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US-Israel Bilateral Relations and Recent Developments in the UN

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In recent weeks there has been a flurry of activity on issues pertaining to Israel at the United Nations, and the United States has regularly come to Israel's aid. The article looks at three developments that provide a stark example of the strategic asset that the special relationship with the current US administration lends Israel, along with the limitations of this alliance. While the benefits are clear, particularly in the Security Council, Israel must consider scenarios in which the special relationship does not or cannot promote Israel's interests, and actively prepare to mitigate damage by enhancing diplomatic processes and cultivating friendly, constructive relations with European and other states.

In recent weeks there has been a flurry of activity on issues pertaining to Israel at the United Nations, and the United States has regularly come to Israel's aid. Three developments in this theater, when taken together, highlight not only the strength and importance of the “special” bilateral relations, but the limitations and potential difficulties they pose to Israel as well.

One development is recent action by the United States in the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly to shield Israel from international criticism. In early June, following the March of Return events on Israel's border with Gaza, Kuwait submitted a draft resolution to the Security Council to consider “measures to guarantee the safety” of Palestinians, and requested a report from the UN Secretary-General on a possible “international protection mechanism.” Despite the abstention of four states (Britain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Ethiopia), the resolution would have passed had it not been for the United States veto. This is the second UNSC veto exercised by the Trump administration in relation to Israel in the space of six months. In contrast, prior to the first veto by this administration, in December 2017, the last time the United States took this measure was in 2011. For its part, the US did not succeed in garnering enough support to pass a UNSC resolution condemning Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with three Council members rejecting and 11 abstaining.

In the weeks that followed the failed resolutions in the Security Council, the General Assembly, where each member state has an equal vote, became a focus of the Palestinian cause. In mid-June Turkey and Algeria succeeded in passing a UNGA resolution calling

for greater protection for Palestinians and deploring any use of “excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate” force by the IDF against Palestinian civilians, particularly in Gaza. In parallel the United States engaged in insistent efforts to propose an amendment to the text of the draft resolution condemning the role played in Gaza by Hamas. Even though this amendment secured a majority (62 in favor and 58 against) it was disqualified, coming up short of the two thirds majority needed.

A second development in the UN is the United States decision to withdraw from the Human Rights Council. The withdrawal was announced one year after the US issued a public warning of this move should the Human Rights Council not change its conduct, and against the background of the Council's criticism of the Trump administration's immigration policy. This move is also in line with the current administration's "America First" policy and US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, UNESCO, and most recently the JCPOA.

In announcing the decision, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley referred to several issues, including the Human Rights Council's "disproportionate focus and unending hostility towards Israel." Paradoxically, however, empirical findings show that during the previous US boycott of the Human Rights Council (in 2006 under President Bush), focus and hostility by the Council toward Israel was greater in comparison to the period since the United States resumed its active role in this body (in 2009 under President Obama).

The missed opportunity that this step encompasses for Israel was exacerbated by an exchange between US Ambassador Haley and human rights organizations contending that the US withdrawal came on the heels of an important and much-needed, albeit failed, attempt to lead to a significant reform of the Council. The ultimate need to correct the way the Human Rights Council operates, and not this specific attempt's failure, should be the driving force for both the US and Israel in relating to this body. In the meanwhile, and until such a reform is mastered, a more constructive US approach could be to activate the British threat: vote negatively on all resolutions proposed under Article 7 (singling out Israel's conduct in the only country-based agenda item to feature permanently in the Council's three regular sessions each year) and recruit additional member states to do so as well.

The third recent development is Israel's withdrawal from the June election for one of five seat openings in the UN Security Council. Seats in this prestigious body are allocated according to a key of five regional groups, with two seats opening to WEOG (Western European and Others Group) states every even year. Thanks to US diplomacy and extensive efforts by former US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, in 2000 Israel was accepted as part of WEOG.

While not formally documented, it has been noted that upon Israel's acceptance to WEOG, the year 2018 (almost two decades in advance) was marked as the first time that Israel would represent the group at the UN Security Council, along with Belgium. This idea is supported by reports after the 2016 elections noting that Israel signaled its intent to run in the next race. The practice of internally allocating seats among in-group states (as opposed to competing over seats in an election) is not uncommon, and leads to a rotation guaranteeing that each group member receives a turn to sit on the Council.

Recent media reports on why Israel withdrew its candidacy emphasize Germany's last minute decision to enter the race, effectively eliminating Israel's chance of being elected. Two issues are relevant in considering why Germany, which following the election will be seated in the Security Council for the sixth time, decided to run for a seat at Israel's expense and overturn the prior informal and undocumented agreements. The first is *realpolitik*: states rarely voluntarily yield power in the international arena, even if they unofficially agreed to do so some two decades earlier. An alternative explanation, however, is that in so doing Germany protested Israel's alliance with the Trump administration on several issues, most notably the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA. More specifically, Germany's decision not to enable Israel to receive the seat on the Security Council without competition could be in reaction to the Israeli government's fierce objection to the nuclear agreement and its overt attempts to encourage President Trump to withdraw from the deal, thereby actively lobbying against what Germany perceives is a European interest.

Taken together, the three developments in the UN over the past few weeks provide a stark example of the strategic asset that the special relationship with the current US administration lends Israel, along with the limitations of this alliance. While the benefits are clear, particularly in the Security Council, Israel must consider scenarios in which the special relationship does not or cannot promote Israel's interests, and actively prepare to mitigate damage by enhancing diplomatic processes and cultivating friendly, constructive relations with European and other states.