Making “Israel Alone” a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Israel is not actually alone, despite the U.S. abstention at the U.N. But preventing its sense of isolation from deepening depends on Netanyahu wising up to where he does and does not have leverage.

By Michael J. Koplow
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On Monday, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that checked many important Israeli boxes. It called for a temporary ceasefire for the duration of Ramadan that should then lead to a lasting and sustainable ceasefire, rather than calling for a permanent ceasefire now. In the very same clause as the one calling for a temporary ceasefire, it demanded the “the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, as well as ensuring humanitarian access to address their medical and other humanitarian needs.” It deplored acts of terrorism and reiterated that taking hostages is prohibited under international law. It also called for expanding humanitarian assistance in Gaza—presumably in line with Israel’s statement last week that it will now be flooding Gaza with aid—and for protecting civilians, both of which Israel has said it is doing and will continue to do. The resolution was not perfect; it did not, for instance, condemn Hamas by name, unlike the draft resolution authored by the U.S. last week that was vetoed by China and Russia. As a result, the U.S. abstained from the resolution, allowing it to pass 14-0. In response, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu canceled the trip that Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi were scheduled to make to Washington this week at President Joe Biden’s request in order to get the U.S. and Israel on the same page with regard to Israeli plans in Rafah.

If that type of escalation and public rebuke from Netanyahu does not make sense to you, you are not the only one. The Economist’s cover last week was a picture of an Israeli flag struggling to stay upright against a backdrop of billowing smoke and the ruins of Gaza, with the caption “Israel Alone.” What the image got wrong is that Israel is not alone; it has its most powerful and only indispensable ally in its corner. Despite world opinion having decisively turned against Israel as its military response to Hamas’ horrific October 7 terrorism continues and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza worsens, the U.S. has continued to provide Israel with military assistance without conditions. It has
vetoed multiple one-sided U.N. resolutions that blame Israel for all that has transpired. It has actively defended Israel’s West Bank occupation at the International Court of Justice. It has suspended all funding for UNRWA in response to Israeli charges of UNRWA’s complicity in the October 7 attacks and its entanglement with Hamas. It has deployed aircraft carrier groups to deter Iran from getting directly involved. It has worked non-stop to try to get a negotiated agreement to push Hizballah back from the Lebanese border in order save Israel from having to launch a large-scale operation in the north. This has all happened against a backdrop of Netanyahu and other Israeli government officials publicly dismissing American concerns about the number of civilian casualties in Gaza, insisting that the U.S. is wrong in its contention that Israel could be doing more to ensure more aid reaches those who need it, vetoing American plans to train a Palestinian security force akin to the U.S.-trained one that coordinates directly with the IDF in the West Bank, and categorically ruling out U.S. requests to consider plans for the war’s aftermath that involve any role for the Palestinian Authority.

To add to the already-stratospheric levels of both chutzpah and irony, Netanyahu’s announcement that he was recalling Dermer and Hanegbi from his only meaningful remaining ally before they even had a chance to leave Israeli airspace came as Defense Minister Yoav Galant was walking into meetings with Lloyd Austin, Tony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, and others with a reportedly long wishlist of weapons system and munitions that Israel wants the U.S. to supply. If it weren’t for the fact that Israel is legitimately in the midst of a precarious security situation, Netanyahu attempting to punish the Biden administration through publicly embarrassing the president diplomatically over an alleged slight—abstaining on a resolution that backs Israeli policies but contains the genuine sin of not condemning Hamas by name—at the exact same time that he is demanding unfettered access to American-made weapons would make for a great Eretz Nehederet skit. Instead, it stands as a sad testament to just how reckless and irresponsible Netanyahu is: throwing Israel’s interests and needs under the bus in order to score a few meager political points at home in a doomed last-ditch effort to hang on to power by distracting Israelis from his failures.

Netanyahu is acting as if he is the one holding the leverage over the U.S., as if it is the U.S. that desperately needs Israeli assistance with all manner of things in Gaza, as if Biden is the one who has no choice but to accede to Israeli pronouncements at risk of being left entirely isolated and holding the military, material, and diplomatic burden of Gaza alone. It is of course the opposite, and yet Netanyahu either delusionally believes it is Biden who needs him rather than the other way around, or he still retains the ability to perceive reality as it is and nevertheless is willing to burn everything down around him so long as he remains standing in the center of Balfour amidst the ruins. Biden’s
patience with Netanyahu's behavior since October 7 has been remarkable, and the latest example is his not ordering Galant's plane to immediately turn around after it had a chance to refuel.

If your reaction to Monday's events is outrage at the administration over its abstention because the resolution did not condition a temporary ceasefire on the prior release of the hostages, I'd gently suggest that you read the actual text; when a single numbered paragraph demands both a ceasefire and the unconditional release of all hostages, it takes a tendentious reading to argue that these things have been treated as wholly separate issues. And if your reaction is outrage at the administration over its abstention because the resolution did not condemn Hamas by name, I genuinely share your disappointment but would point out that the result was China, Russia, and Algeria endorsing the release of all hostages without any corresponding release of Palestinian prisoners, without a permanent end to Israel's military operation, and without a call for an IDF withdrawal from Gaza. If that is worth an Israeli accusation that the U.S. has effectively abandoned it and giving the U.S. a metaphorical middle finger—thereby ensuring that the dispute over what happens in Rafah becomes even wider—then your notion of what constitutes smart diplomacy is very different than mine.

The cold hard reality is that contrary to the t-shirts sold in Ben Yehuda Street tourist traps declaring that the U.S. need not worry because Israel is behind it, it is Israel that needs to be constantly worried that the U.S. remains behind it. If Israel is truly left standing alone, it will become instantly clear how absurd it is to claim that abstaining on a resolution that is a reflection of Israel's best-case policy scenario—but that does not contain every single rhetorical element of Israel's best-case textual scenario—is the equivalent of abandoning Israel. What Netanyahu is risking is that he will finally succeed in driving away Biden, Chuck Schumer, and every other true Democratic friend of Israel, at which point he should fly a Mission Accomplished banner with his signature on it to accompany the Israeli flag sadly fluttering alone in the smoky and ash-filled diplomatic landscape.

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