Durban Reviewed:
The Transformation of Antisemitism
in a Cosmopolitanizing Environment

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I. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to discuss antisemitism in the cosmopolitanizing environment of the UN Durban Review Conference (henceforth, Durban II), which took place in Geneva in 2009. Based on our definition of antisemitism, we will map the transformations and continuities of antisemitism at Durban II as compared to traditional antisemitism. Instead of a mere description of the events, we seek to capture Durban II, the preparatory process, and the surrounding debates as a cosmopolitanizing environment. As shall be explained later, such an environment is a fairly institutionalized setting that is located between the nation-state and (the so far non-existent) world society. This more abstract conceptualization of Durban II allows for an evidence-based investigation of the degree to which antisemitic practices were modified at Durban II. By way of conclusion, we suggest that, on the surface, antisemitic speech has been adapted to the new cosmopolitanizing environment of Durban II. A more thorough inspection reveals that the most remarkable turning point in modern antisemitism remains the Shoah and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel. In other words, the patterns of resentment unfolding at Durban II are to be understood as antisemitism coming after the Nazi annihilation of European Jews and in light of the continued threat to the existence of a Jewish and democratic sovereign state.

The 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban and its 2009 follow-up, both organized by the UN, garnered wide media attention due to the antisemitic acts

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1 Throughout this text, the spelling antisemitism is preferred. In contrast to the hyphenated version, it visualizes that antisemitism is an ideology directed against Jews or people perceived as such and that it bears no relation to opposition against Semitism, which outside the field of linguistics is a largely meaningless concept.

2 In an earlier article (Falter & Kuebler 2010), based on a comprehensive analysis of all documents pertinent to Durban II, we identified the obsession with Israel as the sole bearer of blame for the Middle East conflict, the delegitimation of Jewish statehood, the equation of Israel with Nazi Germany, the Jewish world conspiracy myth, and the hijacking of Jewish Holocaust remembrance as the core antisemitic moments at Durban II.
of various conference participants and accredited NGO representatives, the almost obsessive concentration on Israel’s role in the Middle East conflict, and the corresponding protest, which included the withdrawal of several country delegations. Even commentators who are rather critical of Israel, such as Banton, argue that a unique opportunity to address racism, colonialism, and slavery at global level was thereby missed (Banton 2002: 359). In September 2011, Durban III took place in New York to mark one decade of what could be called the Durban process of UN anti-racism events and related preparatory processes.

The UN-Israel relationship has been tense since its inception. The UN’s disproportionate focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is characterized by an anti-Israel bias (cf. Mréjen 1998). Resolution 3379, branding Zionism as a form of racism, which was passed in 1975 and revoked in 1991, represents the pre-Durban nadir of this relationship. At the same time, the UN refers to the end of World War II as its founding moment, following the failure of the League of Nations, and has been active in Holocaust remembrance and genocide prevention since the turn of the millennium.

Before analyzing antisemitism and Durban II, our normative point of departure should be clarified. We advocate the viewpoint that international and regional organizations are shaped by power relations and unequal access. They accordingly constitute venues of politics, i.e. the ideologically grounded contestation of interests and preferences, and are clearly not a-political regulators. These international and regional actors by no means render the nation-state obsolete, but rather supplement it in terms of moderating member-state positions and re-importing adapted or novel policies to the domestic level. Conceding to Dahl’s skepticism (Dahl 2010), this does not automatically imply that international or regional organizations promote or at least partially function according to Western liberal democratic principles. This is especially true of intergovernmental organizations, whose actors are delegated or appointed by nation-state governments and cannot be elected into office or forced to resign by the people. Dahl’s critique of unrealistic expectations regarding global democracy can be expanded to the realm of transnational civil society. Yet ideology and interest-based politics do not necessarily need a full-blown democratic framework to materialize. Moreover, it is important to emphasize the significance of the UN’s legitimacy, which is due to its foundation as an immediate response to the crimes against humanity and atrocities of World War II and the inclusion of practically all sovereign nation-states. Antisemitic agitation in such an environment does not only bestow acceptability on this ideology but can also have a very tangible impact on concrete geo-political decisions.

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3 Israel and the United States withdrew their delegations from the WCAR. Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, and the United States refused to participate in Durban II due to the anti-Israel stances that became obvious during the preparatory process. The United Kingdom and 22 other European countries boycotted President Ahmadinejad’s speech. The Czech Republic, which held the rotating European Council presidency at the time, recalled its delegation shortly after Ahmadinejad’s antisemitic tirade.

4 Due to time constraints, Durban III is not covered in this analysis. It can only be assumed that our theoretical argument will be at least partially applicable to the decennial conference. As of the beginning of September 2011, Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands and the United States had announced their intention to boycott the event.