
The Durban Debacle: An Insider's View of the UN World Conference Against Racism

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The terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11 have awakened President Bush and his administration to the importance of an engaged multilateral foreign policy. After months of unilateralism, the Bush administration, in response to the great challenge of September 11, quickly and effectively shifted toward a multilateral approach, building a broad coalition to wage war against the Al-Qaeda terrorist network and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that harbored it. In the months ahead, as the United States attempts to broaden its war on terror, the administration will face new challenges requiring sustained engagement and a comprehensive review of our relations with a host of regimes that promote anti-Western hate and harbor terrorists.

As we consider the most effective way of implementing a strategy to confront and defeat the forces of intolerance, hatred and terror, it would be wise to reflect upon the lessons of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), a seminal international event, which concluded in Durban, South Africa, just two days before the fateful events of September 11. Held during the high point of world hostility toward President Bush's unilateral approach to foreign affairs, the conference was a disaster for the United States. After a hopeful start, it disintegrated into an anti-American, anti-Israeli circus. A number of Islamic states conducted a well-orchestrated effort to hijack the event, and they succeeded in swaying America's erstwhile partners and forcing the United States

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delegation to withdraw. Although the United States walkout succeeded in preventing the most virulent anti-Israel language from surviving in the conference text, the United States sustained substantial damage in its efforts to secure an historic understanding on race and to prevent an escalation of tensions in the Middle East. Durban will go down in history as a missed opportunity to advance a noble agenda and as a serious breakdown in United Nations diplomacy.

To many of us present at the events at Durban, it is clear that much of the responsibility for the debacle rests on the shoulders of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson, who, in her role as secretary-general of the conference, failed to provide the leadership needed to keep the conference on

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track. It must be added that the Bush administration also shares some responsibility for the meltdown. Six months of unilateralist foreign policies had created such a climate of hostility and mistrust toward the United States that marshaling support among our allies to prevent the conference

from being taken over and abused became an almost impossible mission. The majority of blame for the failure of Durban, however, must be laid at the feet of several members of Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). These regimes, some U.S. allies, proved unwilling to yield in their campaign to scuttle the noble agenda of the conference and to turn it into a forum to shun, isolate and de-legitimize Israel, America's key democratic ally in the Middle East.

As an official U.S. delegate at Durban and as one who worked closely with the State Department in preparing for the conference, I observed this diplomatic fiasco first-hand. After several months of reflection, I am convinced that the Durban conference offers critical lessons regarding U.S. involvement in world affairs. Durban teaches us that there is a high price to pay when we disengage from global diplomacy. The international mechanisms we have helped build to support a liberal international system, including the UN, require U.S. leadership to stay on track. When we fail to lead, rogue regimes and hostile forces are quick to step into the breach to appropriate these mechanisms for their own propaganda and political purposes. If we want to win our war against terrorism, we will have to stay engaged in the UN and elsewhere, promote American interests and values abroad, and transform our coalition against terrorism into a new international order that supports pluralism, democracy, and human rights.

THE ROAD TO DURBAN: PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

In December 1997, the United Nations announced plans for a third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related

Intolerance. The UN General Assembly's Resolution 52/11 contemplated a forward-looking conference focusing on confronting and reversing a host of disturbing contemporary manifestations of racism, from widespread discrimination against migrant workers in Western Europe and the Middle East to the proliferation of hate sites on the World Wide Web. It also sought to broach the sensitive subject of slavery and its painful legacy in an effort to achieve an historic reconciliation on this critical issue. The UN leadership hoped that the conference would encourage the development of practical solutions, and avoid becoming embroiled in the "Zionism-is-racism" canard that doomed the two previous global meetings on racial discrimination in 1978 and 1983.

Former Irish President Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, developed a clear vision to unify and energize the global dialogue on race in the years leading up to the convening of the conference. Her vision focused on bringing the world together to overcome fear—fear of what is different, fear of the other, and fear of the loss of personal security. In her public statements, Robinson made a compelling case that racism and xenophobia are on the rise by tying its current manifestations to growing economic and social dislocations caused by globalization. As a way to move forward, she repeatedly challenged the international community to shift its focus away from viewing diversity as a limiting factor and to discern the potential for mutual enrichment in diversity. She hoped the conference could not only serve as a catharsis for victims' groups to relieve their grievances but could also initiate a lasting dialogue between civil societies and governments focused on finding solutions to overcome hate. Robinson's public pronouncements prior to the conference also reflected an understanding that no nation is free of racism, and that all share responsibility for eradicating this pervasive and universal evil.

President Bill Clinton was a natural partner in Robinson's effort to focus the world on confronting the problem of race. Combating racism was a centerpiece of the President's domestic agenda, manifested in his National Initiative on Race. The World Conference was the perfect forum for internationalizing this noble cause. As a sign of the administration's serious commitment to make a positive contribution to the World Conference, the White House created an interagency task force led by a diverse and well-qualified cadre of senior officials including Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Harold Koh and Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Bill Lann Lee. The task force launched a national dialogue to begin laying the groundwork for the event, holding town hall meetings across the country. The Clinton administration's message was clear: the United States could make a valuable contribution to the global dialogue on race by virtue of its national experience in struggling to overcome its past to create a successful multi-racial, multi-ethnic society.

SETTING THE STAGE

In 1999, the General Assembly's Third Committee (which deals with social, humanitarian, and cultural issues) decided that the conference should be held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, and should be preceded by regional meetings in Strasbourg, France; Santiago, Chile; Dakar, Senegal; and Tehran, Iran during the fall of 2000 and the winter of 2001. The committee also decided to book-end the regional meetings with two preparatory inter-governmental meetings at the UN in Geneva. Each regional conference was charged with drafting a declaration and plan of action on racism that would ultimately be synthesized into a single set of documents to be ratified in Durban.

Developments at the first three regional meetings suggested that Robinson's best hopes for the Durban conference were possible. In Strasbourg, Santiago, and Dakar, participating governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and experts demonstrated a willingness to confront regional manifestations of contemporary racism, and to develop and implement practical solutions. At each of these meetings, Mrs. Robinson pressed governments and civil society to recognize and confront the ways in which racism and xenophobia were limiting social, economic, and political development. In Strasbourg, she criticized governments for creating a "fortress Europe" through immigration policies designed to protect prosperity against perceived threats. In Santiago, she implored American governments to acknowledge institutionalized racism against indigenous people, migrants, and people of African descent. In Dakar, she challenged African governments to face up to contemporary slavery, trafficking of women and children, and discrimination against victims of HIV/AIDS. Delegates and representatives of civil society engaged in intense debates on all of these issues. The documents that emerged from them attempted to tackle a range of vexing issues from the legacy of slavery to the need to confront the global resurgence of anti-Semitism. Significantly, the Europe and Latin American regional conferences took concrete steps to prevent the return of the anti-Israel "Zionism-is-racism" language that doomed the two previous World Conferences. Further, they explicitly condemned anti-Semitism in their draft documents.

TEHRAN: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The Asian Preparatory Meeting for the WCAR, convened in Tehran from February 19 to 21, 2001, marked a sharp departure from the spirit of tolerance that was evident at the first three regional meetings. Although the initiation of the second Intifada in September 2000 certainly contributed to the poisonous anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic atmosphere evident at the Asian conference and in the documents it produced, there were significant warning signs even before the

Middle East conflict flared that Tehran would be a far different type of forum than the conferences convened in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

At the beginning of August 2000, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an international Jewish human rights organization dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust, learned that Israeli passport holders and Jewish non-governmental organizations would be barred from attending. The Wiesenthal Center requested that Robinson transfer the meeting to an Asian host country that would not discriminate against delegates. She rejected the request, however, maintaining that throughout the fall and winter that the Iranian government understood that all NGOs must be allowed to attend.

Although Robinson did successfully negotiate to obtain the visas on the first day of the conference, Jewish NGOs were effectively excluded from participation, as there was no way to arrange transportation to Tehran until the closing of the meeting. Kurdish and Bahai NGO representatives were also excluded despite Robinson's protests to Iranian authorities.

Robinson also assured Israeli delegates to the UN that Israel would be permitted to attend the Asian meeting as an observer state. She took no action, however, to overcome Iran's bar on granting visas to citizens of Israel, a state Iran does not recognize. No Israeli delegates attended.

Australia and New Zealand, two outspoken supporters of Israel in the Asia group, were also excluded from participation in the Tehran meeting despite vigorous attempts to gain credentials. Their bid met with vociferous opposition from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, led by Malaysia and Pakistan, who forced a vote on the issue. This represented a departure from UN practice where credentials are routinely granted by

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host nations to delegates of all states who have a legitimate reason, based on UN membership or observer status, to attend an official UN meeting. Apparently, Iranian authorities were willing to go to great lengths to block participation by any state that would actively seek to frustrate their efforts to isolate Israel. Sadly, the UN leadership refused to challenge them.

Commissioner Robinson's tentative role in confronting the discriminatory practices of Iran in hosting the conference seemed to carry over to her behavior at the meeting itself. In Strasbourg, Santiago, and Dakar, Robinson opened the meetings with forceful appeals to governments to recognize and confront their own present-day problems of discrimination. In Tehran, however, Robinson appeared to take a back seat. There was no appeal to focus on the proliferation of anti-Semitic textbooks and curricula in Arab schools; no appeal for tolerance of religious practice by non-Muslims; no

appeal to improve the horrendous treatment of imported domestic workers in Arab sheikhdoms; no condemnation of the Taliban's destruction of sacred Buddhist artifacts; and no demand for an elevation of the status of women in Islamic society. To many of us following these early developments, her silence was deafening.

The Declaration and Plan of Action agreed to by the delegates in the discriminatory atmosphere of Tehran amounted to what could only be seen as a declaration by the states present of their intention to use the conference as a propaganda weapon attacking Israel. Indeed, the documents not only singled the country out above all others—despite the well-known problems with racism, xenophobia and discrimination that exist all over the world—but also equated its policies in the West Bank with some of the most horrible racist policies of the previous century. Israel, the text stated, engages in “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population of historic Palestine,” and is implementing a “new kind of apartheid, a crime against humanity.” It also purported to witness an “increase of racist practices of Zionism” and condemned racism “in various parts of the world, as well as the emergence of racist and violent movements

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based on racist and discriminatory ideas, in particular, the Zionist movement, which is based on race superiority.”

At the end of the Tehran Meeting, Commissioner Robinson made no visible effort to confront the breakdown that had occurred in the global dialogue on race that she had done so much to nurture. In fact, in a baffling statement to the press after the conclusion of the conference, she congratulated the Tehran delegates on their degree of “consensus” and urged them to carry on in the fight against racism. She characterized the meeting as a productive dialogue between civilizations. When asked about the inflammatory rhetoric directed at Israel, she stated, “The situation in the Palestinian occupied territories was brought up at the meeting and it is reflected in the final declaration.” These comments represented a pivotal moment in the evolution of the WCAR. By appearing to condone the Asian conference's efforts to place the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the agenda of the World Conference, she betrayed its intentions and emboldened those intent on using the conference for their own political purposes. From that moment the conference began to take a dangerous trajectory that became ever more difficult to correct.

THE FORCES GATHER

The work of all four regional meetings was slated to be merged into one final draft declaration and plan of action at a two-week final preparatory meeting

at the UN in Geneva, held from May 21 to June 1, 2001. As the meeting opened, it was clear that the Islamic states, fresh from their triumph in Tehran, were in no mood for compromise. Delegates from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria and the observer from the Palestine Liberation Organization insisted on the inclusion of the anti-Israeli text from the Tehran document. These OIC delegates also worked to undermine constructive language on the Holocaust and on anti-Semitism from the Strasbourg and Santiago meetings by affixing new text to pollute the meaning of these concepts. Thus, whenever the word "Holocaust" was read during the plenary review of the combined text, one of the Islamic delegates—usually Egypt—intervened to change "Holocaust" to "holocausts." Adding insult to injury, the same delegates requested that the phrase "and the ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine" be inserted after the appearance of "holocausts."

Both of these maneuvers were a transparent attempt to de-legitimize the moral argument for Israel's existence as a haven for Jews. To deny the unique status of the Holocaust is to deny the magnitude of the crime perpetrated against Jews in Europe and to erode the legitimacy of the state of Israel, which was in part inspired by the need to prevent a repeat of that cataclysmic event. The juxtaposition of the Holocaust with a caricature of Israel's behavior in the Palestinian conflict serves the same purpose by falsely equating victims with victimizers.

Each time Santiago or Strasbourg language on anti-Semitism and the need to combat it was raised in the plenary, the OIC states intervened to couple anti-Semitism with the phrase "racist practices of Zionism," or the even more outlandish "Zionist practices against Semitism"—a deliberate move to confuse the real meaning of anti-Semitism.¹

As the OIC states spread their rhetorical attack on Israel from Tehran to the world stage in Geneva, their strategy became ever more clear—turn Israel into an international pariah, not unlike the way apartheid South Africa became the center of past UN world conferences. The first two global gatherings on racism in 1978 and 1983 were held at a time when the world's human rights community was rightly focused on defeating apartheid in South Africa, and the agenda of each World Conference was narrowly focused on this project. If the OIC delegates could turn Israel into the new apartheid South Africa—the world's sole racist regime—the broad agenda of the third WCAR could be overthrown in favor of bringing the world together to shun, isolate, and embargo the country. This came at a time when the world was riveted by almost daily images of both Palestinian suicide-bombing attacks on Israeli citizens and by retaliatory strikes by the Israeli military against the terrorists. As we all know too well, such a caricature of Israel as a racist state only helps to legitimize terrorist violence against innocent Israeli citizens.

The Geneva preparatory meeting also struggled with a genuine and worthy issue—how to come to terms with the painful legacy of the slave trade and colo-

nialism. Europe, Canada and the United States opposed language imported from the Dakar Declaration that contained an explicit apology to victims and their descendants, and language requiring reparations to states and parties impacted by these practices. On this critical issue, there were many hopeful signs. The United States, Canada and EU representatives made it clear that, while we were not willing to commit to pay reparations or to any language creating new legal liabilities, we were willing to go quite far in recognizing the magnitude of the crimes committed against people of color by slave trading and colonial exploitation, and in expressing explicit regret for these practices. Significantly, however, there was little effort to address the Indian Ocean slave trade or the trans-Saharan slave trade involving Arab peoples.

At the end of the two weeks of talks at the first preparatory meeting in Geneva, it was clear that Mary Robinson's vision for the World Conference was in severe jeopardy. Negotiations were deadlocked. The OIC appeared hell-bent on using the conference for its own political aims. Although there were hopeful signs that North and South could reconcile on the issue of colonialism and slavery, the path through this issue remained unclear. Robinson called for an additional unscheduled, emergency meeting at the end of July, again in Geneva, to continue to work on the remaining problems.

THE BITTER FRUIT OF AMERICAN UNILATERALISM

As the anti-Israeli lobby was launching this plot in the winter and spring of 2001, President George W. Bush was struggling to establish his administration and to put his mark on foreign policy. Many of President Bush's initial moves suggested a marked disdain for multilateral initiatives and an unwillingness to work with the UN to solve pressing global problems such as climate change, the spread of chemical and biological weapons, and the trade in small arms. To many in the world community, this behavior was an alarming departure from the Clinton administration's commitment to internationalism. The new administration's abrupt withdrawal from the Kyoto climate treaty and its promise to undertake a unilateral withdrawal from the ABM treaty were particular irritants to our NATO and G-7 partners.

Thankfully, the pattern of aggressive unilateral action characterizing the Bush administration's foreign policy did not carry over to the race issue. From early on, it was clear that President Bush, and his Secretary of State Colin Powell, were committed to supporting High Commissioner Robinson's efforts to nurture a global dialogue on race. After Secretary Powell's first meeting with Commissioner Robinson on February 8, 2001—two weeks before the Tehran Meeting—he expressed support for the World Conference. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher in briefing reporters after the meeting said that Powell told Robinson that he had “personal as well as professional interest” in the conference.

Although some conservatives in the White House such as Elliot Abrams were clearly uncomfortable with the idea of the WCAR, Powell had the President's support on the issue. President Bush retained the inter-agency task force that President Clinton had set up under the leadership of Deborah Carr, one of the Justice Department's top attorneys, to prepare for the event. The task force continued with feverish preparations to put together a large U.S. delegation to go to Durban.

Having devoted my entire career in Congress to combating racism and promoting human rights, I was pleased with the new administration's decision to build on President Clinton's preparations for the World Conference, and was eager to do whatever I could to help them

make the effort a success. In Secretary of State Colin Powell I found a devoted partner in this endeavor. Beginning in May 2001, after the break-down of the first preparatory meeting in Geneva, Secretary Powell and I began a running conversation that lasted through the bitter days in Durban. He and I shared the belief that the World Conference represented an historic opportunity to achieve real progress on the

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issue of racism, and we shared the concern that, unless the United States exercised leadership and held steadfast to our principles, the event could be derailed by efforts to demonize Israel.

Secretary Powell's plan to save the conference was elegant and powerful in its simplicity: make clear that U.S. participation at Durban would depend upon removal of the text attacking Israel, and mount an intensive diplomatic offensive to isolate the hardline OICs states as the obstacle to success. In the early summer, Secretary Powell directed his deputy, Richard Armitage, to assemble a team of our finest diplomats to develop a strategy for the upcoming emergency session in Geneva. Armitage turned to Michael Southwick, one of our senior UN diplomats and a former Ambassador to Uganda, to work with the new Assistant Secretary for Human Rights, Lorne Craner, to develop a strategy for the Geneva deliberations.

Powell and Armitage were well aware that any hope for success in Geneva would depend on the support of our European and other allies. Therefore, they launched a massive diplomatic effort to gain support from as many countries as possible. Dozens of demarches were sent out to foreign capitals requesting our friends to adopt the position that no country could be singled out for criticism at the racism conference.

Secretary Powell also understood that Commissioner Robinson's failure to speak out forcefully at Tehran and in Geneva against the inclusion of the OIC's

hateful language had contributed to the crisis that threatened to thwart a constructive conference. Secretary Powell met with Robinson on June 18 in Washington and told her that the U.S. would not participate in the Durban conference if the language condemning Israel was not removed. He made clear to her that he expected her to take a leading role in asserting the principle that it was not appropriate to single out one country for criticism and one territorial dispute for discussion at Durban. Powell also asserted that, although the U.S. was willing to explore appropriate language to express regret for its involvement in the slave trade, we were not prepared to use the word "apology." After the meeting, spokesman Richard Boucher made Powell's threat to boycott Durban public. Boucher also expressed U.S. displeasure with Robinson's posture at the meeting with Powell, stating that Robinson had "failed" to address adequately U.S. concerns.

As Ranking Member of House International Relations Committee, I worked with my Republican counterpart, Chairman Henry Hyde, and other members of Congress to reinforce the secretary's diplomatic efforts by meeting with ambassadors from key EU, Latin American, African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. In these meetings, I asserted that the U.S. Congress would not

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stand by and permit the critical functions of the United Nations to be commandeered by undemocratic forces seeking to de-legitimize Israel. The responses of our Middle Eastern allies (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan) were by now predictable—they stressed the domestic difficulties they faced as a result of the flare-up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explained that they were under pressure to take a firm position on Israeli settlements and Israeli counter-attacks on Palestinian terrorists.

The responses of our top European allies were troubling. The EU ambassadors dutifully said they would do all they could to help—but alluded to the anti-U.S. climate at the UN resulting from American positions on climate change, the ABM treaty, small arms and a host of other issues. They expressed a collective sense that the Bush administration should not expect help on issues it cared about after neglecting so many global problems of concern to Europeans. For some, the Bush administration's foreign policies provided a convenient excuse for acting on their anti-Israeli proclivities. For others, the complaints were genuine.

To underscore our diplomatic efforts, I introduced legislation, House Resolution 212, supporting the goals of the World Conference and denouncing the attempt to single out Israel for attack in the draft conference documents. The

resolution specified “that since racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance exist to some extent in every region of the world, efforts to address these prejudices should occur within a global framework.” It went on to specify that this framework should be constructed “without reference to specific regions, countries or present-day conflicts.” The resolution also reflected a strong view on the slavery issue, calling for an explicit recognition of the “extreme pain, suffering, and humiliation (inflicted upon) millions of African people.” On July 30, 2001, the opening day of the emergency session in Geneva, the measure passed, 408 to 3, with 3 abstentions. This vote demonstrated overwhelming congressional support for the approach that the Bush administration was taking.

Soon after the passage of my resolution, I called Mary Robinson to let her know that America was unified in its position. I told her that I felt that the conference was in danger of collapsing and urged her to assume a leadership role in denouncing the OIC language. Robinson reported that she was making progress on persuading the Arab and Islamic states to drop their specific demand to equate Zionism with racism, but insisted that a majority of states felt that the situation in the Middle East, and Israel’s settlement policies in the occupied territories, could not be ignored in the Durban discussions. I was troubled by her response and explained to her that the U.S. position was non-negotiable, that no individual country or political conflict should be singled out in the context of a World Conference on Racism.

I urged Robinson to consider the implications of appeasing the radical and fundamentalist forces that wanted to turn the entire aim of the conference on its head. In fact, the OIC language on Israeli settlement policy and other wording twisting the meaning of anti-Semitism went far beyond the concept that Zionism equals racism—they sought to make Israel itself the focus of hate. The forces promoting the inclusion of this language understood that equating its settlement policy to ethnic cleansing could turn the Middle East conflict from a regional territorial dispute (which could be resolved through compromise) into an ideological and existential one that could only be resolved by driving Israel into the sea. I also argued that allowing these same forces to appropriate terms like “ethnic cleansing,” “genocide,” and “crimes against humanity” to describe Israel’s behavior would forever debase their meaning, and thereby undercut progress in the global human rights struggle that we had both made our life’s work.

THE SHOWDOWN IN GENEVA

As I prepared to leave Washington to attend the final emergency session in Geneva, I was not optimistic that we would be successful in rallying support to drop the OIC language, but I felt that we had to try and take a stand in support of the principles upon which the conference was conceived. Lorne Craner and Michael

Southwick visited me on their way to Geneva and told me that they were hopeful that we would be able to turn the tide in our favor. They sensed, as I had in my contacts with many ambassadors, that the anti-American mood at the UN would present challenges, but believed that the EU and others would rally to our side as negotiations got underway. Craner and Southwick both felt that the OIC had overreached and could not go unchallenged. They also pointed to progress in negotiations with African states on finding a mutually acceptable way to express regret for slavery and colonialism. Craner and Southwick hoped that if they could seal a deal with the African states early on in the negotiations, the Africans would recognize that the OIC language threatened progress on issues important to them. Once this recognition set in, it was hoped, the Africans would pressure the OIC contingent to seek another more appropriate venue to discuss tensions in the Middle East.

When I arrived in Geneva on August 6 for the start of the second and final week of negotiations, James Foley, our Charge d'Affaires in Geneva, Mike Southwick, and Lorne Craner reported significant progress in the discussions with the African states on the slavery and colonialism issues. Negotiations were going back and forth on specific proposals of language to express regret short of apology, and "deep regret and profound remorse" was the formulation around which consensus was crystallizing.

With agreement on slavery tantalizingly near, the United States strategy to derail the OIC's demonization of Israel began to gain momentum. As predicted, the African states began to see the OIC as the only remaining obstacle to progress. "Why are you letting Egypt ruin this conference?" a young ambassador from a sub-Saharan state asked me in one of my first diplomatic meetings after arriving in Geneva. "Don't you give them \$2 billion a year in aid?"

He explained that most African states were satisfied with the proposed compromise on the apology issue and implored me to "ask Bush to call Mubarak and tell him to get his people under control," confidently predicting that, "once the Arabs start to behave, we will all be ready to go to Durban and declare victory." He was not alone in sharing these sentiments.

Indeed, a true victory for the forces fighting against racism seemed at hand. It was becoming widely known that progress had been made on the slavery and colonialism issues, and the European delegations began to join the Africans in pressing the OIC to abandon their attempt to vilify Israel.

In an act of desperation, OIC delegates drafted a "non-paper" for consideration by the conference that they hoped would salvage some of the original anti-Semitic language of the Tehran drafts. This document, in fact, was dripping with hate. All of the slurs against Israel and all of the distortions of the discussion of anti-Semitism in the earlier draft text were included in this "compromise." This effort appeared to fall flat, however, as our European and African partners, in no mood to compromise, were prepared to reject the "non-paper" as a non-starter.

After this document appeared, I met twice with Mrs. Robinson over the next 12 hours—the second time at her request—and urged her publicly to denounce it in order to salvage the conference. She expressed concern over the document, but pleaded with me to provide her with the “diplomatic space” she needed to overcome this obstacle by not making the document public until a press conference which I had scheduled for the next day. I agreed to her request. In the meantime, I continued my bilateral negotiations with the key OIC ambassadors, representing Pakistan, Algeria, and Turkey. These meetings left me in a very hopeful mood. It was clear that the Islamic countries were prepared to relent and were searching for a way to save face. All three of the OIC ambassadors I met with assured me that they were trying to convince the radical elements of their caucus to abandon the attempt to attack Israel by name, and all three asked me for help in shoring up the other two for their ongoing battle with the hard-line countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Iran, and the Palestinians.

Mrs. Robinson's intervention with the assembled delegates later in the same day left our delegation deeply shocked and saddened. In her remarks, she advocated precisely the opposite course to the one Secretary Powell and I had urged her to take. Namely, she refused to reject the twisted notion that the wrong done to the Jews in the Holocaust was equivalent to the pain suffered by the Palestinians in the Middle East. Instead, she discussed “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.”

Thus, instead of condemning the attempt to usurp the conference, she legitimized it. Instead of insisting that it was inappropriate to discuss a specific political conflict in the context of a World Conference on Racism, she spoke of the “need to resolve protracted conflict and occupation, claims of inequality, violence and terrorism, and a deteriorating situation on the ground.” Robinson was prepared to delve into the arcana of a single territorial conflict at the exclusion of all others and at the expense of the conference's greater goals.

Robinson's intervention broke all momentum that the U.S. had developed. The Arab countries immediately seized on these statements as a clear indication that the tide had turned again in their favor, dropped all talk of compromise, and began pressing for the continuation of the Middle East discussion in Durban. U.S. civil rights NGOs, sensing that all bets were now off, then began to press the African states to dig in their heels on both “apology” and reparations. The

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negotiations on mutually acceptable language to express regret for slavery and colonialism quickly unraveled, and all pressure from the African states on the OIC evaporated. The EU position on the appropriateness of discussing the Middle East softened. The talks lurched on for another two days and ended with no improvement to the text whatsoever.

It was clear to me that Mrs. Robinson's intervention during the Geneva talks represented the *coup d' grace* on efforts to save the conference from disaster. If the conference was knocked off track in Tehran, it was completely derailed in Geneva.

THE MOMENT OF DECISION

Returning from the failed Geneva preparatory conference, I spoke with Secretary Powell to relay my observations and offer my recommendation on the appropriate level of U.S. representation at Durban. Based on my experience in Geneva, it was my belief that the conference was doomed and that the adminis-

For me, having experienced the horrors of the Holocaust first hand, this was the most sickening and unabashed display of hate for Jews I have seen since the Nazi period.

tration should uphold its threat to sit out. I urged the secretary not to dignify the proceedings with his presence, though I assured him that I would support him in whatever decision he made. The secretary was clearly leaning in the direction of not attending and instead sending a lower level delegation, but he wanted to wait as long as possible to see if an agreement could be worked out behind the scenes to remove the anti-Israeli language. He was visibly pained by the

prospect of having to walk away from a conference that was so close to reaching an historic agreement between the North and the South on slavery and colonialism because of the intransigence of the OIC states.

The decision on the level of U.S. participation in Durban was made ultimately by the President himself during a press event at his Texas retreat on August 24. "We will not have a representative there as long as they pick on Israel," the President stated in response to a question. "We will not participate in a conference that tries to isolate Israel and denigrates Israel." Soon after, Secretary Powell confirmed to me that he would indeed not attend, but that the United States would send a working-level delegation instead. Ambassador Southwick was named to head a small team of State Department negotiators and lawyers. Southwick was to get support from two other veteran foreign service UN experts, John Blaney, the chargé in Johannesburg, and Craig Kuehl, the counsel general in Durban.

THE DEBACLE IN DURBAN

On the eve of the Durban meeting, I consulted with Ambassador Southwick, whose proposed strategy was to work with Norway (and its partner, Canada), on their plan to save the conference. The Norwegian compromise was essentially generic language expressing concern about the conflict in the Middle East without veiled criticism of Israel. Although I felt it was a major concession on the part of the U.S. to agree to discuss the conflict in the Middle East, when the conference was not discussing Kashmir, Chechnya, Tibet, or any other regional conflict, the language Southwick showed me was a truly neutral description of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I told him I could support the compromise if—and only if—it was our bottom line. I felt we had to draw a firm line on this issue—accepting any veiled attacks on Israel would indicate a U.S. willingness to appease radical Arab regimes. Southwick supported my position and told me that the secretary and the White House agreed.

Ambassador Southwick also had a fallback plan that he thought might be effective in the likely event the OIC remained intransigent. Southwick's idea was to offer an amendment to strike all of the objectionable text on the Middle East at the climax of the conference. He believed it would be difficult to defeat a motion to table this amendment, but felt confident that if we could survive procedural challenges, we could win the final vote on the substance. I told Southwick that I thought his idea was excellent and offered assistance in lobbying for favorable votes on this amendment. Regrettably, however, the U.S. delegation had still not received word from Washington on whether it had permission to engage in bilateral discussions, and amid all the back and forth, Southwick was never able to get the broad authority he would have needed to execute his entire strategy. He continued to work with Norway on building consensus for substituting their generic language on the conflict in the Middle East for the OIC text, but it was clear that the Bush administration was not prepared to go for broke in lobbying for a last minute amendment to strike all of the objectionable language at the end of the conference.

As the U.S. and Canada worked with Norway to build support for their compromise, several mini-dramas were playing out in the circus-like atmosphere surrounding the conference. The leaders of many Western states and their ministers did not come to Durban—for the same reason that Colin Powell did not. Among the leaders who did show up, however, were luminaries like Fidel Castro, Yasir Arafat, and the increasingly hostile Amr Moussa, the former Egyptian Foreign Minister and current Secretary-General of the Arab League. It was increasingly clear to me that a reasoned discussion on racism would not happen in this rogues' gallery.

Diving into this hornets' nest was the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who announced with much fanfare on August 31, the first day of the conference, that he had made a deal with Arafat to tone down the rhetoric on Israel. My wife and

I, returning from a friendly visit with Kofi and Nan Annan, ran into Jackson and Arafat in our hotel lobby, and Jackson jubilantly announced his “breakthrough” to us, saying that Arafat had agreed to drop all references tying Zionism to racism. I responded that I looked forward to seeing the compromise, and I hoped they would also drop the other veiled attacks on Israel scattered throughout the text.

The next day, the media excitement over Jackson’s news quickly evaporated, however, after Arafat delivered a speech to the conference plenary that was both hateful and vituperative, describing Israel as engaging in a “racist, colonialist conspiracy” against Palestinians. “The aim of this Government,” Arafat said, “is to force our people to their knees and to make them surrender in order to continue her occupation, settlements and racist practices, so as to liquidate our people by carrying out the *Orainim* (i.e. Hell) plan which were declared by Sharon (sic)...”² There was no more talk of Jackson’s deal with Arafat after this speech.

Another ring in the Durban circus was the NGO forum, taking place just outside the conference center. Although the NGO proceedings were intended to provide a platform for the wide range of civil society groups interested in the conference’s conciliatory mission, the forum quickly became stacked with Palestinian and fundamentalist Arab groups. Each day, these groups organized anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rallies around the meetings, attracting thousands. One flyer which was widely distributed showed a photograph of Hitler and the question “What if I had won?” The answer: “There would be NO Israel...” At a press conference held by Jewish NGO’s to discuss their concerns with the direction the conference was taking, an accredited NGO, the Arab Lawyers Union, distributed a booklet filled with anti-Semitic caricatures frighteningly like those seen in the Nazi hate literature printed in the 1930s. Jewish leaders and I who were in Durban were shocked at this blatant display of anti-Semitism. For me, having experienced the horrors of the Holocaust first hand, this was the most sickening and unabashed display of hate for Jews I had seen since the Nazi period.

Sadly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the official NGO document that was later adopted by a majority of the 3,000 NGOs in the forum branded Israel a “racist apartheid state” guilty of “genocide” and called for an end to its “racist crimes” against Palestinians. It also called for the convening of an international war crimes tribunal to try Israeli citizens. What is perhaps most disturbing about the NGO community’s actions is that many of America’s top human rights leaders—Reed Brody of Human Rights Watch, Michael Posner of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Gay MacDougal of the International Human Rights Law Group—participated. Although most of them denounced the NGO document that was adopted, it was surprising how reluctant they were to attack the anti-Semitic atmosphere and the clear OIC effort to derail the conference. Instead of supporting the Bush administration’s principled stand against the anti-Israeli and

anti-Semitic language in the governmental document, the NGOs attacked and condemned the administration for failing to send Colin Powell. An oft-repeated slander repeated by the NGOs was that the administration was using the issue of opposition to the anti-Israel language as a way to dodge serious negotiations on the reparations issue.

During September 1-2, when the NGOs took the stage to unveil their hateful document, Michael Southwick's team was feverishly meeting with a wide range of delegations, UN leaders, and South African officials serving as chairs of the conference. Ambassador Southwick was under enormous pressure to make progress in securing support for the Norwegian language. He was in constant contact with Colin Powell and with the White House, who felt that it was important to pull the U.S. delegation out of the conference as soon as it became clear that there was no hope to prevail on the U.S. bottom-line demand that the conference documents contain no anti-Israeli language. I met with a number of foreign ministers and other national delegates to underscore the message that the Norwegian language was as far as we were willing to go.

As the U.S. pressed its case, Robinson seemed to be working to stymie our efforts.

In her public and private statements, as was the case in Geneva, she insisted that the conference had to recognize the suffering of the Palestinian people. In a meeting on Sunday, September 2, with Ambassador Southwick, she lashed out at him, characterizing the U.S. threat to pull out if the Norwegian language was not accepted as "warped, strange and undemocratic." In a meeting I had with Commissioner Robinson later that same day, she pleaded with me to compromise and see the Norwegian text as a starting point for discussions. I told her that she should be under no illusions—it was an enormous concession for the U.S. to accept even a generic discussion of the situation in the Middle East since no other political dispute was mentioned in the text. I also told her that the U.S. government was extremely displeased with the way she had handled the conference, and we indicated that we held her responsible for her actions that contributed to its failure.

The final showdown between the United States and the OIC came in a meeting between Ambassador Southwick and Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher on Monday, September 3. The purpose of the meeting was to try to strike a deal to drop all the anti-Israeli language scattered throughout the draft text and replace it with the Norwegian language expressing regret for the crisis in the Middle East. Maher's behavior in the meeting, as described to me later that night by a U.S. official who was present, was not what you would expect from one of

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America's closest allies. Maher was indignant. He launched into an anti-American diatribe, insisted that Israel is a racist state, and that its actions had to be condemned by the conference.

Shortly after the breakdown of Ambassador Southwick's diplomatic efforts with the Arab League countries, in the early afternoon of September 3, Secretary Powell wisely decided to withdraw the U.S. delegation from a conference which had become a diplomatic farce. I spoke to the secretary just minutes after he communicated his decision, and he asked that I help explain it to the international

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media at the conference site. I held an impromptu news conference where I explained that the United States had made an enormous compromise by being willing to discuss the situation in the Middle East—that that we had gone the extra mile. I stated that those countries who made it their specific goal to hijack the conference had shown rigidity and an unwillingness to

compromise, and I praised President Bush and Colin Powell for their principled position to withdrawal.

After we left, the EU delegations stayed put to see if they could salvage an agreement. The compromise, for which South Africa claimed authorship, removed some of the anti-Israeli language, but contained Mary Robinson's longed-for language that recognized the "plight of the Palestinian people under occupation"—language that clearly would have been unsatisfactory to the United States. Not only does the final document single out one regional conflict for discussion, it does so in a biased way: the suffering of the Palestinian people is highlighted, but there is no discussion of the Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens.

Although the compromise was presented by Robinson as an agreement between the EU and the OIC, brokered by South Africa, it was opposed by the OIC and South Africa in the final plenary session. The OIC delegates, led by Syria and Pakistan, continued to show the intransigence they had demonstrated in negotiations with the United States, launching a last minute parliamentary maneuver to salvage three of the most extreme paragraphs of anti-Israeli language that they had inserted into the conference documents in Geneva. The OIC lost on a procedural motion offered by Brazil to prevent them from adding the paragraphs on a vote of 51-38, leaving the "compromise" language as the final outcome of the Durban conference. Many of our partners in the newly formed coalition against terrorism—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Pakistan—supported this last ditch effort to demonize Israel.

LESSONS LEARNED

Amid the swirl of events in Durban, a number of useful lessons emerged which American policymakers should consider.

1. The UN can only solve pressing global problems with strong leadership. Mary Robinson's lack of leadership was a major contributing factor to the debacle in Durban. Her yearning to have a "dialogue among civilizations" blinded her to the reality that the noble goals of her conference had been usurped by some of the world's least tolerant and most repressive states, wielding human rights claims as a weapon in a political dispute. As a result, the discussion of important issues—regret for the sins of the past, recognition of the emergence of new types of hate, and the means to combat them—was attached to a conference stripped of all moral credibility.

The comparison of the Durban farce with the UN AIDS summit held a few months earlier in New York is instructive. Just as they had at Durban, the OIC attempted in New York to attach a non-germane discussion of the Middle East conflict to a critical global dialogue. Secretary-General Kofi Annan rebuffed the attempt, making it clear to everyone that the AIDS issue was too important to be side-tracked by narrow interests. The result was the initiation of the Global AIDS Initiative, which, with strong U.S. support, is transforming the fight against AIDS in Africa and elsewhere.

2. U.S. withdrawal from the world stage places our interests in jeopardy. Our diplomats met stiff resistance as they sought support from our closest democratic allies—the EU, Canada, Japan, Australia, and others—in trying to form a united front against the regimes seeking to distort the conference. The delegates representing these countries in Geneva and Durban were genuinely angry at the disdain they felt the Bush administration had shown for UN efforts to tackle critical global problems such as climate change, chemical and biological weapons proliferation, and the trade in small arms. They were deeply offended that the United States—the world's greatest polluter, and its largest economic and military power—would ignore its responsibility to the world community. The OIC sensed this, and the tepid resistance they met with from traditional American allies emboldened them to carry out their plan.

In a perfect world, it would certainly be reasonable to expect our closest democratic allies to rise above their resentments toward us and to realize when the common interest in fighting anti-democratic forces dictates close cooperation. In the world in which we find ourselves, however, it is critical for the United States, as the world's only superpower, to remember that the world needs and expects us to lead. When we don't, resentments build fast.

3. NGOs can't always be counted on to promote liberal values. The official NGO forum at the UN World Conference on Racism was stacked with

anti-American, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli activists. These activists sought to use an important UN human rights mechanism to advance their radical agenda. The official NGO document they produced debases terms like genocide, ethnic-cleansing, and crimes against humanity by using them to describe Israeli settlement policies in the occupied territories. This language not only infects the official document of the NGO forum itself, but tragically is also evident in the Youth Forum document.

The leaders of the great Western human rights NGOs like Human Rights Watch, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and Amnesty International participated in the NGO Forum in Durban. Shockingly, they did almost nothing to denounce the activities of the radicals in their midst. They made no statements protesting the debasement of human rights mechanisms and terms taking place in front of their eyes and they offered no support to the principled position that the Bush administration took against the singling out of Israel and Jews for attack and criticism at the conference. Instead, they repeated, like a mantra, the ludicrous charge that the Bush administration was using the Middle East issue as a smokescreen to avoid discussion of slavery.

Durban demonstrates that we cannot always assume that all NGOs are focused on advancing universal standards of human rights. When the U.S. government abrogates its role as the leading advocate of pluralism, democracy and human rights, the NGO process can become as polluted as the intergovernmental process.

4. The United States' Middle Eastern allies must reform. Unfortunately, in the troubled Arab Middle East, our friends may pose nearly as much danger for U.S. interests as our enemies. Too many of the so-called moderate Arab regimes have chosen to permit, encourage, and even champion hatred—of Jews, of the U.S., and of the West in general—as a way of deflecting popular frustration with their own inability to deliver economic and political development. This approach may be helping these leaders cling to power in the short-term, but it is wildly destructive over the long-term. For us at the conference, it is evident that the same attitude that sought to turn Durban into an anti-Israeli carnival also led to the horrific terrorist attacks in New York and Washington only two days after the conference closed. Indeed, hate is the thread that connects Durban and the terrorism of September 11 and it is the same ideology that produced terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. It should be of great concern to the U.S. government that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other allies, after years of American economic and security support, did not just support the effort to vilify Israel and subvert the agenda of the World Conference—they led it.

Most dismaying to me at Durban was the performance of the Egyptians, our leading Arab world partner and the recipient of nearly \$40 billion in U.S. aid over the past two decades. It was Egyptian delegates, more often than not, who

intervened in the Geneva Preparatory Session to add language disparaging the meaning of the Holocaust and perverting the definition of anti-Semitism. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, Egypt's foreign minister until early 2001, organized Arab resistance to U.S. and EU efforts at compromise. Egypt's current foreign minister, Ahmed Maher, treated American diplomats with shocking disdain, while insisting that the conference label Israel a racist state. Meanwhile, Pakistan, in partnership with Syria, led the effort to restore the most strongly anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic language after the South African compromise was accepted.

The U.S. must urge friendly Middle Eastern states to recognize the link between hate-mongering and violence. Arab states, meanwhile, need to look deeply within themselves, analyze their missteps, cease the inflammatory lies and embrace the path of openness and political reform, releasing their citizens' positive energy. If they do not, U.S. hopes for defeating terrorism will be hopelessly compromised, and the prospects for a peaceful, prosperous, progressive, and pro-Western Middle East will be negligible.

PULLING BACK FROM THE ABYSS

It is important that the lessons of the Durban debacle not be forgotten as the Bush administration continues to manage a broad coalition against terrorism. One lesson of Durban is clear—strong, principled leadership from the United States and the United Nations is critical in order to prevent hostile forces within the international community from hijacking vital multilateral institutions. As Durban showed, the UN leadership abrogates its responsibilities at the risk of discrediting the institutions they represent. American leaders, furthermore, absolve the United States from the world's problems at the peril of our own national security interests. Episodic and selective engagement in international affairs damages our negotiating position in international deliberations such as the World Conference on Racism, and ultimately undermines American interests and values. It is also clear that we must challenge our Middle Eastern allies to move away from their promotion of popular resentment towards Jews, Americans and the West. We cannot defeat terrorism if our coalition partners continue to peddle the hate that breeds it.

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The Cold War ended with the collapse of international communism, but in the resulting vacuum, radical forces bent on spreading fundamentalist ideologies have arisen, propelled by the very globalizing developments they often disdain. 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. ■

NOTES

- 1 The purpose of these interventions was to confuse the real meaning of anti-Semitism, namely persecution of Jews and Judaism. The term itself and the practice of anti-Semitism have a long and well-documented history originating in Europe. The word was first used in 1879 by the German scholar William Marr, who started an anti-Semitic league that sought to prove that Jews are morally and physically inferior to other races.
- 2 A full text of Arafat's plenary statement on September 1 is available on the Internet website for the World Conference against Racism, <http://www.un.org/WCAR/statements/palestineE.htm>.