

# Demonization in Durban: The World Conference Against Racism

BY HARRIS O. SCHOENBERG

**I**N LATE SUMMER 2001, a coalition of Arab and Islamic countries and their allies, along with many nongovernmental human rights organizations (NGOs), used the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held in Durban, South Africa, to demonize Israel. Powerful voices at the conference sought to brand Israel as a racist state, casting doubt on whether there was a place for it in the community of nations. This perspective found its way, explicitly or by implication, into official conference documents. The message of Durban could easily be construed to justify violence against Israel and its citizens of the kind that the Palestinians had reignited a year earlier in the so-called “second intifada,” including suicide bombings. Similar justifications for terrorism would be heard again soon after the conference, in the wake of the horrific events of September 11.

## *Genesis of the Conference*

No century in recorded history has witnessed genocide on a scale comparable to the 20th. The creation of the United Nations after World War II seemed to usher in a new era when such disregard for human life and dignity would not be permitted.

In a search for a new world vision for the fight against group hatred, the UN has convened a series of world conferences on racism and related phenomena. The first two took place in 1978 and 1983, and a major theme of both was dismantling the apartheid system of racial segregation in South Africa. The third conference, scheduled to begin on August 31, 2001, was set for Durban, South Africa, in order to underscore the victory of the South African people—with the substantial help of the UN—over apartheid. Its declared purposes were to increase the level of awareness of the horrors of racism, review existing standards, and formulate con-

crete recommendations that would be applicable around the world.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a conference of governmental representatives, there would be a number of parallel meetings in Durban, the most important of them a forum of nongovernmental human rights organizations, or NGOs.

Two major regional groups at the UN came with their own specific political agendas for the WCAR. The first were the African states. The second were the Muslim/Arab states, organized in the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

The Africans were interested in securing reparations for the slavery practiced in previous centuries in Western countries; slavery in other parts of the world, outside the West—including contemporary manifestations of the phenomenon in Islamic countries—was not on their agenda. Since 1996, the principal supporters of the initiative had demanded an admission that slavery had been a crime against humanity, which required some form of redress from the West. The payment, according to these African states, was not to go to the descendents of the African slaves living across the Atlantic, who were perceived as well-off compared to most Africans. Rather, it would provide debt relief and increased economic aid for African development.

The Muslim and Arab NGOs sought to revive the Zionism-equals-racism libel that the UN General Assembly had adopted on November 10, 1975, but which it later repealed overwhelmingly, 111 to 25, on December 16, 1991,<sup>2</sup> and to add a new action component. They wanted to make use of the South African venue to resurrect the anti-apartheid coalition of third-world states, and use it this time against Israel. The new multiracial South Africa symbolized a successful UN struggle against racism, and Israel was now to be singled out as the next embodiment of that evil, and, like the old apartheid regime in South Africa, one that the international community was obligated to dismantle. Destroying Israel, not merely condemning certain of its policies, was the goal. As UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, secretary general of the WCAR, warned, “the reopening of the

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<sup>1</sup>UN General Assembly Resolution 52/111 of Dec. 12, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>This resolution was one of only two ever to have been repealed by the General Assembly in its first 55 years.

specific debate that Zionism is racism . . . has been used in the historical context to challenge the very existence of the State of Israel itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Several factors facilitated this agenda. Ongoing bloodshed in the Middle East, initiated in late-September 2000 by the Palestinian Authority after it turned down the offer of a Palestinian state worked out by Israel and the U.S. at Camp David, induced a mindset of confrontation in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The violence also generated slanted media images of Israelis as oppressors and Palestinians as innocent victims, so that in those parts of the world where ignorance or naïveté about the Middle East were common, the identification of Zionism with racism and apartheid seemed reasonable. Furthermore, Israel—widely considered a beachhead of the West and especially the United States—became a vicarious target for anti-American, anti-colonial, and anti-globalization sentiment in the developing world. Thus, anger at U.S. “unilateralism” and at its perceived refusal to discuss reparations for the slavery it practiced centuries ago had anti-Israel repercussions.

Cuba, for its part, encouraged the African and the Muslim/Arab groups to press their grievances, thereby hoping to further its own goal of solidifying a coalition of the economically underdeveloped nations of the “South,” and isolating and condemning the industrialized “North.”

Another important factor was the failure of most, though certainly not all, of the NGOs to resist the exploitation of the conference for anti-Israel purposes. To some extent this may have reflected a simple desire to go along with the vocal majority of the “developing world,” or an aversion to the policies of Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. But the problem had deeper roots. A number of leading NGOs had been slow to adapt to a post-cold-war world in which some of the greatest challenges to human rights have come not from governments, but from terrorists, war lords, criminal organizations, and other nongovernmental actors. Such respected human rights organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch never fully grasped that the anti-Israel forces in Durban did not want to *change* the policies of Israel but

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<sup>3</sup>Letter from Mary Robinson to Raji Sourani, Aug. 3, 2001, [http://www.pchrgaza.org/test/mary\\_r2\\_en.htm](http://www.pchrgaza.org/test/mary_r2_en.htm).

to *eliminate* Israel as a Jewish state, and in that sense advocated the suppression of the human rights of Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Making the task of the Israel-haters easier was their already established tradition of using the UN's human-rights apparatus against Israel. The UN Commission on Human Rights annually adopted five anti-Israel resolutions. The first two UN world conferences on women's rights—in Mexico City (1975) and Copenhagen (1980)—explicitly called Zionism a form of racism, even though this was a political issue that had nothing to do with the purpose of these conferences. Likewise, the first UN conference against racism, in 1978, condemned Zionism as racism, and the second, in 1983, called Israeli policies racist.

Another factor contributing to the debacle in Durban was the equivocal role of the WCAR secretary general, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson.<sup>5</sup> When she first took up her position at the UN, Mrs. Robinson had received high marks for seeking to mainstream human rights into all areas of UN activity and promoting the idea that every UN professional should have some training in human rights. It soon became evident, however, that to deter or deflect attacks from governments opposed to a strong human-rights agenda she placed great emphasis on the economic and social "rights" championed by the developing world, and on political "balance." These goals frequently took priority over tackling the most egregious violations of human rights wherever they occurred, and led her to coddle some governments known for their abuses.

To mollify the Arab/Islamic bloc, she voiced criticism of Israeli policies. Thus, after Arab rioters threw stones and shot at Israeli soldiers on the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel in May 1998, High Commissioner Robinson condemned Israel for not permitting the right of "peaceful assembly." When 20 NGOs wrote to her expressing their concern about this breakdown in the credibility of her supposedly nonpolitical office, she did not respond. Later that same year, the Swiss government, as the depositary of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians in Time of War,

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<sup>4</sup>David Matas, "Civil Society Smashes Up," <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/institute/articles/dm020107.html>.

<sup>5</sup>On the Office of the High Commissioner, see Harris O. Schoenberg, *Enhancing and Advancing Human Rights: An Essay on Improving UN Human Rights Instruments, Mechanisms, and Procedures* (Wayne, N.J., 1999), pp. 16–21.

called a meeting of experts for October 27–29 in Geneva to discuss the establishment of general principles for the convention's application. To prevent the politicization of international humanitarian law, the rules of the meeting permitted no mention of specific situations. Nevertheless, High Commissioner Robinson's representative denounced Israel and recommended the adoption of sanctions against it, and when the chairperson called this out of order, the representative defended his actions. Mrs. Robinson later stated that she stood by the words of her representative. Another indication of Mrs. Robinson's eagerness to win the confidence of the Arab/Muslim bloc was her hiring of a Palestinian Arab woman with a long record of activism in the Palestinian cause to serve as a high-level adviser, replacing the highest-level American citizen serving in the commissioner's office.

### *Preparations*

When Secretary General Kofi Annan chose High Commissioner Robinson to run the WCAR, she at first resisted, and then accepted the task with great reluctance, perhaps anticipating problems. The UN General Assembly determined that the WCAR be preceded by four regional conferences, and Mrs. Robinson made positive contributions to the first three, organizing meetings of experts to add depth to the deliberations and pressing governments to confront the impact of racial discrimination on the political, economic, and social development of their countries. These conferences took place in Strasbourg, France, October 11–13, 2000 (Europe); Santiago, Chile, December 5–7, 2000 (the Americas); and Dakar, Senegal, January 22–24, 2001 (Africa). The documents they generated focused on ways to combat the evils of racism, xenophobia, slavery, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, with no indication of the assault on Israel that was to come.

The Clinton administration, opposed in principle to costly UN conferences outside of UN headquarters and well aware of the bad experiences the U.S. had had with previous UN conferences on racism, went along, albeit unenthusiastically, and established a task force to lay the groundwork for American participation. When President Clinton left office on January 20, 2001, the first three regional meetings to prepare for the WCAR had already taken place.

The incoming Bush administration was briefed about the plans

for the conference in January. High Commissioner Robinson visited Washington on February 8, and Secretary of State Colin Powell told her he supported the idea. A State Department spokesman explained to reporters that Powell had a “personal as well as professional interest” in the event.<sup>6</sup>

The fourth and final regional preparatory meeting, the one for the UN’s Asian region, was scheduled for Tehran on February 19–21, 2001. Iran, the host government, did not recognize Israel and indeed favored its elimination, and the ongoing intifada ensured an anti-Israel atmosphere at the heavily Arab and Muslim Asian meeting. Iran barred the Israeli delegation, as well as the Bahá’i International Community and Kurdish NGOs. It effectively excluded non-Israeli Jewish NGOs as well: it granted their people visas—negotiated through High Commissioner Robinson—but too late for transportation to be arranged. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which quickly took control of the Tehran meeting, even kept Australia and New Zealand from participating, presumably fearing any Western voice in the proceedings. The day the conference opened, the Iranian government placed an article in the *Tehran Times* denying the Holocaust. The Declaration and Plan of Action that emerged in Tehran (it was actually negotiated beforehand, though the anti-Israel portion was strengthened in Tehran) singled out Israel for its alleged “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population of historic Palestine,” described as “a new kind of apartheid, a crime against humanity.” Zionism, the text stated, was “based on racial superiority.”<sup>7</sup>

High Commissioner Robinson offered no appeal for tolerance, respect, or understanding of non-Muslims in the Middle East, nor did she mention the Taliban’s destruction of sacred Buddhist artifacts in Afghanistan. Though an avowed champion of women’s rights, she did not call for elevating the status of women in Islamic society, and she reportedly even told the women who were there representing NGOs that they should wear veils or head scarves in conformity with local law. Mrs. Robinson did criticize some points in the Tehran document, but said nothing about the singling out

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<sup>6</sup>Tom Lantos, “The Durban Debacle: An Insider’s View of the UN World Conference Against Racism,” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26, Spring 2002, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup>UN Document A/CONF.189/PC.2/9, the Report of the Asian Preparatory Meeting, February 19–21, 2001.

of Israel for condemnation. Later, she ascribed the anti-Israel language to “the situation in the Palestinian occupied territories . . .” In what Congressman Tom Lantos (D., Cal.)—a founding member of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and a member of the U.S. delegation to the WCAR—called “a baffling statement to the press” upon the conclusion of the Tehran meeting, High Commissioner Robinson characterized it as a “productive dialogue” and congratulated the delegates. “From that moment,” Lantos noted, “the conference began to take a dangerous trajectory that became ever more difficult to correct.”<sup>8</sup>

At another preparatory meeting, held May 21–June 1 in Geneva, with all governments and regions in attendance to coordinate the four sets of regional recommendations and make them into one document, Mrs. Robinson presented a draft, in the name of the UN Secretariat, which omitted the abusive Tehran language. The Arab and Muslim states rejected her version and secured the “bracketed” (tentative; proposed but not agreed) inclusion of the Tehran language about Israel and Zionism. In addition, they perverted the language of the conference document by adding proposals insisting that Israeli policies be described as anti-Semitic, since Arabs were, they said, Semites. They also proposed that references to the Holocaust be put in the plural so as to include what Israel was allegedly doing to the Palestinians.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, Secretary of State Powell told High Commissioner Robinson that the U.S. would not participate in the Durban conference if the condemnation of Israel remained in the document, pointing out that no state was supposed to be singled out, and that the Arab conflict with Israel was political, not racial. Another problem the U.S. had with the text was the proposed “apology” that the West was to make for slavery, adopted from the document approved at the African regional meeting in Dakar. Such an apology might subject the U.S. and other countries to pay compensation. Powell said that while the U.S. was prepared to express regrets, there could be no apology.<sup>10</sup>

With no agreement reached, another, truly “final,” preparatory

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<sup>8</sup>Lantos, “Durban Debacle,” p. 36.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 37. Mrs. Robinson’s draft clearly would have had a better chance of passage had she arranged for South Africa, the chair, to propose it.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

meeting was needed to iron out these issues, and it convened in Geneva on July 30. In her remarks at the opening session, High Commissioner Robinson said that references to Zionism as a form of racism were not only inappropriate, but could threaten the success of the Durban conference. Raji Sourani, director of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, responded in a letter that he was “shocked and dismayed” that this issue was off the table since “Zionism as a racist doctrine is not a problem of the past, rather it continues to prevail today as a major obstacle . . .”<sup>11</sup> That same view was reflected in a “non-paper” prepared and circulated by the OIC that restored some of the most anti-Israel language of the Tehran document.

Congressman Lantos, who was part of the U.S. delegation in Geneva, believes that a developing consensus on how to handle the slavery issue came close to unifying the Western and African representatives in opposition to the anti-Israel language. However, he notes, Mary Robinson took a different tack and encouraged others to do so as well. At a crucial moment on August 9, she made a carefully prepared speech—the text was circulated to the delegates beforehand—proposing the inclusion of both “the historical wounds of anti-Semitism and of the Holocaust on the one hand, and the accumulated wounds of displacement and military occupation on the other.” While insisting that the final document denounce anti-Semitism and not reopen the charge that Zionism was a form of racism, she endorsed and legitimized the inclusion of “Palestinian suffering” in the conference document, although it was silent on any other cases of such “suffering” elsewhere in the world. Mrs. Robinson also undercut the U.S. strategy of resolving all disputes over language before Durban, and declared, in the same speech, that the major issues could be debated at the WCAR. The projected compromise over slavery broke down as well, and this issue too would haunt the Durban conference.<sup>12</sup>

David A. Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, wrote to Mrs. Robinson that her insistence on a section about the Middle East in the WCAR document was “deeply troubling.” The issue, he wrote, “is simply not germane to a con-

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<sup>11</sup>Letter of Raji Sourani to Mary Robinson, Aug. 1, 2001, [http://www.pchrgaza.org/test/mary\\_r2\\_en.htm](http://www.pchrgaza.org/test/mary_r2_en.htm).

<sup>12</sup>Lantos, “Durban Debacle,” pp. 43–44.



ference on racism and the appropriate means to combat racism." Harris also protested her equation of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, on the one hand, and displacement and military occupation, on the other. The Holocaust, he reminded her, was "the most monstrous genocidal act of human history." Rather than resist efforts, alongside the United States, to keep out extraneous issues, Mrs. Robinson was prolonging and exacerbating the agenda dispute, he stated.<sup>13</sup>

Several NGOs, Jewish and non-Jewish, warned about the possible revival of Zionism=racism at Durban. Major Jewish organizations, as well as the UN Caucus of Jewish NGOs and the Center for UN Reform Education, emphasized the harm that a new condemnation of Zionism would have on the Jewish people and Israel. The U.S. branch of the United Nations Association, the NGO dedicated to promoting the role of the UN, held a high-level briefing at UN headquarters, pointing out that such an attack on Israel would damage the UN and its programs by endangering U.S. engagement in its work. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, while avoiding the substantive issues, also opposed raising Zionism=racism since that would bring up "ideologies," and these should not be considered at a conference on human rights.

In late August, Secretary Powell, dissatisfied with the Geneva meeting's insistence on keeping the Middle East on the WCAR agenda, decided not to go himself to Durban, but to send a small group of State Department negotiators.<sup>14</sup> Jewish organizations were divided over whether to attend. On the one hand, they were reluctant to lend legitimacy to what was now likely to be a disaster, and yet, on the other hand, it was possible that their presence could limit the damage. Among the Jewish NGOs that sent representatives were the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith International, Hadassah, the International Council of Jewish Women, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), UN Watch, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and the World Union of Jewish Students. These groups formed a Jewish Caucus at the NGO Forum in Durban.

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<sup>13</sup>Letter of from David A. Harris to Mary Robinson, Aug. 9, 2001, *New York Times*, Aug. 17, p. A18.

<sup>14</sup>*New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2001, p. A6.

*Delegitimizing Israel and the Jewish People*

Apart from the actual UN conference of member states, there were also several parallel meetings planned for Durban—of youth, of victims, of political and other distinguished personalities—that were expected to broaden the impact of the conference. The one that attracted the most publicity was the NGO Forum.

NGOs are voluntary associations of citizens working on human-rights issues—in this instance, on practical measures to combat racism. However, many of the NGOs at Durban were not independent voluntary associations of citizens. Some were organized by their governments, and were thus actually GONGOs—government-organized NGOs, often led by professional agitators. For example, the Iraqi government sent its GONGOs to combat both the U.S. and Israel. Cubans sent theirs to fight for the transfer of wealth from the developed world to the developing world and to help the Palestinians agitate against Israel and the Jewish people.

A key role would be played by SANGOCO, the South African National NGO Coalition, which the UN chose to organize and host the NGO Forum, and which dominated its International Steering Committee. SANGOCO had been founded in 1995 by people associated with the African National Congress (ANC), which, in turn, had a long and close association—political, financial, and military—with the PLO.<sup>15</sup>

The reason that many governments had set up their own NGOs was that a good number of UN member-states wanted above all to prevent the exposure of harsh truths about themselves that might come out at the meetings. There was “a lot of nervousness” about the conference, since almost every participating country had something to hide.<sup>16</sup> Some examples were the plight of migrant workers and Gypsies in Europe, Dalits in India, and slaves in contemporary North Africa and South Asia. South Africa, the host nation, worried that its failure, ten years after the end of apartheid, to provide minimal amenities for its people—relative safety from

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<sup>15</sup>See Arye Oded, *Africa, the PLO, and Israel* (Jerusalem, 1990), Policy Studies of the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem 37, pp. 23–25.

<sup>16</sup>*New York Times*, Mar. 4, 2001, p. A12.

violent crime, decent housing, adequate education and health care, safe drinking water, and jobs—might prove embarrassing.<sup>17</sup>

A coalition of four groups transformed the NGO Forum from a conference with a global thrust into one whose overriding objective was “to brand one country and one people as uniquely, transcendently evil.”<sup>18</sup>

The first consisted of Palestinian NGOs—among them the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), and LAW: The Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment.

The second consisted of Arab and Muslim activists, among them established organizations such as the Cairo-based Arab Lawyers Union. While many of these activists were officially accredited to the NGO Forum, there were also ordinary Muslim South Africans, who participated in the proceedings as well as in demonstrations against Israel.

The third group, in this postcommunist era, were the people who addressed each other as “comrade,” insisted that the “liberal bourgeois” model of human rights was inappropriate,<sup>19</sup> said they were for the redistribution of wealth, admired Marxism, and wildly cheered Fidel Castro. This militantly secularist camp of leftists was, on the surface, ideologically distant from the Arab and Islamic militants. Nevertheless, as Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, executive director of the International League for Human Rights, explains, the “aggressive anti-Western Marxist-based ideologies” of Cuba and its radical allies in Africa and other parts of the developing world “make them actually profoundly conservative in a funny way in terms of rejecting modernity”<sup>20</sup> After all, Cuba and the Soviet Union had initiated the Zionism=racism libel of 1975. Similarly, in Durban as at the preparatory meetings before it, the Cuban

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<sup>17</sup>A million jobs had reportedly been lost since the end of apartheid. A survey conducted in 2001 by the South African Institute of Race Relations found that South Africans ranked racism as the country’s ninth biggest problem, with the amenities mentioned in the text considered more important. Peter Beinart, “Going South,” *New Republic*, Sept. 17, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Charles Krauthammer, “Disgrace in Durban,” *Weekly Standard*, Sept. 17, 2001, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Cuba’s contribution to the report by the UN Commission on Human Rights’ Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia, in UN Document E/CN.4/2001/21 of Feb. 6, 2001.

<sup>20</sup>Catherine Fitzpatrick, “Durban/Dur-dom” [Durban/ Madhouse], unpublished manuscript, p. 23. Many South Africans at the conference were reportedly attracted to the Islamo-leftist rhetoric, especially since they believed that Muammar Qaddafi, Yasir Arafat, and

pupils of the old USSR were in the vanguard of the onslaught against the United States, Israel, and the Jewish people, even sending some governmental delegates into the NGO Forum to reinforce the Arab and Muslim cadres.

These groups prevailed at the NGO Forum because they were allowed to do so by the large international human rights NGOs—particularly Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and, most shamelessly, the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH)—and by the equivocations of High Commissioner Mary Robinson.

### *The Nongovernmental Meetings*

On August 7, as the final Geneva meeting drew to a close, several representatives of NGOs spoke with Mrs. Robinson regarding their concerns about the Durban NGO Forum, which, like the intergovernmental meetings, was preparing a comprehensive document for adoption. They cited “the disrespect, disenfranchisement and hostility” against Jewish representatives in the preparations for the NGO part of the Durban conference, and that “the climate was getting worse.” Mrs. Robinson said that she was troubled by their report. She promised to use her good offices to address the language in the NGO document and also “the non-inclusive and secretive nature of the [NGO] drafting process,” even though “political considerations” required the inclusion of language about the situation in the Middle East in the governmental conference document.<sup>21</sup>

The Durban proceedings began on August 26 with a day-and-a-half “youth summit” for students. The rationale for this was that young people are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of racial discrimination, or to experiencing the feelings of alienation that may cause them to discriminate against others. Ironically, the youth meeting itself proved the point, and set the scene for what followed: some 200 participants received free T-shirts that carried the official logo of the conference along with a slogan identifying Israel as an evil “apartheid” state. Over the course of the next

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Fidel Castro had supported them in their liberation struggle. See Michael Hamlyn, “Banners, Beatings and Boycotts,” *Jerusalem Report*, Feb. 11, 2002, pp. 34–35.

<sup>21</sup>Lantos, “Durban Debacle,” p. 43.

week, the Jewish students tried to distribute a T-shirt reading "Fight Racism, Not Jews," followed by a quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., declaring that when people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews. Mercia Andrews, president of SANGOCO, tried to stop its distribution. A delegation from the World Union of Jewish Students participated in the proceedings of the "youth summit" until its proposal for an end to violence and a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was rejected and its representatives were refused permission to speak.

The NGO Forum opened on August 28.<sup>22</sup> On the great stage at Kingsmead Stadium in Durban, a performance by Zulu dancers welcomed the participants. Already at that performance there were harbingers of things to come. Opposite the dancers were huge printed banners screaming out: "STOP THE MASSACRE OF THE PALESTINIANS" and "RACISM = ISRAELI RULE." At the registration desk, a representative of the organizing committee wore the anti-Israel T-shirt with the official conference logo that had been distributed at the Youth Summit. At the opening ceremony, Mercia Andrews appeared on stage with a Palestinian kaffiyeh around her neck and announced, to considerable applause, that the forum would deal with "the Israeli occupation of Palestine." She did not refer to any examples of actual racial discrimination that the conference had been called to address.

Meetings of the NGOs took place in large white tents that were set up on the Kingsmead cricket field, and "the atmosphere was folksy and vibrant, with posters advertising a wide range of people's struggles worldwide." But the Jewish participants were to experience a different reality. "Hatred for Israel has become almost a folk idea," noted a South African Jewish journalist who was there, "shared in brotherhood among different people who feel themselves oppressed in one way or another."<sup>23</sup> One particularly popular flyer that was handed out showed a photograph of Adolf Hitler asking the question, "What if I had won?" Below the photo, the page was divided in half. On one side were the good things—no Israel and no Palestinian bloodshed—and on the other was the

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<sup>22</sup>Matas, "Civil Society Smashes Up," is a vivid eyewitness account of the NGO Forum by the representative of B'nai Brith Canada. Much of the description that follows is derived from it.

<sup>23</sup>Geoff Sifrin quoted in *New York Jewish Week*, Aug. 31, 2001, p. 30.

one bad thing—Hitler would not have permitted the production of the Volkswagen Beetle. On September 9, upon the conclusion of the conference, the *Sunday Times*, a South African newspaper, reported that 20,000 copies of this flyer had been printed and distributed by Yousef Deedat of the Islamic Propagation Centre, who claimed to be an associate of Osama bin Laden and was on the payroll of the bin Laden family.

On August 31—the day that the governmental conference got under way while the NGO Forum was still in session—thousands were bused in from Cape Town for a march that combined the grievances of the Landless People's Movement together with the cause of the Palestinians. One journalist remarked: "Here were South Africans of color—undisputed symbols of a just and triumphant cause—marching with their anti-imperialist, anti-globalization, antiracist supporters in loud denunciation of the next international pariah: The Jewish State."<sup>24</sup> But it was not Israel alone that was under attack. The marchers ended up at the Durban Jewish Club, making clear that, in their minds, Jews and the State of Israel were one. Built in 1931 down the road from the Kingsmead cricket grounds, it was the only place where the Jewish participants thought they could meet and enjoy kosher meals together. Instead, it was closed as a safety precaution, and surrounded by South African riot police.

Nearby, in the exhibition tent set up for the distribution of antiracist literature, that most notorious of anti-Semitic tracts, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was for sale. Arab groups brought huge boxes there, full of banners and posters. They also provided free kaffiyeh scarves and T-shirts. One of the latter portrayed the Palestinian boy, Muhammad al-Dura, who had been caught in a crossfire and killed at the outset of the new intifada in 2000, and others proclaiming that "Israel Is an Apartheid State" and "Zionism Is Racism."

There were even Jews who gave aid and comfort to the haters of Israel. A number of left-wing Israeli Jewish groups that agreed with conference organizers that Israel practiced apartheid sent people to Durban to say so. At the other end of the Jewish ideological spectrum, three men from the ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist Neturei

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<sup>24</sup>Stuart Schoffman, "Deconstructing Durban," *Jerusalem Report*, Oct. 8, 2001, p. 36.

Karta, wearing black coats and sidelocks, arrived in Durban to proclaim to the media that "Zionism is the antithesis of Judaism." One carried a large red-bordered placard that read, "Authentic RABBIS have always opposed Zionism," and although he represented no legitimate NGO, his photo was reproduced on the front page of SANGOCO's Internet site, with the caption: "Delegates having their say"<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere on the grounds of the NGO Forum, representatives of the Arab Lawyers Union displayed posters and distributed pamphlets filled with grotesque caricatures of hook-nosed Jews depicted as Nazis, spearing Arab children. The Jews dripped blood from their fangs, and missiles bulged from their eyes. Nearby, pots of money were depicted strewn on the ground.<sup>26</sup> UN Watch complained to the forum's International Steering Committee and asked it to recall the credentials of the Arab Lawyers Union, but the request was refused with the explanation that the material was not racist but "political," and therefore constituted no problem.<sup>27</sup> High Commissioner Robinson denounced this blatant anti-Semitism in no uncertain terms, and identified herself with the Jews under attack, saying, "I am a Jew because these victims are hurting."<sup>28</sup> But she did not call for the Arab Lawyers Union to be ousted from the conference.

The Arabs and their friends dominated many of the "caucuses" and "commissions" that conducted the NGO sessions. One session run by the Palestinians had the title "The Palestinians and the New Apartheid." The session on the environment and racism was run by a Palestinian, as was the one on hate crimes, where Israel's existence was itself defined as a "hate crime." The Jewish Caucus, made up of the Jewish NGOs, had arranged for a session on anti-Semitism as a form of racial discrimination and intolerance, but it was disrupted by Arabs and their allies. The Jewish Caucus then called a press conference, but it too was broken up by hostile demonstrators, forcing "the abandonment of what had been hoped

<sup>25</sup>See <http://www.racism.org.za/intro.html>.

<sup>26</sup>See Michael J. Jordan, "Jewish delegates to U.N. forum enduring a circus of Jew baiting," JTA [Jewish Telegraphic Agency], Daily Electronic Edition, Sept. 4, 2001.

<sup>27</sup>Janine Zacharia in *Jerusalem Post*, Internet Edition, Aug. 31, 2001.

<sup>28</sup>Gay McDougall, "The World Conference Against Racism: Through a Wider Lens," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26, Summer/Fall 2002, p. 145.

would be a rare opportunity for Jewish voices to be heard." A workshop on the subject of Holocaust denial, which had been on the formal program of the NGO Forum, had to be canceled on the advice of security officers.<sup>29</sup>

### *The NGO Declaration and Action Program*

The vote on a "declaration," a set of resolutions emerging from the NGO Forum, was scheduled for Saturday, September 1, and Jewish delegates asked that it be held after sundown so that Sabbath observers might participate. Even though the Jewish Caucus had a natural concern about how the declaration would handle the issues of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, a concern that made them, at the very least, interested parties, the steering committee turned down their request. But the dispute turned out to be academic: translations of the draft document were not ready on time, and the voting had to be postponed until after the official closing session, when the Jewish Sabbath had already concluded. As the Jewish participants returned to the forum on Saturday night, the closing session was still on; Fidel Castro was in the middle of a two-hour-long tirade, mostly directed against the United States. This dictator was wildly cheered.

After Castro finished, the proposed declaration was to come up for a vote. Under the agreed-upon rules of procedure for framing the declaration, each "victim group" had the right to define its own experience and describe the nature of its victimization. Thus the anti-Israel coalition of NGOs had proposed language that labeled Israel a "racist apartheid state," revived the equation of Zionism and racism, recommended sanctions against Israel, and demanded an end to the "ongoing Israeli systematic perpetration of racist crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing." For its part, the Jewish Caucus had submitted a section on anti-Semitism whose "Paragraph 14" denounced attacks on synagogues and Jews anywhere in the world that were motivated by anti-Zionism that had spilled over into anti-Semitic acts and violence. However, the World Council of Churches, speaking for the Ecumenical Caucus and act-

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<sup>29</sup>Jeremy Jones, "Durban Daze," *The Review* (Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council), Oct. 2001, pp. 32, 21.



ing at the request of the Palestinian NGOs, proposed the deletion of Paragraph 14.

The chair refused to allow debate or discussion on the issue, and, despite a procedural protest by the representative of the Jewish Caucus, the delegates went ahead and voted to drop the paragraph. Thus the Jews became the only official "victim caucus" at the NGO Forum to have the language it presented challenged and eliminated, and it was done in a way that has aptly been described as "intimidating and undemocratic."<sup>30</sup>

The Jews then walked out, chanting "Shame! Shame! Shame!" to the taunts of the assembled, and the Palestinians called back: "Free, free Palestine."<sup>31</sup> Many of the Jews felt personally threatened, and their non-Jewish friends feared for their safety. "I was frankly frightened," recalled Catherine Fitzpatrick of the International League for Human Rights. "I have never [before] been in a situation, at home or in any foreign country, where I literally felt I had to cover Jewish colleagues with my body, and watch out lest they be physically attacked."<sup>32</sup> To their credit, the Central and East European NGOs also left the hall in protest; they returned later hoping to vote against the entire declaration, but no vote was taken at the time. Later, the West Europeans and the Roma (Gypsies) walked out as well, one of the latter taking the microphone before leaving to explain that they could not approve the hate language in the declaration. Three other caucuses—Cultural Diversity, South Asia, and Peace—also distanced themselves from the declaration.

With the Jewish participants absent, the Palestinian and other Arab NGOs appropriated the victimization of the Jewish people by adding "anti-Arab racism" to the definition of anti-Semitism.<sup>33</sup> In the middle of the night, a rump session of some 100–200 people—out of 7,000 official participants—took it upon themselves to approve the declaration. But the anti-Israel and anti-Jewish forces were not yet satisfied. Ronald Eissens of the Magenta

<sup>30</sup>McDougall, "World Conference Against Racism," p. 134.

<sup>31</sup>Yair Sheleg in *Ha'aretz*, Internet English Edition, Sept. 28, 2001.

<sup>32</sup>Fitzpatrick, "Durban/Dur-dom," p. 21.

<sup>33</sup>In his address to the governmental conference, read by Ambassador Mordechai Yedid, Israel's deputy foreign minister, Michael Melchior, commented that efforts to eradicate the plain meaning of the word were not only anti-Semitic, they were anti-semantic.

Foundation, a Dutch NGO, describes what happened two days later:<sup>34</sup>

On the evening of September 3 members of the Palestinian Caucus together with a few members of the ISC [International Steering Committee] and SANGOCO invaded the office where the drafting committee was working hard to incorporate all amendments and new paragraphs that resulted from the Declaration adoption meeting on September 1. They demanded from the drafters that some paragraphs be changed and some put into another section (for example, the paragraphs on anti-Semitism should be moved to the section on Palestine since anti-Semitism was, "in fact," against "Semites," which are Arab people).<sup>35</sup>

The drafters asked them to leave several times since their presence was illegal. No one, not even ISC members, were allowed to enter the drafting room. This did not help. The invaders shouted, screamed and intimidated the drafters. Recounted one drafter: "They shouted that we were all Jewlovers since we did not want to make any changes. We told them they were trying to corrupt the process and that they should get out. They did not listen. The ISC members who were present gave them full support." Drafters were personally threatened. Bizarre remarks were made: "You look Jewish. Now we understand why you do not want to change anything in the draft!" The invaders left only when they managed to grab some diskettes.

In the end, the official NGO document did not include the statement on anti-Semitism in the section on Palestine, but maintained it as a separate section. However it did add to it that "Arabs as a Semitic people have also suffered from alternative forms of anti-Semitism, manifesting itself as anti-Arab discrimination and for those Arabs who are Muslim, also as Islamophobia." Under the rubric of "colonialism and foreign occupation," the declaration denounced Israel's "brand of racism and apartheid and other racist crimes against humanity" as well as "ethnic cleansing" in the territories, identified the denial of the Palestinians' "right of return to their homes of origin" as racist, and asserted the right of the Palestinians "to resist such occupation by any means provided under international law." These sentiments appeared again under the "Palestinians and Palestine" item, which also accused Israel of "genocide," called for an end to its "racist crimes," and charged that

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<sup>34</sup><http://www.icare.to> (Internet Centre Anti-Racism Europe), Oct. 8, 2001.

<sup>35</sup>The section in which a paragraph was placed was crucial, since, according to the rules, it determined which group had the right to decide on the wording in that paragraph.

Israeli policies particularly targeted women and children. In its "action program," the NGO document recommended the dismantling of all Jewish settlements in the territories, the trial of Israeli nationals before an international war-crimes tribunal, and "the launch of an international anti-Israeli-Apartheid movement" that would "impose a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel . . . the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training)"<sup>36</sup>

A joint statement prepared by 77 of the roughly 3,000 NGOs in attendance strongly criticized the process by which the declaration and program of action were adopted. It specifically noted that the language of the chapter on "Palestinians and Palestine" and "the deliberate distortion of language" involved in describing the Palestinians as victims of anti-Semitism were "extremely intolerant, disrespectful and contrary to the very spirit of the World Conference"<sup>37</sup> A black member of the American Congress who was present, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (D., Tex.), noted that the Arab conflict with Israel is "a political land-based conflict that is not grounded in racism. The berating of the Jewish people fills the conference with unnecessary hatred." Barbara Arnwine, executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, resigned from the International Steering Committee in protest, declaring that the process had been corrupted.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, some of the most prestigious NGOs vacillated in their comments about the anti-Israel declaration. An official of Human Rights Watch agreed that the language was "intemperate" and that "the use of the word genocide is not appropriate," but added that Israel "commits serious abuses, including extrajudicial executions, torture, and arbitrary arrests." Amnesty International, for its part, declined to endorse the declaration but did not repudiate it either, due to "the contentious and complex nature of some of the problems." Felice Gaer, director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, commented: "The human rights movement is, above all, about speaking out. The tepid, after-the-fact remarks about the unquestionably hate-filled language and spreading of hate propaganda is an extraordinary

<sup>36</sup><http://www.racism.org.za/delARATION.html>.

<sup>37</sup>Jones, "Durban Daze," p. 21.

<sup>38</sup>McDougall, "World Conference Against Racism," p. 149, n. 50.

disappointment.”<sup>39</sup> Even for some NGOs that unequivocally rejected the defamation of Zionism and Israel, the matter was hardly a high priority: Michael Posner of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, for example, told a press conference, “it’s time to move on.”<sup>40</sup>

### *The Governmental Conference*

As noted above, the draft resolution for the governmental meeting of the WCAR, adopted in Geneva in August, mentioned only one political conflict in the world, that in the Middle East, and condemned only one country by name, Israel. As a result, Secretary of State Powell decided not to go to Durban. Instead, he sent a small U.S. delegation to the governmental conference, led by Ambassador Michael Southwick, the deputy assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs, a senior diplomat with considerable experience. Recognizing that it was politically impossible to remove the reference to the Middle East, the Americans in Durban worked behind the scenes with the Norwegian and Canadian delegations on crafting “essentially generic language expressing concern about the conflict in the Middle East without veiled criticism of Israel.”<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, on August 31, the opening day of the governmental conference, the Rev. Jesse Jackson arrived and announced that Palestinian Authority president Yasir Arafat had committed himself to reject the equation of Zionism with racism, and to support language deploring the Holocaust and condemning anti-Semitism. Jackson said he had this commitment in writing from Nabil Sha’ath, a member of the Palestinian cabinet. That same day, however, Arafat delivered a speech asserting that Israel engaged in “racist practices.” In a blistering attack on Israel, the Palestinian leader said:

Palestine is tormented by racial discrimination, occupation, aggression, and settlements . . . The bloody tragedy . . . is a racist, colo-

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<sup>39</sup>Michael J. Jordan, “Faced with hostility at U.N. forum, Jewish activists seek to place blame,” JTA Daily Electronic Edition, Sept. 5, 2001. In fact, an Amnesty International press release handed out during the NGO Forum cited examples of violations of human rights around the world, but mentioned only Israel by name.

<sup>40</sup>Ina Friedman, “Here We Go Again,” *Jerusalem Report*, Apr. 8, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup>Lantos, “Durban Debacle,” p. 45.

nialist conspiracy of aggression, forced eviction, usurpation of land, and infringement upon the Christian and Islamic holy places . They have stolen our water. They have made refugees of many of our people. . This brutality, this arrogance is moved by a supremacist mentality that practices racial discrimination, that adopts ethnic cleansing . and that protects the daily attacks carried out by the settlers against our people.<sup>42</sup>

Even though an understanding had been reached at the Geneva preparatory meetings not to push, in Durban, for a denunciation of Zionism, the Syrian and Egyptian delegations advocated the position Arafat took in his tirade. Syria's foreign minister, Farouq a-Shara, railed against "racist" Israel, which, he charged, started by massacring children, and ended up "hunting children." Representing one of the most brutal regimes in the world, Shara had the effrontery to say that "many contemporary historians have registered with admiration, not shorn of surprise, the human and religious diversity in Syria, as many of the oppressed people found a generous and secure haven there." Egypt's new foreign minister, Ahmed Maher, was equally vitriolic. Other Arab delegates, including Maher's predecessor, Amr Moussa, now serving as secretary general of the Arab League, vigorously resisted any compromise language that would have avoided demonizing the State of Israel.<sup>43</sup>

And High Commissioner Robinson went along. During the NGO Forum, Robinson had denounced expressions of anti-Semitism, and then refused to convey the NGO declaration to the governmental conference, saying, "It's sad for me that for the first time I can't recommend to delegates that they pay close attention to the NGO declaration."<sup>44</sup> But she was publicly committed to the specific mention of the "plight of the Palestinians" in the WCAR declaration, and, on September 2, she told Ambassador Southwick of the U.S. that the American threat to leave the meeting if the WCAR document singled out Israel for criticism was "warped, strange, and undemocratic."<sup>45</sup>

On September 3, when it was clear that the governmental con-

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<sup>42</sup>Full text in "Transcript of Arafat's WCAR Speech," [http://sf.indymedia.org/2001/09/103664\\_\\_comment.php](http://sf.indymedia.org/2001/09/103664__comment.php).

<sup>43</sup>Lantos, "Durban Debacle," pp. 47-48.

<sup>44</sup>McDougall, "World Conference Against Racism," p. 145.

<sup>45</sup>Lantos, "Durban Debacle," p. 47.

ference would condemn Israel, Secretary Powell instructed the American delegation to come home. He declared it unacceptable to fight racism by drafting statements containing “hateful language,” by suggesting that “apartheid exists in Israel,” and by singling out only one country in the world, Israel, for censure and abuse. Powell himself came in for some criticism for his principled stand. Among the critics were Jesse Jackson and former president Jimmy Carter.<sup>46</sup>

After the Americans announced their withdrawal, the Israeli delegation followed suit. Before leaving, Israeli ambassador Mordechai Yedid spoke words that were to have been delivered by Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Melchior, who did not attend:

It might have been hoped that this first conference of the 21st century would have taken up the challenge of, if not eradicating racism, at least disarming it. But instead, humanity is being sacrificed to a political agenda . . . . A group of states for whom the terms “racism,” “discrimination,” and even “human rights” simply do not appear in their domestic lexicon, have hijacked this conference and plunged us into even greater depths.<sup>47</sup>

The U.S. withdrawal and other embarrassing media reports coming out of Durban apparently stiffened the resistance of Australia, Canada, Guatemala, Latvia, Peru, and the European Union. After difficult and intense negotiations that forced the conference into overtime, agreement was reached by Belgium—acting on behalf of the European Union and, more broadly, the Western democracies—and South Africa, on behalf of the anti-Israel forces,<sup>48</sup> on a declaration and program for action. It did not mention Zionism and had no negative references to Israel. It did, however, single out “the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation” and recognized their right to an independent state, as well as “the right to security for all states in the region, including Israel.” The text also enshrined “the right of refugees to return voluntarily to their homes and properties in dignity and safety,” urging “all states to facilitate such return.” That an unlimited Palestinian “right of

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<sup>46</sup>Carter’s view was somewhat surprising, since, in 1978, he had prevented the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, from participating in the first UN conference on racism for the very same reason that Powell called the U.S. delegation home in 2001.

<sup>47</sup>Full text reproduced in *Jerusalem Post*, Internet Edition, Sept. 3, 2001.

<sup>48</sup>They included Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Cuba.

return” might threaten Israel’s “right to security” was not addressed. There was no reference to terrorist attacks on Israelis. Other paragraphs condemned anti-Semitism along with Islamophobia, and asserted that “the Holocaust must never be forgotten.”

At the last minute, Syria, supported by Pakistan, sought to sabotage the compromise by insisting on an open vote on three paragraphs from the earlier anti-Israel draft that the negotiators had agreed to drop, asserting that Israel’s policies in the territories were manifestations of racism. This was voted down on a procedural motion offered by Brazil, 51 to 38. The Arab and Muslim states, South Africa, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines voted against the Brazilian motion. A compromise was also reached on the other divisive issue, responsibility for slavery: the conference acknowledged that slavery and the slave trade were crimes against humanity, and expressed regret for both slavery and colonialism. Although the statement asserted that an economic-assistance package should be offered to Africa, the European Union countries stressed that they were making no financial commitments.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Aftermath*

High Commissioner Robinson and her defenders believe that Durban, despite its acknowledged shortcomings, was an overall success. Among the positive accomplishments, they list the empowerment of victim groups that had never before had a forum to express their grievances; the Western acknowledgement of regret for slavery and its consequences; and the pledges of the governments to take practical steps toward the elimination of racial discrimination. Gay McDougall, executive director of the Washington-based International Human Rights Law Group and one of the preeminent figures in mobilizing support for the WCAR, writes: “This is the time to champion these renewed commitments, not to belittle them by declaring that the WCAR was a failure.” McDougall argues that those who felt shortchanged at Durban, such as Jews, “cannot let their own agendas undermine the advances gained by so many other groups.” A “distorted focus”

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<sup>49</sup>*New York Times*, Sept. 9, p. A1.

on the role of the Israel/Palestinian issue at the conference, in her words, “misses the proverbial forest for the trees.” As for claims that the conference, especially the NGO Forum, was permeated with an anti-Israel and anti-Jewish atmosphere, McDougall doubts that the vast majority of the people who were there experienced any such thing.<sup>50</sup>

Even leaving aside the Israel-related matters, however, the document produced by the governmental conference came as a great disappointment to many of those sincerely committed to human rights. They point out that, amid all the political posturing, racial minorities with serious grievances were not mentioned at all—the Dalits (Untouchables) in India, for example. Ironically, India had been the first country to raise the issue of South African apartheid in a UN context back in 1946. In Durban and at the preparatory conferences leading up to it, however, India adamantly opposed consideration of the plight of the Dalits, which, it claimed, was a “domestic social problem,” or a religious and not a racial issue, and was already the subject of remedial action. India succeeded in removing the issue from discussion. Similarly, “indigenous peoples” that had hoped for some progress found out, in the WCAR document, that anything mentioned about them was legally subordinate to the overriding principle adopted in Durban asserting that the term “indigenous peoples” cannot be construed as having any implications as to rights under international law.<sup>51</sup>

The Jewish world was not of one mind about the governmental conference’s significance. The document did include the first affirmation of Holocaust memorialization and the first denunciation of anti-Semitism ever to emerge from a UN world conference. The Israeli Foreign Ministry expressed “satisfaction” that the governmental meeting had neither revived the old equation of Zionism with racism nor identified the Jewish national movement with apartheid. But, on the negative side, it noted that the conference had singled out the “Palestinian plight” and the plight of no other people in a UN document ostensibly dealing with racism, and, furthermore, that it had given international recognition—for the first time—to refugees’ “right of return.” Both could become ominous

<sup>50</sup>McDougall, “World Conference Against Racism,” pp. 133–49, quotes on pp. 147, 133.

<sup>51</sup>*International Herald Tribune*, Internet Edition, Sept. 4, 2001. The Aboriginal Caucus walked out upon the adoption of this language.



precedents for further attempts at the diplomatic isolation of Israel. The NGO Forum, in contrast, had no redeeming features for Jews, and its inflammatory delegitimization of Israel could be read to justify the terrorism of “oppressed” Palestinians against Israelis on the essentially racist basis that the Jewish state—and no other—was fair game.<sup>52</sup>

The conference ended on September 8. Three days later, Muslim hijackers flew two planes into the World Trade Center in New York and another into the Pentagon in Washington, while a fourth plane, apparently targeting the White House or the Capitol, crashed in Pennsylvania. More than 3,000 Americans were killed.

The temporal proximity between Durban and September 11 has not gone unnoticed. Anne F. Bayefsky, a Canadian expert on international law who attended the NGO Forum as a representative of the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, believes that the juxtaposition “was as close in substance as it was in time.” Under the cover of the rhetoric of human rights, Durban had declared that terrorism against certain types of people was acceptable. The lesson, writes Bayefsky, is clear: “The linkage between racial hatred and terrorism is a phenomenon which democracies ignore at their peril.”<sup>53</sup> Arch Puddington perceives another strand connecting the WCAR to September 11. Those Arabs, Muslims, and leftists who impugned Israel and Zionism in Durban were also lashing out at the United States—the only government beside Israel to leave in protest when Israel’s policies were singled out for criticism—and at liberal democracy as a way of life. These were precisely the targets of Osama bin Laden and militant Islam: the U.S. and its Western values, and the Jewish state perceived as their outpost in the Middle East.<sup>54</sup>

Given the widespread demonization of Israel and its American ally that was manifest in Durban, it was little wonder that Palestinians danced in the streets to celebrate the carnage of September 11. Many Muslims and Arabs around the world casually

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<sup>52</sup>“The Conclusion of the Durban Conference: Comments by Israeli Leaders and Officials,” Sept. 9, 2001, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAHOkgvO>; Eric Silver, “Off With the Gloves,” *Jerusalem Report*, Oct. 8, 2001, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup>Anne F. Bayefsky, “Terrorism and Racism: The Aftermath of Durban,” *Jerusalem Viewpoints* 468, Dec. 16, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup>Arch Puddington, “The Wages of Durban,” *Commentary*, Nov. 2001, pp. 29–34.

blamed “the Jews” for the attacks. The “proofs” were wild allegations that 4,000 Jews who worked at the World Trade Center supposedly stayed home that day, Jews sold their shares in United and American airlines beforehand, and a “Jewish” film crew had been ready to record the World Trade Center tragedy.<sup>55</sup> In other bastions of anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism—including leftist circles in the West itself—there was a sense that even though fundamentalist Muslims had committed the crime, somehow the U.S. deserved it. While deploring the loss of life and disassociating themselves from the act, many suggested that perhaps a more “evenhanded” American policy in the Middle East would assuage the anger of a beleaguered Islam.<sup>56</sup> In many countries, the identification of Israel as the party somehow responsible for international terrorism helped spark attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions.<sup>57</sup> On college campuses in the U.S., where pro-third-world sentiment was fashionable, there were calls for divestment from Israeli firms and companies doing business in Israel. This campaign was explicitly modeled on the one that had been waged against South African apartheid.<sup>58</sup>

Just a few weeks after September 11, the UN General Assembly met in New York to conduct a special debate on international terrorism. Arab and Muslim representatives pledged their support for the war on terror, but, in the spirit of Durban, insisted that Palestinian violence against Israelis was not terrorism. As the Syrian representative put it, there was “a clear distinction between terrorism, which is a criminal act and an unlawful form of warfare, and armed resistance to . . . racism and foreign occupation, which is a legitimate struggle.” On October 8, four days after these re-

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<sup>55</sup>More than four months after the attacks and despite the publication of clear evidence of who was responsible for them, columnist Thomas Friedman found the idea of a Jewish conspiracy still prevalent in the Arab world. See Friedman, “Run, Osama, Run,” *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 2002, p. A19. A Gallup poll released in late February 2002 showed that the overwhelming view in Muslim countries was that Muslims did not perpetrate the attacks. This perception has been confirmed by later polls, as noted in “The Big Lie,” which aired on CBS on Sept. 4, 2002, transcript available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/04/6011/main520768.shtml>.

<sup>56</sup>Bayefsky, “Terrorism and Racism,” p. 2.

<sup>57</sup>For details, consult the articles in this volume on individual countries.

<sup>58</sup>Plans were discussed even while the WCAR was still in session. See Julie Wiener, “College students call on schools to divest holdings in ‘racist’ Israel,” *JTA Daily Electronic Edition*, Sept. 5, 2001.

marks were delivered, the General Assembly elected Syria to membership on the Security Council.<sup>59</sup> At several subsequent UN gatherings held in Geneva, Israeli policies were repeatedly singled out as uniquely evil, for example at the meeting of the High Contracting Parties of the Fourth Geneva Convention in December 2001, and at the annual session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in March 2002.<sup>60</sup>

The significance of the UN's role was underscored in October 2001, by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the UN and its secretary general, Kofi Annan. Many in the Jewish community—still traumatized by Durban and the UN's overall pro-Palestinian tilt—found this sign of recognition hard to comprehend. “The prize is a reminder to those who dismiss or underestimate the significance of the UN,” commented Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. “It is a reminder of why we should continue to focus on it and some of the dangerous trends there we have witnessed of late.”<sup>61</sup> Adding to the problem is the systemic bias against Israel at the UN—Israel, for example, is the only state excluded from full membership in any of the five regional groups, and thus cannot serve on the Security Council or most other UN bodies.<sup>62</sup>

In the end, as Congressman Lantos argues, it is the United States that “must challenge our Middle Eastern allies to move away from their promotion of popular resentment towards Jews, Americans, and the West.” Lantos warns:

The UN World Conference on Racism provided the world with a glimpse into the abyss of international hate, discrimination, and indeed, racism. The terrorist attacks on September 11 demonstrated the evil such hate can spawn. If we are to prevail in our war against terrorism, we must take to heart the lessons of Durban.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Bayefsky, “Terrorism and Racism,” p. 4.

<sup>60</sup>Friedman, “Here We Go Again,” pp. 22–26.

<sup>61</sup>Michael J. Jordan, “While world honors U.N. with Nobel, Israel and Jewish leaders are leery,” JTA Daily Electronic Edition, Oct. 17, 2001.

<sup>62</sup>Israel has recently been granted temporary inclusion in WEOG (West Europe and Others Group), still a far cry from equal status in the UN.

<sup>63</sup>Lantos, “Durban Debacle,” pp. 51–52.