how to curb Iran’s influence, and right now I don’t see a plan,” said Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

If the U.S. decided to breach the nuclear accord, it would come in conflict with global powers, including European allies, China and Russia, that continue to support it.

At the same time, the Iran deal angered traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, which says it’s battling Iranian proxies in a war in neighboring Yemen. Iranian troops and Hezbollah allies also have backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose regime Trump targeted with cruise missiles this month following a chemical attack.

The U.S. seeks “to portray Iran as a criminal enterprise, not just as another bad country but as a rogue state that is engaged in horrible crimes across the region,” said Suzanne Maloney, a senior fellow at Brookings Institute in Washington. “We are moving from a position of accommodation to one of confrontation across multiple fronts.”

Defense Secretary James Mattis, on a tour of the Middle East, [said Wednesday](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/terminal/OOO5HF6K50YC) in Riyadh that the U.S. will “reinforce Saudi Arabia’s resistance to Iran’s mischief and make you more effective with your military.”

But even with Haley’s leadership role this month, Tehran’s alliance with Russia, which holds veto power in the Security Council, means any resolution condemning Iran’s regional influence is unlikely to pass.

“Building a broad consensus is tough,” Maloney said.