UK must boycott Durban festival of Jew hate

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Twenty years ago, early on in my time at the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET), I represented the British Jewish community at a conference in South Africa. I had been sent to the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance to learn from and work with international friends and partners to tackle various forms of racism.

Instead, to my horror, I saw copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion being freely handed out, swastika-adorned posters with crude caricatures of Jews with bloodied fangs outside the conference hall and leaflets with pictures of Adolf Hitler saying, “What if I had won?”.

You might think I had somehow stumbled into a gathering of neo-Nazis. No. Held in Durban in 2001, this conference — full of noble intentions — descended into antisemitism, anti-Zionism and virulent hatred of Israel. In other words, the conference against racism descended into a racist conference, with I and my fellow Jews as victims.

It was a truly shocking event, something none of us were prepared for. Instead of learning from experts and colleagues from around the world, I spent my time firefighting, trying to persuade British “anti-racist” colleagues of the abuse I was facing and urging them to call it out and stand with me. This form of racism, however, was not enough of an issue for them to pause and consider the implications, so they simply continued with their agenda and instead of building alliances, I learnt who my real friends were.

Antisemitism is, of course, the world’s oldest hatred. But reflecting on this now, I realise the Durban conference provided the fuel which set ablaze much of the current manifestation we have recently faced — whether during the Corbyn era or in the deeply problematic rhetoric coming from some supposed anti-racist movements.

Notions that antisemitism is not a “proper” form of racism because Jews are powerful and rich, because Jews have “privilege”, and the use of Israel or supposed anti-Zionism as cover for Jew hate — these were all present in Durban. The recent spate of incidents and attacks are all part of this.

As events escalated at the 2001 conference and the antisemitism became impossible to turn a blind eye to, the USA walked out and the rest of us were left scarred.

Durban II followed in 2009. The USA, among other countries, boycotted the second conference but the UK decided to give a second chance to this event. The conference was filled with diplomats and representatives from NGOs working to eradicate hatred on an international scale. And so I attended. While it was great to work alongside experts and colleagues from around the world and to discuss and debate issues, the conference was once again tainted as Iranian President, Mahmood Ahmadinejad — well known as rabidly antisemitic, whose pastimes included running worldwide Holocaust denial cartoon competitions and calling for the destruction of Israel — addressed the conference. The British delegation joined the remaining EU countries in walking out when his rhetoric inevitably became openly antisemitic.

Durban III in 2011 was pitched as an “anniversary celebration” of the original conference. The notion of celebrating the anniversary of such a conference, without proper and honest evaluation of the racist farce that it descended into, was understandably not something that the British government wanted to engage in. The UK joined a growing list of nations in withdrawing from the Durban process and recognising its antisemitic history.

And now, twenty years on from Durban I, the UN is again organising an anniversary celebration for later this year. The USA, Canada and Australia have already declared that they will boycott Durban IV. The UK should firmly and proudly commit to joining them.

There is much to be done to tackle racism, discrimination and prejudice at home and around the world. The aims of the first Durban conference are as important today as they were 20 years ago, perhaps even more so. However, tainted with Jew hatred, poisonous rhetoric about Israel and Holocaust denial and minimisation, the Durban process is no place to do this.

Our job at the HET is to show young people where antisemitism can lead and to empower them to speak out, to stand up and be counted every single time that they witness it. For the UK to participate in this conference, based on a legacy of Jew-hatred, would be to fail in that mission.

It is time for the Durban conferences to be consigned to history and for those of us who are passionate about addressing the real challenges of international Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance to find new, hate-free ways of tackling it.