

Durban and the Middle East: Challenges for U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

At the end of August, the United Nations is set to convene a "World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa. But with less than one month to go, preparations for the conference are in shambles. Draft texts under consideration are replete with language equating Zionism with racism. Efforts to address anti-Semitism and the Holocaust have been perverted beyond recognition. Governments and nongovernmental organizations are demanding apologies and recognition of the right to reparations and compensation for slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, and other historical wrongs. These problems have prompted the Bush administration to warn that it may boycott the entire event.

Background. In 1978 and 1983, the UN held the similar "World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination." On both occasions, the United States boycotted the meetings because the UN's "Zionism is racism" resolution was still in effect. At both events, the final conference documents went to great lengths to excoriate Israel for its allegedly racist underpinnings and practices. With the "Zionism is racism" resolution rescinded in 1991, Washington assented to the General Assembly's 1997 decision to hold another gathering on racism. Since then, there have been expert meetings, NGO gatherings, and consultations on a range of issues and themes relating to the conference. Additionally, UN members have gathered both in regional preparatory meetings (in Strasbourg, Santiago, Dakar, and Tehran) and in plenary sessions in Geneva. Their goal has been to iron out as much language as possible for the declaration and a program of action that will eventually be adopted at the Durban gathering.

Issues in Dispute. Two controversies have plagued the run-up to Durban: issues regarding past wrongs and compensation for the African slave trade, and the reinjection of various forms of "Zionism as racism" into the human rights debate. While resolving the slavery compensation issue will require intensive negotiations in a very short period, most observers believe a compromise is probably attainable-although the most recent indications suggest that the Europeans are becoming intransigent in their refusal to countenance any form of apology for past deeds.

Issues relating to the Arab-Israeli dispute, the Holocaust, and anti-Semitism are proving the most difficult to resolve. Before the Teheran regional meeting even began, the Iranian authorities set the tone by barring Australia and New Zealand (and, less surprisingly, Israel) from participating-even though these countries are in the Asian region-and making it impossible for representatives of the Baha'i community and the Simon Wiesenthal Center to attend. The final Teheran document included vicious attacks on Israel, a clear violation of the principle that world conferences are not country-specific. It is replete with code words, including references to "settler ideology" and "colonization by settlers and foreign occupation." And through intensive lobbying by Arab states, the draft documents for the upcoming conference contain a three-pronged anti-Israel campaign:

- Trivializing the Holocaust. Egypt, among others, has suggested that references to "the Holocaust" be changed to "holocausts." In addition, Pakistan has suggested that after references to the Holocaust, the words "and the ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine" be added. These suggestions undermine the historical specificity of the Nazi attempt from 1933 to 1945 to eliminate Europe's Jewish population. At the same time, they

distort the historical and contemporary record of the Arab-Israeli conflict. By juxtaposing the Nazi Holocaust with an Arab critique of Israeli policy, the Arab states and their supporters seek to inject a moral equivalence between the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, delegitimizing a cornerstone of the moral argument for Israel's existence as a haven from anti-Semitic persecution.

- Removing references to anti-Semitism. The observer from the Palestine Liberation Organization (recognized within UN circles as the "Permanent Observer of Palestine") has insisted that references to anti-Semitism be coupled with the formulations "racist practices of Zionism" or, even more bizarre, "Zionist practices against Semitism." The logic underlying this argument is that Arabs are a Semitic people, and can therefore support any condemnation of anti-Semitism. However, as Palestinians "suffer racism on the part of Jews," the words "Zionist practices" must be added whenever anti-Semitism is mentioned. In other parts of the text, the term "anti-Semitism" has been placed in brackets, indicating a delegation's desire to see the word eliminated from the final document.

- Reintroducing "Zionism is racism." UN secretary-general Kofi Annan has said that even with the repeal of the "lamentable" resolution equating Zionism with racism, "deep and painful scars remain," and "its negative resonance even today is difficult to overestimate." But now the conference stands poised to reintroduce the "Zionism is racism" theme into the international human rights debate: "The World Conference recognizes with deep concern the increase of racist practices of Zionism, anti-Semitism (sic) in various parts of the world, as well as the emergence of racial and violent movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas, in particular, the Zionist movement which is based on racial superiority." Buttressing this language are calls for "Israel to revise its legislation based on racial or religious discrimination such as the law of return," and for "all relevant UN organs to endeavor to bring the foreign occupation of Jerusalem by Israel together with all its racist practices to an end." It bears noting that in the draft documents, no other country in the world is condemned by name for any violation of human rights.

All along, the United States has been a vocal opponent of the most egregious politicization of the conference, and Australia, Canada, and Israel have resolutely joined the fight (as, latterly, has Guatemala). The European Union, under the presidency of Sweden, has been willing to take a stand on the Holocaust issue, but has been less evident in the fight against "Zionism is racism."

Defining a U.S. Response. Given the importance the administration attaches to Durban, several steps could be taken now-before the close of the final Geneva preparatory conference on August 10-to increase the chance for moderate voices to win the day:

- First, Washington should make clear now that a low-level delegation will be sent to Durban unless there is demonstrable improvement in the language of the draft texts. It should also telegraph its intention to walk out of the conference if it becomes clear that "Zionism is racism" will be reasserted. Rather than force a vote on the text (which would pass comfortably, considering the composition of the United Nations), the United States should not legitimize the process by remaining at the conference.

- Second, the administration needs to consult broadly with different regional groups and key players. Europe should be urged to act more forcefully and vocally against Durban's transformation into an anti-Israel, if not anti-Semitic, meeting. Swing nations in Latin America should be urged to take a principled stand on these contentious issues; Guatemala was brave to have voiced its opposition during the conference preparations, and this should be both recognized and encouraged among others in the region. African nations need to be informed that even if acceptable language is found to resolve the issue of past wrongs, the entire conference could end in failure if the Israel issue is permitted to dominate the agenda. And Washington needs to signal important U.S. friends that are also leaders in the developing world, like Egypt and India, that playing a negative role in such a high-profile UN event carries costs in the bilateral relationship with Washington. In UN fora, it is fashionable to explain one's behavior as based on the exigencies of belonging to a regional group that includes members more extreme than oneself. Accepting this

argument serves only to encourage further anti-American and anti-Western action. There is no reason that a country able to stand up to the United States cannot stand up to unnamed "hardliners" within its own group.

Conclusion. The potential impact of Durban should not be underestimated. Born with the imprimatur of a United Nations world conference, the conference's final text will provide a powerful basis for future wording of UN resolutions and declarations, and could well become part of the discourse used by various human rights organizations for years to come. The shelf life of UN formulations can be disturbingly long. Once again, the United States is among the few UN members prepared to resist efforts to hijack a UN gathering, but there are other countries likely willing to stand with Washington. Their support must be actively courted, just as those unwilling to prevent abuse at the UN must know that their behavior will have political and diplomatic consequences.

Michael Colson is executive director of UN Watch, a monitoring group based in Geneva.

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