The UN Durban anti-racist process: Projecting racism onto Israel

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The third review of the [World Conference against Racism](https://www.un.org/WCAR/) convenes this month in New York. The 2001 Durban conference should have been focused on advancing the fight against racism, but a campaign to substitute the struggle against Zionism for the recently won struggle against apartheid elbowed its way to the top of the agenda. This centering of Israel as the universal symbol of racism threatened a principle that had seemed obvious since Nazism: that opposition to anti-Semitism and opposition to racism were aspects of the same struggle. Portraying oppressors with a Jewish face was nothing new, even on the left. At Durban, however, anti-Semitism surged back into the universe of the possible for a cohort of young human-rights activists and intellectuals who would go on to shape the thinking of a generation.

At the conference, activists distributed caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, fangs dripping with blood and clutching fistfuls of money. Jewish delegates were physically intimidated and threatened, with crowds screaming at them: “You don’t belong to the human race!” Copies of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were on sale. Ostensibly pro-Palestinian protesters took to the streets chanting “Hitler was right” and “Zionism is racism.” This anti-Semitism was tolerated, excused or denied by the conference as a whole.

We write as a master’s student at Columbia University and a sociologist at London University. We have been watching as the anti-Semitic ways of thinking that erupted at Durban have gained traction and legitimacy in the world of antiracist activism and its related academic disciplines. This was a world where we had assumed we would be at home. What happened at Durban helps to explain why that isn’t so.

President Mbeki, Nelson Mandela’s successor, inspired the 2001 conference with his account of the courage of the mass democratic movement, which, fortified by international solidarity, had defeated apartheid with its pseudo-legal practice of registering the “race” of every citizen. After it had lost its dismal Cold War function, apartheid turned out to be surprisingly fragile; it was a disgusting but obsolete vestige of a bygone age.

Israel, the key Jewish response to anti-Semitism, was not like apartheid, and Jews who refused to disavow Israel were not similar to the old white South African elite. The designation was an Orwellian inversion that retained apartheid’s symbolic force while reversing its actual meaning. The conflict between Israel and its neighbors is about national self-determination, not racism; the Palestinian Authority wants a state and Hamas wants to drive out the Jews. Neither understands the Palestinian struggle as one for democracy and equal citizenship.

In truth, Israel’s policies do not resemble apartheid in any way. The existence of Israel is not a desperate attempt to prolong colonial rule, but a nation-state built in their ancestral homeland by Jews who could not rely on “the international community” to guarantee their rights. As we watch the fall of Kabul we are reminded why. These Jews were refugees from the pogroms and the Holocaust, the “enemies of the people” depicted in Soviet propaganda, and the “others” of Arab nationalism and Islamism.

Israel had always been ready to make peace, but in the January before Durban, the peace process had collapsed. Israel was ready to negotiate over land but never considered negotiating itself out of existence. Israel was not a racist elite clinging to privilege but an instrument of Jewish renewal and a survivor of three attempts by the Arab League states to eradicate it.

Today, academics and student activists across the world are signing declarations affirming that the idea that Israel is an apartheid state that must be boycotted and destroyed is foundational both to their scholarship and to their morality. These statements function as loyalty tests for Jews, making their membership in the community conditional. Demonstrating one’s legitimacy by contrasting oneself to evil Jews is an anti-Semitic practice that has been re-animated by self-defined “antiracists” in the 21st century.

Zionism is portrayed as an obstacle to progress and a spreader of racism and Islamophobia. Zionism is treated as a universal evil and as a keystone of a global system of oppression. The term “Zionist” has been substituted for “Jew” in accusations of child murder, control over the media, police violence, betrayal of “the people” and the instigation of imperialist wars. This anti-Semitic thinking portrays that which is most feared in society as having a Jewish face. The anti-Semitic notion of “the Jews” has evolved through the changing ecosystems of human history into a nest of emotions, ideas and images perfectly adapted to symbolize the nightmares of the collective subconscious.

What is more profoundly dreaded in America than racism? Is America founded on human equality or is it corrupt in its heart because of its original sin of slavery? In Britain, the partly addressed nightmare is “colonialism.” Britain was the colonial power and the Israelis overthrew the mandate, but now Brits project their own past onto Israel’s present. Today’s Europe is founded on the certainty that anti-Semitism and racism have been transcended. Europe was often tempted to project its own unacknowledged horrors onto the Jews in its midst and onto other “races” outside. Now Europeans can project their own disavowed racism onto Jews who are no longer European.

It is Europeans who accuse Israelis of failing to learn the lessons of Auschwitz and then of reimporting racism back into now-clean-again Europe, in the form of Islamophobia. In South Africa, the global and nation-founding triumph over apartheid can feel like a token victory as misery, violence, inequality and poverty persist under a state that appears dysfunctional and quite unable to make life better. The temptation to re-focus anger and despair onto an emotionally satisfying symbolic target is irresistible to some.

Recently we have seen the appearance of the slogan “Globalize the Intifada.” It cements a fantasy of Israel as being symbolic of all evil and raises a fantasy of the Palestinian struggle as a universal symbol of the innocence and courage of all those who suffer. “Globalize the Intifada” reconstitutes the passion plays of old Europe, by which good people could identify with the divine, and with the ultimate justice that would be theirs. The meek shall inherit the earth. And they shall do so by defeating Zionism.