

A DURBAN REVIEW DIARY: HARPER VINDICATED, UN HATERS HUMBLD



Gil Troy

Canada was the first country to boycott the Durban Review Conference. McGill University historian Gil Troy, who attended as an observer, writes that Canada's objections to the farce reflected Canadians' longstanding faith in the United Nations' ideals, upheld today by Conservatives and Liberals, especially Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Irwin Cotler, MP. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's antics justified the boycott while some parallel protests and meetings revealed new alliances that might save the UN's human rights agenda.

Le Canada a été le premier pays à boycotter la Conférence d'examen de Durban. L'historien Gil Troy, qui y a assisté à titre d'observateur note que cette position traduit notre engagement de longue date envers les idéaux des Nations unies, aujourd'hui relayés aussi bien par les conservateurs que les libéraux, notamment par le premier ministre Stephen Harper et le député Irwin Cotler. Le cinéma du président iranien Mahmoud Ahmadinejad justifiait ce boycott, mais les protestations et les rencontres parallèles auxquelles cette conférence a par ailleurs donné lieu ont révélé de nouvelles alliances susceptibles de sauver le programme des droits de l'homme de l'ONU.

The Durban Review farce in Geneva vindicated Prime Minister Stephen Harper's prescient decision to boycott the conference. Harper upstaged Barack Obama in demonstrating moral leadership on this issue. Canada has now taken the lead in reforming the United Nations — and challenging liberal and autocratic hypocrisy throughout the world.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's demagoguery as the conference's opening speaker commanded the spotlight. His antics defined the Durban Review Conference as yet another festival of West-bashing and Israel-bashing by a despot whose regime tortures dissidents and imprisons homosexuals. Less noticed, but more path-breaking, was the alliance forged beyond the conference halls between pro-Israel and human rights activists equally frustrated with the UN's Israel obsession. Canadians, including the former Liberal justice minister Irwin Cotler and the executive director of UN Watch, Hillel Neuer, were essential marriage brokers in building this friendship committed to demanding that the United Nations protect human rights consistently and systematically. In both informal discussions and formal speeches, many activists frequently praised Canada's leadership, hailing Harper's vision in boycotting the Durban debacle months before any other countries.

During the first World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in

Durban, South Africa, which began on August 31, 2001, and ended on September 8, the streets filled with anti-Zionists shouting vitriolic anti-Semitic slogans. Protesters equated Zionism with Nazism as posters lamented that Adolf Hitler did not finish the job. With so many of the 16,000 participants at the parallel NGO (non-governmental organization) conference denouncing Jews, the name Durban became synonymous with Jew-hatred. True believers in human rights mourned that liberal NGOs had helped the Palestinians' nationalist struggle against Israel derail important discussions the world needs about racism.

Some human rights groups and pro-Israel groups began working to reform the UN human rights mechanisms. Not surprisingly, Canadians like Cotler and Neuer were crucial in launching this initiative. Many Canadians maintain great faith in the UN's founding ideals and are proud that John Peters Humphrey, a long-time McGill law professor, drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Cotler, on leave from McGill Law, is a world-renowned human rights crusader, who has spent decades crisscrossing the globe, defending the oppressed, including Nelson Mandela against South Africa's apartheid regime and Natan Sharansky against Soviet Communism. Neuer was Cotler's student at McGill, continuing this McGill — and Canadian — tradition.

When the UN prepared to host a review conference in Durban, Neuer was particularly well placed to head off another

er hate fest. Based in Geneva as the executive director of UN Watch, he has frequently spotlighted the UN's anti-Israel obsession and its hypocrisy in letting dictatorships dominate the Human Rights Council. Working with various organizations in shifting coalitions, including its parent organization the American Jewish Committee, NGO Monitor, B'nai Brith International, Freedom House and Freedom Now, UN Watch helped redirect Durban. Effective lobbying of the Ford Foundation and others cut off funds NGOs would have

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used to replicate the Durban I sideshow. The UN itself, embarrassed by Durban I, agreed to shift the venue to Geneva, where the UN infrastructure and the Swiss police could control events. Western diplomats worked to moderate the Durban Review declaration.

In this environment, Canada's announcement on January 23, 2008, galvanized the forces trying to right Durban's wrongs. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's instincts proved correct. Harper's boldness demonstrated Canada's willingness to lead on the issue. Jewish groups were as surprised by the early boycott announcement as others. "Canada is interested in combating racism, not promoting it," Jason Kenney, at the time secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity, told reporters. "We'll attend any conference that is opposed to racism and intolerance, not those that actually promote racism and intolerance. Our considered judgment, having participated in the preparatory meetings, was that we were set for a replay of Durban I. And Canada has no intention of lending its good name and resources to such a systematic promotion of hatred and big-

otry." Anticipating the metaphor that would define the next conference too, Kenney declared that the 2001 World Conference against Racism (WCAR) had become "a circus of intolerance."

Canada was correct, but alone. Even the Israelis had not yet decided to boycott. President George W. Bush, understandably, did not declare a position, not wanting to impose a decision on his successor.

Inevitably, the sniping against Harper's position began. On February 22, 2008, Sid Ryan, the president of

Ontario CUPE, denounced Harper in the name of "over 200,000 workers." Ryan invoked Canada's long tradition of UN support, saying the Canadian government should "work to help strengthen Durban II if it deemed that the conference planning is flawed." Distorting history, Ryan ignored the Durban ugliness and claimed that the "impact of 9/11 caused the hard work of WCAR to be poisoned and to be seen through the eyes of revisionist history. We have experienced first-hand in Canada that 9/11 spawned unprecedented levels of Islamophobia and racial profiling." In fact, 9/11 upstaged the growing backlash against the Durban hate-fest. In the days following the conference, reporters and politicians had started denouncing how the Palestinians and Islamic countries hijacked the agenda and targeted Jews. The 9/11 attacks derailed the discussion.

Eventually, Israel followed Canada. Shortly after Barack Obama's inauguration, the new president sent a US delegation to the preliminary conference planning the Durban meetings. When his representatives described the anti-Israel hatred and the threat to free speech from Muslim delegates demanding broad latitude to

prosecute "religious defamation" and "Islamophobia," Obama joined the boycott. Before the conference convened, Italy, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Germany also refused to participate.

As the conference began, Harper proclaimed: "Our government is leading the world, not following it, in championing international understanding and pluralism and we are taking a strong stand against racism and anti-Semitism in all its forms. Canada will not lend itself to an international conference that promotes these kinds of things." Explaining why he decided so early, he explained: "In preparatory meetings for Durban II, we observed clear, unmistakable signs this conference will again scapegoat the Jewish people."

Meanwhile, some human rights NGOs were organizing counter-conferences and other demonstrations to show that the UN's anti-Israel obsession hurt the true victims of human rights abuses worldwide. On the Friday before the conference began, UN Watch set the tone by embarrassing Libya, the country chairing the conference's preparatory committee and the Human Rights Council. With Najjat Al-Hajjaji of Libya presiding at a session for NGOs, Hillel Neuer yielded UN Watch's time to Ashraf Ahmed El-Hojouj. "Thank you, Madame Chair," El-Hojouj began. "I don't know if you recognize me. I am the Palestinian medical intern who was scapegoated by your country, Libya, in the HIV case in the Benghazi hospital, together with five Bulgarian nurses." Libyan police tortured and jailed El-Hojouj and the nurses, falsely accusing them of spreading AIDS. Al-Hajjaji of Libya banged her gavel, futilely trying to silence El-Hojouj. The confrontation received wide media coverage, running as the lead item on Swiss TV.

That Sunday, El-Hojouj and 21 other speakers were hosted by over two dozen NGOs at the Geneva Summit for

Human Rights, Tolerance and Democracy, or what I called the “Anti-Racism Conference As It Should Have Been.” Offering a mirror image of the Durban Review Conference leadership, many of the speakers suffered repression thanks to the leaders of today’s UN Human Rights Council. The dissidents from Iran, Cuba, Libya, Iran, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and elsewhere, along with the hundreds of attendees, rejected the toxic combination of European politesse and dictatorial manipulation perpetuating what one speaker called the “coalition of autocrats around the world.” That speaker, Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, imprisoned in Egypt for three years, said that having Libya lead the Human Rights Council made a mockery of human rights. He also denounced “the indifference of the democrats,” regretting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s vow that human rights issues would not sour American relations with the Chinese. “When people no longer denounce injustice...we are giving an oxygen boost to dictators so they can continue to trample on people’s rights,” Jose Gabriel Ramon Castillo, a Cuban activist, warned.

In the emotional opening session, victims of the Darfur and Rwanda genocides moved delegates to tears, describing the evil they endured. Dominique Sopo, the president of SOS Racisme, condemned the Durban Review Conference’s “negationism,” ignoring the real human rights crimes. “It is unbelievable that Darfur is not on the agenda,” Sopo insisted. “What is the point of having a conference against racism if this is ignored?” Contrasting the UN’s passivity with the opening panellists’ activist idealism, Irwin Cotler thanked the dissidents for “inspiring us to act and do that which needs to be done.”

Celebrating 60 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, sessions examined the declaration’s various arti-

cles. One session examined article 5, the “right to be free from torture and cruel or inhuman treatment.” Miss World Canada 2003, Nazanin Afshin-Jam, described her campaign to stop child executions in Iran, the world’s leader in this barbarism. Parvez Sharma described *Jihad for Love*, his film describing the discrimination Muslim homosexuals endure. Ahmed Batebi, a dissident imprisoned in Iran for nine years after the *Economist’s* cover featured a photograph of him waving the bloody shirt of a fellow student shot down during an anti-government demonstration, testified. He recounted how he was thrown into solitary confinement on flimsy legal grounds. He recalled threats, mock executions, bru-

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talization of friends, and how “they tied my hands to a chair and kept me awake until I lost consciousness, then cut me and poured salt in my wounds to wake me up.” This cruelty, he explained, “is an attempt to crush the spirits” of anyone who criticizes Iran’s regime.

The next day, April 20, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived from Iran, proving how absurd the Durban Review Conference and the UN human rights mechanisms had become. At least Ahmadinejad is honest. Just as Hamas failed to learn Yasser Arafat’s lessons about lying to the world and keeps its anti-Semitic charter calling for Israel’s destruction, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s appearance illustrated the modern UN’s perversity.

Like all good demagogues, Ahmadinejad is clever. He guaranteed himself the prime speaker’s spot, as the only head of state amid a clump of junior ministers at the downgraded conference. Ahmadinejad brought star power into otherwise tedious proceedings. He fed the crowd red meat. After invoking the prophets, including Abraham, Jesus and — the final one — Muhammad, he earned applause from the Third World delegates by calling the Security Council an imperialist leftover from the Second World War. More broadly, he blamed America, capitalism and liberal values for today’s economic crisis.

Ahmadinejad’s speech can be studied as a classic anti-Semitic specimen, attributing to Jews (although he uses the word Zionism) disproportionate power and importance, adding a dash of Holocaust denial. Ahmadinejad blamed “the Zionist regime” for the Iraq War, among other crimes. He claimed the conference against racism would fail unless it assailed the Jewish state — and broader Western ideals of liberalism, secularism and capitalism.

As soon as Ahmadinejad began speaking, two French students donned clown’s wigs and threw red clown noses at the Iranian leader. Expressing that irrepressible Gallic style, the students reasoned that because inviting Ahmadinejad, allowing oppressors like Libya to chair the Human Rights Council and ignoring genocide in the Sudan, torture in Iran, sexism in Saudi Arabia and suppression in Cuba made the conference into a circus, they might as well dress appropriately.

More significant was the European walkout, as soon as Ahmadinejad claimed the European powers used “the pretext” of Jewish suffering to establish a Jewish state. True, these 23 countries did not boycott the conference. But who ever thought a parade of (mostly) men in (mostly) dark, pinstriped suits could be so moving? If only they regularly demanded the UN stick to its ideals.



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MP and former justice minister Irwin Cotler speaking to a demonstration at the Durban Review Conference in Geneva in April. Behind him, (L to R) are Pierre Poilievre, parliamentary secretary to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, and the author, Gil Troy, of McGill University.

The conference scuttlebutt reported that the European Union delegates had met that morning, and agreed to walk if Ahmadinejad crossed red lines into Holocaust denial or denying Israel's right to exist. Apparently, all followed the French ambassador. Students in the hall reported that after they walked out, delegates were desperately scanning copies of the official text of Ahmadinejad's speech, searching for the offending passage to justify their actions retroactively.

The text showed that Ahmadinejad had skipped a line dismissing the Holocaust as "ambiguous and dubious." UN officials took credit, attributing his edits to their lobbying. European delegates believed Ahmadinejad was unnerved by their actions — although cameras caught him grinning amid the tumult.

In the spirit of Swiss President Hans-Rudolf Merz, who greeted Ahmadinejad with warm smiles, the conference president thanked Ahmadinejad for his sentiments — which went about 23 minutes over the allotted seven minutes with no reprimand. The next speaker, Norway's foreign minister, Jonas Gahr Store, repudiated the Iranian's remarks. Store said Ahmadinejad expressed himself "in a way that threatens the very purpose of this conference... Freedom of speech, yes," Store said, "but incitement of hatred, no." Ahmadinejad's speech, Store said, "runs counter to the very spirit and dignity of this conference." Of course, most reporters ignored Store's words. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stole the show, and defined the conference

— to Durban's detriment and the UN's eternal shame.

Equally important was what did not take place on the streets of Geneva — and what did. There were no angry mass demonstrations against Israel. The dissidents, the victims and the Jewish activists dominated, demonstrating the moral power of their growing, Canadian-sanctioned alliance. The morning the conference began, Jewish students stood outside the NGO delegates' entrance, with grey tape shutting their mouths, protesting the UN's silence on Darfur and other crimes. Two Darfuris approached, asked for tape and joined them.

Monday night, after Ahmadinejad's speech, thousands joined a moving Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Day) commemoration in front of the Unit-

ed Nations featuring Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, Irwin Cotler, Father Patrick Desbois and the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy. Cotler recalled his parents' lesson that some events "in Jewish history, in world history, are too terrible to imagine, but not too terrible to have happened." Cotler's words and his denunciation of Ahmadinejad's geno-

who called Hussein a hero, Ahmadinejad and his terrorist proxies Hezbollah and Hamas. "Woe unto any of you out there who support Hamas," Dershowitz thundered. "You are supporting Hitler's heirs — you are complicit in the great evil of the 20th century." The freed Soviet prisoner of conscience Natan Sharansky linked the Soviet Union's "Orwellian world" with

hard to improve. Anti-Semitism is a way of "changing the subject."

The largest demonstration that week appears to have been a festive gathering of two to three thousand Israel supporters on the conference's third day, again in front of the United Nations. Joining one American, one Italian, one Israeli, and one French politician on the podium were two of us from McGill University, Cotler and I, and the Prime Minister's parliamentary secretary — and personal representative to the side conferences — Pierre Poilievre, MP. When a Darfuri interrupted the keynote speaker Natan Sharansky, mid-speech, shouting, "Free Darfur," Sharansky echoed the man's cry — and embraced him, to warm

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cidal designs on Israel linked the traumas of the past that Wiesel described so eloquently with the threats of the present. Mourning the Holocaust in Europe, with six elderly survivors lighting candles in front of the UN, hours after Ahmadinejad's appearance, linked the world's failures yesterday with some of the world's failures today.

Still, with so many eloquent supporters of Israel assembled, the conference occasionally felt like a Jewish fringe festival — but with a profound message. At one side NGO session on modern anti-Semitism inside the UN, the capacity crowd heard Wiesel, visibly anguished by Ahmadinejad's appearance, denounce the Iranian's speech as "an insult to our intelligence, an insult to our sensitivity, an insult to our memory." Wiesel received a standing ovation by demanding the UN apologize for inviting Ahmadinejad at all.

The actor Jon Voight followed with a heartfelt tribute to Israel and the Jews, mystified by the hatred such a "sacred" people endure. Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz then drew "the unbroken line" linking Hitler, his Palestinian ally Haj Amin el Hussein, Yasser Arafat,

the modern UN's Orwellianism. Sharansky offered a simple test for "a real conference against racism." Countries that grant free speech should be given free speech; countries that fight against racism should be allowed to join the conference combating racism. Father Desbois, who uncovers mass graves of Jews in eastern Europe by speaking to elderly parishioners, demonstrated the importance of challenging people to do the right thing. When he approaches, many ask, "Father, why are you coming so late?"

While each of these speakers testified eloquently against the Durban distortions, the fifth speaker, Shelby Steele, tried explaining the continuing appeal of modern anti-Semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism. Steele, a leading black American intellectual, analyzed the wave of revolutions after the Second World War that eliminated white supremacy. Unfortunately, for many Africans, Arabs and African Americans, ending racism, achieving freedom, did not improve their lives as much as they expected. The result was an obsession with racism, and a scapegoating of Israel and Jews, as an act of "bad faith." It is easier, Steele said, to denounce someone else than to take responsibility for your own misery — or to work

applause. The image of the bald Sharansky on stage, awkwardly but lovingly cradling the tall, bald Darfuri's head, symbolized the important alliance Durban II celebrated. In that spirit, Cotler contrasted the hatred on Durban's streets in 2001 with the constructive spirit on Geneva's streets in 2009.

"Please use your liberty to promote ours," Soe Aung, a Burmese dissident, begged at the Geneva Summit. If the first Durban sideshow embodied the UN at its worst, the second Durban side conferences made strides toward meeting Aung's challenge. If the UN starts reforming, history will remember Prime Minister Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party — with his Liberal colleague Irwin Cotler — not only for saving the United Nations, but for helping to save many liberal activists from their own moral myopia.

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