Unravelling the Real Story Behind the UN Vote

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The UK's acquiescence in the US's refusal to veto UN resolution 2334 just before Christmas prompted widespread fury within the community.  One senior communal leader told me: "If Labour wasnt so toxic, the Tories might have blown 20 years of work in one vote."

But the fury was not confined to the Jewish community. There was also rage within Number 10.

The JC has been able to piece together the background to the vote — and to two subsequent statements that have presented a very different approach towards Israel.

UN resolutions on Israel have rarely caused anxiety to British governments, not least because the US has vetoed criticism. As a parting gift, however, President Obama decided this time that the US would not use its veto.

The initial draft of resolution 2334 was Egyptian but when it became clear that the US was willing to criticise Israel, British officials joined in trying to find a form of words that would satisfy the Americans.

Meanwhile, with Christmas hours away, Boris Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, was on holiday abroad. The shop was minded by Tobias Ellwood, the Middle East Minister. According to well-placed sources, this was the root of the problem to come. As a former ministerial colleague put it: “He was completely out of his depth. The officials ran rings round him.”

As the drafts emerged, FCO officials — who have traditionally regarded more pro-Israel politicians with a kind of bemused condescension — told Mr Ellwood this was in effect a private spat between the US and the Israelis.

Mr Ellwood was told the resolution was in fact an improvement on earlier drafts because it now included references to Palestinian terrorism. There was, they said, nothing in it that need trouble him or cause controversy.

Usually, an Israeli Ambassador would make clear any reservations and the Conservative Friends of Israel would weigh in with its own view. But almost the entire Westminster village had disappeared for Christmas. Lord Polak, CFI honorary president, was in Florida and Mark Regev, the Israeli Ambassador, was out of the country on holiday. A series of juniors were in charge. None appeared to grasp the storm about to break.

When the resolution passed and the Jewish community realised what the government had done, however, there was apoplexy in Downing Street. A source told me: “Number 10 took its eye off the ball. They screwed up badly.”

My Whitehall contacts were adamant at the time that this was a change of policy and that Number 10 had been kept fully in the loop. That week, the JC’s front page story emphasised Number 10’s role. This only added to the anger with FCO officials.

The damage of 2334 was already done. But there was a determination — not least from Nick Timothy, Mrs May’s joint chief of staff — to show this was not indicative of a new policy. Number 10 decided it would take the first opportunity to unravel the UN mess.

The opportunity presented itself almost immediately. Five days after the UN vote, John Kerry launched a withering attack on the Israeli government in a speech at the State Department. But if that was unprecedented, so was the response from Number 10 — a direct and unambiguous dismissal of Mr Kerry’s speech.

A spokesman for Mrs May said: “We do not believe it is appropriate to attack the composition of the democratically elected government of an ally. The government believes negotiations will only succeed when they are conducted between the two parties, supported by the international community.” Within minutes of the statement, it was being portrayed as a craven attempt by Mrs May to curry favour with the then president-elect, Donald Trump, who had earlier tweeted his response to the UN resolution: “As to the UN, things will be different after Jan 20.”

But this misunderstands the dynamic. The aim was rather to repair the false impression of British policy under Mrs May given by Resolution 2334. Re-emphasising this, the government’s response to the Paris conference last weekend was an almost direct contradiction of 2334.

Tobias Ellwood was refused permission to attend; the delegation was low level, headed by an FCO official with a couple of diplomats from the British embassy in France.

Then, much to the chagrin of the 70 nations present, the UK not only refused to sign the concluding communique but issued a damning statement, highlighting the government’s “particular reservations about an international conference intended to advance peace between the parties that does not involve them — indeed which is taking place against the wishes of the Israelis”.

The harm done by Resolution 2334 is obvious. But it is clear from the government’s behaviour since that it is determined to make good.