

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN
COMBATING ANTI-SEMITISM

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By

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Wisdom of Abdur Rahman,

“Remember, my son, that these are God’s kingdoms, God who gives and takes away at his leisure . . . Be just to all men, equally to the poor and the rich, for injustice is the road to ruin; at the same time be gentle and merciful with those who are dependent on you, for they are all creatures of God. Trust the government of the provinces to wise, experienced men and punish without pity those ministers who oppress the people.”

Abdur Rahman,
Caliph of Cordoba
787 C.E.

Here in the heart of Cordoba, we sense the wheels of history turning yet again.

Cordoba has been drenched in the historic cycles of tolerance and discrimination. From early Roman times before the common era Jews settled in this region called Sepharad mentioned in the Bible by Obadiah.

From Roman times to the Visigoths, Iberia especially, from 711 C.E., when the Moors of Morocco, the Al Andalus came to govern regions of the Iberian Peninsula until The Reconquest was complete in 1492 when the last Arab Kingdom of Granada was defeated, Cordoba has resonated between two ideas – multiculturalism and multi-religion and tolerance on the one hand and exclusivity and discrimination and intolerance on the other. For over 300 years, the Al Andalus governed Cordoba and transformed it into a leading City of both Europe and the Middle East.

And it was here in 787 that the Caliph of Cordoba, Abdur Rahman, the great Muslim Moor instructed his successor son, Hisham, and his government officials on the importance of tolerance towards all of his subject, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

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During the reign of the Al Andalus Mosques, Churches and Synagogues were built side by side. In Cordoba that the greatest Jewish Philosopher Maimonides was born in the 12th Century and commenced one of his greatest works, “The Guide to the Perplexed.” The core of his belief was that reason and religion complimented each other. For this idea, his books were burned in Cordoba by his Jewish co-religionists. Also born in Cordoba, was Ibn Rashid known as Averroës, one of Islam’s greatest philosophers and a close friend and contemporary of Maimonides, who sought to prove that there was no contradiction between religion and reason since both emanated from the Spirit of G-d. His Muslim co-religionists burnt Averroës’ books. Both were physicians and scholars who taught that revelation and rationality could be synthesized and harmonized.

These men of reason and others who believed in tolerance and reconciling faith with philosophy were perceived to be a threat to all three religions.

During the period of Al Andalus Cordoba blossomed in the sciences -medicine, mathematics, botany, navigation, astronomy – and the arts, poetry, literature, architecture, painting and music. All this, as a centre of moderation, erudition and culture came to an end with the Reconquest that led to the Spanish Inquisition accelerating in 1492.

Moderation had been overtaken by extremism near the end of the 12th Century when the fanatical Almohads invaded from North Africa forcing conversion or emigration to the north, Jews and Muslims alike. And in the old Visigoth north, this fueled the notion of Reconquest infused with religious fervor. Massacres erupted anew. Public humiliation was practiced. Badges of shame were demanded of both Jew and Muslim, anticipating much later Nazi practices.

So a dark cloud hovered over the Iberian Peninsula and descended when both Jews and Muslims were expelled, forcibly converted or massacred, reducing smothering its multicultural society and reducing its status as a centre of educational and aesthetic leadership. Books had been collected in voluminous libraries. Literacy in multiple languages was the norm. Paper came to be manufactured. Cordoba's markets teemed with exotic goods and foods. Trade and government were open to all faiths and minorities were protected and encouraged to participate. By the Tenth Century Cordoba rose to become the greatest centre to both Jewish and Islamic scholarship in the known world. 1492 ended this golden period of history. It took almost 500 years for Spain to recapture that virtuous cycle of tolerance and openness to all religions and rationalism.

So it is fitting that this historic Conference combating Anti-Semitism should be situate here in Cordoba –witness to so much hope and despair about the human condition.

Before I turn to the topic at hand when one pulls back the veils of history and turns to leaders who advocated intolerance, from Julius Caesar who had granted Jews a Charter of Liberty, confirmed by Augustus to Saladin, when he reconquered Jerusalem and dealt fairly to all religions, to Charlemagne who issued Europe's first declaration of tolerance to Frederick the Great in 1740 when he affirmed the principles of tolerance to Napoleon who demanded equality of treatment for all citizens in Europe, that one sees the virtuous cycles of tolerance matched by cycles of discrimination that led to the tragic excesses of the three miserable “-isms” – Nazism, Communism, and Fascism – and recalls such leaders as Hitler and Stalin that we can appropriately place this conference more fully in its historic context.

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN COMBATING ANTI-SEMITISM

So here we are in Cordoba at this historic conference on combating Anti-Semitism sponsored by the OSCE. I am privileged to share this Panel with two outstanding OSCE PA colleagues, the President of the OSCE, Alcee Hastings and Gert Weisskirchen, Member of the German Parliament who serves as the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism.

It might be useful to remind ourselves how we got here. The origins of this Conference cannot be separated from the origins of the OSCE. In 1974 the Helsinki Process was at its core, a remarkable compromise. The Soviet Union and its eastern allies agreed with the western democracies that if its borders would be respected, in turn they would agree to a regime respectful of human rights.

From that historic bargain called the Helsinki Accords emerged the OSCE, the largest international organization dedicated to human rights, political rights, economic and democratic development.

The Helsinki Process led directly to the formation of the OSCE – The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

From the Copenhagen and Paris Declarations in 1990 to the 1992 Charter of European Security, from the Lisbon Declaration in 1996, culminating with the Berlin Resolution in 2002 and the Edinburgh Declaration in 2004, the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, the Parliament of Parliamentarians from 55 Member States from Vladivostok to Vancouver has insistently and consistently raised its voice against the ugly revival of Anti-Semitism and intolerance.

Last year, at the OSCE Ministerial Conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, the OSCE took a further concrete step. The Chair-in-Office appointed three personal representatives to follow up on resolutions against intolerance. First, our colleague, Gert Weisskirchen was named Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism and Intolerance.

Anastasia Crickley was appointed as Personal Representative on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions and Ambassador Omur Orhun was appointed as Personal Representative on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims.

But a brief word about the leadership of Parliamentarians involvement in this historic process. Just before the Berlin OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in the spring of 2002, I received a call from Congressman Christopher Smith, the Chair of the OSCE Helsinki Commission in Congress about a resolution we had earlier discussed with Gert Weisskirchen and others about Anti-Semitism. He advised me that other Congressmen,

such as Alcee Hastings had enthusiastically supported this Resolution. He asked me to join them to convince all our Parliamentary colleagues at the forthcoming Berlin meeting. I immediately agreed and this Resolution went forward to Berlin. It was approved unanimously adopted after debate in Committee and ultimately by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly as a whole. This Resolution in turn triggered a series of conferences across the face of Europe and in Washington. Twice in Vienna, in Berlin and in Washington, Copenhagen, Oporto, Maastricht, Rotterdam, Warsaw, Paris and Rome. The list goes on! This process was from outset led by Parliamentarians.

The same OSCE Resolution passed in Berlin in 2002 inspired the United Nations and Kofi Annan to hold the First U.N. Conference on Anti-Semitism just over a year ago.

So the role of Parliament and the leadership of Parliamentarians in combating Anti-Semitism and intolerance have been intrinsic to changing public opinion about the magnitude of the problem of Anti-Semitism itself.

Why are Parliaments and Parliamentarians essential to this struggle against hate and intolerance?

The history of Anti-Semitism can be traced to governments and to Parliament as well as organized religions.

Czarist Russia's government was the instigator of Pogroms and instrumental to fomenting infamous Protocols of Zion.

Modern anti-semitism was systemic in Governments for all the wrong reasons.

It was the French government that covered up the Dreyfus Affair. And it was the French Parliament, pressed by the Media that raised the issue in the French Parliamentary that ultimately led to Dreyfus' redress.

It was the German government and German Parliament that passed the infamous Nazi Nuremberg laws.

It was Vichy France and other Parliaments across Europe that passed and implemented compliant laws.

Yet it was Parliamentarians in America and England that first raised the spectre of the Holocaust, when both governments, and media, chose to ignore the emerging signs.

In free and democratic societies, Parliaments are shaped by public opinion, Parliaments also shape public opinion. Misconduct erupting within civic societies or within government usually receives their first public debate airing within Parliamentary forums.

Opinion polls are deeply shaped by consensus reached in Parliament. Parliaments can educate!

Parliamentarians must educate themselves on steps to eradicate anti-semitism before they educate their constituents.

So what can Parliaments and Parliamentarians do to eradicate the roots of ancient scourge of Anti-Semitism that sustain intolerance, hate and discrimination and violence towards the “other”.

1. Public debate. The OSCE Resolution can be an excellent catalyst to foment such debate in each Parliament. Silence is acquiescence and always leads to license. License leads to incitement. Incitement leads to violence.
2. Governments and Committees of Parliament can study in detail how to attack the roots of Anti-Semitism still embedded in each civil society.
3. Governments can compile timely, cogent statistics on hate incidents and publicize them regularly.
4. Governments can renovate and legislate stronger anti-hate laws.
5. Governments can encourage anti-hate law enforcement. May I commend the ODHIR for organizing meetings in Toronto where just last month curricula are being developed for police forces across the OSCE space based on enlightened police practices of the Toronto Police Department, my home city?
6. Education. A number of countries have led the way in education. Germany, Bulgaria and others. We have heard now on education strategies in many Member States. Many have adopted no change in education. We need to accurately measure the nature, implementation and impact of these recent developments.

Elie Wiesel correctly advised us in the Berlin Conference that “a child can be taught to love or to hate.” Early education and continuous reinforcement at the primary, secondary and university levels can ultimately dilute the springs of discrimination of the “Other” including politically incorrect private or public discourse. Work should continue to cleanse religious text and teachings of Anti-Semitism. It was the fervor of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II that marked a sea change in religious teachings. John Paul II was the first Pope to visit a Synagogue, Auschwitz and the Vad Hashem. John Paul II understood public opinion, He understood the power of his position He spoke forcibly and regularly the rising tide of Anti-semitism. Public education is an endless process. This work must be continued by the leadership of the Church and joined by all other denominations.

Why critics ask, the preoccupation on Anti-Semitism? Why not generalize? Why? Discrimination exists against the “Other”, against Christians and Muslims and other faiths as well why then anti-Semitism, why not a macro approach. A macro

approach to all forms of intolerance blurs the solution to specific forms of discrimination as the Representative of Germany so clearly pointed out yesterday. Anti-semitism is the oldest discrimination. Each form of discrimination is unique. Each form of discrimination emanates from different roots and requires different solutions. It has been said; with some irony that discrimination starts with Jews but never ends with Jews. Ethnic cleansing of Jews was the unique contribution of Nazism in the 20th Century. Now anti-semitism has re-emerged with renewed power and vigor in the 21st Century. After 1989 when the wall came down I believed the “anti-semitism” dossier would become part of the dustbin of history. I was wrong.

It has re-emerged in a powerful form abetted by the convergence of communication via the internet. So solutions are complex in our free and democratic societies.

What are common are the desire and the objective of all Parliaments to ultimately erase all forms of discrimination.

What is being asked in Cordoba is simple. Just as Parliaments and governments are bound by the U.N. Charter of Human Rights so it is a truism that the U.N. Charter is episodically enforced against its own members. The Charter is embedded the rule of law in all democratic nations of the world. Even those that are not democratic have agreed to the U.N. principles of the Charter. At the heart of the U.N. Charter is a simple idea. Do not treat others differently from how you would treat yourself.

There’s great debate about ending this public process in the fight against Anti-semitism and intolerance. This would be wrong. National strategies require years to implement. Just as the OSCE took years to transform the OSCE space we parliamentarians recognize that the work of respecting the “other” will never end until Anti-semitism and all forms of intolerance no longer manifests itself in our region for which we have public trust.

Governments and Parliaments must be held to account as we heard. While some Governments have started a national strategy many had lagged behind. Regular meetings to share best practices culminating with an Annual meeting that audits and measures each Member State against their commitment to the Berlin process is essential if we are to eradicate the rising problems of Anti-semitism and intolerance. The work is just beginning. It is just gaining momentum. This is no time to dilute the process just as it is starting to work.

Let us put principles and practices to work. Principles and practices march bet when they march together.

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