

Remarks by Elisa Massimino, President and CEO, Human Rights First at the UN General Assembly, Informal Session on Antisemitic Violence, January 22, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about this important issue. I want to thank His Excellency Mr. Sam Kahamba Kutesa, current President of the General Assembly, and all the countries who pressed to have this important discussion today. And a special thanks to Ambassador Samantha Power for her powerful words this morning and her principled leadership in combating the scourge of anti-Semitism and all forms of intolerance and hatred.

Antisemitic violence is a problem for countries all over the world—including here in the United States—but I'm going to focus on Europe because that's where my organization, Human Rights First, has focused its work on this issue for more than a decade.

For the past 12 years—following a spate of violent antisemitic attacks in Europe that had been largely dismissed by governments as hooliganism or a spill-over from conflict in the Middle East—we have been documenting antisemitic and other forms of hate violence and making recommendations to our own and other governments on how to combat it. We have worked with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to establish a program of practical assistance for governments and civil society. And we have championed a strategy for how governments can combat hatred without restricting freedom of expression.

After gunmen attacked the office of Charlie Hebdo two weeks ago, the world recoiled in horror—and mourned the 12 victims. But there wasn't much, if any, talk of antisemitism in the immediate aftermath. That soon changed with the attack on a kosher supermarket the following day in which four Jews were killed.

The role that antisemitism plays among violent Islamist extremist groups and their supporters is sometimes overlooked. These groups target people of various faiths, races, and ethnicities, and the vast majority of their victims are Muslims. But it is important to recognize that antisemitism is an animating belief for these organizations, as it is for

many violent hate groups. Indeed, it's a malignant thread connecting Islamist extremists and neo-Nazis.

At Human Rights First, we view antisemitism as a grave threat to human rights. To us, that is obvious. But antisemitism is sometimes viewed as distinct from—and even subordinate to—other human rights issues. That is a mistake. Antisemitism, left unchecked, invariably leads to the persecution of other minorities, and an overall increase in repression.

The converse is also true. Human rights problems left to fester exacerbate antisemitism. Throughout history, antisemitism has surged and retracted depending on social conditions and political factors. Jews—often the default scapegoats—fare better when there is less demand for scapegoats.

France is home to Europe's largest Jewish population. The environment for French Jews has been deteriorating for a long time, and even before the recent attacks, the danger had become acute. Amid a spike in antisemitic violence last year, about 7000 Jews reportedly left France for Israel, more than double the number who left the year before.

In France, as in other European countries, a classic fascistic antisemitism exists alongside a newer incarnation that has taken root among marginalized and alienated citizens and immigrants of Muslim heritage.

Terrorist attacks like those in Paris are linked, in part, to problems in the Middle East—complex, interwoven problems that I can do no more than touch on right now. Repressive regimes—often backed by the west—deny rights to their citizens and effectively empower extremists. With the tacit approval of some of these same regimes, wealthy individuals and institutions fund extremist groups. Antisemitic hatred is disseminated through electronic media, in mosques, and to children in schools. The wars in Syria, Iraq, and Libya attract fighters from the West. And abuses committed by western countries in the fight against terrorism help Islamist extremist groups win members and sympathizers.

Given these complex dynamics, it's wrong to view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the primary destabilizing factor in the region—and even worse to allow it to be used as an excuse for antisemitism. Only an anti-Semite would argue that it justifies animosity toward Jews. But only a fool would deny that it exacerbates it.

For all the deep-seated problems in the Middle East, this horror happened in France, and was committed by people born and raised there.

It's important not to group all French Muslims together. Many are integrated into the mainstream of French life. Even the term "Muslim" is imprecise. Many French people of Muslim descent aren't observant. Some are fully secular.

But a sizable minority remain shut out—culturally, economically, and physically. Muslims represent 12 percent of the French population but more than 60 percent of the prison population. That points to a serious problem.

Among this marginalized population, antisemitic conspiracy theories tend to resonate, and the line between criticizing Israeli policies and demonizing Jews often vanishes. While a fraction of Muslims who hold antisemitic beliefs engage in violence, there's no denying that propagation of hatred has led to attacks.

The existence of an entrenched underclass of Muslims has created an opening for extremists on the right. There's a symbiosis between anti-Muslim extremists and Islamist extremists. As Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution said recently:

Just as Islamist extremists benefit the far right, an emboldened French far right benefits Islamist extremists, allowing them to drive a greater wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims and feed their "clash of civilizations" narrative.

For the social ills that contribute to terrorist violence, far-right extremists offer precisely the wrong prescriptions. Exclusion rather than inclusion, persecution rather than acceptance, repression rather than freedom.

Unfortunately, some governments in Europe have been slow or not aggressive enough in confronting far right extremism.

Amid economic collapse in Greece, neo-Nazi and antisemitic Golden Dawn has become the country's third strongest political party. The ruling party has cracked down on Golden Dawn, launching a prosecution targeting party members' involvement in violence. But this comes late, after years of complacency in which Golden Dawn received support from some in the Greek police.

Prosecution is essential when extremists break the law, but the battle must also be waged politically.

In Hungary, the antisemitic and xenophobic Jobbik party won 20 percent of the vote in recent elections. Instead of challenging Jobbik, Prime Minister Victor Orban has coopted

a good part of its agenda. As part of a broad slide toward authoritarianism, Mr. Orban has trafficked in ethnic nationalism and World War II revisionism. In a 2013 European Union report, almost 50 percent of Jews surveyed in Hungary said they had considered emigrating because they felt unsafe living as a Jew in their country.

Parties like Jobbik and Golden Dawn, and the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands—and movements like Pegida in Germany—present themselves as the protectors of an ethnically and religiously cleansed national identity. In reality, they serve as stimulants of hatred.

In France, the terrorist attacks have complicated an already-complicated situation. The National Front—which rose to prominence under the openly anti-semitic Jean-Marie Le Pen—has moderated its public face under his daughter Marine Le Pen.

The lesson from other countries is that hatred must be confronted, not indulged, and on this front France has risen to the challenge. Officials have been appropriately bold in denouncing both antisemitism and anti-Muslim bigotry.

But there's another important lesson here. It is that repression of speech deepens the divisions on which extremists feed. In the wake of the Paris attacks, the French government is using a new counterterrorism law to restrict speech. Dozens of people—mostly Muslim—have been arrested for speech allegedly in support of terrorism. Such repression fuels grievances in the Muslim community that it is being held to a double standard where the “offensive” speech of the majority is protected, but that of the minority is prosecuted.

Government officials should counter hate speech with more speech in the marketplace of ideas. At the same time, they should be vigorous in going after perpetrators of antisemitic violence and all other forms of hate crime. Violence motivated by hatred harms not just direct victims but entire communities. With a single act of violence, an attacker can terrorize thousands. Indeed, that's often the goal.

So in terms of targeted action to combat antisemitism, the first step is for governments to work with Jewish communities to assess their security needs and provide protection against violence. Increased security is only a stop-gap measure, however. Leaders must work to create a political culture of condemnation and rejection of antisemitism and other forms of hatred that lead to violence and discrimination. And governments must demonstrate zero tolerance for antisemitic and other bias motivated violence, fully investigating and prosecuting incidents of violence, collecting and publishing data, training police and prosecutors and forging productive relationships between law

enforcement and affected communities. The OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency have all created tools to help governments combat violence while respecting rights—governments should participate fully in these multilateral efforts, share experiences and best practices and avail themselves of technical assistance. The UN can do its part to promote these tools globally.

Civil society and religious leaders must do their part as well. No community should stand alone and face violence or other human rights abuses. Targeted minorities—along with human rights groups—often share an interest in preventing persecution and exclusion. Leaders should work together to forge coalitions to denounce hatred and work to promote respect for the rights of all.

Finally, governments need to build relationships with and empower local community leaders to counter violent extremism wherever it exists.

Make no mistake: the rise of antisemitism in Europe presents a daunting political challenge. Ultimately, the most effective response is good and accountable governance. Across Europe, extreme neo-Nazi parties and their ilk are using economic distress to scapegoat immigrants and Muslims. And their messages of exclusion in turn fuel Islamist extremism, as does antisemitic incitement from extremist groups in the Middle East.

This is a destructive and self-defeating cycle, and we all have a stake in breaking it. This is the unfinished challenge of the 20th century. Failure to meet it risks unravelling the progress we made in the wake of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust towards building a just and peaceful world based on respect for universal rights.