

U.S. ‘Personality Assassination’ of a Palestinian Ally

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The report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, which the head of the mission, Judge Richard Goldstone, presented to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on September 29, prematurely plunged the Palestinian Authority (PA) in a short-lived euphoria over what it first envisaged as a political prize that would hit two major birds of its political adversaries simultaneously, namely the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu and its Palestinian rival Hamas.

But the report has backfired to put the very survival of PA’s presidency of Mahmud Abbas in the balance and make both adversaries come out winners with Abbas himself as the only loser, thanks to the blundering of the U.S. Administration of President Barak Obama, who seemed to shoot his own diplomacy in the legs by undermining the leadership of the only rubber – stamping ally of his country among the Palestinian polity, and “threatening” as well his own “global public diplomacy options” and “scrupulously graduated approach to whatever passes for a Middle East Peace process (according to Ian Williams in Foreign Policy in Focus on September 23, 2009).

On April 3, the HRC adopted (following the adoption on January 12, 2009 of resolution S-9/1 by the HRC at the end of its 9th Special Session) a legislation sponsored by Cuba, Egypt and Pakistan, representing the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), the Arab League (AL) and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) respectively, and established the UNFFMGC “to investigate all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law that might have been committed at any time in the context of the military operations that were conducted in Gaza during the period from 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, whether before, during or after.” Goldstone reported violations of both laws, with recommendation to the UN Security council to adopt the findings, the conclusions thereof, including the recommendation that if either Israel or the authorities in Gaza did not conduct their own impartial investigations of the findings within six months, the UN Security Council should take the matter to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Immediately, Netanyahu mobilized his diplomacy, the U.S. Jewish and Zionist lobbyists to recruit Obama’s administration into a bilateral front against the report, because its advance would, in his words, “strike a fatal blow to the (Palestinian and Arab – Israeli) peace process” and because the report’s fate depends “to a large extent on the attitude of the United States.” The U.S. was forthcoming. On September 27, Israeli Haaretz reported that Israeli and American diplomats went to the UN General Assembly “to bury” the 574-page Goldstone Report, and as a result “it appears all but certain” that the report “will not reach any binding international forums.” The U.S. Jewish weekly, the Forward, agreed. Israelis blackmailed the U.S. by a very thinly veiled threat that the report would be a precedent carrying a “hidden danger” to U.S. war record against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan: It

“basically makes it illegal for democratic countries to defend themselves against terrorism,” Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon told the US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, at a meeting during which he asked her to remove the Goldstone report from the UN’s agenda. Spokesman of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, Jonathan Peled, was more vocal: “We need to make sure this report does not endanger the U.S. and other countries,” he said.

U.S. - Israel Collusion

The U.S. Administration picked up from there to act as Israel’s proxy. It indicated it will oppose any effort by the HRC to move the report to the U.N. Security Council and all efforts to refer the report’s findings to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for investigation and possible prosecution. A top White House official told Jewish organizational leaders in an off-the-record phone call that the U.S. strategy was to “quickly” bring the report to its “natural conclusion” within the HRC and not to allow it to go further, indicating that the Obama administration is ready to use the U.S. veto at the U.N. Security Council to deal with any other “difficulties” arising out of the report, adding that his administration also has made clear to the Palestinian Authority that Washington is not pleased with a PA petition to bring the report’s allegations against Israel to the ICC, Jewish participants in the call told Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) on September 23. A week earlier, Susan Rice, described the UNHRC mandate as “unbalanced, one sided and basically unacceptable. We have very serious concerns about many of the recommendations in the report. We will expect and believe that the appropriate venue for this report to be considered is the Human Rights Council and that is our strong view.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters at U.N. headquarters in New York City that Washington considered the “mandate” for the commission and its subsequent report to be “one-sided,” adding that Washington “has grave concerns about the recommendations,” and that the “appropriate” venues to deal with its recommendations are “the institutions within Israel” and “within the international system is the Human Rights Council.”

Similarly, her Assistant for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael Posner, called the report “deeply flawed.” Speaking to the Human Rights Council on September 29, Posner said the United States was “confident that Israel, as a democracy with a well-established commitment to the rule of law, has the institutions and ability to carry out robust investigations into these allegations.” (The Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem documented 773 cases where Israeli forces killed civilians not involved in hostilities during the December-January Israeli war on Gaza, but found that Israel has to date convicted only one soldier of a crime - for stealing a credit card.)

On October 1, U.S. presidential envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, reportedly approached a senior PA official and Hillary Clinton called Mahmoud Abbas in a climax of “intensive diplomacy,” which indicates that the pressure was coordinated at the U.S. White House level. Amira Hass reported in Haaretz that Abbas capitulated to American pressure after a visit from the American consul-general on the same day, and phoned Geneva. Pakistan’s representative Zamir Akram told the 47-member Council that the co-sponsors of the resolution wanted the vote to be postponed until the next session in March. The next day, U.S. Assistant Secretary, Esther Brimmer, confirmed the U.S. diplomatic intervention and told reporters: “We discussed with [Human Rights] council members - and in particular, we discussed with council members and the state of Israel, as well as the Palestinian Authority - how to approach the Goldstone report.” A senior U.S. official told AP that the

Palestinian decision came after “intense diplomacy” by Washington to convince the Palestinian leadership that going ahead with the resolution would harm the Middle East peace process, and “The Palestinians recognized that this was not the best time to go forward with this.”

Viewed from the Middle East, the United States, which had signed agreements with more than seventy nations worldwide to ensure that American military are immune against national and international persecution in cases of human law violations, was perceived as providing a similar shield that would ensure that the Israeli military are similarly immune and above the international law, and has embroiled the Palestinian Authority in this network of political protection of Israeli suspects of human rights violations against its own people in the Gaza Strip.

A ‘Palace Revolt’

U.S officials cite the resumption of the peace process as their *casus belli*. George Mitchell, arrived in the region last Thursday on his fifth tour this year. But the outcome counterproductively boiled down to strengthening the hands of the forces of the opposing camp, namely the Netanyahu government and Hamas, who came out winners, and weakening to the breaking point the pro-U.S. and pro-peace forces, in particular Abbas and his autonomous PA, the only loser.

Coming on the backdrop of the U.S. “intense diplomacy,” which similarly brought Abbas to New York for a summit meeting with Netanyahu and Obama on September 22 against his will and his proclaimed demand for freezing Israel’s Jewish settlement expansion in the West Bank as a precondition for any meetings with Netanyahu, which also had lost Abbas “a lot of credibility with the Palestinian people” (according to Hanan Ashrawi, member of the Abbas - led executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization - PLO), the Obama Administration while acting as the proxy for Israel on Goldstone report has devastated whatever remained of his credibility.

Let alone Hamas, the deferral of the HRC vote on the report has created a palace revolt against Abbas. ABC on October 6 reported he “is in dire political trouble. The U.S. ally is being accused by Palestinians of colluding with Israel and the United States .” His veteran coalition partners of the PLO factions have condemned the move as a moral, national and political “crime.” His government of Premier Salam Fayyad said in a statement Monday that, “We mustn’t give up the opportunity to go after those who committed war crimes during Israel ‘s attack on the Gaza Strip.” Fayyad rejected a resignation in protest by his economy minister Basem Khoury, an independent Christian businessman. His mainstream Fatah movement was divided between those who condemned the move and those who justified it but nonetheless considered it a mistake that must be undone. Many Fatah leaders held Abbas personally responsible. Fourteen Palestinian human and civil rights NGOs joined the protest, demonstrated and expressed their bitter feelings of betrayal of their nine - month old efforts. Palestinian Diaspora were more free to raise hell over his “national treason;” the council of Palestinian organizations in Europe called on Abbas to step down. Vocal voices called for his resignation. Other voices called for the dissolution of the PA. For the first time in history, an Israeli Palestinian political party (Balad, led by Jamal Zahalka, an MP) called for the immediate dismissal of Mahmoud Abbas. In Beirut ‘s Daily Star, Rami Khouri wrote: “Abbas caved in to US pressure, making it clear that he was more concerned about his relations with Washington than relations with, well, his own people.” Abbas’ statement that Arab states were aware of his move in Geneva drew a backlash from a major “peace

partner” like Egypt , whose foreign minister, Ahmed Abu el-Gheit, had no waste of time in confirming that his country had no knowledge beforehand of the Palestinian decision. Squeezed into a corner, the Abbas presidency finally had to admit on record that the Palestinian leadership was “mistaken,” according to the spokesman of the PLO’s executive committee, Yasser Abed Rabbo, and chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat. The “investigation committee” ordered by Abbas to determine who was responsible for his own decision to defer the HRC voting on the report to next March highlighted only the credibility debacle he is facing now. His decision to redress the “mistake’ and again approach the UNHRC for an emergency session to vote on the report has only complicated this debacle further, positioning him on a collision course with the U.S. and making Mitchell’s mission to make progress toward resuming Palestinian - Israeli talks more unlikely.

Abbas’ internal and external politics were in no less disarray than U.S. politics. Sending George Mitchell on his fifth trip to the region this year would neither contain the damage nor would it revive a good faith for resuming the peace process whose momentum has been defused by the fallout from Goldstone report’s diplomatic controversy. The inter - Palestinian reconciliation efforts sponsored by Egypt, which is an indispensable precondition for a successful resumption of peace talks, received a blow that might prove fatal; Cairo reportedly received a request to postpone the October 26 deadline for signing the Palestinian accord agreement. Obama came out a loser with both Israelis and Palestinians: Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren said on October 8 that in Israeli polls, Obama is scoring the lowest ever; a survey published last month by the International Peace Institute, headed by Terje Larsen, the former UN envoy to the region, has found that the U.S. has 80 percent unfavorable rating from the Palestinians, 70 percent do not support Obama and 56 percent do not expect him to achieve progress in the “peace process.” Obama who has just prematurely won the Nobel prize for peace and was recently applauded for announcing a more cooperative approach to the United Nations has shot himself in the legs by recurring to the traditional U.S. threat of “vetoing” the world community. Similarly his pronounced intention of a turnabout in U.S. approach to human rights, symbolized by his decision to close the Guantanamo detention center, has antagonized the world human rights community, first by ignoring more than 300 American civil organizations grouped in the coalition of The US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, which urged his administration to vote in favor of Goldstone’s report in an open letter signed by more than 150 organizations, and second by ignoring a similar plea by a world community of more than 300 organizations. The weaker and less credible Abbas and Obama are perceived, and the stronger Netanyahu becomes, the less credible any efforts for peace making will look, and vice versa.

Abbas Insecure

Palestinian consensus on condemnation has created a volatile environment of insecurity for Abbas. An ongoing personality assassination process has put his personal safety in jeopardy. In the behind the scenes intrigues of the Middle East politics, he might pay with his life for rubber - stamping U.S. advice, to be the second potential victim after late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for “putting all their eggs in U.S. basket.”

Forcing a voluntarily pro - U.S. regime into a de facto U.S. puppet arbitrarily is the sure way to undermine it literary, or practically when it becomes — as a result of a wide spread opposition — incapable of delivery. This could only be interpreted in either one of two ways. Either the United States has decided to “remove” Abbas as it had done with his predecessor Arafat and replace him in another “change of regime,” or Washington has gravely

miscalculated, which is unforgiveable in view of the fact that the Palestinian polity and society are completely vulnerable to U.S. intelligence collecting agencies. It's worth noting in this context that the U.S. man in the PA, the western donors' favorite and veteran of the World Bank, Salam Fayyad, has been almost completely distanced from being politically tarnished by the fallout of both the New York trilateral summit meeting and the Goldstone furore. A third interpretation could not be ruled out. For Obama to move forward with his vehemently pursued plan to resume the Palestinian - Israeli talks, he might have found it more easier to further weaken Abbas into dropping his proclaimed conditions for going along with the resumption of talks after Obama's efforts failed to bring Netanyahu to toe his line on freezing the expansion of Israel's colonial settlement enterprise in the Israeli - occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank of River Jordan.

Obama's description of anti - Americanism as "reflexive" does not apply to Arab, in general, and Palestinian anti - Americanism in particular. An Arab and Islamic consensus has welcomed him at least with the benefit of doubt. The Palestinian regime has been successfully "changed," particularly since the "removal" of late leader Yasser Arafat, into a pro - U.S. one, with U.S. - trained and Israeli - armed security forces. Most of the Arab rulers are either "allies" or strategic "friends," and since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, U.S. - channeled finances that bypass governments have sponsored a burgeoning pro - U.S. civil society NGOs, which are aggressively promoting American liberal values at the grassroots level among Arabs and Palestinians without competition except from similar European - funded bodies. Wide spread Arab and Palestinian anti - Americanism, which is squandering these assets, is U.S. - made and not Arab - made; it is the product of U.S. foreign policies in the region. Cornering Abbas' leadership into an impossible embarrassing situation was only the latest example.

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