20 years since Durban : Most sickening display of Jew-hate since Nazis

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When the UN announced in 1997 that it would be holding a [World Conference Against Racism](https://www.jpost.com/opinion/its-time-to-reject-racism-but-disconnect-from-durban-679947) (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa in 2001, there was great enthusiasm, including in Jewish and pro-Israel circles.

Irwin Cotler, founder and chairman of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, was at the time a lawmaker and human rights lawyer who had defended dissidents like Nelson Mandela and Natan Sharansky and would go on to become Canada’s justice minister. Cotler “greeted the news with anticipation, if not excitement,” he recounted. “It was the first World Conference Against Racism in the 21st century, the first international human rights conference in the 21st century… in Durban, South Africa, the birthplace of apartheid. As someone involved in the anti-apartheid movement, I had a particular anticipation to participate in such a conference.”

Simon Wiesenthal Center Associate Dean Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who had been involved in UNESCO and other international conferences against antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust, also said he “thought Durban was an opportunity to meet with people around the world, especially from the Muslim world, which was my portfolio… Having a major conference in Africa, shortly after apartheid ended, with an African UN secretary-general [Kofi Annan] – these were powerful symbols converging.”

But Cooper was also circumspect ahead of the event. After all, the UN had held world conferences against racism in 1978 and 1983, ostensibly focused on ending apartheid in South Africa, in which declarations that Zionism is racism were a major focus of the proceedings.

And those concerns only increased as regional preparatory meetings for the Durban conference took place around the world.

US Democratic then-senator Tom Lantos, who died in 2008, was an official American delegate of the conference. He wrote in a lengthy, peer-reviewed article in The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs in 2002 that meetings in Strasbourg, Santiago de Chile and Dakar were productive and focused on contemporary racism; the first two even explicitly condemned antisemitism, and none called Zionism racism.

The fourth regional conference was in Tehran. The events surrounding this conference belie claims that the anti-Israel and antisemitic attitudes at the later Durban conference are related to the Second Intifada, which began in September 2000, because Iran hosted UN delegates a month before the intifada broke out.

Cooper and Simon Wiesenthal Center International Relations Director Shimon Samuels – who are American and French, respectively – wished to attend the Tehran conference, but the Iranian hosts said they would not allow Israelis or Jewish NGOs, nor Kurd or Baha’i representatives, to attend. Former Irish president Mary Robinson, who was UN high commissioner for human rights and presided over the Durban conference, despite Iran’s blatant bias, insisted that Iran let everyone in.

“Iran promised again and again to let us in,” Cooper recounted. “We got our invitations right after the last flight for Tehran had already left from Paris,” which meant they could not actually attend.

The events at Durban were foreshadowed by the results of the Tehran conference. There was no mention of racism in the Arab and Muslim world, such as intolerance for non-Muslims, the recent destruction of ancient Buddha statues by the Taliban or mistreatment of women in society. Israel, however, was accused of “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine,” “a new kind of apartheid,” an “increase of racist practices of Zionism.” The declaration warned of “the emergence of racist and violent movements based on racist and discriminatory ideas, in particular, the Zionist movement, which is based on race superiority.” And Robinson congratulated the delegates, saying the meeting was productive.

When the four regions came together in May and June 2001 to form a unified draft, Palestinian suicide bombers were regularly murdering Israeli citizens, but the World Conference Against Racism was drafting a declaration that would paint Israel as the new South Africa and even Nazi Germany, setting the stage to shun it. Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries insisted that the anti-Israel text remain.

Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the US Congress, took particular umbrage with an attempt to change “the Holocaust” to “holocausts” and insert a line about “holocausts and the ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine.”

On June 18, 2001, then-US secretary of state Colin Powell told Robinson it was inappropriate to only single out one country – Israel – and one regional conflict, and that the US would pull out if the language was not removed. In addition, the US would not apologize for slavery, though it would express regret.

Robinson told Lantos she was working to convince Arab states to remove the parts calling Zionism racism, but that they felt settlements must be addressed.

“I urged Robinson to consider the implications of appeasing the radical and fundamentalist forces that wanted to turn the entire aim of the conference on its head,” Lantos later wrote. “In fact, the OIC language on Israeli settlement policy and other wording, twisting the meaning of antisemitism went far beyond the concept that Zionism equals racism. They sought to make Israel itself the focus of hate. The forces promoting the inclusion of this language understood... [that they] could turn the Middle East conflict from a regional territorial dispute (which could be resolved by compromise) into an ideological and existential one that could only be resolved by driving Israel into the sea.”

At the final draft meeting in Geneva, Robinson “refused to reject the twisted notion that the wrong done to the Jews in the Holocaust was equivalent to the pain suffered by the Palestinians in the Middle East,” Lantos, the Holocaust survivor, recalled, saying she legitimized that link. Robinson’s remarks compared “the historical wounds of antisemitism and the Holocaust on the one hand and... the accumulated wounds of displacement and military occupation on the other.”

On August 24, 2001, days before the Durban conference, then-US president George W. Bush said: “We will not have a representative there as long as they pick on Israel. We will not participate in a conference that tries to isolate Israel and denigrates Israel.”

The Betrayal

Anne Bayefsky, who directs the Touro College Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, had represented Canada at the UN Human Rights Commission and in human rights groups at the Fourth World Conference on Women. She arrived in Durban for the August 31 conference’s NGO forum, still hoping to have productive interactions with her colleagues in the world of human rights.

But Bayefsky learned “a hard lesson” about “the ultimate betrayal of Jewish activists and genuine fighters for human rights by international human rights organizations.”

This was Bayefsky’s first UN conference as a representative of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, and she walked around with her mandatory lanyard on, which labeled her as Jewish wherever she went. She could feel the chill that came after many read her name tag.

The NGO forum was a hotbed of antisemitism.

“For me, having experienced the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand, this was the most sickening and unabashed display of hate for Jews I had seen since the Nazi period,” Lantos recounted.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was distributed, along with a flyer with a photo of Adolf Hitler and the message “What if I had won? There would be no Israel.” The Arab Lawyers Union distributed a book of antisemitic caricatures “frighteningly like those seen in the Nazi hate literature in the 1930s,” Lantos wrote.

Cotler said that “20 years later, I can still hear the chants and see the images. Durban indelibly imprinted itself on my memory, on my being... For those of us there, it was a transformative event.”

Cooper said it was the worst antisemitism he had seen since the Simon Wiesenthal Center was founded in 1977, “basically an ambush of Israel, Zionists, Jews and Judaism.”

Jewish representatives would gather at Durban’s Jewish community center for kosher dinner most days and would swap war stories. Cooper said he saw grown men cry.

Durban’s police chief told Cooper that the Jewish delegates should not try to walk to the community center on Shabbat. When Cooper asked why, the officer brought the rabbi to the top tier of the stadium in which the conference took place, where he saw 20,000 anti-Israel protesters. Some were holding a banner that said “Hitler was right,” he recalled.

Their message was that the struggle against apartheid in the 20th century was to dismantle South Africa, and in the 21st it was to dismantle Israel, Cotler said.

Bayefsky felt betrayed by her encounters with colleagues in the human rights world and their responses to the antisemitism.

“Jewish people deeply involved in the international human rights movement and who care about and understood the value in multilateral engagement in the world of human rights… [learned] how little the world’s major international human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch… cared about what happened to Jews,” she recounted.

For example, when there was to be a vote on the draft of the NGO’s declaration, which included a statement that Zionism is racism, and Israel is an apartheid state, implying that Israel must be eliminated, Bayefsky approached the tent for the meeting. She recalled that a representative from Human Rights Watch who she had known for 20 years told her she could not enter, being “a member of a Jewish organization [who] can’t be trusted to be objective.” She turned to someone else from Human Rights First who she’d known for many years, and he refused to stand up for her. Yet a Palestinian NGO representative was allowed in.

“People that I had worked with, broken bread with and had been friends with for a long, long time, sometimes as long as decades, really were prepared at the turn of a dime, when it was hard to stand against the tide, to throw us overboard. That’s exactly what they did,” Bayefsky said.

Lantos said international NGOs claimed that the Bush administration was using Israel to dodge negotiations on slavery reparations.

Cotler, a leading human rights figure, said: “For human rights NGOs to be witness and remain silent while demonological antisemitism was manifesting itself, for them to have participated in that, either by their silence or their complicity, is something those of us who were there were not able to forget. They couldn’t say they didn’t know it was happening. This was a festival of hate.”

Bayefsky does not buy later claims by NGO representatives that they didn’t know about the antisemitism, because they were “in an environment [in which] all around you are posters and signs and people handing out flyers that are overtly antisemitic, all around... It was everywhere, in your face.”

And international human rights NGO representatives were present when the Jewish caucus was banned from speaking before the final draft vote.

“All victims groups were supposed to speak in their own voices, but the Jewish caucus were the only ones that were excluded on the issue of what constituted antisemitism,” Bayefsky said.

In fact, an Israeli-Arab woman from Nazareth representing the World Council of Churches brought up a motion to remove language condemning attacks on synagogues in Paris earlier that year, saying it had nothing to do with racism. The motion was approved by a voice vote, Cooper said.

That was the point at which Jewish delegates decided to walk out, “to the whistles and catcalls of the gatekeepers of civil society,” Cooper recounted.

When Cooper, Bayefsky, Samuels and others tried to hold a press conference about their concerns, “a phalanx of black-clad Iranian women pushed in to stop it,” Cooper said.

The final NGO Forum Declaration called Israel a “racist apartheid state” guilty of “genocide” and was so rife with antisemitic, anti-Israel content that Robinson refused to accept it.

“The official NGO document they produced debases terms like genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity by using them to describe Israeli settlement policies,” Lantos wrote. “The leaders of great Western human rights NGOs like Human Rights Watch, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights and Amnesty International... offered no support to the principled position that the Bush administration took against the singling out of Israel and Jews for attack and criticism at the conference.”

Cooper said he encountered minority groups from India and indigenous people from South America who “spent their last penny to get to Durban with the false hope that their cause would be heard, and they were treated like roadkill.” Lantos said delegations from African states were disappointed that Israel was overshadowing anti-black racism because of the OIC countries’ stance.

Meanwhile, negotiations on the governmental declaration continued. Cotler had contacts from Egypt, Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority from time he had spent working in the Middle East, and tried to discuss the matter with some of them, but encountered anti-Israel “groupthink.”

Lantos found American politician and activist Jesse Jackson in Durban. Jackson said he was negotiating with PA president Yasser Arafat to drop the Zionism is racism language from the declaration, but those talks ended after Arafat gave a speech in which he said Israel’s government wanted to “continue her occupation, settlements and racist practices so as to liquidate our people.”

The US and Israel pulled out of the conference soon after that, realizing the OIC would not compromise. The EU remained, in hopes it could moderate the document. Cotler said he had been in touch with Israel’s deputy foreign minister at the time, Rabbi Michael Melchior, who encouraged the Canadian delegation to remain and speak for the record to condemn the proceedings, which it did.

The end result recognized the “plight of the Palestinian people under occupation.”

“Not only does the final document single out one regional conflict for discussion, it does so in a biased way: the suffering of the Palestinian people is highlighted, but there is no discussion of the Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens,” Lantos wrote months later.

A legacy of hate

The 9/11 attacks took place three days after the Durban conference ended.

“One of my colleagues who had been at the Durban conference said something I never forgot,” Cotler said. “If 9/11 was the Kristallnacht of terror, Durban was the Mein Kampf. Twenty years later, that legacy of Durban is regrettably still with us.”

Similarly, Lantos wrote: “The terrorist attacks on Sept.11 demonstrated the evil such hate can spawn. If we are to prevail in our war against terrorism, we must take to hear the lessons of Durban.”

Durban combined old and new antisemitism, Cotler said, bringing “demonological antisemitism” to the fore, by which “the Jewish people and their state are the enemy of all that is good and the embodiment of all that is evil.

“What we hear today, the indictment of Israel as an imperialist, racist, colonialist, settler, ethnic cleansing, child-murdering, Nazi state was already there in Durban. It’s metastasized since then. What was at the time seen to be horrific and exceptional was now mainstreamed, normalized and legitimated,” he said.

The Durban NGO Forum is considered the inception point of the “Israel apartheid” campaign, which eventually inspired the anti-Israel boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, modeled after the one targeting apartheid South Africa.

Dan Diker, Director of the Program to Counter Political Warfare and BDS at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, told the Jerusalem Post podcast that the Durban NGO forum “provided the seed and the poisonous root of what would become known as the BDS movement, which is an overtly antisemitic movement.”

Durban was also the start of the racialization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is so common in anti-Israel activism today, Diker noted.

“In other words,” he said, “what Durban did was to regularize Israel as an incorrigible evil that was based on systemic racism modeled after the apartheid regime in South Africa... essentially denying Israel any sort of sovereign rights.”

The Durban declaration called Israel “a new kind of apartheid,” meaning they twisted its definition to represent all evil, Diker posited.

“That slander stuck to Israel and became mainstreamed in the international discussion about Israel, and we see today, 20 years later, you go onto any university campus in North America and Israel apartheid is as basic as the core curriculum.”

A racist state is morally repugnant and doesn’t have the right to exist, Diker explained, and as such, the Durban NGO forum wanted to eliminate Israel, not call for a solution – two states or other – between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Durban conference was “a black eye to what the UN stood for,” Cooper said. “Civil society as a bulwark, a redline against antisemitism and that kind of hatred – those things were over. They were not part of the solution; they were another front. And we continue to see that grow on campuses.”

One of the lessons Lantos learned is “NGOs can’t always be counted on to promote liberal values. The official NGO forum... was stacked with anti-American, antisemitic and anti-Israel activists. These activists sought to use an important UN human rights mechanism to advance their radical agenda.”

But Bayefsky said Durban had “both an NGO problem and a governmental problem. One led into the other and created an environment that was obvious before we started.”

Cotler also sees the new permanent UN Human Rights Council inquiry into supposed Israeli war crimes – the only panel of its kind – as part of the aftermath of Durban.

“The legacy of hate has become institutionalized in a way that must be combated,” he said. “The unprecedented resolution not only singles out Israel as others have done, but establishes a permanent investigative inquiry not only into Israeli actions in the occupied territories but into Israel itself, and has appointed three people to head up the commission who have themselves been on record with regard to participating in singling out Israel for selective opprobrium and indictment... It was adopted in the wake of the [May 2021] war between Hamas and Israel, but has no mention of Hamas.”

“We have no intention of lying down”

In 2009 and 2011, the UN held Durban review conferences. In 2009, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the opportunity to deny the Holocaust, calling it an “ambiguous and dubious question” and a “pretext” for Israeli racism against Palestinians. Then, he was invited back to speak two years later. The conferences reaffirmed the 2001 Durban Declaration.

This week, after press time, the UN was set to hold its third Durban review conference, known as Durban IV, marking the 20th anniversary of the World Conference Against Racism in the South African city.

Israeli officials and Jewish groups began working to bring allies to speak out against and boycott the conference since it was announced.

In March, US diplomats in Geneva mentioned the Durban Declaration in a positive light, as part of its commitment to fighting racism, which raised alarm bells.

Ambassador to the UN and the US Gilad Erdan said he raised his concerns to the Biden administration.

“At first, the State Department said it’s not a precedent, but we showed them that it is, so they decided to go back to their previous position,” Erdan said, adding that it was important that the Biden administration, which has emphasized fighting racism, show the Durban format is not the way to do it.

Touro College Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, CAMERA and Human Rights Voices held a virtual counter-event on Sunday, at which Erdan, former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo and others spoke.

Erdan, the grandson of survivors of Auschwitz, compared Durban to Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels’ exhibit “The Eternal Jew,” which legitimized and spread antisemitism in Germany.

“Too many [countries] continued to play along with the farce of Durban, even as its follow-up events featured Iranian president Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust denial,” he said. “In failing to stand up and speak out, these countries and organizations not only encouraged the delegitimization of Israel, but legitimized violence against Jewish communities everywhere, under the banner of the crusade against Israel’s so-called ‘racist regime.’ A direct line connects Durban and the wave of antisemitic incidents we have seen over the past several years.”

At the same time, Erdan said Israel “must continue to work tirelessly to eliminate all manifestations of racism in its society and be a clear moral voice in the international arena against all forms of racial hate.” He also commended the US Jewish community for its part in the civil rights movement.

A diplomatic source in Jerusalem also emphasized that Israel and the Jewish people’s commitment to fighting racism should not be in question, pointing to MASHAV, Israel’s development agency, projects in Africa.

Several speakers at the counter-conference were black, including Likud MK Gadi Yevarkan, South African lawmaker Rev. Kenneth Meshoe and American historian Shelby Steele, pushing back against the anti-Israel message at Durban, which is meant to be a conference against racism with a special focus on people of African descent.

Yevarkan said he was speaking “truth to propaganda... Durban was not and is not a conference for human rights. It is a crucifixion of Jewish human rights. And Durban is a moral embarrassment for the UN itself... Durban has used and abused the suffering of millions of black South African victims of apartheid by racializing Israel.”

The Durban IV draft circulating days before the conference focused on combating “racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.”

It notes an increase in “racist violence, threats to violence, discrimination and stigmatization” against Asians in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, but does not mention the increase in pandemic-related antisemitism and distortion of the Holocaust.

It includes antisemitism among its examples of “prejudices against persons based on their religions or beliefs,” in a paragraph “acknowledg[ing] with deep concern the rise in discrimination, hate speech” and more.

However, it reaffirms the 2001 Durban Declaration, with its singling out of Israel.

At press time, a diplomatic source estimated 25 countries would boycott Durban IV. Twenty of them had already gone public: Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the UK and the US.

In 2011, 14 countries boycotted, and in 2009 there were 10, as opposed to in 2001, when only Israel and the US walked out.

Erdan considered the growing number of countries boycotting Durban, as well as the fact that not one Western country sent a high-level representative to Durban IV or volunteered to lead a roundtable, as a success for Israel “in labeling it antisemitic and anti-Israel.”

Cooper, however, said Israel should have reached out to Abraham Accords countries, as well as states in Africa, South America and elsewhere, “to gently, politely say, look, great things are happening bilaterally,” but they need to speak up against antisemitism as well.

Diker saw these announcements as a “silver lining” in Durban IV, together with an even larger number of countries accepting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, by which the Durban Declaration arguably and the NGO declaration certainly would be considered antisemitic.

It is up to the countries that adopted IHRA “to enforce that moral mandate and not allow international organizations such as the UN to upend and uproot and dismantle their own founding charter, which calls for righting against racism of any kind,” Diker added.

Bayefsky sees the boycotts by major democratic countries as an important milestone: “All the democratic members of the UN Security Council are with Israel on this. They have said no to Durban. That’s a big deal. They don’t agree on everything... Israel’s other solid friends and allies stood shoulder to shoulder with Israel on this abomination... saying this demonization of Israel is antisemitism. That message is getting through whether the other side likes it or not. They cannot make the case that calling for the dismantlement of the Jewish state is somehow unrelated to antisemitism.”

Bayefsky also said that the Jewish delegates who pushed back against antisemitism in 2001 are still involved today.

“We have been able to get the team back together, with some of us who were there and others of a younger generation who were not there and understand the danger to the State of Israel and the Jewish people and aren’t prepared to let it go,” she stated.

“We have no intention of lying down and letting the so-called human rights world walk all over us.”