

# Missing an Anti-Racism Moment

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In boycotting the United Nations conference on racism, the Obama administration demonstrated that just because an African American can be elected president doesn't mean the United States will be any more committed than the Bush administration in fighting global racism. Rejecting calls by liberal Democratic members of Congress, leading human rights groups, Pope Benedict XVI, and most of the international community to participate, the Obama administration instead gave into pressure by Congressional hawks and other anti-UN forces by joining a handful of other nations refusing to participate in the historic gathering.

The five-day conference, which is taking place this week in Geneva, assessed international progress in fighting racism and xenophobia since the UN's first conference in Durban, South Africa eight years ago. The Bush administration withdrew from that gathering, but there had been hope the Obama administration wouldn't continue its predecessor's ideology-driven opposition to the UN and its human rights agenda.

With pressure from the United States and some other countries, the draft declaration prepared for this year's conference dropped a call to ban "defamation of religion," which raised concerns regarding restricting free speech, as well as any references to Israel and Palestine. State Department spokesperson Robert Wood acknowledged that the draft was "significantly improved," and that the United States was "deeply grateful" that requested changes had been made. Yet he announced the United States would boycott the conference anyway because the document reaffirmed the final declaration of the 2001 meeting in Durban right-wing critics had labeled "anti-Israel."

## **Anti-Israel?**

Despite ongoing claims to the contrary by various right-wing pundits, however, the final document didn't contain any anti-Israel statements or language equating Zionism with racism. Efforts by some participating states to include that and similar objectionable language were defeated.

Indeed, the only mention of Israel in the final 61-page document was as follows:

We are concerned about the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation. We recognize the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State and we recognize the right to security for all States in the region, including Israel, and call upon all States to support the peace process and bring it to an early conclusion; We call for a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region in which all peoples shall co-exist and enjoy equality, justice and internationally recognized human rights, and security.

Why would the Obama administration find such a statement so reprehensible that it would boycott a conference whose focus isn't on Israel, but on ending racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerances? Since the document explicitly recognizes Israel's right to security, the Obama administration apparently objects to its formal recognition that Palestinians are under foreign occupation, and that they have a right to self-determination and statehood. Yet virtually the entire international community — including the United Nations, the World Court and a broad consensus of legal scholars — recognizes this reality.

According to the State Department, the Obama administration believes the 2001 declaration "prejudges key issues that can only be resolved in negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians." In other words, it appears the Obama administration believes that assuming the Palestinians' right to self-determination and statehood, and

calling for a Middle East in which all peoples “shall coexist and enjoy equality, justice and international recognized human rights, and security” should not be givens.

During the more than 15 years of these U.S.-facilitated negotiations, the Palestinians have seen illegal Israeli settlements on the West Bank more than double, their freedom of movement restricted, their human rights deteriorate, and their social and economic standards plummet. Moreover, the new Israel government with which the Palestinians need to negotiate is led by a coalition of far right-wing parties that have refused to acknowledge Palestinian rights, and have threatened further war against its neighbors. Its foreign minister is an outspoken anti-Arab racist who has proposed the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population in Israel and the occupied territories.

Yet the Obama administration insists that rather than the international community reiterating the longstanding international legal principle of the right to self-determination, the Palestinians’ future should instead be placed on the bargaining table under an ongoing U.S.-led “peace process,” which has thus far only worsened their suffering.

### **Addressing Anti-Semitism**

Legitimate concerns about Israeli policies regularly appear at international forums sponsored by the United Nations. But they have sometimes been contaminated by sweeping statements condemning the state of Israel itself, and portraying some of the most racist and chauvinistic aspects of Zionism as representative of Jewish nationalism as a whole. However, these kinds of discriminatory resolutions have been declining in recent years, as countries have become more willing to recognize that, while some governments may pursue racist policies, no state should be singled out as inherently racist in and of itself. Efforts by anti-Israel delegations at the 2001 anti-racism conference in Durban were defeated and weren’t considered a realistic threat at the Geneva Conference either. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s claim that Israel was a “racist state” during a speech on the opening day of this year’s conference was not well-received, prompting many delegates to walk out in protest.

Still, even some of the more reasonable resolutions critical of Israel proposed at the 2001 conference distracted attention from the broader issues at stake. Such efforts often result in dividing Jews — themselves a historically oppressed people — from their natural allies among people of color. Furthermore, other governments that have as bad or even more racist policies than Israel have not been subjected to as much attention at such conferences.

The Israeli government has been able to inflict its racist policies on neighboring Arab populations largely as a result of the unconditional diplomatic, economic, and military support of the United States. Any country with a history of war with its neighbors that found itself effectively immune from sanctions, or any other negative repercussions for violating international norms, would likely behave the same way, regardless of whether it were Jewish, “Zionist,” or anything else. Were it not for the United States providing Israel with protection from international pressure to end its illegal occupation and colonization of neighboring lands, the “just, comprehensive and lasting peace” called for in the 2001 declaration the Obama administration apparently finds so objectionable could have by now been a reality.

However legitimate some of the concerns regarding anti-Semitism at international forums, nothing in the final 2001 declaration at Durban — the alleged reason for the U.S. boycott this year — appears to have been even remotely anti-Semitic. Indeed, the final declaration states:

We recall that the Holocaust must never be forgotten...We recognize with deep concern the increase in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in various parts of the world, as well as the emergence of racial and violent movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas against Jewish, Muslim and Arab communities...We

condemn the persistence and resurgence of neo-Nazism, neo-Fascism and violent nationalist ideologies based on racial or national prejudice, and state that these phenomena can never be justified in any instance or in any circumstances.

Even if the 2001 declaration was as problematic as the Obama administration depicted it, participation in this year's conference would not have implied an endorsement of every single phrase of a lengthy and wide-ranging declaration hammered together by representatives of more than 200 governments.

### **Reaction to the Decision**

The Congressional Black Caucus, which strongly encouraged U.S. participation in the international meeting, stated that it was "deeply dismayed" by Obama's decision. "Had the United States sent a high-level delegation reflecting the richness and diversity of our country, it would have sent a powerful message to the world that we're ready to lead by example," the statement reads. "Instead, the administration opted to boycott the conference, a decision that does not advance the cause of combating racism and intolerance, but rather sets the cause back."

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) observed how the U.S. decision to boycott the conference was "inconsistent with the administration's policy of engaging with those we agree with and those we disagree with." She added that "the United States is making it more difficult for it to play a leadership role on UN Human Rights Council as it states it plans to do. This is a missed opportunity, plain and simple."

A spokesperson for Human Rights Watch noted how the meeting would lack the diplomatic gravitas it deserved as a result of Washington's absence. "For us it's extremely disappointing and it's a missed opportunity, really, for the United States," she said. Other human rights groups, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, also expressed their disappointment.

By contrast, the right wing applauded Obama's decision. A bipartisan group of congressional hawks, which pressured Obama to boycott the conference, sent him an open letter applauding Obama's decision. The letter claims that the meeting "undermines freedom of expression and is tainted by an anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic agenda that questions the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state." The effort was led by such influential members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee as Ron Klein (D-FL), Mike Pence (R-IN), Shelley Berkley (D-NV), Eliot Engel (D-NY), and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), as well as Henry Waxman (D-CA), chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, all of whom previously attacked the United Nations, the World Court, and various human rights groups for challenging certain U.S. and Israeli policies.

By accepting the recommendation of these congressional militarists and unilateralists to boycott the conference, while rejecting calls to participate by the Black Caucus, reputable human rights groups, UN officials, and world religious leaders, Obama has given the clearest indication yet as to who he will listen to in determining how his administration approaches the United Nations and other international initiatives in support for human rights.