

LEVELING THE PROPAGANDA PLAYING FIELD

In the aftermath of Durban I, the first United Nations Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, and which quickly degenerated into nothing more than a Jew-baiting, anti-Semitic hate fest, would anyone, could anyone, have expected Durban II to be any different? This time around, however, with brilliant advance planning by Hillel Neuer's UN Watch, the tables were neatly turned

by Machla Abramowitz

It's not often that one hears good news when it comes to the treatment of Israel on the international scene. But good news was precisely what Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch brought us.

UN Watch is an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) that holds the United Nations accountable to its own principles. It also closely monitors the doings of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the body that deals specifically with matters of human rights abuses worldwide. As such, the UNHRC is one of the UN's leading institutions.

It is the UNHRC which organized the Durban Review Conference, which was held April 20-24 in Geneva, Switzerland, and it is Hillel Neuer and UN Watch who are responsible for preventing "Durban II," as it's been dubbed, from becoming merely a repeat of the anti-Semitic proceedings of Durban I, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001.

I met with Hillel Neuer in Montreal, the day after the conference ended. Hillel Neuer is a thoughtful and personable young man in his 30s who is extremely passionate about his work. He spoke candidly to me about his work; Durban II; the United Nations Human Rights Council; and what he sees as its "pathological obsession" with Israel.

Neuer has been heading UN Watch, an NGO that is affiliated with the American Jewish Committee, for five years. He is a graduate of Hebrew Academy, an Orthodox Jewish day school in Montreal.

Upon graduating from McGill law school, he studied for a year in Yeshivat Maaleh Adumim in Israel. He also obtained his masters of law from Hebrew University and served as a law clerk with the Israel Supreme Court. Mr. Neuer believes that his strong Jewish education, beginning from values learned at home and seeing his parents as role models, was a key factor in his decision to work full-time defending Israel and the Jewish People. "Activism comes from a sense of mission and values, and one's education and background play formative roles."

He went on to discuss the UNHRC's present objectives, which are of grave concern to the European Union and other Western democracies, and his perceptions regarding the direction the United States should take within this body now that the US has, for the first time, become a member.

To fully understand what was accomplished at Durban II, it is important to flashback to what transpired in August 2001. At that time, Jewish human rights advocates approached the first United Nations Conference on Racism, Racial



Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, which took place in Durban, South Africa, with much hope that the world would begin to seriously address issues of human rights abuses.

“What they discovered instead was an Orwellian reversal in which a conference convened to combat racism turned into a major anti-Semitic event,” Mr. Neuer told me. This was during the height of the intifada. As a result, Islamic states and their African and Asian allies were, according to Mr. Neuer, “determined to use this opportunity to condemn Israel for ‘a new kind of apartheid’ and for ‘crimes against humanity.’”

Many groups that proclaimed themselves to be independent “NGOs” — organizations with no affiliation to any government — were, in fact, controlled by Arab governments, who utilized the established NGO Forum to orchestrate a well-planned hate fest against Israel and Jews.

On Durban’s streets, pro-Hitler T-shirts were displayed and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the infamous Russian anti-Semitic forgery, was available for purchase. Jews were verbally and physically attacked. “Jewish students were traumatized. Many to this day call themselves ‘Durban survivors,’” Mr. Neuer said. “The late US Congressman Tom Lantos, who witnessed these events, remarked that it was the worst public

display of anti-Semitism he had seen since the Holocaust.”

All of this prompted the United States and Israel to walk out. “And it was only because of the credible threat that the European Union states would also walk out that changes to the final Declaration were made,” said Hillel Neuer. As a result, rather than condemning Israel for “apartheid” and “crimes against humanity,” the Durban Declaration “expressed concern over the plight of the Palestinians under foreign occupation.” By doing so, it not only singled out Israel, but transformed a political conflict into a racial one.

With these memories of Durban firmly intact, Jewish communities looked with trepidation to the Durban Review Conference (DRC) scheduled for 2009. Initial reports were not promising. First, the Organization of the Islamic Conference

and the Group of Arab States — those who controlled the 2001 Durban agenda — were again in charge. Libya, one of the world’s worst perpetrators of human rights abuses, was appointed chair of the DRC, while the vice chairs included Iran and Pakistan, whose abuse records rival those of Libya. In addition, two preparatory commissions were scheduled to take place on both Pesach and Yom Kippur, which, by intention or not, would effectively preclude Israeli and Jewish participation. It also became clear that the original mandate of the DRC — to review and assess the implementation of the 2001 Durban Conference action plan (which singled out the Palestinian issue) — was to be further subverted to indict Western democracies and Israel for alleged racism, “defamation of Islam,” and racial profiling. These became the dominant themes of the Durban II Draft Declaration, referred to as

the Draft Outcome Document.

At this point, international Jewish communities became actively engaged, through letter writing and direct contact, in alerting government officials, major NGOs, and the media to this Draft Outcome Document and what it meant. The result was that many governments were quick to set “red lines” which they would not cross, signifying by this whether they would attend the conference or not. These “red lines” included not stigmatizing Israel. In setting these “red lines,” French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy made the following statement: “The Durban Conference led to intolerable excesses from certain states and numerous NGOs that turned the Conference into a forum against Israel. No one has forgotten. France will not allow a repetition of the excesses and abuses of 2001.”

The Canadian government, citing Durban II’s proposed anti-Semitic and anti-Western agenda, was the first country to boycott Durban II. Organizations like the Ford Foundation, which had previously sponsored NGO participation in Durban, were this time persuaded to offer no financial endorsement.

Of great concern to UN Watch was the venue of the conference. In Durban, pro-Palestinians activists had taken over the streets and the authorities had failed to maintain order. UN Watch therefore strongly advocated for the conference be held in a major United Nations capital, such as New York or Geneva. After Western states were persuaded to make this a red line, the United Nations followed suit. The moment it became official that Geneva was the chosen site, Hillel Neuer and his team went to work.

“Geneva is a small city, and so our first actions were to reserve key spots during the scheduled week of the conference,” Hillel Neuer stated. UN Watch reserved the only major convention Center next to the United Nations compound where Durban II was to be held; and the only public square outside



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of the UN. They were able to book half of the 300 beds of Geneva’s only youth hostel, and the next day the remaining 150 were immediately reserved by the European Union of Jewish Students.

In this way, they effectively denied anti-Israel forces adequate venues in which to hold their activities, or the ability to find proper accommodations. This was in direct contrast to what had happened in Durban, where anti-Israel activists were clearly visible everywhere.

One of UN Watch’s major events was the holding of a bona fide human rights conference, showcasing the victims of the regimes behind the Durban II conference. Working together with thirty other authentic human rights NGOs — as interested as UN Watch in making certain that real human rights abuses be brought to the world’s attention — they held the Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance, and



THE UN’S WATCHDOG

UN Watch advocates against human rights abuses throughout the world, and counters anti-Israel bias in the media and in the UNHRC. It does so by meeting with diplomats and government officials to try to influence them to vote in the right way; by educating the public regarding the issues in order to sway public opinion; and by holding UN officials to account. Knowing that they are being watched often is in itself a deterrent.

Besides Hillel Neuer, UN Watch has an additional staff of five full-time individuals and voluntary interns, Jewish and non-Jewish, from the US, Canada, Switzerland, and Greece. They attend the United Nations Human Rights Council sessions and report on all resolutions being considered and passed. Written briefs are sent out to diplomats, government officials, media, and think tanks. It is in the area of swaying public opinion that it appears to have the greatest success.

“For most people around the world, what the UN says is infallible truth, like *Torah miSinai* [sacrosanct], says Hillel Neuer. “What UN Watch does is inform them of what UN resolutions really mean. Especially in regards to Israel they are particularly one-sided. For example, when Hamas or Hizbullah attacks Israel, the UNHRC will immediately convene to condemn Israel and its resolution will make absolutely no mention of either Hamas or Hizbullah. Similarly, when it came to Durban II, people were generally ignorant of what it meant for the council to elect Libya as chair with Iran and Pakistan as its vice chair. This was only one example of the ‘foxes guarding the chickens,’” Hillel Neuer pointed out.



Democracy, on the day prior to the DRC’s opening, and right across the street from the UN.

In addition, events exposing the conference’s inherent hypocrisy, as well as programs geared toward directly countering what UN Watch knew would be slanderous accusations pitted against Israel and Jews, began to take shape. These programs were undertaken with the advice and assistance of prominent human rights activists like Canadian Member of Parliament and former Justice Minister Professor Irwin Cotler, who had witnessed firsthand the ugly scenes of Durban 2001. This time around, “Durban” was to happen on Hillel Neuer’s turf and it was a turf he knew well.

As the Durban Review Conference approached, the United States, under the new administration of President Barack Obama, tried, but failed, to influence change in the content of the draft resolution that singled out Israel for alleged racism — a resolution that constitutes a new form of anti-Semitism, in which Israel is singled out as the Jew among the nations, and which leads to hatred of Jews everywhere.

Subsequently, Australia, Germany, Holland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Poland joined Israel, Canada, Italy, and the US in boycotting the conference. France and Britain did attend but promised to walk out should any offensive language be introduced. At this point there was a legitimate fear at the DRC that the remaining members of the European Union would boycott the conference as well.

With the international media centered on Durban II, UN Watch unleashed its action plan. Two days prior to the conference’s opening, with only the Swiss media informed of what was about to occur, Hillel Neuer patiently awaited UN Watch’s turn to speak at the 3rd Substantive Session of the Durban Review Council Preparatory Committee, during the time allotted to NGO input. Instead of taking the microphone himself, he deferred to his special guest Ashraf Ahmed El-Hagoug who responded to Najjat Al-Hjjaji, the Libyan chair, by stating: “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 the five Bulgarian nurses.”

Dr. El-Hagoug, who together with five Bulgarian nurses, had been convicted and sentenced to death in Libya for allegedly infecting Libyan children with the HIV virus, went on to accuse the Libyan government of intentionally and falsely arresting and torturing vulnerable minorities in Libya. His prepared speech was repeatedly interrupted by the Libyan chair. Hillel Neuer stated: “Even though he was not allowed to finish his speech, his testimony succeeded in

A HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS, UN STYLE

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was established in 2006 and is housed in Geneva. Its purpose was to replace the previously existing United Nations Commission on Human Rights that was acknowledged by Kofi Annan, then secretary-general of the United Nations, to have failed in its mandate to promote human rights.

"At the time, Mr. Annan acknowledged that this body had become selective and politicized and that countries were joining not to promote human rights but to shield their own records of abuse," Hillel Neuer explains. This reality was clearly substantiated by the election of Sudan into the Commission on Human Rights. Sudan was then, and still is today, engaged in carrying out racist genocide in its Darfur region. "Mr. Annan went on to say that it was 'casting a shadow upon the reputation of the UN as a whole.' This was an unprecedented self-indictment by the highest official of the UN body."

Unfortunately, even though Mr. Annan proposed that the newly established UNHRC consist of members whose countries "have a solid record of conforming to the highest human rights standards" this did not happen. "People are generally unaware that the secretary-general's position is essentially weak. It is basically a bully pulpit. It can be used to draw attention to issues. But the secretary-general doesn't make the decisions — governments do," Neuer explained.

So when most governments within the United Nations are nondemocratic, the new Human Rights Council that consists of forty-seven members elected by General Assembly majority will reflect that reality. Currently, twenty-four out of forty-seven UNHRC members (51 percent) fall short of basic democracy standards, with ratings by Freedom House, a respected organization that measures democracy worldwide, of either "Partly Free" or "Not Free."

In addition to the US now joining, other countries that were reelected include China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba — "all of these repressive regimes." Israel is not a member of the council.

As a result, while 50 percent of resolutions passed by the previous Commission on Human Rights were in condemnation of Israel, today it is 80 percent: of the thirty-two resolutions passed in the last three years, twenty-six were against Israel. Similarly, 50 percent of all emergency sessions were held to condemn Israel. In fact, the UNHRC has essentially two permanent agenda items, one for Israel's "violations" and the other for the rest of the world. "This is not rational in any way and it does nothing to help Palestinians. It only gives them false hope for extremist positions that are impossible to achieve," Neuer says.

While singularly focusing in on Israel, examples of human rights abuses that are not being addressed include those taking place in Zimbabwe, which once was considered to be the "bread basket of Africa" but whose citizens today, according to Mr. Neuer, "are being deprived of their right to food by their government." Other examples of human rights abusers are, "China, where freedom of religion and freedom of speech are being systematically denied," and Iran that consistently discriminates against Jews, Bahai, Sunni Arabs, and women, and where children are executed. Similarly, no

resolution has ever been passed against Sudan. "On the contrary," Neuer says, dryly, "it was praised for its cooperation."

One proposal made by Kofi Annan that did succeed in being implemented was the establishment of the Universal Periodic Review. This requires that all countries be reviewed every four years regarding its human rights record. This review is carried out by the UNHRC member states. "So when China gets reviewed, by Russia and Pakistan for instance, it gets praised. This is essentially a mutual praise society."

In this regard, it is ineffective. But, given that for the first time countries like China are being officially reviewed by a world body, allows NGOs like UN Watch to shine the spotlight on their record. "We can now use the occasion to bring attention to victims of abuse in these countries."

Voting in the UNHRC is done by blocs and "is often according to their national interests as opposed to what they see as right. As a result, these blocs form alliances and vote to protect one another." There is also a very cynical trading system of votes established. For instance, countries know that if they vote for the Islamic bloc, they will get their own resolutions passed.

"Although the UN as a whole is not intrinsically evil or incompetent, when it comes to political matters it is often skewed," Hillel Neuer said. "Unfortunately, the UN and its Human Rights Council cannot be ignored in that they are important forums for reflecting international opinion and legitimacy. But they are also completely dominated by antidemocratic and anti-Israel voices."

Within the UNHRC, the vote of the European Union is extremely critical. "For the Arab states it's not only important that they get a majority on their resolutions, they want a qualitative majority. They have the numbers already, but they want a moral legitimacy from the democratic states. When they don't get the EU votes, they become frustrated." Usually the Arab states play the game in such a way to assure that they get these votes. An example of this process is when the original motions introduced against Israel are so offensive that even the EU would vote against them. The Arab states then remove some of the more extreme language while retaining their core position. The Europeans then agree to the Arab bloc's motion, asserting that now the Islamic states "are being reasonable."

Although the EU usually votes as one bloc, at times there are divisions among them, especially in regard to Israel. Those governments that are currently friendlier toward Israel are the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Germany, and more often than not the United Kingdom. Those who are more hostile are Spain, Belgium, Ireland, and Greece. "Although France in recent years has traditionally been more critical of Israel, President Sarkozy is clearly a friend of Israel, though France's foreign policy doesn't always reflect this."

Similarly, even though the voting process is essentially cynical — for instance the Europeans want to sell their fighter jets to the Islamic states and they want, in return, to buy oil from them — there are "leaders among them who are decent people and they understand that they are fighting a war against terrorism and extremism."

exposing the UN conference's hypocrisy, as best exemplified by their appointment of Libya as their chair." This exchange was covered by many major news agencies.

The next day, Dr. Ashraf El-Hagoug was one of many speakers taking part at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance, and Democracy organized by UN Watch together with these other NGOs, and which took place in the previously reserved Convention Center. This "counter-conference," as it was called by some, was broadcast live worldwide via the Internet. Dr. El-Hagoug spoke of the torture and suffering he experienced at the hands of the Libyan authorities. He went on to state that as a Palestinian he had been raised to hate Jews. "But, it was a Jew, Mr. Solomon Passy, the ex-foreign minister of Bulgaria, who was the first person to offer me help. I will remember this forever."

In addition to Dr. El-Hagoug, the conference included personal testimonies from individuals such as Egyptian dissident Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Iranian dissident Ahmad Batabi, and Ester Murawajo, a Tutsi survivor of Rwandan genocidal policies — all of whom were severely victimized and tortured by their respective regimes. "In this way, we brought to the world's attention the true nature of the countries who were now presiding over this Durban II Conference on Racism and Discrimination."

On April 20 — which, some noted, coincidentally happened to be Hitler's birthday — the DRC was officially opened with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressing the assembly. He was the only head of state to come speak, so he got to go first. With UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in attendance, what UN delegates heard Ahmadinejad say through simultaneous translation was: "Following World War II, they (the UN Security Council) resorted to military aggression to make an entire nation homeless on the pretext of Jewish sufferings. They sent migrants from Europe, the US, and other parts of the world, in order to establish a *totally racist government* in occupied Palestine; in fact, in compensation for the dire consequences of racism in Europe, they helped bring to power the *most cruel and repressive racists in Palestine.*"

Most diplomats applauded while he spoke, but twenty-three European delegates and others, walked out. Representatives from the Vatican remained seated. Ahmadinejad's blatantly anti-Semitic comments had indubitably crossed the "red lines" originally



set by all Western democracies. Hillel Neuer clearly remembers watching Ahmadinejad surrounded by his entourage as he made his way smirking into the United Nations building. "If there is a person in the world today who embodies evil, it's him."

That evening UN Watch held a Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) commemoration in the outdoor square. All 3,000 seats were filled. In the audience were dozens of Jewish French students (two of whom had disrupted President Ahmadinejad's speech by wearing carnival wigs and throwing clown noses onto the podium), the Geneva Jewish community, and Jewish and non-Jewish officials and visitors from around the world. Others were standing in the aisles. In contrast to President Ahmadinejad's words of hate, they listened to speakers like Elie Wiesel tell the audience, "We have learned from our history that even in darkness there is song and prayer and even when suffering became intolerable, there is a rising of the soul above and beyond."

"Geneva has about 5,000 Jews and many congregations," Neuer informed me. "They all came together — Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Orthodox and non-Orthodox — to organize the event, and, standing together, we all recited the Mourner's Kaddish in memory of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust whose suffering President Ahmadinejad had, only hours earlier, sought to deny before the world."

Following this walkout the UN delegates began to panic. There was real concern that the entire conference would fall apart. As a result, they hastily adopted their final document three days before the conference

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THE FREEDOM TO CRITICIZE

One area in which the Islamic states and their bloc partners are fiercely pitted against the EU and Western democracies is in regard to the passing of "Defamation of Religion" resolutions. This issue was introduced by the Islamic states about ten years ago but took on greater urgency after 9/11 when Islam found itself under attack because of the terrorism that took place in its name on Western soil. Rather than acknowledge that they have major internal problems with which to contend, they went on the offensive and claimed that it was not those who were killed who were the real victims of 9/11, but Islam itself, which was being "defamed," as well as Muslims who were being racially profiled. After the incident with the Danish cartoons in 2005 they began to push forward more aggressively with these resolutions that single out Islam and its prophet for protection.

What these resolutions propose is that all individuals be denied the right to criticize Islam in any way. So, for instance, one would not be allowed to associate Islam with terrorism. That would be "defamation of religion." Similarly, one could also be prevented from criticizing Saudi Arabia's prohibition against women driving. In international human rights law, this concept of "defamation of religion" doesn't exist. Not only because the term itself is vague and raises questions about how one can legally *defame* a religion, but also because it privileges the protection of ideas over human beings. In this way, Hillel Neuer explained, "it is not an individual's freedom of religion that is being protected, but religion itself. Doing so violates the very concept of individual human rights."

It also forces and entitles the state to decide which religious viewpoints may be expressed. The passing of these resolutions not only establishes a legislative history to which it can now refer back but also confers a moral authority upon Islamic states determined to muzzle moderate Islamic voices from within as well as democratic Western criticism from without.

Mr. Neuer explains: "In international law everybody has a right to practice their religion and to have freedom of speech to be critical of any religion or aspect of it they want ... What they are proposing is a complete rewriting of present human rights laws. It is an assault on freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Even though these are not binding resolutions, they don't have to be enforceable to have an impact."

One area where the Islamic states are now seeking to amend an existing binding treaty is on the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). As it stands today, some kind of "delicate balance" exists in all democratic countries between freedom of speech and the prohibition against hate speech. What the Islamic states are trying to do is upset that balance by integrating the criticism of religion into the latter category. "Because they say there is a *gap* in existing standards there is no prohibition on criticizing religion [in particular Islam]. Therefore, they say they need to bring in additional standards." These additional standards are referred to as "complementary standards." Hillel Neuer warns: "The Durban declaration, in fact, takes note that there is a Committee on Complementary Standards. This is very dangerous."

Neuer believes that some potential exists for the US admission to the UNHRC to make a substantial difference. But what is important to understand is what will not happen. The US will not become the majority leader overnight. Rather, it will certainly become "the de facto head of the opposition" — a position of some significance.

In this capacity, what the US can do is begin by remaining true to the principles of human rights upon which this council was established. They can also try to build alliances with countries such as the Latin American bloc and with countries that are presently "wavering," like the Philippines, who are not committed to an absolute ideology. But, mainly, Neuer believes, it should take advantage of the tools available to the minority. "The power of the UNHRC is neither the power of the sword nor the power of the purse, but the power of shame." A continuous directing of the spotlight onto the world's worst human rights abusers will perform contribute toward influencing individuals throughout the world. It will also bring to light the council's refusal to adequately address these issues, and may possibly succeed in moving the UNHRC agenda into a more centrist position.

Until now the EU's philosophy in regards to its voting patterns within the UNHRC has been geared toward reaching consensus. But Neuer points out that, "consensus at the Human Rights Council works to the detriment of the victims." In order for the US to be effective, "it must be determined to table resolutions knowing full well that these resolutions will fail." Taking a lesson from what happened at Durban II, success can often emerge when least expected, but when individuals are most determined and best prepared.

was officially scheduled to conclude. While Neuer considers the text problematic in many respects, it was unprecedented that the final version had no express mention of Israel or Palestinians. "When 80 percent of all United Nations Human Rights resolutions are against Israel — explicit condemnations — this result was remarkable," he pointed out.

On April 22, UN Watch played a key role in helping a large coalition of pro-Israel groups, Jewish and non-Jewish, organize an outdoor "Israel Wants Peace" rally, to counteract the negative and false stereotyping of Israel. There were those in the Jewish community who were initially fearful of bringing public attention to the issue of Israel. But, 2,000 people — Jewish and non-Jewish — attended. One of the rally's special representatives was Kikonjo Augustin Isodoro Tamer, a Sudanese refugee who, together with her daughter, was rescued by Israel. She was there to tell the world how grateful she is to the people and State of Israel and how much she loves them. Standing on that stage, among others, were black Muslims who had fled Arab countries to find refuge in Israel, belying by their very presence "the false claim promulgated by Islamic countries that Israel is the most racist country in the world," Hillel Neuer said.

What, indeed, differentiated the results of Durban II from other advocacy attempts, "was that the European Union set a standard that was new — no stigmatization of Israel. But, we have also learned that if we as a community are united, mobilized, and a little clever, we can make a difference." ■

This article has been reviewed and approved by Rav Dovid and Rav Reuven Feinstein, shlita.

