

Israel and US walk out of UN conference on racism

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6 September 2001

The joint US-Israeli walkout from the United Nations conference on racism in Durban, South Africa was something of a foregone conclusion. It was a stage-managed affair, the purpose of which was to portray all opposition to the Zionist state's persecution of the Palestinians as inherently racist.

The original draft resolution to the UN conference stated its "deep concern" at the "increase of racist practices of Zionism and anti-Semitism" and spoke of the emergence of "movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas, in particular the Zionist movement, which is based on racial superiority." It made direct criticisms of Israeli repression against the Palestinians on the West Bank as a "new kind of apartheid, a crime against humanity."

The US and Israel insisted on the removal of any direct reference to Israel. Prior to the walkout, the two delegations had been offered the prospect of a compromise resolution, drawn up by Finland and South Africa in consultation with the Arab states. Having toned down any specific criticisms of Israel, press reports indicated that the new version had even been pronounced acceptable to Washington by US Congressman Tom Lantos, who was part of the delegation. But events proved that there was no intention to compromise by the US and Israel.

Discrediting the Durban conference was a top priority for the Zionist regime and its US backers because it was seen as an arena through which the Palestinians could score a propaganda coup, when everything else was going against them.

The Palestinians have found themselves isolated in the face of the US's tacit support for Likud Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's military offensive against the West Bank and Gaza. They have had no practical support from the Arab states, which have maintained

their own relations with Israel throughout the past year of conflict, other than token amounts of money. On top of this, the European powers—while more eager than the US to renew negotiations between the two sides—are unwilling to do anything that alienates Israel. The European Union views closer relations with Israel, which remains the Middle East's military powerhouse, as essential in order to offset US hegemony in the region.

Israel has also achieved some success in winning a more friendly response from Russia, which is again seeking to challenge US domination of Middle Eastern affairs by offering itself as an honest broker between Israel and the Arab regimes. During the Durban conference Sharon visited Moscow for talks with President Putin to discuss the common threat posed by Islamic terrorism—Sharon has even indicated sympathy for Russia's bloody suppression of Islamic rebel forces in Chechnya—the possibility of a further one million Jewish immigrants from Russia to Israel, armaments and other trade deals.

The US and Israel considered it essential that no crack be allowed to appear at Durban in the pro-Zionist front they were working to enforce amongst the major powers. To justify their walkout, therefore, Durban was portrayed by the Bush and Sharon governments as a hotbed of anti-Semitism, comparable with a gathering of Nazis.

Shimon Samuels, the head of the Jewish caucus in Durban, declared, "We saw an NGO document that would have made [Hitler's Nazi Party propaganda chief] Goebbels happy. And now it is clear that we are going to see, at the end of the government conference, resolutions that can be called the UN's Mein Kampf."

Mordechai Yedid, Israel's official spokesman at the conference, insisted there could be no condemnation of

Israel in the resolution. He told the plenary meeting prior to the US-Israeli departure, “anti-Zionism, the denial of Jews the basic right to a home, is nothing but anti-Semitism, pure and simple.” Yedid derided the Arab regimes proposals to criticize Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians as “a group of states for whom the terms ‘racism’, ‘discrimination’, and even ‘human rights’ simply do not appear in their domestic lexicon”. The UN resolution, he continued, was “the most racist declaration in a major international organization since World War Two”.

His remarks prompted a walkout by Egypt’s Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher, who represents one of the most pro-US of all the Arab states.

Announcing its withdrawal from the conference, US Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced any attempt to single out “only one country in the world, Israel, for censure and abuse” and any suggestion that apartheid existed in Israel. For his part, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres proclaimed, “We were portrayed in an insulting and baseless manner as a colonial nation... The Arab League, all of it, has come out against peace.”

The right-wing media in Israel marched to the same tune. An article in the September 4 *Jerusalem Post* by Yossi Olmert described the Durban conference as “the mirror image of the Nuremberg rallies, in which the Nazis propagated their anti-Jewish messages, striving hard to delegitimise the Jews, as an inevitable step leading to their eventual liquidation.” He conceded reluctantly that “not all the participants in Durban are Nazis, maybe not even a majority of them, but too many are, and they clearly give this shameful gathering its true character”.

The Israeli-US offensive appears likely to have succeeded in its aim of preventing any chance of an official UN condemnation of Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. It was followed by threats from Canada and the EU to walkout if the resolution did not do the same. French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said on Wednesday that France and the EU would walkout, “If the final resolution continues to assimilate Zionism and racism”. As we go to press five delegates from South Africa, Belgium (on behalf of the EU), the Arab League, Norway and Namibia are fine-tuning a supposed compromise statement on the Middle East.

Even prior to Israel’s walkout, Peres could not

conceal his personal sense of achievement. He told the press, “This is the first time that the opposition to the Arab proposal includes not only the United States but also the 15 EU nations, which adopted a formal decision to oppose, all the Eastern European nations, which in the past would generally vote with the Arab side; Canada, Russia, the Latin American states...India, Japan and Singapore.” He expressed his gratitude to the 43 states that opposed the “one-sided decision” of the Arab and Muslim leagues.

The claim of those governments rallying to the defence of Israel on the grounds that they are taking a stand against anti-Semitism is entirely spurious. There is no doubt that there were expressions of anti-Jewish racism by some of those protesting outside the conference, as well as in official statements by Syria and Iran—the latter having rejected a discussion on anti-Semitism with the claim that it was not a contemporary form of racism. But it would have been entirely possible to have opposed anti-Semitism while condemning Israel’s repression of the Palestinians and the Zionist regime’s routine discrimination against non-Jews. Instead the US and European powers have helped prepare the way for Sharon to step up his drive to undermine the Palestinian Authority and bring the bulk of Occupied Territories under direct Israeli control once again.



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