

US abstains as UN passes toothless resolution criticizing Israeli settlements

Jean Shaoul

24 December 2016

On Friday, the United Nations Security Council passed a toothless resolution censuring Israel's expansion of settlements. The vote followed a decision by the Obama administration to abstain, rather than exercising its veto power.

A vote on the resolution was postponed on Thursday by its initial sponsor, Egypt, following the intervention of US president-elect Donald Trump. It was reintroduced on Friday with new sponsors New Zealand, Malaysia, Venezuela and Senegal.

According to an Israeli official, after becoming aware that the Obama administration would not veto the resolution, "Israeli officials reached out to Trump's transition team to ask for the president-elect's help." Trump reportedly called Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to urge him to withdraw it.

Following the vote, Trump tweeted, "As to the UN, things will be different after Jan. 20," that is, the day that he is inaugurated.

The resolution states that the establishment of settlements by Israel has "no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law." It expresses grave concern that continuing settlement activities "are dangerously imperilling the viability of a two-state solution," adding that the council would "reiterate its demand that Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and that it fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard."

However, the resolution has no enforcement mechanism and does not impose sanctions if it is ignored by Israel. A statement from the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu following the vote declared that "Israel rejects this shameful anti-Israel resolution at the UN and will not abide by its terms."

Netanyahu added that the Obama administration had "failed to protect Israel from the gang-up at the UN," and that Israel would work with Trump and "all our friends in Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike," following Trump's inauguration.

The resolution followed a report published last July by the "Quartet" made up of the UN, the US, the European Union and Russia, which has postured as a supporter of the Israel/Palestine "peace process." It called for an end to Israel's settlement construction and stated that at least 570,000 Israelis were now living in the settlements in violation of Article 49 of the Geneva Convention, which forbids the transfer of civilians onto land captured in war.

The Obama administration's decision to abstain was a last-ditch attempt to present Washington as some kind of honest broker in the Israel/Palestine conflict and a break from Washington's long tradition of supporting Israel unconditionally at the UN.

According to a Security Council Report, the US has vetoed 30 resolutions relating to Israel and the Palestinians, and another dozen relating to Israel and Lebanon or Syria. Combined, these make up more than half of its 77 vetoes since the UN was established in 1946.

For the past eight years, the Obama administration has used its veto to block any and all resolutions criticizing Israel, which is massively funded with US military aid.

The decision to abstain in this vote is an expression of conflicts within the US ruling class over policy in the Middle East. Earlier this month, Kerry accused right-wing Israelis of deliberately obstructing efforts to broker a peace deal with the Palestinians. He said, "I'm not here to tell you that the settlements are the reason for the conflict, no, they're not... But I also cannot

accept the notion that they don't affect the peace process, that they aren't a barrier to the capacity to have peace.”

There are concerns that the open embrace of Israel's settler project will further stoke hostility to US imperialism throughout the resource-rich Middle East and precipitate the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, whose role has been to police the Palestinian working class.

Top Congressional Republicans and Democrats joined Trump in condemning the resolution before and after it was passed.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who oversees the Senate subcommittee that controls US financing of the UN, threatened to “suspend or significantly reduce” this financing if the resolution passed. Among the top Democrats condemning the resolution were incoming Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer and Representative Eliot Engel, the ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The coming to power of Trump has encouraged the most right-wing factions of the Israeli ruling class. “The right is convinced that anything is possible now,” Shlomi Eldar, a columnist for *Al Monitor Israeli Pulse*, told the *Christian Science Monitor*. “The two-state solution can be erased, there will be no problem building in the settlements – the Messiah has come.”

Just days before, Trump had tapped Daniel Friedman, a right-wing supporter of Israel's settlers, for the post of US ambassador to Israel, signalling his intention to ditch the pretence of opposition to Israel's expansion of the settlements and its outright annexation of the occupied West Bank. Furthermore, he made clear that the US would move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thereby ending its support for a mini-Palestinian state.

Trump's appointment of Friedman has already given succour to the settler movement and Netanyahu's right-wing coalition partners, particularly his rival and Education Minister Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home Party, on whom his fractious Likud-led coalition depends for its survival. They view this as a chance to sideline Netanyahu and his Likud Party.

Bennett has seized the political opportunity provided by the incoming Trump administration to push for the introduction of a “normalisation” or “regulation” bill,

obtaining Netanyahu's endorsement. It will allow the government to expropriate private Palestinian land on which thousands of housing units were built in many settlements, thereby retrospectively legalising settler outposts on Palestinian land.

The bill, if passed, will transfer the right to use private land to the government and force the Palestinian landowners to accept compensation. In so doing, the law would end the ambiguous status whereby the West Bank has, since the 1967 war, been subject to Israel's military commander and decrees, not Israel's Knesset and its laws. This served to provide a cover for the occupation that allowed the Palestinians to appeal to Israel's Supreme Court, while simultaneously settling 800,000 Israelis in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Syria's Golan Heights.

It will also pave the way for Israel's full annexation of that part of the West Bank designated as Area C under the 1993 Oslo Accords.



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