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## Durban II: Canada did the right thing

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In early 2008, Canada was the first – and for many months – the only country to say that it would not participate in another UN-sponsored anti-Israel and anti-Semitic conference under the façade of opposing racism. In April 2009, that decision proved to be the right one.

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**CJN columnist Gerald Steinberg's monthly column appears in the April 30 issue of The CJN. However due to the timely nature of his material, we have decided to immediately post it online. — *The Editor***

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It wasn't prophetic, it was just that the Canadian government – Prime Minister Stephen Harper, along with opposition leaders who joined in this extraordinary bipartisan decision – understood the realities of international politics. Canada had a major role in, and responsibility for, the catastrophic 2001 UN anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa, which singled out Israel for attack and took place in an atmosphere of vicious anti-Semitism and hatred. But the lessons were learned, and this wasn't going to be repeated.

When Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad opened this year's Durban Review Conference, dubbed Durban II, by making claims that Jewish suffering in the Holocaust has been exaggerated and referring to Israel with terms such as "racist" and "apartheid," Canadian officials didn't have to walk out – they were never there. Neither were representatives from Israel, the United States, Italy, Germany, Australia and four other countries. While not the massive show of disdain for the Durban process that should have taken place had all the democracies joined, the empty seats in the conference room were quite visible.

Even without Ahmadinejad, the conference was doomed to failure. From the beginning, with Libya as chair and Iran as vice-chair, the tone was set – this was going to be another platform for Israel-bashing and attacks on free speech and democracy. It was only in the past month that UN officials realized that they might have made a mistake and tried to remove some of the worst poison from the conference's draft declaration. By this time, U.S. President Barack Obama had followed Canada and Israel in deciding not to take part, after two negotiators sent to try to change the text came back empty-handed.

Ottawa came under attack for its position on Durban II from a variety of non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International, that claim to speak on behalf of oppressed minorities and victims of discrimination. Ken Roth, the head of the powerful Human Rights Watch (HRW), came to Ottawa recently and in media interviews, he arrogantly rebuked the government for its principled position. HRW was also guilty of involvement in the 2001 Durban conference, but it learned no lessons. In a statement issued the day after Ahmadinejad's appearance – which took place on Holocaust Memorial Day – HRW again condemned the countries that refused to give this absurd conference the legitimacy of their participation, but HRW didn't even mention Ahmadinejad speech.

The Canadian policy of not providing funds for NGOs to participate in the 2009 conference also marked an important and principled departure. In 2001 at Durban, thousands of NGO members, ostensibly sent to contribute to action plans against racism, turned into racists themselves, carrying signs and chanting that "Zionism is racism." In addition to the decision by Canada regarding NGO funding, the powerful Ford Foundation adopted the same policy, and the presence of radical NGOs in the streets of Geneva during the review conference was greatly reduced. These activities were primarily led by groups such as North South 21, which is linked to the Libyan government and has little credibility.

In contrast, having learned the lessons from 2001, this time, Jewish pro-Israel and pro-human rights activists

came in large numbers and made sure that Ahmadinejad was not made to feel welcome when he came and left the building. In addition, speeches by Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, Canadian Liberal MP Irwin Cotler and Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, as well as a very moving Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony opposite the UN building in Geneva, served to offset the bitterness of events inside.

While one success doesn't mean that the entire mechanism of anti-Israel boycotts, lawsuits and NGO campaigns under the façade of fighting racism has been defeated, this is an important precedent. It's now possible to at least visualize and work toward a new beginning for these moral principles, which would help the real victims of racism – in Darfur, Rwanda, and many other places. Canada has marked the path, and for this, we are all grateful.

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