The Curious (and Ongoing) Case of Egypt’s Anti-Settlement UN Resolution

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The first round of dramatic news broke overnight Wednesday-Thursday, Israel time.

Egypt had introduced an anti-settlement resolution, and it was scheduled to be voted on at the UN Security Council within hours, on Thursday evening. Though a resolution had been anticipated by year’s end, the announcement came as a surprise to everyone, including the Israeli and American missions to the UN.

The second round of dramatic news followed on Thursday late afternoon. Egypt had reconsidered, and did not want its resolution voted on after all — not on Thursday, and perhaps not any time after Thursday, either.

In between, the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had gone into full-scale crisis mode — which tells you all you need to know about the levels of trust, or lack thereof, between the Netanyahu coalition and the Obama Administration, which is now less than a month away from handing over power to President-elect Donald Trump and his team, all staunch opponents of any Palestine-related moves at the UN.

Netanyahu’s envoy to the UN protested against the resolution. Senior Israeli sources complained anonymously that were the Administration to allow the resolution to pass, by not exercising its veto, this would be a breach of US promises to Israel. Netanyahu himself tweeted entreatingly that the US “should veto the anti-Israel resolution.” He convened his innermost decision-making body, the security cabinet, as the countdown to the vote continued.

Adding to the sense of panic in Jerusalem was the news that Secretary of State John Kerry was about to make an address, in which, it was speculated, he would explain why the US would allow the resolution to pass. Netanyahu assembled his cabinet and updated them about the diplomatic outreach efforts that he, the Foreign Ministry and the National Security Council had been making in a desperate effort to block the resolution.

At around 4 p.m. Israel time, Trump issued a statement calling for a US veto. “As the United States has long maintained, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians will only come through direct negotiations between the parties, and not through the imposition of terms by the United Nations,” the future president said.

At 5:21 p.m. Israel time, Netanyahu published a statement hailing the “willingness over many years of the US to stand up in the UN and veto anti-Israel resolutions” and calling on the Obama administration not to “abandon” this policy.

And then, just minutes later, came what initially appeared to be the all-clear. The Egyptians had asked for a postponement of their resolution. There would be no vote — certainly not on Thursday and perhaps never, unconfirmed reports claimed, citing unnamed Western diplomats.

The rumor mills were running wild and for hours it was unclear what exactly had transpired in the behind-the-scenes contacts involving Jerusalem, Cairo, Washington, New York… and Palm Beach, Florida, where Trump is currently continuing to assemble his team and to issue policy statements.

In briefings with Israeli reporters, officials in Jerusalem, insisting on anonymity, took credit for having engineered the Egyptian postponement. But as of this writing, it was unclear whether such relief was premature. Theoretically, the resolution could be proposed again last thing Thursday, Friday, anytime. The Security Council doesn’t even take a Christmas vacation. The only relevant deadline is the US presidential transition. After January 20, a US veto is a dead cert.

“The delay of the vote is an important step. However, we realize that this issue is not yet resolved,” Israel’s ambassador the UN, Danny Danon, told The Times of Israel on Thursday night, as the foreign ministers of Arab League member states deliberated on how to proceed. “We are continuing our diplomatic efforts on all fronts to ensure that this disgraceful resolution will not pass the Security Council.”

Meantime, there’s the question of why Cairo rescinded (temporarily or not) a resolution it had itself surprisingly proposed less than a day earlier.

One theory has it that Netanyahu reached out to Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, with whom he has a good personal relationship. Reuters reported that Cairo sought the postponement at Israel’s behest, after “high level” contacts between the two governments. If true, this would be a remarkable testament to the budding alliance between Egypt and Israel, and quite the diplomatic achievement.

But it seems rather implausible. If it was Netanyahu who got Sissi to withdraw the resolution, why was the prime minister still frantically calling on the US to veto the resolution until late Thursday afternoon?

Perhaps, then, it was Trump’s statement that prompted Cairo’s volte face. The two strongmen met in September and Sissi was the first foreign leader to call and congratulate Trump on his election victory. Dependent on financial aid from Washington, the Egyptian president might have reasoned that it was better not to anger the incoming administration by pushing a resolution it opposes.

It is also known that some Jewish groups who have recently met with Sissi got involved, trying to get the Egyptian leader to withdraw the resolution.

Or maybe Netanyahu picked up the phone to Trump or Vice President-elect Mike Pence, and asked them to pressure Cairo into rescinding the text. That would be a spectacular precedent — senior members of the incoming administration convincing a foreign head of state to rescind a resolution that the current administration was reportedly considering supporting.

Egyptian diplomats, meanwhile, indicated on Thursday night that the Palestinians had blindsided the Arab Group at the UN by rushing to bring the text to a vote on Thursday. Cairo had wanted to circulate the draft among Arab leaders and schedule the vote only in January, these diplomats intimated. The relevance of such a delay is hard to fathom: [The Security Council’s composition will change with the new year](http://www.timesofisrael.com/will-the-palestinians-get-a-security-council-motion-passed-and-would-it-matter/), to Israel’s slight advantage, but an anti-settlements resolution would still be expected to garner the required nine out of 15 “yes” votes to pass, and until January 20 it would still be Obama’s decision, not Trump’s, on whether to veto.

The suspense is not over. The Egyptian resolution could yet return. If not, New Zealand — whose two-year term on the council ends next week — could introduce its own version. And should Wellington pass, incoming council member [Sweden might gladly take its place](http://www.timesofisrael.com/swedish-fm-vows-to-seek-anti-settlement-resolution-upon-assuming-unsc-presidency-in-january/) as the proud sponsor of a resolution condemning the settlements.