

UN Security Council Loses Credibility Over Iran, Israel

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The 15-member U.N. Security Council (UNSC) is set to lose its credibility once again as it prepares to impose a third set of sanctions on Iran while failing to pass any strictures on Israel for its continued heavy-handed repression of Palestinians in Gaza.

“Many ask whether the UNSC still has any credibility left,” says Mouin Rabbani, contributing editor to the Washington-based Middle East Report.

But the more pertinent question, he pointed out, “is whether it should have any — after its consistent failure to ensure either peace or security, and of turning a malignantly blind eye to so many threats to peace and security and the basic rights of many millions.”

“Indeed, the UNSC’s continued obsession with Iran’s apparently non-existent nuclear weapons programme, and its dogged determination to do nothing of consequence to address Israel’s very real occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip — to the point of currently failing to issue even the lamest of statements on the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip — speaks volumes,” Rabbani said.

“And this is in a conflict the United Nations played a direct role in creating in 1947,” he added.

After four days of intense closed-door negotiations last week, the UNSC failed to come up either with a resolution against Israel or a unanimous non-binding presidential statement.

With the United States demanding a stronger text critical of Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel, the UNSC lacked consensus for a collective statement condemning Israel’s decision to choke Palestinians in Gaza and cutting off electricity and humanitarian supplies.

The decision-makers in the UNSC, which also has 10 rotating non-permanent members, are the five veto-wielding permanent members, namely the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia.

In a strong statement issued last week, John Dugard, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights, said that Israeli action violates the strict prohibition on collective punishment contained in the Fourth Geneva Convention governing conflicts.

“It also violates one of the basic principles of international humanitarian law that military action must distinguish between military targets and civilian targets,” he said.

Dugard singled out the killing of some 40 Palestinians in Gaza and the targeting of a government office near a wedding party venue resulting in the loss of civilian lives.

“The closure of crossings into Gaza raises very serious questions about Israel’s respect for international law and its commitment to the (Middle East) peace process,” he added.

While it remains paralysed over Israel — as often happens because of the protection afforded to the Jewish state by the United States, Britain and France — the UNSC is readying for a third set of sanctions against Iran.

“For the Security Council to bow to U.S. pressure to impose additional sanctions on Iran despite its lack of an active nuclear weapons programme will seriously harm the U.N.’s credibility,” said Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco.

For more than 26 years, he pointed out, Israel has been in violation of UNSC resolution 487 which calls upon Israel to “place its nuclear facilities under IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguard.”

Yet — despite deciding to “remain seized of the matter” — the Security Council has refused to even threaten sanctions, Zunes told IPS.

Similarly, he said, there have been no threats of sanctions against India and Pakistan for remaining in violation of resolution 1172 to end their nuclear weapons programmes for almost a decade.

“It is particularly ironic that the United States is taking the lead in pushing for U.N. sanctions on a nuclear-related issue, given that, as a result of its recent deal with India, Washington is now in violation of article 8 of resolution 1172, which calls on all states to prevent the export of technology that could in any way assist that country’s nuclear weapons programme,” said Zunes, who is also Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy in Focus project at the Institute for Policy Studies.

The last two UNSC resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran, first in December 2006 and then in March 2007, called on Tehran to suspend all uranium-enrichment related activities and also banned arms sales and froze Iranian assets in overseas financial institutions.

But Iran has consistently maintained that its nuclear programme is essentially civilian-oriented, and that it has no plans to produce nuclear weapons.

Last month, the National Intelligence Estimate — a collective study by all U.S. intelligence agencies — said that Iran has not re-started its nuclear weapons programme, as of mid-2007.

The report, described as a political bombshell which jolted the administration of President George W. Bush, also declared Iran currently has no nuclear weapons.

Despite the widely-circulated report, the UNSC’s proposed move for a third set of sanctions against Iran has challenged the credibility of the U.S.-driven world body itself.

“It’s not much of an exaggeration to characterise the purported world body as the United

Nations of America,” said Rabbani.

A key reason for this, he argued, is the marginalisation of U.N. organs, like the 192-member General Assembly, and the growing monopoly on U.N. decision-making by the Security Council.

He said the latter was constituted in the days when empires still reigned supreme and most of the globe was dominated by less than a handful of great powers, and hasn’t changed since.

“For states like the UK and France to have powers of veto while, for example, Japan or Brazil aren’t even permanent members is an affront to the 21st century,” Rabbani said.

Taken together, he said, this means the United Nations is a thoroughly undemocratic, indeed anti-democratic institution, certainly when compared to other multilateral institutions where decisions are made either by consensus or on the basis of majority votes.

“At least in the World Bank, money talks,” he said.

In this context, the end of the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet rivalry removed many of the remaining obstacles to the ability of a single power to dominate U.N. decision-making.

If the U.S. proved unable to consistently get its own way, it has at least been able to ensure that not a single decision goes against it or favoured allies such as Israel.

A pertinent example was its rush to condemn the Basque separatist organisation, ETA, for the Madrid bombings, in a transparent attempt to bolster then Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar’s prospects for re-election on the eve of the 2005 Spanish parliamentary elections.

“To the best of my knowledge, it has never issued a correction,” said Rabbani.

“In my view, the extraordinary damage done to the U.N. system by the subordination of the entire organisation to the UNSC can only be reversed if and when other U.N. organs such as the General Assembly assume their rightful role in the organization,” he declared. “But this is a virtually unimaginable development in the foreseeable future.”

Meanwhile, “as for the Russians and the Chinese”, an Arab diplomat told IPS, “They are trading off their vetoes in return for Western support to protect their own national interests.”

“The Chinese will continue to cave in to American demands until the successful completion of the Olympics in August,” he added. So, Chinese support for a sanctions resolution on Iran is no surprise.

The Bush administration has come under pressure from human rights activists who say that only a U.S. threat to boycott the Olympics could force the Chinese to drop their opposition to harsh sanctions against Burma (Myanmar) and Sudan, two countries with strong military and economic ties to Beijing.

But the White House is unlikely to support such a boycott.

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