Why was the Jewish response to Durban a failure?

September 17, 2021

By Jonathan Tobin

JNS.org

<https://www.jns.org/opinion/why-was-the-jewish-response-to-durban-a-failure/>

Exactly 20 years ago, the egregious proceedings of the Durban Conference illustrated how the international community, and in particular, the United Nations had legitimized anti-Semitism. A conference whose purpose was to oppose racism was essentially hijacked by the Palestinians and their allies, who were eager to revive the United Nations’ since-rejected libel about Zionism being racism. In an international community in which diversity and various expressions of national identity and self-determination were celebrated, only the Jews were told that the movement dedicated to their rights and self-determination was illegitimate.

The labeling of Israel as an apartheid state—an outrageous libel that gained new momentum after Durban and became a totem of the success of intersectionality, an ideology that became best known for its willingness to analogize the Palestinian war to destroy the one Jewish state on the planet with the struggle for civil rights in the United States and against racism everywhere. Intersectionality and critical race theory, to which it’s closely related, were initially seen as far-left ideas with little impact on the real world. But from the perspective of 2021, it’s clear that what was embraced at Durban has led to directly to the current situation in which these toxic concepts have not only become embraced by the chattering classes, mainstream media and even leaders of the Democratic Party, but also have effectively given an unprecedented permission slip for anti-Semitism.

Since then, there have been three official follow-up conferences hosted by the United Nations with much the same focus. The most recent, scheduled for Sept. 22 in New York City, is being boycotted by the United States and at least a dozen other countries. But while that is commendable, [as Anne Bayefsky pointed out](https://www.jns.org/opinion/why-is-biden-indifferent-to-a-un-celebration-of-anti-semitism/) earlier this year, the Biden administration has also re-joined the U.N. Human Rights Council, a key prop of the Durban canards, and has done virtually nothing to try to halt the Durban reboot even if it isn’t attending itself.

This problem and its various implications will be addressed in an [important conference](https://www.jns.org/spotlight/webinar-fight-racism-not-jews-the-united-nations-and-the-durban-deceit/), “Fight Racism, Not Jews: The U.N.’s Durban Deceit,” that deserves a wide online audience.

But with the passage of two decades, the questions I think deserve an answer are why the response from the organized Jewish world to this outrageous calumny has been so feeble. How is it possible that the identification of Jews with racism and apartheid has been met with what are, for the most part, perfunctory protests?

How is it that the Jewish world has confronted the apartheid Israel lie that Durban helped put on the ideological map with the sort of complacence and minimal activist response that has essentially given it a pass?

Is this merely a failure of public relations, or does it indicate a more profound inability to comprehend the danger that comes from allowing these ideas to go unchallenged or, even worse, to be treated as reasonable arguments?

And equally important, do those tasked with defending the Jews against rising anti-Semitism understand the consequences of their failure?

Part of the problem stems from one of the great strengths that is also a potential weakness for Jewish groups and those tasked with defending Israel and Zionism. Judaism contains a balance of universalism and parochial concerns; however, to much of the Jewish community, the former has assumed a far greater importance.

Some of that manifests itself in natural and laudable impulses to demonstrate solidarity with minority groups and the cause of civil rights. But it has also led to a willingness to turn a blind eye to trends that are associated with such causes but which are actually toxic to both the public square and to Jewish security.

And it is precisely because of their diffidence in opposing anything that was somehow connected—rightly or wrongly—with anti-racism that the apartheid libel and the intersectional arguments that underpin it became regarded as not so much a frontal attack on Jewish security but merely an over-enthusiastic application of good principles. This willingness not to merely downplay the justice of Zionism and the injustice of the war being waged against Jewish self-determination is itself lamentable. But when added to the inclination of many liberals to regard anti-Zionism as a legitimate point of view that deserved a hearing despite its inherently prejudicial nature, that has continued to undermine the response not just to the spirit of Durban and the apartheid Israel lie; it has materially aided the assault on Israel in various U.N. forums, as well as academic and political venues where intersectionalism has found a foothold.

Liberal Jewish groups that dominate American Jewish life were at one and the same time too busy pursuing domestic agendas and virtue-signaling their disagreements with the policies of various Israeli governments to understand that what was happening under the auspices of the United Nations wasn’t just a meaningless exercise in Third World politics or internationalist propaganda. Rather, it was an idea that had the power to delegitimize not just Israel’s existence, but the rights of Jews everywhere as those connected to the Jewish state ultimately found themselves in the sights of movements determined to treat all those connected to Israel as equally at fault and guilty of oppression.

Expressions of support for Jewish rights and full-throated opposition to the anti-Semitism that had been taken up by supporters of the Palestinians was regarded by many well-meaning Jewish groups as somehow too assertive or parochial. Such stands were also damned as insufficiently concerned about the plight of Palestinians regardless of how often the latter had rejected Israel’s offers of an independent state and peace.

While the United Nations has long since lost the luster that its idealistic origins gave it, much of the organized Jewish world, like various foreign-policy establishments in Western countries, regards multilateralism and diplomacy as an end in and of itself, regardless of whether it advances or actually sets back the causes of freedom and opposition to genuine racism.

Layered into this problem is a tendency among many Jewish groups and many Jews to view anti-Semitism only through the prism of their historical memories and contemporary partisan prisms. This leads groups like the Anti-Defamation League to seeing Jew-hatred as primarily a problem of the far-right, while either ignoring or minimizing the way anti-Semitism has always found a home on the left. The efforts of the Palestinians and their Third World and Islamic allies to use not merely the language of the left to delegitimize Israel’s existence but the structures of international organizations to pursue their goals is largely off the radar screens of Jewish defense groups. Those groups have been too focused on looking for enemies among the extremists of the far-right while regarding anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist invective from the left as less threatening.

To point this out is not to deny that anti-Semitism also exists on the right, and that it can pose a genuine danger. But the almost exclusive focus on the right—motivated in part by the partisan priorities of some of those tasked with fighting anti-Semitism—led to a degree of complacency about the spirit of Durban, the anti-Semitism of the United Nations and intersectionalism that caused it to metastasize in the last decade almost without the anti-Semitism monitors noticing.

It is also true that Israeli diplomacy has largely abandoned the field in international organizations both because its diplomats focus on other crucial matters and because the Jewish state has become inured to the influence of a United Nations that remains dead set against it.

The consequences of this failure are readily apparent in 2021. Other than a few groups that have taken up this task, the organized Jewish world has largely failed to recognize that allowing these slanders to become entrenched in international discourse can have a catastrophic impact on Jewish security. This is partly a matter of underestimating the influence of U.N. agencies. But intersectional ideology has taken hold of academia and, like most toxic ideas that begin on college campuses, and then migrated to the rest of society. The delegitimization of Jewish nationalism and Jewish nationalism alone has created a reality in which anti-Semitism has received a permission slip from intellectuals, activists and opinion-influencers in the media in a way that would have been unthinkable two decades ago. And rather than crying “stop,” liberal groups like the ADL and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs are cheerleading for these dangerous notions.

It’s time the organized Jewish world started treating this problem and its connections to an increasingly popular variant of left-wing anti-Semitism in the United States seriously. The failure of major Jewish groups isn’t just a disgrace; it is creating a dangerous environment in which they have effectively cleared a path for those who hate Israel and the Jews.