

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Opening Remarks of Rabbi Andrew Baker
Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism

These are difficult times.

In a month we will mark the anniversary of the mass killing at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, notably the worst antisemitic incident in US history. We fully expect that when American Jews go to synagogue next week for Rosh Hashana services, they will see an unprecedented level of security. What has long been the norm for Jews in Europe has now crossed the Atlantic.

In the United Kingdom, Jews have reacted with growing alarm to a British Labour Party whose leadership seems not only to condone antisemitism within its midst, but actively promotes antisemitic messages, which frequently illustrate how anti-Zionism is only a mask for antisemitism. The Party has now announced that it will convene a special meeting to address the problem. But it will do so on a Saturday (the Jewish Shabbat) thus insuring that Jewish Labour party members will not be present for the discussion.

Right-wing populist parties for whom antisemitism is a prominent component are making unprecedented gains in well-established democracies. When Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured a strong second place finish in two recent German State elections, many observers were “relieved,” having feared that they would win the most seats in these regional parliaments. But that party, with its xenophobic and antisemitic platform, will be around for a while.

The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) released its second (and expanded) survey of experiences and perceptions of Jews in the EU last December. And while fully half of those surveyed believe their governments recognize the seriousness of the problem, nearly three-quarters say it doesn’t make any difference in combating antisemitism. That survey also pointed out another, difficult truth: the largest percentage of antisemitic incidents are identified as coming from individuals with an Islamist ideology. Available data tell us that on average Muslims in Europe may hold more negative views of Jews than that of the general population, so we must find the practical tools to address and change those attitudes.

We have seen continued efforts in some countries to ban ritual circumcision and religious slaughter, elemental obligations for both Jews and Muslims since Biblical times. Legislation prohibiting kosher slaughter has been enacted in Belgium, home to one of Europe’s most significant Orthodox Jewish communities. The Community’s only recourse now is an appeal to the courts to overturn the law. If they lose, Jews may decide they have no alternative but emigration.

Only yesterday, I was in Vilnius, Lithuania where I joined with Holocaust survivors, the Prime Minister, the leader of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, and other dignitaries and officials for the national Holocaust Commemoration ceremony in Ponary Forest, where in 1943, Vilna’s Jews were murdered and buried in mass graves. But in Lithuania as in other countries in the region Holocaust history appears to be under review and open to distortion if not outright denial. This summer the Mayor of Vilnius acted to remove a public plaque and change a street name that honored two wartime figures who were complicit in the persecution and murder of Lithuanian Jews. It was the right thing to do, but not without controversy. Hundreds of protestors demanded that the honor of these Nazi-collaborators be restored.

All this, by way of anecdotal example, illustrates the problems we face today as we continue our efforts to combat antisemitism.

There is a long and productive record of the OSCE and ODIHR stepping up to the challenge, from our first conferences in 2003 and 2004, to the seminal Berlin Declaration and subsequent OSCE Ministerial decisions and declarations. It includes numerous commitments by the participating States and a Department on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination at ODIHR, which has developed practical tools and training methods to combat antisemitism. More recently, we have seen the outcome of Words into Action to Address Antisemitism, a special project initiated by ODIHR which offers governments important guidelines and advice, especially when it comes to Jewish community security and to the role of education. The OSCE has long been in the forefront of the fight against antisemitism, but we are not alone. Last December the European Council adopted its own declaration with clear recommendations for EU Member States. In 2016, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) adopted the Working Definition of Antisemitism, a critical tool in understanding the full and complex nature of the problem, and it too considers the fight against antisemitism one of its core objectives. Only days ago, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief issued the first ever UN human rights report focused exclusively on the problem of antisemitism and offered a series of recommendations for the UN and for its member states to implement.

We should be pleased to have these allies alongside us, but they should not cause us to withdraw our own focus. The problem of antisemitism requires all our efforts. Looking ahead we need to build on the Words into Action project and make full use of the reach and the resources that are unique to the OSCE and ODIHR.

The Slovak Chairmanship held a high-level conference on antisemitism at the beginning of this year, which has provided some broad recommendations for work. Various participating States are still determined to provide financial and political support, and I very much hope that the incoming Albanian Chairmanship will follow in this path. There is much we have done and much still left to do. The needs are real and pressing, and I know that the interventions that are about to come in the remaining hours of this plenary from participating States and especially from civil society leaders will make this clear.

Thank you.