

Western hypocrisy fuelling polarisation

By Karamatullah K. Ghorl

Middle East

THE walkout was intended to be dramatic but turned out being churlish and wreaking of orchestration of a very tentative kind.

As President Ahmedinejad of Iran — the western world's reigning bogey-man because of his outspoken views about Israel — got to the main thrust of his speech about the European hangover on the Holocaust, the European delegates at the UN-sponsored conference on racism, in Geneva, got up, one by one, to walk out on him. It was a crude attempt by the 'civilised' Europeans to throw spanners in the works of the second World Conference against Racism, on its inaugural day, April 20.

The spectacle was risible if not sickening. The proud flag-bearers of free speech were seen fleeing the scene like scared chickens and not prepared to give a hearing to someone saying things deemed unconventional on something deeply controversial, to say the very least. The European guilt on centuries of relentless Jewish persecution has been morphed into an impenetrable shield against the genesis of Israel.

It may be taboo in the new western lexicon to ask any questions about how and why Israel was conjured up. But to Ahmedinejad, and millions others — especially those with a tear to shed on the ruthless Israeli pulverisation of the Palestinians — it's a perfectly kosher question.

The battle lines for the Geneva conclave had been drawn days before it got under way. The saga goes back to the first racism conference at Durban, South Africa, where Israeli apartheid was categorically denounced as 'racism' of a most brutal kind. Israel and the US, with Bush then firmly in the saddle, had boycotted that conference, which didn't deter the UN from going through with it. It wasn't the first time that Israel's inhumane treatment of its captive Palestinian subjects had been equated with racism; years earlier the UN General Assembly had adjudged Zionism for being equal to racism. And who could have known racism and apartheid better than the South Africans who had laboured for decades under its cruelty.

But the organised and orchestrated walkout in Geneva was symptomatic of the deep malaise afflicting the policies of the western world when it comes to erecting an impenetrable wall against any attempt to question Israeli policies, or raise concerns about the unending sufferings of their Palestinian quarry. All this, surprisingly, at the cost of those vaunted ideals and principles supposedly underpinning western democracies, which are routinely on offer to the rest of the world as paradigms of virtue.

It's perfectly alright and legitimate in western eyes for the Israelis to elect an ultra-rightist government, led by a war-monger like Benjamin Netanyahu, who cares two-hoots for the American and European blueprint of two states — Palestinian and Israeli, existing side by side — which the West has been propagating with so much élan to, largely, hoodwink the Arab and Muslim worlds.

However, it's absolutely not okay for the Palestinians to cast their die in favour of Hamas, standing up to a bullying and brutal Israel, in vanguard of the Palestinian yearnings for liberation from the Israeli yoke. Israel, under Netanyahu, will remain a blue-eyed baby to the West but Gaza under Hamas must remain a pariah at the mercy of Israel.

The element of double-standard and double-speak that has seeped so much into western policies since 9/11, raised its ugly head months ago with regard to this important global gathering under the UN banner. The ignoble standard of Israel's unabashed partisanship was raised with gusto by three of its most ardent and admiring votaries: the US, Australia and Canada.

Canada and Australia have fallen under the sway of closet-racist governments with a pronounced anti-immigrant bias. The more regrettable is the case with Canada which has lately deviated diametrically from its erstwhile neutrality. Under statesmen like Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau, Canada was well respected and admired for steering clear of the Arab-Israeli divide. However, its incumbent Conservative PM Stephen Harper has taken the country firmly into the Israeli camp.

And it's US which under President Barack Obama is so much in the focus of an interna-

with its European allies fell back on Plan-B: sabotage the conference proceedings by picking on a common 'enemy.' That 'enemy' is none other than Iran's outspoken, and quite often unguarded, President Ahmedinejad, whose passion for stating the unvarnished truth leaves him no room to stand on diplomatic niceties or under-statements.

Creating bogey-men and whipping them at will, whenever needed, used to be a favourite tool of the US, in particular, and of the Europeans, in general, during the Cold War. Nikita Khrushchev, of the Soviet Union, was a pet *bête noir*, in the 50s. Gamal Abdel Nasser, of Egypt, and Cuba's Fidel Castro adorned that list soon after. Castro has stayed on, longer than anybody else. Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and Yasser Arafat, of course, hogged the list for at least three decades.

But none has been targeted with as much venom and vituperation as Mehmoud Ahmedinejad because he has never been able to learn to mince his words. His utterances about Israel have been cherry-picked in the western capitals to paint him as a modern-day Dracula thirsting for the blood of Israel.

The world had heaved a sigh of relief when Obama, last month, sent a positive signal to Tehran hinting at the possibility of burying the hatchet with Iran and turning a

new leaf. The Iranian leadership, including Ahmedinejad and the supreme Iranian leader, Ali Khamenei, had guardedly welcomed the prospect of putting paid to the sordid

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tional community that had pinned so many hopes on a US self-correcting itself under him. But his admirers, reposing faith in him to be an agent of change in American policy, especially in regard to Israel, has ample reason to be badly disappointed.

Change, in any meaningful sense, is more conspicuous by its absence. The US is as formidable a sheet-anchor of Israeli excesses on Obama's watch as it was under George W. Bush or Bill Clinton. Nearing his first 100 days in the White House, Obama may have already done wonders for the sick and ailing American economy. But his score card is dismal on the foreign policy front.

Since Barack Obama is a very intelligent and erudite man, one would expect him to know that as far as the Arab and Muslim worlds are concerned the most dominant contributory factor in their trust deficit is Washington's unapologetic partisanship on the side of Israel. He seemed fully conscious of this deficit when he included a special message for the Arabs and Muslims in his inaugural address as president. His visit to Turkey and address at the Turkish National Assembly added on to this perception.

But words fade out when not matched with action. Washington did its best, in the UN committee rooms, to scuttle the work of the anti-racism lobby just because it suspected the conference of nurturing an anti-Israel agenda.

Failing in its efforts to make the conference Israel-friendly, Washington, in cahoots

legacy of their strained relations.

Obama should, therefore, be the one, more than anybody else, asking the question, is he not being made a prisoner of the same set of policies, dictated by Israel and its lobbyists in Washington, that have checkmated any possibility of US playing an even-handed role between Israel and the Arab/Islamic world? Obama should be able to plumb the depth of this special interest group which seems more inclined to shielding Israeli interests than safeguarding American.

The ruckus kicked up by this Israeli lobby recently over Obama bowing, out of sheer courtesy and respect, before King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, should be an eye-opener to Obama.

The drama at the Geneva conference cannot be dismissed as spontaneous reaction of friends of Israel. The preposterous walkout was coupled with orchestrated demonstrations against Ahmedinejad, both outside the conference hall as well as inside as a show of strength. Those accusing Ahmedinejad of 'hate speech' indulged in it, themselves, with full impunity.

George Orwell must be turning in his grave; his nightmare of a Britain taken over by a gang of dictatorial 'big brothers' is now playing itself out on a larger European and western stage. The picture is alarming. An endemically divided and polarised world beckons. ■

The writer is a former ambassador.