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Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism
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At the outset I would like to thank the Irish Chair-in-Office for affording me the opportunity to serve as its Personal Representative on Combating Anti-Semitism. I am especially grateful to ODIHR and to its department on tolerance and non-discrimination for its ongoing guidance and assistance throughout the year. And it has been particularly helpful and enlightening to have worked cooperatively with my colleagues, Judge Catherine McGuinness and Senator Adil Akhmetov on much of the work.

During this year the three of us traveled together for country visits to Austria, Norway, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Additionally I have made separate trips—as a follow-up to previous visits—to Hungary, Spain and Sweden. I would like to thank these governments for accepting our requests to visit and for providing us with the necessary logistical assistance and access to officials. During the four years that I have served in this capacity we have held discussions in North America and across Europe and the Caucasus. These itineraries are less a reflection of problems than the recognition that no country is immune from prejudice and intolerance, and there is always more that can be done. I only regret that there are still some participating States that continue to deny our requests to visit.

Ideally, the goal of our visits is to learn from civil society and from government agencies, to focus attention on problems and shortcomings and to suggest practical steps that can be taken to better combat intolerance and discrimination. By way of example, I would like to make special mention of Norway, where our report received significant attention in the general media. Some of it was critical, but much of it underscored our points and contributed to a useful public discussion about anti-Semitism and discrimination.

Background

A decade ago the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution on combating anti-Semitism in the OSCE region. That led to the OSCE organizing a first conference on anti-Semitism in 2003, and a high level follow-up conference and seminal declaration the following year in Berlin. There were parallel conferences on racism and intolerance and successive high level conferences over the years in Cordoba, Bucharest and Astana. They in turn led to the establishment of a department on tolerance and non-discrimination in ODIHR, commitments in the area of education and combating hate crimes, and the appointment of personal representatives to focus attention on these issues.

All of this demonstrates a serious OSCE commitment which is internationally recognized, and there are tangible examples of success. But we know full well that these challenges are still with us, and in a climate of economic stress they may yet become more acute. That is all the more reason why we cannot despair or lose focus.

Anti-Semitism in Public Discourse

In last year's OSCE high level conference on confronting anti-Semitism in public discourse organized in Prague expert observers described a serious and growing problem, manifest in print and traditional media and increasingly on the Internet. Long standing anti-Semitic imagery of blood libels and conspiracy theories are now combined with the demonization of Israel and frequently the conflation of Jews and Judaism with the Israeli state which serve to present a distorted and pernicious picture of Jewish life today while fomenting prejudice and group hatred. The conference concluded with a series of recommendations, including better monitoring by governments and disaggregating data to have a more accurate picture of the level of anti-Semitism, as well as practical steps that can be taken by political leaders and NGOs to alleviate the problem.

Sadly, little has changed. Anti-Semitism remains ever-present in much of the electronic media. No one should doubt its corrosive and negative impact, especially since so few people have their own direct experiences of Jewish friends or coworkers.

By way of example, in Spain opinion surveys continue to demonstrate that a significant percentage of the population hold negative views about Jews. But this is considered to be a prejudice not based on firsthand knowledge but rather a legacy of nationalist identity politics and the anti-Israel views of the media. It is to the credit of the current Spanish Government that it is working closely with its Jewish community to find ways to change these public perceptions.

Norway offers another case. Earlier this year an official survey conducted by that country's respected Holocaust Research Center found that 38 percent of the population considered Israeli treatment of Palestinians to be analogous to the actions of the Nazis. This was an alarming result not only for the country's small Jewish community but also for government leaders whose frequent criticism of Israel may have contributed to it.

The current Chair-in-Office has rightly focused attention on the Internet and new social media and the role they play in society, as witnessed by the Dublin Conference on Internet Freedom in June of this year. Although only briefly touched on at this gathering, more attention must be given to employing these new media as vehicles to promote tolerance and combat prejudice. And we can certainly find tools to combat the spread of anti-Semitism and other forms of hate speech without limiting the essential freedom of expression. To be clear, protecting media freedom and combating Internet hate need not be mutually exclusive or a zero-sum game.

Jewish Community Security

We have warned that anti-Semitic public discourse is not only a problem in its own right but it can directly impact the security and well-being of Jewish communities. Such is the case today, where the physical security of Jewish communities in many OSCE participating States is imperiled. We have this year witnessed lethal attacks on Jews in several countries as well as numerous incidents of verbal harassment and physical damage to Jewish community buildings.

The most persistent threat has come from right wing and neo-Nazi groups and individuals. But during this past decade attention has turned to the problems posed largely from elements in local Arab and Muslim communities. And today counter-terrorism experts also recognize that many of these same Jewish communities are potential “soft targets” for international terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and subject to the volatile triggers of the Middle East conflict and Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Jewish communities are already shouldering security needs that impose significant financial burdens. In some cases these costs can extend to as much as twenty-five percent of a community’s annual budget. They require physical enhancements of schools, synagogues and other community buildings; the presence of police and security volunteers for times of worship and other communal gatherings; and the assistance of and close coordination with law enforcement officials.

Governments of the OSCE participating States have thus far responded differently to these concerns. Some have provided the necessary funds and assistance to help secure and protect vulnerable community buildings, especially schools. In some places there is a close working relationship with authorities at high levels which adequately reflects the heightened needs. But in too many places government support is limited or lacking. This may be due to financial constraints or legal restrictions. Yet, it may also be the result of a self-imposed political correctness that ignores special needs or bureaucratic indifference or the inability to see or adequately assess the threats.

For these reasons—and following the path set by last year’s Chair-in-Office sponsorship of the high level conference on confronting anti-Semitism in public discourse—we had hoped to organize a similar high level experts conference to confront these pressing Jewish community security needs during this calendar year. Although an agenda was drafted and additional funding was secured, it could not take place. Therefore, every effort should be made to schedule it for early 2013.

Economic Stress and Heightened Anti-Semitic Expressions

As we meet Europe continues to confront dire economic problems that threaten the long term viability of the common currency and pose a challenge the Union itself. So far

in even the most vulnerable states mainstream government leaders and parties have been united in their resolve to maintain a steady, centrist course. But this stress and the real and perceived economic hardships imposed on large numbers of citizens have also bolstered support for extremist parties that regularly play with racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic themes. The Jobbik Party in Hungary and the Golden Dawn Party in Greece and most recently the Svoboda Party in Ukraine now join the more established National Front in France and Freedom Party in Austria in garnering support in these difficult times. Each may offer up a different primary target of group hatred depending on local conditions and prejudices, but all find it useful to weave an anti-Semitic thread in their respective tapestries. And it is perhaps more than coincidence that each one flirts with Holocaust revisionism.

Jewish Ritual Practice Endangered

Local political initiatives in a number of countries have sought to limit or restrict the freedom to perform ritual circumcisions or sought to impose bans that would prohibit the kosher slaughter of animals. Ostensibly advocates are motivated by special concerns for the protection of children or the rights of animals, but they may also mask anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments. And in much of the public reaction and Internet postings there is no mask: the anti-Semitism is quite explicit.

By way of example, last year in the Netherlands a small animal rights party proposed legislation that would effectively ban ritual slaughter as performed by Jews and Muslims. It drew significant support from anti-Muslim prejudice and came close to passage. Switzerland and Norway are among those countries which have long-standing bans on kosher slaughter, the direct legacy of an anti-Semitic past. Their small Jewish communities have accommodated themselves to these restrictions, but growing Muslim populations pose new challenges.

Earlier this year a German court in Cologne decreed that ritual circumcision as performed by Jews and Muslims should be outlawed. National leaders in Berlin quickly declared that such a ban would be unacceptable, and they have drafted legislation intended to guarantee this millennia-old religious practice. However, a growing public debate featuring strong voices opposed to circumcision suggests that passage of the legislation cannot be assured.

In each instance one might first assume that basic guarantees of religious freedom, enshrined in national constitutions and European basic law, would easily overturn these imposed or potential restrictions. Yet such is not necessarily the case when we speak of increasingly secular societies where respect for religion in general has steadily declined and where understanding of Judaism and Islam is often lacking.

Recommendations

1. The physical security of Jewish communities may be the most pressing issue we face today. We need to highlight the good practices in some participating States that are being employed and strategize with Jewish community leaders and appropriate government authorities to see that they are replicated elsewhere. This can be best achieved through a high level conference early next year.
2. At the same time that the OSCE looks to restate its commitment to media freedom and as it considers how it may update these principles for the digital age, it cannot ignore the parallel challenge we face in confronting anti-Semitism and other forms of hate on the Internet. There are numerous tools available that can do this without out jeopardizing the freedom of expression, and we need to find ways to highlight them and support their use.
3. An early hallmark of ODIHR's contribution to combating anti-Semitism was the development of innovative educational materials tailored to individual countries. These materials need to be updated to take advantage of today's interactive and tech savvy teaching techniques. And they still require the support of governments to help fund and implement them.
4. ODIHR pioneered efforts to promote police training to identify and respond to hate crimes. After a period of review and evaluation it has renewed these efforts and also sought to extend this training to prosecutors and judicial officials. Despite a growing awareness there are still too many cases where these crimes are not properly identified or not dealt with in an appropriate—and even legally mandated—process. OSCE participating States should be encouraged to support and participate in these training programs.