

15 Years Since Durban — the Conference That Ushered in an Era of Israel-Demonization



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For both supporters and detractors of the state of Israel, no single conference of the past 15 years has had a more enduring impact on the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict than the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa.

The event, which took place in September 2001, was hijacked by many of the over 1,500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in attendance, as well as by governments that reject Israel's right to exist. Multiple instances of antisemitic imagery and language were reported at the UN-sponsored NGO Forum, and Jewish attendees were intimidated and excluded. Even the initial governmental draft, prepared at a UN preparatory conference in Iran, sought to demonize Israel, reinstating the antisemitic slander that Zionism equals racism. In the mainstream Jewish community, the overwhelming majority of which professes the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in their ancestral homeland, there were no delusions as to whom was being targeted as a whole when the term Zionist was used in such a derogatory context. The virulent antisemitism and anti-Israel atmosphere led the United States and Israel to withdraw their delegations, noting the absurdity that a conference intended to combat xenophobia and intolerance instead singled out one particular ethnic group of one particular nation state for demonization.

While some of the anti-Israel rhetoric was ultimately removed from the final governmental Declaration and Programme of Action, the NGO Forum overwhelmingly adopted its own Final Declaration that depicted Israel as committing “crimes against humanity,” “ethnic cleansing,” “apartheid” and “genocide” against the Palestinians. The NGOs at Durban also called for “a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state...the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel.”

Since 2001, this declaration has served as a blueprint for the well-financed NGO network, aiming to demonize and isolate Israel internationally. The grossly unfounded accusations have exhaustively been repeated by anti-Israel groups, which lobby to influence the foreign policies of Israel’s allies, especially in Europe, and pursue investigations by UN bodies, the International Criminal Court and national justice systems of supposed Israeli “war crimes.”

Likewise, Durban marked a turning point with the emergence of BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) campaigns, which are rooted in the strategy set out in the NGO Forum’s Final Declaration. The situation has progressively worsened as Israel is obsessively targeted for boycott, prosecution and condemnation in the UN, European capitals, trade unions, media outlets and on many college campuses.

For many observers, the “Durban Strategy” marked the coming out party for a “new antisemitism.” Unlike more traditional forms of antisemitism, which were by nature more overtly religious or racial in their blatant discrimination towards Jews, new antisemitism conceals the millennia-old hatred in a contemporary package, one better suited for a 21st-century audience. This antisemitism, as reflected in the Durban process, exploits the language of universal human rights and civil society, with NGOs publishing false and distorted allegations regarding Israel, and creating and maintaining double standards that apply only to a single country. New antisemitism goes well beyond any

notion of legitimate criticism of Israel and its policies, and instead promulgates hateful vilification of the country, its people, and its Jewish character.

The impact Durban has had on the Jewish world can also be seen in the strategies adopted in response. Following Durban, the organized Jewish community, and later the Israeli government, recognized the threat of “soft power” warfare, in the form of BDS, lawfare and related campaigns. As a result, a major amount of energy and resources have gone into debunking the political attacks against Israel and its supporters.

To be sure, an alienated, vocal minority that rejects the existence of the state of Israel has also emerged. Over the past few years, some fringes have attempted to make Israel a wedge issue in the community. Many of Israel’s staunchest opponents, in particular pro-BDS forces, use the internal dissent coming from this small Jewish minority as “kosher” affirmation to their vigorous anti-Israel activities.

Yet, to a larger extent, the response to demonization has succeeded, as seen in the failure of BDS campaigns to gain meaningful traction. The NGOs that attended the Durban Review Conference in 2009 reversed some of the damage, providing a counter-voice to the hate which was supplemented by then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Fifteen years later, the “halo effect” that protected NGOs from scrutiny at Durban has been eroded. Many NGOs with misleading names and mission statements using buzzwords like “peace,” “justice” and “human rights” have been called out and exposed for their deceptive agendas.

Many NGOs utilize the financial support they receive to fulfill a genuine humanitarian mandate, despite problems that can emerge when doing so in areas controlled by recognized terrorist groups (see Hamas’ appropriation of aid in Gaza). Still, many other NGOs serve a detrimental role, facilitating hate and mistrust, fueling the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Looking back 15 years, one can see that the Durban conference ushered in an era of coordinated efforts to isolate Israel internationally and advance a strategy of

demonization. Campaigns by NGOs, and counter-efforts to prevent the damage they cause, are now essential elements of the contemporary configuration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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