

OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination  
Astana, June 29-30, 2010  
Session 2  
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Remarks

A decade ago European NGOs, including Jewish organizations, gathered in Strasbourg for a preparatory conference in advance of the UN World Conference on Racism, scheduled for the following summer in Durban. What were our concerns at the meeting? What did we want to see included in the UN gathering?

Anti-Semitism still informed the ideology of right wing parties. Several of them were of long-standing and exerted some national influence, such as the National Front in France and the Freedom Party in Austria. Anti-Semitism in these corners was not surprising. It had not disappeared, but we thought it could be contained. With the help of mainstream parties and responsible political leadership, it would be relegated to the margins of society, if not eliminated altogether.

We also witnessed the continued activity of Holocaust deniers. It was hard to believe that only 55 years after the war's end, with hundreds of thousands of survivor eye witnesses living among us, some people could still maintain that the gas chambers never existed and the most documented crime in modern history was somehow a forgery. These deniers were not numerous, and it was unclear whether they really were attracting many new adherents. But it was painful and offensive to hear them, and any international gathering to combat racism should also condemn their voices too.

Anti-Semitism has sometimes been described as the oldest hatred—a line that one can follow back to Amalek, attacking the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. It was naïve to think that it would disappear in our lifetime. But a decade ago we were remarkably optimistic. There was an active peace process in the Middle East and intensive negotiations were underway between Israelis and Palestinians. Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe and in the states of the former Soviet Union were engaged in their own surprising revival. Hostile and repressive regimes had given way to new democracies, warmly disposed to Israel and supportive of local Jewish life.

Sad to say, it was a short-lived moment. Instead this decade now coming to a close has proven to be far more distressing than anyone might have imagined.

Today, much of the anti-Semitism that we confront is connected to the Middle East conflict and the state of Israel, a phenomenon that no one even thought to mention ten years ago at that Strasbourg meeting. Ironically the Durban conference heralded the change, with interwoven anti-Israel and anti-Semitic diatribes emerging as a prominent feature.

Recognition of the new problem came slowly. The breakdown of the peace process and a renewal of conflict triggered a wave of attacks on Jewish targets in many western European cities, but political leaders were reluctant to call this anti-Semitism. Eventually, this position could not be sustained. Can one really justify the firebombing of a Jewish school bus in Paris by citing Israeli settlement policies? Does a radio appeal in Stockholm calling for the death of "Jewish pigs and monkeys" constitute political speech because its source is a Muslim broadcaster? This was not a matter of robust debate going too far. Rather it was age-old Jew hatred, albeit in new forms and frequently with new protagonists.

It is worth recalling at this OSCE gathering here in Astana that the first serious discussion by governments of the problem that some have termed "the new anti-Semitism" was organized by the OSCE in Vienna in 2003. No doubt there were some who imagined that the Vienna Conference would be a first and only contribution, but as we have seen it was followed by a high level conference in Berlin the following year, which spawned a sustained effort to combat anti-Semitism and in the process led to the marshaling of new resources to confront other forms of intolerance as well.

A year after that conference the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) published its first study on the problem of anti-Semitism in the EU. It noted that neo-Nazis, skinheads, and right wing radicals still posed problems, but a new source of these anti-Semitic attacks was now to be found in Arab and Muslim communities. The report referenced attitude surveys that had been conducted in some states, but overall it relied on data compiled from its contact points in each country. They in turn sought information from police, governments and NGOs. But the material was openly acknowledged to be incomplete. Most governments had no special policy of identifying hate crimes, while some cited data protection laws as reason for not indicating the race or religion of the victims or not releasing the information they had.

The EUMC also presented the results of interviews conducted with Jewish community leaders and representatives in seven countries. This offered a startling picture that was sometimes at odds with the more empirical presentation of surveys and incident accounts. In general, these Jewish leaders shared a much more pessimistic view of the situation than the data would otherwise suggest. A few who were survivors of the Holocaust questioned their own wisdom in staying in their native countries after the war rather than emigrating to the United States or Israel. Others genuinely doubted that there was a Jewish future for their children and grandchildren. Nearly all revealed a level of anxiety and concern that had not been present for decades.

Were these Jews alarmist and overreacting? Did their own historical experience make them hypersensitive to the problem and thus not a reliable barometer? Or was it the opposite? Were they still the proverbial canary in the cage with antennae that allowed them to sense danger that others had not yet come to realize?

These strongly negative views were only partially explained by the spike in incidents, significant though they may have been. As we have learned, increased police protection and law enforcement eventually brought that number down. Some of those attacks were certainly triggered by tensions in the Middle East conflict, and as one lessened so did the other. But something else was also occurring. There was a new and more ominous public discourse. After the collapse of the peace process and the second intifada, criticism of Israel grew more strident. Attacks on Israel became attacks on Israel's supporters and then attacks on Jews.

At the conclusion of the OSCE Berlin Conference in 2004 the Chairman-in-Office read out a declaration that had been approved by the 55 participating states. It stated that anti-Semitism "had assumed new forms and expressions" and went on to declare that, "...international developments or political issues including those in Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East never justify anti-Semitism."

This is what we were confronting then and, in significant measure what we still must address today.

On June 1, I was in Brussels together with my OSCE colleagues, Adil Akhmetov and Mario Mauro, for meetings at the European Parliament. We sat with Mrs. Heidi Hautala, Chair of the Parliament's Human Rights Committee. Referring to the previous day's deadly events surrounding the flotilla to Gaza, she said to us, "One thing is certain. There will be an increase in anti-Semitism."

Events in the Middle East continue to trigger anti-Semitic responses in Europe and elsewhere in the world. We witnessed this in the early part of 2009 during the war in Gaza, and we saw it again this month. Last week a Jewish dance troupe in Hanover, Germany was pelted with rocks by a group of mostly Muslim youth, shouting "Juden Raus." Recently police in Amsterdam announced they plan to go "undercover," donning skullcaps as a means of luring and arresting the attackers of Jews in that Dutch city.

At that first OSCE Conference in Vienna, former New York City Mayor Rudi Giuliani spoke of the importance for police to identify the victims and the perpetrators of hate crimes. Despite repeated commitments by Governments and pioneering police training programs launched by ODIHR, far too many OSCE member states still come up short in monitoring and reporting, let alone responding to these crimes. And even some of the most experienced authorities have not yet adjusted to the new situation. Sweden does some of the best reporting of hate crimes, including anti-Semitism. But earlier this month in Stockholm officials conceded that their focus on right wing, "white power" groups had become outdated.

Equally troubling has been the problem of anti-Semitism in public discourse, pernicious in its own right but also a threat to individual Jews and community institutions.

Following the EUMC reports in 2004, it developed—in consultation with representatives of ODIHR—a working definition of anti-Semitism. It presented a framework for police and monitors to understand the phenomenon and offered examples of both “old” and “new” forms, including those related to the State of Israel. Among them:

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic anti-Semitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the State of Israel.

The definition also noted that, “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic.”

But again in recent weeks we have seen this boundary being crossed in public demonstrations, on the Internet and in press commentary and cartoons. Among the cartoons—some originating in the Arab world but circulated elsewhere—distinctions between Jews and Israel are frequently erased. By way of example one depicts an Israeli soldier stabbing a peace activist with a Menorah, whose seven branches have been fashioned into knife blades. Thus is the symbol of the Temple in Jerusalem transformed into a weapon. Another presents a bearded, hook-nosed, Nazi-like caricature of a Jew swimming in the water. Above the surface hands grip a machine gun and bloody cleaver, while lurking below are octopus tentacles, a common metaphor for the “international Jewish conspiracy.”

[See below]



Oman, June 1, 2010

The ship is labeled "Freedom Convoy."  
The man being beaten by the Jewish man is holding a sign that reads: "Free Gaza"



*Al-Watan*, June 2, 2010  
In Arabic: "Terror State."

Admittedly, these are extreme examples. But they are intended to inflame passions and arouse hatred. And they succeed.

We need to find ways to reverse this trend. Some countries offer legal avenues for bringing suit against such incitement to ethnic hatred, which frequently includes Holocaust denial. But as a rule the record of prosecution and conviction is not very good, and punishment is seldom so significant as to deter future perpetrators. Ironically, better examples may be found among countries with strong free speech protections; they must therefore rely on the quick reactions of political and civic leaders or the voices of public ombudsmen to counter hate speech.

The challenge we face now, much as we did earlier in this decade, is how we can mobilize political leadership and civil society. We are not complacent. We are no longer surprised by the persistent and normative presence of anti-Semitism in day-to-day life in so many parts of the world. We have better tools and increased resources to monitor what is happening, and that reinforces our sense of urgency.

I give credit to the Kazakh Chairmanship for having proposed and organized this conference and thus renewing the OSCE practice of more frequent, high level gatherings designed to address these problems. Sadly, competing demands both within the OSCE and elsewhere have made it more difficult to

get the attention and participation we need if we are to make serious progress. The work of combating anti-Semitism and confronting other forms of intolerance and discrimination is still largely before us.