

Tackling the Disease of Antisemitism



It is commendable that the European Commission in October 2021 announced it was presenting the first-ever strategy on combatting antisemitism and fostering Jewish life. It proposes measures articulated around three factors: preventing all forms of antisemitism; protecting and fostering Jewish life; and promoting research and education about the Holocaust. Its premise is that any form of antisemitism, incitement to hatred or violence is unacceptable and should be opposed in a comprehensive way, multifaceted and international.

The task is formidable. The disease of antisemitism indeed has spread in many forms: hate speech, murders, attacks, sometimes violent and lethal, on Jewish people and on their property and institutions, stereotyping of Jews allegedly proponents of conspiracies, casual offensive remarks at work or in public places, desecration of synagogues, cemeteries, memorials. Distasteful speech can be open or veiled. The virus is present in fringe and radical groups, politically both right and left wing, and Islamist, and increasingly related to the State of

Israel.

Can the carriers of truth and justice prevent all forms of antisemitism? Two recent issues show the extent of the task. Alexander Lukashenko, ruler of Belarus since 1994 is an extreme example. At the country's Independence Day on July 3, 2021, this dictator remarked that "no one today would dare to raise a voice and deny the Holocaust, because the Jews have succeeded in making the whole world bow down to them. The entire world is afraid to say a single word out of place." However, Belarus has raised its voice in recent days as it has in the past. The memorial stone for Jews, in the center of Minsk, the capital, has been defaced several times. The fact that 80% of the Jewish population of Belarus was murdered during World War II remains unmentioned.

Contrary to Lukashenko's harangue, Holocaust denial or distortion is increasing in the world, often feeding hatred against Jewish people, as well as rewriting history and collective historic memory. The European Commission recommends commemorating the Holocaust publicly, including participation in the national parliaments, and increasing education about the Holocaust.

A second issue relates to an apology on November 16, 2021, by a former professional cricket player, Azeem Rafiq, who sent antisemitic messages more than a decade ago. Rafiq born in Pakistan in 1991 played for the Yorkshire Cricket Club, the youngest person and the first person of Asian origin to captain the Yorkshire team. He apologized and was "deeply ashamed" for using antisemitic language. One message in 2011 referred to a Derbyshire cricketer, Atif Sheikh, who he said was reluctant to spend money on a meal because "he is a Jew." Rafiq added, using his language, that Sheikh would "probs go after my 2nds (second helping of food) again. Only Jews do that sort of s..." However, whether his apology was heartfelt and sincere or not, he said in weeping tones in testimony before Parliament that his antisemitic remarks were not as bad

as the racism he suffered in his career. English cricket, he remarked, was institutionally racist. Rafiq's implication, an all too familiar one, is the relative insignificance of antisemitism.

More politically important is the attitude of the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, who cannot be considered a proponent of antisemitic views but who has accepted the views of her own political party in supporting the BDS movement against Israel. It is true that Sturgeon has explicitly reiterated the Scottish government's commitment confronting antisemitism and racism in all its forms, but her support of the boycott against Israel has increased hostility to Jewish students on campus as well as being discriminatory. Logically, a similar boycott could apply to all states with territorial disputes such as Tibet, Kashmir, and Cyprus, but this has not been done. The essential problem remains. What is it about Jews and the State of Israel that makes them always the single victim and the specific target for political criticism, prejudice, and economic sanctions? Scottish universities have been accused of anti-Jewish discrimination, such as students being punished for refusing to take exams on the Jewish sabbath.

And there is Thanos Plevris, appointed Greek minister of health in September 2021, who offered a meek apology for defending in 2009 the antisemitic writings of his father Constantine who advocated for Auschwitz to be kept in good condition, presumably because it could be used again, to kill Jews. At the trial of his father, Thanos commented on this statement, "What incitement is this? Is it that one is not allowed to believe and want to believe that "I want to exterminate someone?" Thanos, on appointment as minister, shrewdly said he completely disagreed with his father, and did not mean to offend anyone with his 2009 defense. But he did not his father's revolting remark in the context of Greek behavior during the Holocaust when 83%-87% of the Jewish

population were killed, deported to Auschwitz, or murdered. Greek official authorities and individuals assisted in organization and deportation of Jews to their death, and participated with Nazi occupiers in looting, interrogation, and execution. Greece is the last European capital to have a Holocaust memorial.

Certainly, antisemitism in the contemporary world comes in many forms, from all political sides, and divides parties. It comes not only from the extreme political groups left, right, and Islamist, but also from the center, open or veiled, in legal and illegal fashion. A familiar accusation is that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to their own country. They are the subject of conspiracy myths, fake news, and disinformation, and the widespread fable that Jews have undue control of banks, and the media.

An Oxford study showed that a fifth of Britons believed that Jews created COVID-19 to collapse the economy for financial gain. A British document edited by Lord Mann noted the resurgence of antisemitism in the anti-vaccination movement: an analysis of 27 leading anti-vaccination networks showed that 79% had antisemitic content. At the center of these diatribes is the contention that Jews created coronavirus, and that Jews are colluding to destabilize the economic system by spreading the virus. This is the newest form of the long history of Jews as scapegoats, of deliberately poisoning wells, of accusations of the association between infectious diseases and antisemitism: in the 14th century Jews were blamed for the spread of the bubonic plague and the Black Death 1348-1351.

A global fight against antisemitism has been proclaimed from time to time, especially in international bodies, yet the disease is still prevalent, even as the Jewish population declines. The worldwide Jewish population today is estimated to be about 15.2 million. About 6.9 million, or 45% of the

total, live in Israel. In other countries there are 5.8 million in the U.S., 446,000 in France, 393,000 in Canada, 292,000 in Britain, 150,000 in Russia. About 27,000 live in Arab or Muslim states and 14,500 in Turkey.

Before World War II an estimated 9.5 million Jews lived in Europe: today the Jewish population in the EU is 1.5 million, and has been declining, particularly because of security concerns, the refusal and reluctance of some governments to address the issue, and the insensitivity to Jewish customs and traditions.

The stark truth is that Jews are experiencing antisemitic attacks in most countries, that fear among Jewish communities has increased, and that more security is necessary. Displays of Holocaust denial or distortion are increasing, as is the belief that the Holocaust is a myth or has been exaggerated. This example of hate speech has two effects. It feeds hatred of the Jewish people. And it falsifies historical memory. The EU Commission correctly holds that antisemitism must be tackled as a racist phenomenon and it is important to commemorate the Holocaust publicly, and to ensure that the true character and dimensions of the Holocaust is taught.