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Resisting Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in Europe

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Chairman Keating, Vice Ranking Member Wagner, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. I deeply appreciate the Subcommittee's commitment to examining antisemitism in Europe. Continuing to focus the congressional spotlight on this most ancient of evils is a critical first step in combating its resurgence.

I am also appreciative for the opportunity to bring students from my class at Georgetown University's Center of Jewish Civilization, "Confronting Contemporary Antisemitism." As I emphasize to my students, the battle against antisemitism will continue for years and decades to come. It is an important part of our job as practitioners in this fight to educate a new generation on how to wage it. I can think of no better way of educating a new generation than to have them witness today's proceedings with their elected representatives and the distinguished experts with whom I am honored to be sitting this afternoon.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not recognize the professionals at the U.S. State Department who work in the human rights arena. I have never been prouder of my country than when I had a chance, as the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, to work with these dedicated men and women in upholding our country's ideals. The personnel at our embassies and consulates around the world are worthy of special praise. Not only do they do an exemplary job of tracking antisemitism and other forms of bigotry for the annual Human Rights and International Religious Freedom reports, but every U.S. diplomatic mission I visited was in close contact and working with the local Jewish communities. In some instances, U.S. embassy staff were the only reliable ally for small, beleaguered Jewish communities overseas. Under such circumstances, just showing up and telling these Jewish leaders that their plight will not be forgotten provides some degree of safety and relief.

The Seriousness of the Problem

Seventy-five years ago, almost to the day, allied forces liberated the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Thus, it is most fitting to start with the questions of "how bad is the world's antisemitism problem today" and "how alarmed should we be?"

I won't spend time this afternoon recounting the hate crime data or the antisemitic incidents data in the United States and Europe. Nearly every news story on this topic cites these statistics to reinforce the belief that we are in a period of escalating antisemitism. There is also a wealth of recent polling data on such topics as antisemitic attitudes prevalent in individual countries, as well as surveys of Jewish populations focusing on their experience with antisemitism— and this data is often shockingly negative. Moreover, one need only talk to Jewish leaders and citizens in some European countries to understand the increasing fears within many European Jewish communities.¹

¹ See, for example: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018>; <https://www.adl.org/2018-audit-S>; https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey_en.pdf; <http://www.fondapol.org/en/etudes-en/analysis-of-anti-semitism-in-france/>

But are the circumstances as bad as the situation in the decade before the Holocaust in Europe and the United States? The honest answer is no. One difference is that, unlike in the 1930s, when nearly the entire world shut its doors to Jewish refugees, today Jews threatened by antisemitism have a place they can go—the state of Israel. Another significant difference is that in the 1930s, a number of national governments (not just Nazi Germany) openly advocated for and implemented blatantly antisemitic policies.

Yet current facts on the ground in Europe prohibit us from imagining any Pollyannaish scenarios. National governments may not be openly advocating antisemitic policies, but some are employing dog whistle forms of antisemitism when they feel it is politically advantageous to do so. Likewise, some governments persist in distorting their histories to erase all records of past antisemitism on their national territories that can't be attributed to Nazi German occupation. Segments of the population in some countries are deeply infected with problematic attitudes toward Jews and beliefs about Jewish conspiracies. Moreover, while we can find many differences between today's antisemitism and that of the 1930s, we have no tools to accurately predict whether trends seen today will lead to more dire consequences a decade or more from now. In other words, we ignore this peril only at great risk to individual Jewish communities and the health of democratic societies.

We should also consider, as we employ scarce resources, whether the threat from antisemitism is greater for the Jewish community in the United States or communities in Europe. If we quickly scan Moment Magazine's Anti-Semitism Monitor, an archive of incidents of antisemitism by date and country, we might conclude that antisemitism in the United States is the greater problem.² Indeed, in the United States in recent years, taboos against antisemitic speech have weakened, while violence against Jewish individuals and vandalism of Jewish property has grown. In the last 15 months, 14 Jewish Americans have been killed by domestic terrorists motivated by antisemitism. Tragically, this represents a greater number than in any other period in American history.

Nevertheless, there is equally compelling evidence that overall, public opinion toward American Jews remains very positive, and that the American Jewish community's position in society is much more secure than in any of the much smaller diaspora communities around the world.³ These findings do not justify ignoring signs of rising antisemitism in the United States. But they are a reminder that despite recent, appalling violence at home, European Jewish communities face even greater immediate threats.

² <https://momentmag.com/anti-semitism-monitor-2019/>

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/feelings-toward-religious-groups/>

The Complexity of Today's Antisemitism

To effectively fight antisemitism, we must first understand its nature and from where it emanates within societies. In 2020, this is no simple task. Today, in any given country, antisemitism takes multiple forms that interact and mutate.

The story of antisemitism in three European countries illustrates the major paradigms.

In Hungary, antisemitism manifests as xenophobic, extreme right-wing, and nationalist. While the Fidesz-led government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán consistently declares that Hungary has "zero tolerance" for antisemitism, and has strengthened cooperation with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government in Israel, it also has employed a number of policies that are of great concern to the Hungarian Jewish community.

The Fidesz government has touted a false historical narrative that minimizes the role of Hungarians in the persecution and deportation of the majority of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in 1944. In pursuing this false history, it has attempted to establish a museum dedicated to the fate of Hungarian Jews in the 1940s, while, at the same time, insisting that the museum be led by a known Holocaust distorter.⁴ Likewise, the Orbán government has, on multiple occasions, honored literary and political figures from the 1930s and 1940s who were outspoken antisemites.⁵

The Fidesz government has also employed Nazi-era antisemitic themes, such as portraying liberal financier and philanthropist George Soros as a "puppet master" conspiring to undermine Hungary.⁶ Billboards and posters deployed during Hungary's recent federal elections portraying a laughing Soros mimicked an infamous Nazi-era meme, the "laughing Jew."⁷ The fact that these posters were often defaced with antisemitic comments underscores the potency of their message. Simply put, the antisemites and neo-Nazis understood exactly what Orbán intended to convey. As did his critics. One one-time Orbán admirer wrote in the *National Review* that the prime minister's March 2018 re-election speech echoed language found in the infamous antisemitic forgery the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.⁸

In France, antisemitism emanates from both the extreme right and the extreme left. However, in recent decades, the French Jewish community has been most threatened by violence—sometimes lethal—carried out by a small number of followers of extremist forms of Islam. During the 2014 Gaza war, such individuals targeted Jewish individuals, Jewish property, and

⁴ <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/House-of-Fates-Fact-Sheet%20.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-jews-statue-idUSKBN0TW0RG20151213>
<https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/press-release/hungary-must-reverse-its-support-memorial-antisemitic-politician> <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/03/14/honoring-anti-semitic-literati-on-the-national-holiday/>

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/george-soros-viktor-orban-ceu/588070/>

⁷ <https://forward.com/fast-forward/376352/will-hungary-yank-laughing-jew-billboards-targeting-george-soros/>

⁸ <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/viktor-orban-george-soros-speech-anti-semitism/>

Jewish businesses. As reported widely in the media, many French Jews responded by emigrating.⁹

When I visited France on behalf of the State Department in the weeks following the Gaza war, our Paris embassy arranged a meeting with representatives of the French Jewish community. At that gathering, I asked about the fate of French Jewry. What I heard from one Jewish community leader was instructive. He began by describing how everyone in his circle of friends was talking of leaving, but relatively few were likely to do so, as emigration is a very difficult and consequential decision for a family. He went on to outline the series of problems the community faced in the wake of the violence—including the large numbers of Jewish children being sent to private Catholic schools by their parents to avoid bullying and harassment in public school, and the threat from terrorists in Jewish day schools.

He praised the French national government for its commitment to combatting antisemitism. Yet, at the same time, he expressed concern that government action was not enough. He explained that the ultimate fate of the community rested with the degree of support that French civil society would lend to the fight against antisemitism. He closed by declaring that the crisis was not about just the fate of the French Jewish community. For though Jews were—and are—often the first minority to suffer consequences when societies succumb to conspiracy theories, they are never the last. The people of France were living, he concluded, in a defining moment for the values underpinning the French Republic and the fate of French democracy.

Lastly, the United Kingdom. Five years ago, few observers believed that British Jews encountered antisemitism to a degree comparable to that faced by communities on the European mainland. In the last few years, however, we have been proven wrong, as Britain's Labour party has become poisoned with a form of extreme, left-wing antisemitism.

There is no better description of this form of antisemitism than a monograph recently authored by Professor Alan Johnson titled "Institutionally Antisemitic: Contemporary Left Antisemitism and the Crisis in the Labour Party."¹⁰ Johnson describes how, under Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's direction, a two-camp worldview that divides the planet into an evil western imperialist camp and a virtuous anti-imperialist camp has been adopted by significant segments of Labour's membership and elected officials. Under this simplistic philosophy, Israel, Zionists and the vast majority of Jews who support the concept of a Jewish state are relegated to the former camp, even when their opponents are Iranian Revolutionary Guards or Hamas terrorists.

This Manichean worldview turns complex geopolitical events like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a cartoon pitting good against evil. Moreover, though much of the philosophy manifests itself as vitriol aimed at Israel and Zionists, it also sometimes reveals itself through criticisms of the Rothschilds and Jewish control of banks and capitalism. At its most extreme, this form of

⁹ <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4609941,00.html>
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/is-it-time-for-the-jews-to-leave-europe/386279/>
¹⁰ <http://fathomjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Institutionally-Antisemitic-Report-FINAL-5.pdf>

left-wing antisemitism even manifests itself in incidents where Labour supporters circulate materials generated by the racist right, one example being when a local elected Labour official shared a video on Facebook from KKK leader David Duke entitled "CNN, Goldman Sachs, and the Zio Matrix."¹¹ The most important reason that many who closely follow global trends in antisemitism have championed the International Holocaust Alliance's (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism is because it is a particularly potent tool for identifying just this type of antisemitism: a form where "Zionist" becomes a convenient stand-in for "Jew."

How Should the World Respond?

There are no silver bullet solutions to today's antisemitism. Yet, if you attend any of the numerous international gatherings organized to examine the phenomenon behind today's hearing, you invariably encounter a number of counter-strategies.

First, there is widespread agreement that we need better data collection and analysis to more fully understand the problem. Though the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mandates that its 57 member states collect, maintain, and publish hate crime statistics, in 2018 only 41 states submitted this data, and only 25 of those states provided data disaggregated by bias motivation.¹²

Virtually everyone agrees that heightened security measures are indispensable to securing the safety of Jewish communities and other beleaguered minority groups. Yet as essential as such measures are, they rarely do anything to counter the actual spread of antisemitic sentiments.

Similarly, there is widespread agreement that education is part of the necessary response. However, there is little research as to what type of education is most effective. There may be many reasons to require Holocaust studies as part of school curriculums. However, not every Holocaust education program is an effective tool against antisemitism. To give an obvious example, if we are going to rely on education to help stop the spread of antisemitism, we must avoid teaching about the Holocaust as mere history. We must instead find ways to relate the lessons of the Holocaust to the lives of today's students.

Everyone also agrees that hate has proliferated online, and that we must focus on how to counter bigotry on multiple social media platforms. However, as successful as we have been in the past in pushing back against hate in other forms of media, we still don't fully understand on how to effectively counter bigotry in the digital world.

There is also broad agreement that antisemitism can't be fought by Jewish community alone, and an effective response must incorporate larger civil society. At the local level, religious leadership, business leadership, law enforcement, political leadership, and other civil leaders must be mobilized to counter antisemitism and other forms of bigotry and discrimination.

¹¹ <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/labour-take-no-action-against-11923281>

¹² <http://hatecrime.osce.org/what-do-we-know>

Twenty-five years ago, someone widely thought to be a white nationalist hurled a cinder block through the window of a Billings, Montana home where a Jewish family had displayed a Hanukkah menorah. Billings' civil society spontaneously responded with an outpouring of support for the Jewish community and a message of outrage aimed at the white nationalists.¹³ How do we replicate the Billings response all over the United States and in Europe? How do we send messages of support to victims of hate in our communities, while isolating and ostracizing those doing the hating?

There are also actions that we should assiduously avoid if we wish to effectively counter renascent antisemitism. Foremost among them is the temptation to treat antisemitism as another partisan wedge issue. As with any struggle, we can't fight the war if we're not united against the enemy. As documented above, antisemitism comes from both the right and the left. If we choose to only recognize the antisemitism of our ideological adversaries, and ignore that which emanates from our ideological allies, we are doomed to failure.

Recommendations for Congressional Action

Members of Congress have a number of avenues by which to constructively engage in the fight against antisemitism, and I would be remiss not to mention them today. These include:

1. Conduct further hearings on the challenge of antisemitism in countries of specific concern. This is most important in countries where government policies contribute to the growth of antisemitism. From my experience, focusing a bipartisan light on certain international examples of antisemitism is one of the most effective methods of grabbing the attention of problematic actors. One caveat to this recommendation is that it is important to determine, in a private and sensitive manner, how this public spotlight will affect a local Jewish community. There are some communities that feel that public criticism of their government will have negative consequences for their own well-being. In other cases, local communities will welcome public advice and censure.
2. Identify countries of particular concern, and schedule CODELS to meet with foreign government officials and Jewish communities. On more than one occasion, I have been told by community leadership that high-level U.S. government visits, including Congressional visits, serve to protect their community's status, as these events signal that the U.S. government is watching.
3. Urge your Senate colleagues to bring up and pass legislation similar to the House passed bill H.R. 221, which elevates the status of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to the rank of Ambassador. Enhancing the status of the Executive branch's point person on antisemitism, and ensuring that the office has adequate

¹³ <https://www.rd.com/culture/town-stands-up-anti-semitism/>

resources, are critical if the United States is going to continue to take a leading role in the fight against international antisemitism.

4. Speak out in the form of resolutions and public letters addressed to heads of government on the most egregious examples of international antisemitism. In late 2015, the State Department put together a coalition of democratic allies, local Jewish community representatives, local civil society actors, Jewish NGOs, and human rights NGOs to protest the Hungarian government's support for the placement of a statue to a leading 1940s era antisemite. A letter addressed to the government by a bi-partisan group of House members served a critical role in convincing Prime Minister Orbán to withdraw his support for the project.
5. Join the House Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Anti-Semitism. And if you've already done so, urge your colleagues to do the same. Bolstering this body on a bipartisan basis lends credibility to the idea that confronting antisemitism is a top congressional priority.

In closing, we should be clear-eyed about the nature of the challenge we face. Antisemitism is an ancient hatred. In modern form it takes many guises. Pushing back against antisemitism requires an understanding of its specific nature at a given time and place. It also requires both government and private resources, and genuine bipartisan cooperation.

Moreover, we need to understand that our goal is not the eradication of antisemitism. This disease has infected human societies for at least 2,000 years, and we can be confident that it will be around for many years to come. But if we can't realistically expect to eliminate the threat, we can strive to reduce and tame it. To use a metaphor, we can't turn off the faucet, but we can turn down its flow. That in and of itself is an important goal, because the stakes are so high.

The struggle against antisemitism in 2020 is not just a fight to protect beleaguered Jewish communities. As the French Jewish leader whom I referenced earlier stated, this is ultimately a fight about democratic values. It is about the well-being of our democracy, and that of the democracies of our European allies. It could not, therefore, be of greater importance.