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UN Resolution on Israeli Settlements: Obama's Farewell 'Kiss of Death' To Long- Time Ally

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US deals a blow to Israel's faith and dependence upon Washington by abstaining rather than vetoing the UN Security Council Resolution on the settlements in the occupied territories.

Now, the tragedies in Syria, Yemen and Iraq would be forgotten by the return of the Palestinian issue to the Arab mainstream and hence chorus over Israel's human rights violations would only get louder.

Days before leaving office, President Barack Obama could not resist the temptation of giving a deadly farewell gift to Israel in the form of UN Security Council Resolution on the settlements in the occupied territories. The US decision to abstain rather than veto it, facilitated the adoption of Resolution 2334 supported by the other 14 members of the Council. It is not clear if the Obama administration coordinated this drastic move with the transition team of President-elect Donald Trump.

In terms of its content, there is nothing new and the resolution reiterates the widely known international as well as American positions on the legal status of the territories that Israel had captured during the June 1967 War as well as the parameters of a solution suggested by Security Council Resolution 242 adopted in November that year. Indeed, since the days of President Lyndon Johnson no US administration had accepted let alone recognised the Israeli claims and activities beyond the 4 June 1967 lines.

Obama's refusal to veto the resolution endorses and legitimises the wider international position on the application of the Fourth Geneva Convention for the occupied territories and the demand

that Israel should not alter their demographic composition. The resolution also declared that Israel's settlement activities "are dangerously imperilling the viability of the two-State solution based on the 1967 lines." In line with the earlier resolution adopted in response to the Quartet Road Map in 2003 the resolution called for "the dismantlement of all settlement outposts since March 2001."

Keeping some of Israel's interests and arguments in mind, the resolution also condemned "all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as acts of provocation, incitement and destruction." However, due to prevailing political correctness the resolution did not explicitly name the Palestinians or their leadership.

Ironically, just days before remitting office, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon confessed and admitted to a well-known and widely recognised fact: inherent anti-Israeli bias of the world body. With unusual candidness he admitted that "disproportionate" volumes of resolutions against Israel had "foiled the ability of the UN to fulfil its role effectively". He attributed "a disproportionate number of resolutions, reports and committees against Israel" to "political manoeuvring" and told the Council: "Over the last decade I have argued that we cannot have a bias against Israel at the UN", which, according to him "instead of helping the Palestinian issue... has foiled the ability of the UN to fulfil its role effectively." The antecedents of many countries criticising Israel's human rights records are unflattering to say the least and they routinely carry out scores of death sentences annually and practice legalised discrimination of women and minorities and intolerance as state policy. The Resolution 2334 is merely a continuation of the anti-Israeli nature of the United Nations.

Two, the resolution was possible because all the five permanent members were on board and this was not possible vis-à-vis over other burning issues in the Middle East, especially over Syria, Yemen or Iraq. The response of the Council to the Syrian crisis is a classic case of irresponsibility; until now the conflict has resulted in at least 300,000 deaths (much more than the casualties in all the Arab-Israeli wars since 1948), over 400,000 refugees and another 7.6 million internally displaced persons. Yet, the Security Council was paralysed by the veto of China and Russia. Same holds true for the Yemen crisis, violence in Iraq or political uncertainties and violence in many parts of the Middle East. Israel, however, is an easier and convenient target for the international community to exhibit 'leadership' and the five permanent members (P5) could now 'congratulate' themselves for shouldering and fulfilling on their 'international responsibility'.

Three, the resolution marked the nadir of the US-Israeli relations since the days of the Suez crisis of 1956 when President Dwight Eisenhower forced Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to unconditionally withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip. Despite occasional

disagreements, no US President had gone so low as Obama, especially when he only has a few more days at the White House.

This abstention in the UNSC was a reflection of a larger problem facing both the countries. The Obama presidency was marked and marred by an endemic US-Israel tension since March 2009 — incidentally weeks after Obama entered the White House — when Netanyahu returned as prime minister. Obama's maiden visit to Israel as president had to wait until March 2013, that is, after his re-election and by then there were serious bilateral disagreements over a host of issues including the Arab Spring, June 1967 lines, Iranian nuclear controversy and the peace process.

For his part, Netanyahu sought to counter the perceived unfriendliness of the Obama administration by courting his friends in Capitol and during the 2012 presidential campaign had the chutzpah to convey the impression that Israel would be better off with Mitt Romney than Obama. The Israeli leader even crossed the taboo by addressing the joint session of the US Congress in March 2015, when the Iranian nuclear deal was being cooked. Even friends of Israel were horrified by his defiance of the US President. For a while, Obama tried to convey an impression that he continued to be a friend of Israel but only had problems with Netanyahu and his peace policies. He managed this well with Shimon Peres when the latter was Israeli's president and conveyed his friendship by attending his funeral last September.

Four, the tacit US endorsement of the Security Council resolution would rekindle anti-Israeli sentiments in the Middle East. The Arab street which continues to view the Palestinian cause as a core problem facing the Arab world would be emboldened and one should expect more activism both within and outside the region in opposition to Israel and its legitimacy. The tragedies in Syria, Yemen and Iraq would be forgotten by the return of the Palestinian issue to the Arab mainstream and hence chorus over Israel's human rights violations would only get louder. The timing of the resolution puts additional pressure upon Israel, especially when the larger contours of the President-elect Donald Trump's Middle East policy are far from certain. Angered by the vote, Netanyahu has launched a counter offensive and had recalled Israeli ambassadors to New Zealand and Senegal and cancelled the visit of Ukraine Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman. One should not rule out similar moves against other Security Council members.

Five, Netanyahu cannot escape from personal responsibility for creating this mess. Even before the stunning victory of Trump, many were anticipating that Obama would bring 'a surprise' upon Israel before leaving office. Moreover, the international community has been highly critical of the settlement activities and held it responsible for the stalled peace process, but Israel was able to weather the storm with the backing of the US. Obama's action has raised fresh doubts over that unshakable Israeli faith and dependence upon Washington.

As with the two recent UNESCO resolutions that questioned the historic Jewish claims to Jerusalem, Netanyahu failed to read the mood in Washington and take sufficient actions to throttle the Council vote. Like individuals, nations also defy to convey their autonomy and independence but such defiance often comes with a price; and in the coming weeks and months Israel would be grappling with the new Council resolution and its politico-diplomatic fallout.

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