State Dept: US will not take part in Durban IV conference

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The US will keep up its policy of not participating in events commemorating the 2001 Durban Declaration, which singled out Israel as racist, a State Department spokesperson told *The Jerusalem Post* on Monday.

“The United States will not attend or participate in any events commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action or the World Conference on Racism, which preceded it,” the spokesperson stated.

The UN plans to hold events marking the 20th anniversary of the World Conference on Racism, called Durban IV, on September 22, coinciding with Sukkot.

The State Department spokesperson said that the US “remains deeply committed to combating antisemitism at home and abroad. Furthermore, the United States stands with Israel and has always shared its concerns over the Durban process’s anti-Israel sentiment, use as a forum for antisemitism and freedom of expression issues.”

The spokesperson responded to a query from the Post about the March 2021 UN Human Rights Council Joint Statement on Countering Racism and Racial Discrimination, initiated by the US.

The statement mentions the Durban Declaration in a positive light: “Recalling the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Durban Declaration and Program of Action, we are committed to working within our nations and with the international community to address and combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, while upholding freedom of expression.”

The State Department spokesperson said that the joint statement “includes a brief reference to the fact that the Durban conference happened 20 years ago and in no way reflects a change in our position regarding the problematic portions of the document or the process that led to its creation.”

The spokesperson also said that “the Biden Administration has put racial justice at the top of its priorities, both in multilateral fora and at home.”

The 2001 World Conference against Racism, also known as Durban I after the South African city in which it took place, teemed with antisemitic and anti-Israel messages, and is thought to be the point of inception of anti-Israel activists using the accusation of apartheid against Israel.

An early draft of the resolution adopted at the Governmental Conference at Durban equated Zionism with racism, leading the US and Israel to withdraw from the conference. Then US secretary of state Colin Powell denounced the draft as including “hateful language...[that] singles out only one country in the world, Israel, for censure and abuse.”

The final draft does not condemn Zionism as racist, but the Israel-Palestinian conflict is the only one listed specifically under the section on “victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.”

THE NGO Forum at Durban approved a resolution calling Israel a “racist apartheid state” and accusing it of genocide. The antisemitic pamphlet The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was distributed at the event. A flyer saying “no Israel” would be one of “the good things” if Hitler had won World War II, and the only “bad things” is [sic] that he “wouldn’t have allowed the making of the new [Volkswagen] Beetle,” according to the pro-Israel blogger Elder of Ziyon.

Durban Conference secretary-general Mary Robinson refused to accept the document over the language, saying “there was horrible antisemitism present.”

The US did not participate in the Durban II and III follow-up conferences. Then-US President Barack Obama explained: “I would love to be involved in a useful conference that addressed continuing issues of racism and discrimination around the globe,” but that the 2009 conference appeared likely to be a rehash of the original, “which became a session through which folks expressed antagonism toward Israel in ways that were oftentimes completely hypocritical and counterproductive.”

Israel, Canada, Italy, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Poland also boycotted the conference.

In 2011, for Durban III, the number of countries boycotting rose to 14. The Obama administration did not attend because the Durban process “included ugly displays of intolerance and antisemitism.”

Earlier this year, the Simon Wiesenthal Center urged the US, Canada and other democracies to boycott Durban IV.

“Durban I degenerated into the worst antisemitic hate fest since the end of World War II,” declared SWC associate dean Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who served as a spokesman for Jewish groups attending the 2001 gathering in South Africa.

“Durban was an unmitigated disaster where Israel was cast as a racist apartheid state, and Jewish delegates – including myself and my SWC colleague, International Relations Director Dr. Shimon Samuels – were verbally and physically attacked,” he said.

“The new UN call to fully implement the Durban Declaration will provide extreme anti-peace [sentiments] and reconciliation with additional global platforms to demonize the Jewish State and supporters of Zionism.”