Strategy needed to preserve Durban 2 victory

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With only one month to go before the opening of the UN's very controversial Durban Review Conference, the battle over the terms of the final declaration to be adopted by the participating governments has intensified. Faced with a growing number of countries which have declared that they would not participate in another anti-Semitic and anti-democratic conference, the organizers suddenly changed the text. The hate language, attacks on Israel, and attempts to restrict free speech and give Islam a preferred status - all using the façade of human rights - were removed.

For the governments that had already declared that they would not go to this conference, scheduled for April 21 in Geneva, and for others considering a similar move, this poses a policy dilemma. Canada (the first to denounce the anti-Semitism of the Durban process), Israel, the US, and most recently, Italy confronted UN human rights officials with public embarrassment. Following Rome's lead, a number of other democratic governments - Holland, Britain, Denmark, Australia, and the Czech Republic - were also on the verge of pulling out. This would have triggered a cascade of additional dropouts, leaving the room half-empty.

Now that this text has been changed, should these governments, including Israel, acknowledge this important diplomatic victory that forced a change in text - over the heads of the Libyan and Iranian officials - and agree to participate on the basis of a revissed document? Or is this a diplomatic sleight of hand - a temporary change in language used to bring an end to the revolt of the democratic delegations?

This victory, while incomplete, is nevertheless substantial and almost unique - it may represent a tipping point in the wider "soft war," including anti-Israel boycotts and lawfare cases that abuse human rights as a weapon. The efforts of Iran, Libya, Syria and Egypt to extend the Durban strategy of demonization have been repudiated within the UN - the same body that has led this process since the 2001 original Durban conference.

In parallel, the powerful NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and their Palestinian allies, have also lost prestige and perhaps some influence in this battle. Not only have their campaigns failed to force Canada, the US, and Italy to change their policies, but the vitriolic NGO Forum from the 2001 Durban conference will not be repeated. If these successes can be "locked in," to insure that the text and frameworks will not be changed at the last minute, this would be a strategic success.

HOWEVER, THE CASE against re-engagement appears stronger. From this perspective, the entire Durban process and the UN human rights framework is corrupt beyond repair. In this scenario, the war led by the members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) will resume as soon

as the Obama administration and other democratic governments announce a return. When the conference begins, Libya and Iran, with the support of Egypt, Syria, Cuba, and the rest, will use their majority to restore terms like "apartheid" and Israeli "genocide."

Critics, including the Israeli government, also note that the latest text, which was prepared by Russian "facilitator" Yuri Boychenko, remains problematic, particularly in adopting the final declaration from the 2001 Durban Conference. The Israeli and the American delegations withdrew from that conference over the demonizing language ("apartheid," "war crimes," etc. in the draft declaration), and the "compromise text," negotiated by Canada and the Europeans, still singled out Israel. It emphasized "the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation," recognized "the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination," and promoted the claim to a "right of return." An endorsement of this discriminatory language by the 2009 Review Conference would reinforce the damage done eight years ago in Durban.

While the debate on strategy will continue in the next month before the opening of the conference, the record clearly shows that the only means of defeating the OIC in this venue is through a credible threat of a mass withdrawal. A conference limited to Arab and Islamic regimes - among the worst violators of human rights in the world - would delegitimize the entire process.

Without unity among the democracies on the critical issues, the OIC will succeed in creating the appearance of legitimacy, and in restoring the hate-filled sections of the declaration. Instead, leaders who are inclined to declare victory and participate in the review conference must first insure that, at the first sign of this tactic, they will all walk out together, including every member of the European Union. And if this is impossible, particularly regarding the Europeans, they should stay away.

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