

U.S. Policy on the UN Conference Wrong

By Stephen Zunes

The United States, the self-described leader of human rights, effectively decided to boycott the UN conference against racism in Durban, South Africa. The U.S. could have made a strong, positive impression by sending its African-American Secretary of State, a descendent of slaves, and making a forceful stand against racism. Instead, it chose to send a low-level delegation.

What allegedly prompted the U.S. position were two relatively minor agenda items.

One involved the legacy of slavery. The U.S. strenuously objected to a proposed declaration that slavery was a crime against humanity, though it is hard to imagine why the Bush administration would think otherwise. The U.S. argued that it was not helpful to discuss the past, yet it is impossible to address racism and many other issues without doing so. Nearly a century and a half since slavery was abolished, the U.S. is apparently still too embarrassed to acknowledge its culpability.

Even more contentious was a proposed resolution regarding the contemporary Middle East. The proposed debate on "Zionism as a form of racism," one of the issues that most disturbed the U.S. government, was dropped from the proposed agenda several weeks ago. It was indeed disturbing that this tired, old shibboleth was being raised again. Zionism—like most nationalist movements—certainly has racist elements within it, but it is very wrong to put such a label on an entire movement. Thankfully, it will not be under discussion in Durban.

This was not enough for the United States, however, since language criticizing some of the racist policies currently being carried out by the Israeli government remained as an agenda item. The revised resolution focuses on particular policies of Israel's right-wing government and is no longer a broad indictment of Zionism and

Israel as a whole. The racist policies of the Israeli government have been well-documented by reputable human rights groups, but the United States felt compelled to protect its ally from even justifiable criticisms.

The U.S. is particularly offended at references to Israeli policy in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip as a new form of apartheid. Yet anyone who has actually visited these occupied territories recognizes the validity of the charge. For example, Israel's illegal settlements, the surrounding countryside, and the connecting roads are restricted for Jews only. Local Palestinians, and even Arab citizens of Israel, are barred from owning property or even driving on the roads, all of which are on confiscated Palestinian land.

The U.S. also objects to references to Israel as an occupying power in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, despite the fact that the United Nations, virtually every government in the world, and basic tenets of international law recognize it as such.

A case could be made that such strongly worded resolutions, even while valid and accurate, are not helpful since they distract from the broader issues at stake in the conference. Furthermore, they tend to divide Jews, a historically oppressed people, from their natural allies among people of color. Similarly, other governments have as bad or even worse racist policies than Israel's racism toward the Palestinians, which are not the subject of proposed resolutions, raising concerns that this proposed resolution is being brought up not out of universal anti-racist principles, but out of anti-Semitism.

At the same time, the U.S. boycott of the conference is not out of any genuine concern about possible anti-Semitism, but as an excuse to avoid addressing issues of racism in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Indeed, the way the U.S.

has pressed this issue and has blocked compromise proposals emphasizing the unity of Semitic peoples raises suspicions that the U.S. was simply looking for an excuse to boycott the conference.

It is important to acknowledge the validity of concerns raised about Israeli policies but also to distinguish these policies from the state of Israel and Zionism as a whole. It is also important to recognize that the racist policies of the Israeli government are in large part a result of the diplomat-

ic, economic, and military support the United States provides Israel's rightist government, so Americans must acknowledge our share in the responsibility for the ongoing repression and violence against the Palestinians—and not allow it to be used as an excuse to criticize the world's only Jewish state.

The bottom line, however, is that whatever the validity of the proposed resolutions on Israel or on slavery, the U.S. decision on the Durban conference is wrong. It simply isolates the

United States still further in the international community and weakens the important struggle against racism in all its forms.

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