

The Rose Garden: White House Faced Durban Lobby Push

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Roll Call

March 2, 2009

The Obama administration on Friday told Jewish groups that it will not participate in Durban II, a United Nations conference expected by Jewish leaders to serve as a forum for vitriolic condemnation of Israel.

After an aggressive campaign by leading Jewish groups and their Congressional allies, the administration determined — after attending a preparatory meeting last week for the April session in Geneva — that there was no chance of altering the meeting's agenda so that it did not become an anti-Israeli gathering.

The move is a reassuring sign to some Jewish leaders about President Barack Obama's approach to the Middle East, affirming their cautious optimism about Israel's prospects with Obama in charge. While most Jewish leaders appear to take Obama at his word about his strong support for Israel, there is some concern about whether the new president will be more indulgent than Jewish leaders would like of Israel's enemies in the Middle East and rely too heavily on international organizations — some of which are viewed as less than friendly to Israel — as part of his promised multilateral approach.

"This is seen as a positive indicator on U.S.-Israel relations and how the U.S. will conduct itself on international relations," one Jewish organization official said. "It gives us some comfort."

Under pressure from Jewish groups, the Bush administration withdrew from the first Durban conference in 2001. Bush officials were asked to preempt the Obama team by announcing that the United States would not attend the 2009 session, but they decided to let the Obama administration make its own determination.

Also called the "World Conference Against Racism" and the "Durban Review Conference," the event is run by a U.N. committee that is chaired by Libya and includes Iran and Cuba. The 2001 deliberations reportedly had at times an openly anti-Semitic tone and included calls for reparations by countries that practiced slavery. Israel and Canada had already pledged to boycott the 2009 meeting.

In a conference call with Jewish leaders on Friday, the White House said that not only had it failed to shift the agenda of the conference, but that the proposed direction had gotten even worse, according to participants. The White House official on the teleconference — said by one person familiar with the call to have been Samantha Power of the National Security Council — was firm in stating that unless there were major changes to the program, the United States was not going to Geneva.

Power, who drew controversy during the campaign with derogatory statements about then-candidate and now-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, did not appear to expect any changes, according to participants.

Before last week's conference preparatory session, Jewish groups got on the phone with the White House and with Congressional allies to make sure top administration officials were aware of their grave concerns about U.S. participation at Geneva.

Among those viewed as allies on the issue were Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Joe Lieberman (ID-Conn.), Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), House Minority Whip Eric Cantor (R-Va.), House Foreign Affairs Chairman Howard Berman (D-Calif.), and Reps. Robert Wexler (D-Fla.), Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.), Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Brad Sherman (D-Calif.).

Schumer and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) fired off a letter last week to the administration expressing concerns about U.S. participation in the April meeting. Engel said he privately advised the administration not to go. He added that he didn't take a stand on attendance at last week's meeting, but noted that the move allowed the administration a good "rationale" for not going to the formal Geneva gathering.

Most Israel supporters in Congress and among Jewish groups had acquiesced in the administration's decision to attend the preparatory conference, gambling that the administration would come to the same conclusion they did. Several said they recognized that, given Obama's rhetoric of support for diplomacy and against the Bush administration's perceived "go it alone" stance, the administration at least had to show it tried to work with other nations to alter the conference.

But not all.

Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham H. Foxman said he had opposed Obama officials going to the preliminary meeting. The result was that they "learned what we knew before — that this will not be a conference to deal with racism, but another effort to isolate Israel," he said.

Some Obama opponents view the attendance at the meeting last week as a sign that the administration is too willing to engage with those hostile to the United States and Israel.

The Republican Jewish Coalition sent out an alert last month to contact the White House and lawmakers to end U.S. participation in the conference.

"History will regard President Obama's decision to bring America back to the corrupt Durban project as one of his administration's most shameful moments," the message stated.

Contacted by Roll Call, RJC Executive Director Matthew Brooks said it was "hopelessly naive" of the Obama administration to think it could change the agenda of the gathering. "This is a conference led by Libya, Iran and Cuba," he said.

Instead of putting its toe in the water, Brooks said, the administration should have led an international effort to boycott the session.

Berman had strongly backed the administration's efforts to alter the course of the conference. On Friday, he supported Obama's decision not to go, saying he was "disappointed that the international community is unwilling to stand up to those who are once again hijacking the conference for political expediency."