

London Conference on Anti-Semitism

Remarks of Rabbi Andrew Baker
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Combating Anti-Semitism
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At gatherings such as these, in addition to recounting the sober facts of the current anti-Semitic manifestations, speakers often search for the most appropriate analogy to describe them. Some compare anti-Semitism to ocean waves which range from gentle movements to those of tidal proportion. Some liken it to a virus which may lie hidden one moment and burst forth the next or mutate to adapt to new environments. Others point to anti-Semitism's corrosive effects, which harm far more than the intended targets.

This search for words is not just the quest of eloquent speakers, of which there have been many over these last two days. It also reflects the difficulty in explaining what we see and what we experience and in convincing others of the urgency of the situation.

There is a certain sense that we are replaying events that occurred at the beginning of this decade. Following the Durban Conference and with the second Intifada, we saw a dramatic increase in attacks on Jewish targets. We also saw authorities who were unable or unwilling to label them as anti-Semitism, preferring instead to dismiss them as an inevitable byproduct of the Middle East conflict.

We were forced to recognize that the State of Israel itself, demonized and delegitimized, had become a target as well. The old trope of traditional anti-Semites was now applied to the "Jew among the nations."

Those were difficult times. Political leaders told us candidly that they did not see what we saw. Human rights advocates could not understand it. In most of our countries the Jewish community is well educated, integrated, and economically well-off. We do not look like other victims of discrimination. Anti-Semitism, to be sure, was recognized as a central element of Europe's historical legacy, but it was after all only "history."

The OSCE, whose cold war beginnings contributed so much to the liberation of Soviet Jewry, emerged as a new venue to confront the problem.

A first international conference in Vienna devoted exclusively to examining the resurgence of anti-Semitism was a marked contrast to the UN gathering in Durban two years earlier. It led to a second meeting in Berlin the following year and the tasking of ODIHR to undertake specific steps—to engage with member states in order to monitor and collect information and to develop teaching materials on education and on the Holocaust.

Also in Berlin, the fifty-five OSCE participating states acknowledged that anti-Semitism had taken on new forms and manifestations and they, "declare[d] unambiguously that international developments or political issues, including those in Israel and the Middle East, never justify anti-Semitism."

ODIHR's tolerance department has gone on to develop a police training program to aid law enforcement in identifying and responding to hate crimes, a project whose importance was underscored in yesterday's experts' forum.

An essential element in training police and in preparing government monitors and civil society has been the dissemination of a practical definition of anti-Semitism. Developed by the European Monitoring Centre in collaboration with ODIHR staff, scholars and practitioners, the EUMC working definition offers clear examples. Among them—and with special resonance to the current situation—are holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel and drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.

The OSCE also agreed to establish a special envoy—the Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office on Combating Anti-Semitism—which was realized in the person of Professor Gert Weisskirchen, my predecessor. During his tenure he sought to engage governments and raise awareness to the problem throughout Europe and North America. And we are enormously grateful for his work.

But in light of these tangible developments it is disheartening to realize that not only is the resurgence of anti-Semitic attacks a reprise of several years back, but so too is the mixed and diffident response of some political leaders and much of the general public. Although we can draw on important documents such as the Berlin Declaration to make our case, that case still must be made all over again. The fears and anxiety expressed by Jewish leaders and documented in the EUMC's first study of anti-Semitism five years ago are being voiced anew. They must not be ignored.

With the support of the OSCE Chair and the resources of ODIHR we have invited many of you to join us, one month from today, at the Hofburg in Vienna for a roundtable consultation. It will be another opportunity to take stock and analyze the problem of anti-Semitism, to identify the proper responses of political leadership and law enforcement where they have occurred and to specify the needs where they have not. And it will, I very much hope, conclude with a new set of recommendations for the OSCE, for its fifty-six member states, and for civil society.

If the commitments made here in London are translated into action (which is in our hands) and if the latest conflict in the Middle East dies down (which is not), we may well see a diminution of anti-Semitism. The waves will subside; the fever will break. But our better judgment tells us it will likely be temporary. The work is not over. The problem will come again.