

Why did the PA Stall the Vote on the Goldstone Report?

By

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Hours before the UN Human Rights Council voted in Geneva to endorse the Goldstone Report the Palestinian Authority (PA) bowed to US and Israeli pressure and agreed to defer the vote until March 2010.

Both the Obama administration and Israel have exerted intense pressure on the Palestinian delegation to drop its accusations on Israeli war crimes committed during its 22 day military onslaught on the Gaza Strip beginning on 27th December 2008. Benyamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, in particular claimed that, "*if the Goldstone report is referred to the international court at the Hague, it will stop the peace process*". Surely, a more in-depth analysis of this curious remark is required.

The US position on the Goldstone report has mutated from one of clear rejection to deliberate ambiguity. Whilst the initial reaction was that the Report was flawed from its conception and that the Human Rights Council alone should deal with it, a top White House official privately told Jewish organizational leaders that the US strategy would not allow the Report to go further and that the Obama administration would be ready to use its veto at the UN Security Council to deal with any other "*difficulties*" arising out of the Report. When this statement became public, a White House spokesman claimed that the official "*misspoke*" and that the policy on the Goldstone Report remains as articulated initially, leaving many questions unanswered.



Meanwhile, the US representatives in Geneva coerced the Palestinian delegation into deferring its vote by claiming that a renewal of the peace process should be given priority over any diplomatic initiative based on the Goldstone Report. There have been reports that this pressure on the PA came directly from Barack Obama, who personally intervened during the recent New York summit between himself, Netanyahu and Mahmud Abbas.

From the Israeli point of view, there seem to be double standards when it comes to the Israeli government's understanding of the Goldstone report.

First of all, the UN Report did not assess the grounds upon which war was waged in Gaza or the justification of military action; instead its purpose was to investigate the actual conduct of the operation itself. So when Israel claims that the Professor Christine Chinkin's bias is reflected in the report or when Netanyahu warns that if the Palestinians and international community advance the report to the Security Council that would amount to a denial of Israel's "*right to self-defence*" and kill any chance of peace talks, they seem to be quibbling over semantics.

Secondly, the Goldstone report was dismissed by Israel's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Aharon Leshno-Yaar on the grounds that it dealt with "*politics against the State of Israel and not human rights*". In spite of this, the PA was pressured to defer its adoption of the report and succumb to Israel's alleged interest in the peace process. Furthermore, the Israeli Foreign Minister Lierberman met with foreign ministers of 15 different countries on 1st October, the day before the scheduled vote, and asked them to support efforts to counter the report. This casts doubt on who is responsible for politicising the report.

Not only did Abbas submit himself to the whims of the Obama administration and Israel's alleged peace negotiations. He also failed to take into account his own people's suffering during the Israeli incursion in Gaza. As Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon noted, "*Fatah pushed us away to do with Hamas*" (Jerusalem Post 2/10/09).



On top of all the political pressure mentioned above, Israel has also used economic tactics by conditioning permission for a second cellular telephone provider to operate in the West Bank on the PA deferring the report. This is an issue which is of crucial importance to the PA leadership since if the project is not approved by October 15, the PA will be forced to pay a penalty of \$300 million. This de facto bribery means that any similar efforts to hold Israel accountable for Operation Cast Lead will have to wait until at least March 2010.

If seeking accountability for war crimes is an obstacle to the peace process, and if the building of settlements is 'restrained' and no longer frozen, it is debatable whether anything substantial from this 'peace process' will ever remain on the table.

