## Cancel the Durban IV Review Conference

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### Introduction

The necessity to fight racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance is one of the major challenges of the organized international community.

This has been a central and principal aim of the United Nations since its establishment and is even enunciated in the first article of the UN Charter setting out the purposes of the organization as, inter alia:

…promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.[2](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn2)

One might thus assume that this task would be taken seriously and handled by the organization with all due reverence and consideration.

However, one of the most regrettable, disappointing, and damaging phenomena of contemporary international practice has been the utter failure of the international community in general, and the United Nations in particular, to deal genuinely and sincerely with the evils of racism. On the contrary, partisan resolutions and conferences have served to fan the flames of racism.

Most regrettable is the fact that a serious attempt by the international community to deal with racism by holding the 2001 Durban Conference in post-apartheid South Africa was allowed to be usurped, politicized, and manipulated into a bitter, racist, antisemitic, and anti-Israel hate-fest that left a permanent stain on any such attempts by the international community to deal with the substantive issue of racism.

But no less damaging was the endorsement given at the Durban event to a global campaign to delegitimize the State of Israel within the international community. This damage is immeasurable, and its effects continue to the present day.

### The 2001 Durban Conference

The 2001 Durban Conference[3](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn3) had been initially intended to deal with these issues substantively and seriously. Regrettably, it became a by-word for bitter racism, intolerance, hatred, antisemitism, and Israel-bashing, and nothing more.

What should have ostensibly been a serious colloquium of the leaders and experts of virtually all countries of the world at the first major international diplomatic conference of the third millennium, convened on the African continent, which has suffered so much from slavery apartheid and racism, tragically became indelibly stained. The forum was undermined because of an irrepressible and irresistible urge by Arab and Muslim states, Iran, the PLO, and non-governmental organizations to abuse the conference with a clear anti-Israel agenda.

This group deliberately set out to hijack the conference and turn it into an anti-Israel and antisemitic hate-fest, at the expense of all the other substantive, relevant, and important agenda items, and under the nose of a naïve and lethargic, or apathetic international community.

The initial conference documentation, emanating from a series of regional conferences, expert seminars, and a formal preparatory committee, and placed before the conferees at the opening of the meeting, contained proposals to condemn “Zionist racist practices against Semitism,” described Israel as a “racist, apartheid state,” and accused Israel of “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine.”

In a blatant affront to the memory of the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust, the conference documentation attempted to downgrade the term “Holocaust” with multiple references to “holocausts” suffered by other peoples, including the Palestinians. Similarly, the Draft Program of Action called to end the “foreign occupation of Jerusalem by Israel, together with all its racist practices” and called upon all states to refrain from recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.[4](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn4)

If these were not sufficient indications of the inherent and prevalent bias that had been injected into the very substantive theme of the conference, a review of the official opening statements made by several world leaders proves the extent to which the conference, from the start, had been tainted and polluted.

PLO head Yasser Arafat appeared at this official UN diplomatic conference as both “President of the State of Palestine” (in contravention of the UN resolution determining the observer status of the Palestinian representation) and President of the Palestine “National” Authority (in stark violation of the terms of the 1995 Israel-Palestinian Interim Agreement). Despite having signed the Oslo Accords with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin only six years prior to the conference, Arafat unleashed his criticism of Israel in hostile, demagogic, and pugnacious terms as “a racist colonialist conspiracy of aggression, forced eviction, usurpation of land, and infringement upon Christian and Islamic holy places,” and a “colonialist challenge against international legitimacy … moved by a mentality of superiority that practices racial discrimination, that adopts ethnic cleansing and transfer.”

Paragons of international virtue such as Fidel Castro of Cuba, Kamal Kharrazi, Iran’s foreign minister, and Amr Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League, called to “put an end to the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people,” defined Zionism as “the most vivid manifestation of institutionalized racism,” and condemned “Israeli colonial settlement in Palestine and Arab territories” attempting to “impose an alleged supremacy of one people over other peoples” – the “worst form of racism.”

After both Israel and the United States walked out of the conference on its fourth day and following extensive criticism leveled by other countries that chose not to walk out, especially the Europeans, Australia, and Canada, the organizers of the conference decided with European and other responsible states to redraft the conference documentation, remove the offensive references, and restore the accentuation on the substantive and genuine issues of combating racism.

Ultimately, following extensive objections by Israel, the United States, Canada, and others, all references to Zionism, degrading of the Holocaust, and other antisemitic elements were removed from the final adopted texts, despite the strong and vocal opposition of Iran, Syria, and others. Instead, the conference called upon the international community never to forget the Holocaust and acknowledged the increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia.

However, at the insistence of the Arab and Muslim delegations, a provision singling out and directed against Israel was nevertheless inserted, expressing concern about the plight of the Palestinian people and recognizing the “inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State.”[5](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn5)

Several states expressed their reservations to specifying a single state situation by singling out only Israel. Canada registered its strongest objections and disassociated itself integrally from all texts directly or indirectly relating to the situation in the Middle East, declaring such references to be ultra vires – beyond the conference’s jurisdiction and mandate.

Subject to this direct reference to Israel, and to prevent an utter failure of the conference and ensure a positive outcome, the official conference documentation was thus “cleansed” of the offensive antisemitic and anti-Israel content.

### The Durban NGO Conference Had Other Plans

However, such was not the fate of the NGO conference that took place in parallel to the diplomatic conference.

As befitting the prevailing circus atmosphere in Durban and the ambiance of lynching and Israel-baiting within and around the Durban conference (including violent anti-Israel street demonstrations), the parallel NGO conference, a wild and outrageous event, adopted in its own declaration such formulations on Israel as a “colonial military occupant,” a “racist, apartheid state in which Israel’s brand of apartheid is a crime against humanity.” It declared Israel guilty of “racist crimes including war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing.”

Its Program of Action called for implementation of measures against Israel as employed previously against the South African apartheid regime, deployment of an independent international protection force, reinstatement of the UN Zionism Is Racism Resolution 3379, the repeal by Israel of its Law of Return, the establishment of a special UN committee to deal with Israeli apartheid and other racist crimes, the launch of an international anti-Israel apartheid movement, and a call to the international community to isolate Israel totally.[6](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn6)

While this NGO declaration and program of action were not officially sanctioned by the organizers of the diplomatic conference and were even criticized by the UN Secretary-General and High Commissioner for Human Rights, their content remains on record. The documents have entered into history as one of the primary outcomes of the Durban conference. They have in fact become the “road map” guiding the BDS movement.

### Periodic Durban “Review” Conferences

Attempting to “re-legitimize” the Durban messages through an apparent exercise of reviewing progress on the substantive issues surrounding racism discussed at the original Durban conference, the UN General Assembly convened second and third Durban Review Conferences in 2009 and 2011.

On the strength of the negative reputation emanating from the 2001 Durban conference and follow-up to it, several states, including Canada, the United States, Italy, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, and Poland chose to boycott these review conferences.

True to expectations, and unable to shed the negative reputation that had been built up in Durban, the 2009 Durban review conference rapidly descended into an additional hate-fest against Israel and Zionism, with the formal opening address by then Iranian President Ahmadinejad calling for the eradication of Zionism and attributing all the ills of the world to Zionism and Israel. “The word Zionism personifies racism that falsely resorts to religion and abuses religious sentiments to hide their hatred and ugly faces.” This outrageous Iranian statement prompted many delegations to leave the room.

Even the chief Palestinian delegate to the United Nations in Geneva, Ibrahim Khraishi, expressed the view that the Iranian president had harmed their own position and status. Similarly, the representative of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, in his statement to the conference, expressed regret that “controversies over one single situation have so consumed the attention and energy of the Durban process, from 2001 until now.”

While the conference approved a final document without offensive references or specific singling out of Israel as such, the reaffirmation by the Durban review conferences of the original Durban Declaration and Program of Action was nevertheless understood by all as a reaffirmation and re-legitimization of the original condemnation of Israel.

### The Upcoming Durban IV Review Conference

On September 22, 2021, pursuant to UN General Assembly [resolution](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/237) 237/75 dated December 31, 2020, the United Nations intends to convene a one-day meeting, at the level of heads of state and government, to mark the 20th anniversary of the notorious 2001 Durban Declaration.

In light of the incredible damage that the original 2001 Durban documentation has wrought to the State of Israel, the Jewish People, the UN itself, and the international struggle against racism, the terminology used in this resolution appears to be particularly ironic and cynical inasmuch as it attempts to rewrite history by deliberately concealing the reprehensible outcome of the 2001 conference.

In fact, in a publication dated May 24, 2021, entitled “Durban IV: Key Facts – What is Durban IV and why should countries refuse to attend?” the UN watchdog organization, UN Watch, refers to the Durban IV review conference as “endorsing this perversion of the principles of anti-racism.”[7](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn7)

The new resolution convening the upcoming fourth Durban review conference is entitled “A global call for concrete action for the elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance and the comprehensive implementation of and follow-up to the Durban Declaration and Program of Action.”

Its fourth preambular paragraph describes the 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of Action as:

[A] solid basis and the only instructive outcome of the World conference which prescribes comprehensive measures for combating all the scourges of racism and adequate remedies for victims, and noting with concern the lack of effective implementation thereof….

In its fifth preambular paragraph, as if forgetting the distinct contribution by the 2001 Durban documentation to hatred, incitement, and antisemitism, the resolution expresses alarm:

[A]t the global rise in hate speech, constituting incitement to racial discrimination, hostility, and violence, stressing the importance of addressing it, and in this regard noting the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech in June 2019….

In additional preambular paragraphs, the resolution no less cynically and perhaps even hypocritically expresses alarm at the “spread in many parts of the world of various racist extremist movements based on ideologies that seek to promote nationalist, right-wing agendas, and racial superiority.”

It sees such practices as fueling racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance and stresses the need to:

promote tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity and the need to seek common ground among and within civilizations in order to address common challenges to humanity that threaten shared values, universal human rights and the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, through cooperation, partnership, and inclusion.

Thus, the UN plans to utilize the presence at the opening session of the General Assembly of world leaders to adopt a “political declaration aimed at mobilizing political will at the national, regional, and international levels for the full and effective implementation of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action and its follow-up processes.”[8](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn8)

Several countries have announced their intention to boycott this review conference, including Canada,[9](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn9) the UK,[10](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn10) Austria,[11](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn11) Germany,[12](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn12) the Czech Republic, Australia, the Netherlands,[13](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn13) France,[14](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn14) the United States, and others.

### Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that the reprehensible statements, declarations, and plans of action emanating from the 2001 Durban conference became the primary precursor for ongoing and widespread attempts to delegitimize Israel and its basic rights as a nation-state in the international community. In no less a manner, it institutionalized the regrettable linkage whereby anti-Israelism had become a convenient cover for antisemitism.

By adopting a declaration at an international conference that was intended to be devoted to the blight of racism and by singling out Israel among all the nations of the world, the international community itself contributed to the indelible pollution and soiling of the Durban process and leant its hand to the launching of a campaign of delegitimization of Israel.

As long as the international community, in general, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in particular, continue to attempt to reinstate and re-legitimize the forever-stained “Durban process,” whether by review conferences or by anniversary commemorations, the genuine struggle against racism will suffer. The damage cannot be repaired.

Durban must be expunged and forgotten. The international community must set about dealing with racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and the like in a genuinely serious, a-political, and non-hypocritical manner, far from Durban.

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**Notes**

[1](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref1) Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 31 December 2020 <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/237>

[2](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref2) United Nations Charter, Article 1, Para. 2.

[3](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref3) World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, 31 August – 8 September 2001.

[4](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref4) Draft Declaration, A/CONF.189/4 (see paragraph 33) and Draft Program of Action A/CONF.189/5 (see paragraphs 67-68, 96 and 221-2)

[5](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref5) A/CONF.189/12 and Corr.1 of 8 September 2001 paras. 58 and 63.

[6](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref6) For the full text of the NGO declaration and program of action, see <http://www.adl.org/durban/durban_ngo.asp>

[7](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref7) <https://unwatch.org/countries-rejecting-durban-iv-updates-analysis-more/>

[8](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref8) Ibid footnote 1, see the fourth to the eighth preambular paragraphs and article 27-28 of the resolution

[9](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref9) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-durban-israel-peace-conference-1.6016670> and <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-will-not-participate-in-durban-iv-conference-because-of-anti/>

[10](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref10) <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/france-s-macron-to-boycott-un-racism-conference-citing-antisemitism-concerns-1.10115510>

[11](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref11) <https://mobile.twitter.com/hillelneuer/status/1413951588515958785>

[12](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref12) <https://ejpress.org/germany-will-not-attend-un-event-marking-20th-anniversary-of-durban-conference/>

[13](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref13) <https://nltimes.nl/2021/07/08/netherlands-pulls-uns-durban-iv-racism-conference-anti-semitism-concerns>

[14](https://jcpa.org/article/cancel-the-durban-iv-review-conference/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref14) <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-boycott-un-racism-conference-concerns-over-anti-semitism-2021-08-13/>