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UN vote will strengthen the boycott movement

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December 25, 2016

After two decades of relentless settlement building and domination over Palestinian life, Israel has rendered its footprint on the West Bank indistinguishable from the terrain itself. From street signs to motorways, the dividing line between where Israel ends and the West Bank begins has slowly been erased on the ground. The only borders are walls, checkpoints and fences – none of which correspond to the internationally recognised demarcation line that resulted from the 1967 war.

Pessimism is a tempting reaction to just about everything in Israel and Palestine these days. So what could a toothless United Nations resolution do to reverse the years of colonisation? There have been other resolutions and they never forced any real change. What is different today?

A reasonable question, yet there is some hope on the horizon, even if the short-term future looks bleak. Throughout Israel's colonisation project in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Tel Aviv has been shielded from biting backlash by the United States in forums such as the UN.

Late on Friday afternoon, however, a crack in the partnership appeared. The US abstained on a Security Council resolution that reaffirmed the illegality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The resolution itself was nothing new; it merely confirmed decades of international consensus on the conflict. In fact, many analysts felt it was far too little, far too late.

After eight years of snubbing and inappropriate behaviour from Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, US president Barack Obama could have done much more to assert the illegality of Israel's actions against Palestinians to send a clear message to Israel as to who the superpower in the alliance is. But Mr Obama acted with restraint, and that might prove to be a good thing in the long run.

At this point in the conflict, Israel's greatest enemy is itself. Throughout the history of similar settler colonial movements, most recently the apartheid government in South Africa, it was the colonisers who ultimately defeated themselves. Hubris and the fatigue of maintaining such a brutal regime ultimately forced the white minority to give up. Global anti-apartheid movements, international boycotts and the resistance of the African National Congress played a role in defeating apartheid, but at the end the regime broke under its own weight. The process took many decades but ultimately the white minority couldn't sustain the maintenance necessary to keep apartheid alive.

If Israel's colonisation project is to succeed, then emboldening it to continue dominating Palestinians would have a negative effect. That is why Israeli leaders have spun a careful public relations campaign that manipulates the language of peace. They understand the critical need to have a liberal facade and a "commitment" to peace. Unrestrained colonisation will isolate Tel Aviv, but colonialism with a liberal facade has so far allowed Israel to entrench its footprint in the West Bank and just about annex Jerusalem.

The late Israeli statesman Shimon Peres, for example, spent a lifetime entrenching Israel's grip on Palestinian life and land only to open up the Peres Center for Peace and host charitable football games bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. The Oslo Accords, which Mr Peres helped create, gave Israel a "peace process" to pursue while continuing to build settlements and establish its matrix of control over Palestinian life. It was the ultimate liberal facade, and it has served Tel Aviv's colonial interests extremely well.

Now, counter-intuitively, Israel will begin the process of destroying itself with help from a new right-wing US ambassador to Tel Aviv. Donald Trump's choice for ambassador, David Friedman, views the conflict from an extreme rightist position. In public statements over many years, Mr Friedman has sided with the settler movement, dismissed the two-state solution as a "narrative" and referred to liberal Israelis and their Jewish supporters in the US as Jewish guards at Nazi death camps.

With Mr Trump calling for a veto of UN resolutions on Israeli settlements and support for moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, we can expect the next White House to embolden the Israeli right and expose the country's true aims. After all, the occupation of the West Bank is the largest state project in Israel's history and has been supported by all governments, left or right.

With a new air of honesty coming to American-Israeli affairs, last week's UN vote will certainly breathe new life into nonviolent initiatives such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. Just look at the diversity of countries calling for the resolution: Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela. The rapturous applause that filled the Security Council chamber after the vote passed is clear evidence that the international community is fed up with Israeli intransigence. Israel's hysterical reaction since the vote belies its narrative of strength.

European leaders have been warning Tel Aviv for years that the wave of boycott initiatives coming from diverse sectors of civil society are becoming difficult to ignore. As Israel's largest trading partner, any substantial European boycott momentum has the potential to wreak havoc on Israel's economy. United Nations resolution 2334 will embolden boycott activists to a remarkable degree.

If Mr Trump and Mr Friedman succeed in half of what they propose for Israel and Palestine, Tel Aviv will quickly isolate itself on the international stage in an unsustainable manner. Mr Friedman is going to remove Israel's liberal facade at precisely the same time the international community ramps up boycott efforts.

The UN vote was a small crack in the dam, and Israel's leadership understands that all too well. Whether they can contain their colonial desires and return to the a mirage of liberalism will decide the longevity of their regime. But it will not last for ever in its current capacity.