

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance
Plenary Session 1 on Anti-Semitism and the Media
June 8, 2005

Introductory Remarks
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The historian Paul Johnson, writing in the current issue of *Commentary Magazine* ("The Anti-Semitic Disease") describes anti-Semitism as "an intellectual disease, a disease of the mind, extremely infectious and massively destructive."

There are no cases in recorded history where a wave of antisemitism can be identified as being provoked by a real Jewish threat (as opposed to an imaginary one), he says. In fact, this particular hatred has even caused societies to do things that are self-detrimental. Our presence here in Cordoba might remind us that the Spanish expulsion of Jews (and the persecution of converted and secret Jews during the Inquisition) came at a time when a growing empire could have used the talents that many Jews possessed in the economic and mercantile fields. Spain's loss proved to be a gain for those countries, such as the Netherlands and England, which provided a haven to these refugees.

Antisemitism has defied what we have understood to be the normal definitions of racism and xenophobia. Jews are simultaneously criticized for being too clannish and too assimilated, for being the proponents of international capitalism and world communism, for being too religious and too secular. Antisemitism has flourished in places where Jews have had large and prominent communities and where virtually no Jews have lived.

In the last century no single document served to foment antisemitism more than the forgery of the Czarist secret police known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which purported to reveal a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to secure power and control. Despite the fact that shortly after it surfaced the London *Times* published the results of an exhaustive investigation that thoroughly discredited it, *The Protocols* has lived on. It has been translated and circulated throughout Europe,

the Americas and the Arab world and has confirmed the hatreds of figures as diverse as Adolf Hitler, Henry Ford and the Jerusalem Grand Mufti Amin al-Husseini.

Of course, *The Protocols* lives on in this century, too. And with the aid of television, the Internet, and cable satellite—a dramatized version was produced in Egypt a few years ago—its venom can spread even faster.

We know that media—film and television and the written word—can be a positive force for combating prejudice. Media allows us to understand, to empathize with, and even to experience what others do. The horror of September 11, 2001--the explosions, the collapse of the two towers, the deaths of so many innocents, the flight of would-be victims, the valor and fatigue of firemen and rescue squads—was immediately conveyed around the world, and people thousands of miles from New York could understand and share the pain and the anger. They also could, we thought, recognize that this new scourge of international terrorism was their battle too.

Yet, within a few days of 9/11 other messages were also being sent around the world. Though not headline news on CNN, they traveled swiftly and efficiently on the Internet, via email and through the underground press. Jews who worked in the World Trade Center were warned ahead of time, they claimed, to stay away. The suicide pilots were not terrorists from Saudi Arabia; they were agents of the Mossad and Israel was behind the attacks. Once again, it was a Jewish conspiracy.

At last year's conference in Berlin, OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, suggested that, "instead of perpetually defending the press from suggestions that it has given in to prejudices" it would be in order to offer a checklist on "possible shortcomings." This included the following questions:

- Does our coverage of Israel obscure the fact that the Israeli Government, like any other democratically elected government, is not only deserving of criticism but is actually living with it...[in a] passionately pluralistic political and media scene?

- In light of [this]...the allegation that...the “Jews” reject every criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism could safely be identified as one of the “new” forms of anti-Semitic prejudice.

He went on to state that, “None of Israel’s numerous faults could lead to a labeling of Israeli democracy as totalitarianism, nor to relating its present day violence to genocide, or, as too often happens, to ‘a’ or to ‘some’ Holocaust.”

How should the media handle this problem? Haraszti suggests that this could be addressed as “simply...a matter of style and taste” with editors applying “the tools which the modern liberal press has developed to use when handling minorities.”

Has the media adopted these suggestions? Do they work? Perhaps this session’s panelists or later the Representative on Freedom of the Media will be able to tell us. However, since last year’s conference, both the European Union Monitoring Centre and ODIHR have developed working definitions of anti-Semitism that seek to acknowledge and define the problem of its “new” forms as Haraszti and others have described it.