

US vetoes UN resolution criticising Israel

Jean Shaoul
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The Obama administration was forced to use its veto to block a resolution at the United Nations Security Council condemning Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories as an obstacle to peace.

The resolution, co-sponsored by 130 nations and supported by all the other 14 members of the Security Council, including Germany, France, Britain and the European Union, endorsed the Palestinian Authority's position: that Israel's settlements are illegal under international law, and Israel's refusal to halt their expansion prevents the negotiation of a resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Washington had put enormous pressure on Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to withdraw the resolution. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton threatened to block US aid to the PA, but to no avail. Washington's veto, which was never in doubt, was its first since Barack Obama became president while promising better relations with the Muslim world.

That it was forced to veto the resolution testifies to the isolation of both the US and Israel in the aftermath of the revolutionary events in Egypt. They are bereft of the key client, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who in the past could be relied on to lobby the region's rulers on their behalf. The headline of an article posted on *Time* magazine's web site summed up the situation: "Without Mubarak, US struggles to shield Israel from diplomatic pressure".

The US's Arab allies are loath to further jeopardise their credibility in the eyes of their own restive populations for talks that are demonstrably going nowhere.

Washington and Tel Aviv have been fatally compromised by their open support of the region's unpopular and autocratic dictators, the ouster of Mubarak, and the ongoing protests engulfing Libya, Yemen, Sudan and Bahrain.

It constitutes a major crisis for Israel, whose

intransigence is now increasingly being viewed as a political liability in western European capitals anxious to stem the revolutionary tide sweeping through the region and preserve their own geostrategic interests in the resource-rich Middle East. The European powers fear that Israel and Washington's open contempt for the Palestinians, as revealed by the Palestinian papers leaked by WikiLeaks and published by *Al Jazeera*, will ignite the tinder box that is the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan and Israel itself, and coalesce with the mass movements throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

The US, while opposing new settlement construction, cynically claimed that the resolution complicated the chances of resuming the stalled "peace talks". Susan Rice, US ambassador to the UN, said, "Unfortunately, this draft resolution risks hardening the position on both sides".

In reality, the US-brokered peace talks were always a sham. They were a cover for an Israeli land grab, utilising the chimera of some kind of non-militarised non-contiguous Palestinian entity in order to help the PA suppress all militant opposition to Israel. And all sides knew it. The talks broke down last September when Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to extend the temporary settlement freeze—ignored in practice—only days after talks finally restarted.

Britain, Washington's closest ally and long-time supporter of Israel, which is acutely conscious of the mass movements in Egypt and Tunisia that have seen off long-trusted "assets", voted in favour of the resolution and called on Israel and the Palestinians to resume the charade. William Hague, Britain's foreign secretary, said the parties should not be "diverted by events in the wider region from working towards a just and lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.... I call on both parties to return as soon as

possible to direct negotiations towards a two-state solution, on the basis of clear parameters.”

The European Union told Israel that the growing unrest in the Middle East made it essential that it return to the negotiating table. This fear, as well as anxiety over key policies championed by Israel’s Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, lay behind the veiled criticism of Israel’s attitudes towards its Arab citizens—who face much higher levels of poverty and unemployment and less access to education, health services and welfare. The EU called on Israel to address their economic and social plight, integrate them into Israeli society and protect their rights.

It also criticised Israel for proposals currently going through the Knesset to investigate the funding of NGOs and civil-rights and pro-Palestinian activists, prohibit overseas funding and curtail their rights. This and a raft of other reactionary and racist pieces of legislation under consideration give the lie to the EU’s long-time support for Israel on the grounds that it is the only democracy in the region.

The widespread support for the UN resolution marks a deepening crisis for Israel, as some commentators have noted. *Ha’aretz* warned, “Israel must listen to the Europeans’ message and view it as a warning from important friends who are concerned about the directions the rightist government led by Netanyahu and Lieberman has taken: persecuting domestic political rivals, suppressing the Arab community and preferring settlements to a fair compromise with the Palestinians. Europe isn’t a hostile power: it’s one of Israel’s most important economic, diplomatic and cultural partners. What it has to say deserves attention.”

While the US can veto a resolution on the settlements, it cannot protect Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights. Israel’s props, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, are tottering. Jordan has seen repeated mass demonstrations, forcing King Abdullah to appoint a new prime minister to form a government. The Fatah-led Palestinian Authority controls only the West Bank and is utterly discredited. Hamas, which controls Gaza, is no more popular.

Within Israel itself, Netanyahu’s Labour coalition partners have quit the government, making him more reliant than ever on the ultra-right-wing parties and Lieberman’s Israel Beiteinu in particular. While some

of the right-wing parties refuse to contemplate a deal with the Palestinians, Lieberman insists that a Palestinian state must entail the ethnic cleansing of Israel’s Arab citizens—their forced transfer to any new statelet.



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