

Submission by the World Jewish Congress on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16)

Introduction

The World Jewish Congress is the representative body of more than 100 Jewish communities around the globe. Since its founding in 1936, the WJC has prioritized the values embodied in SDG 16 for the achievement of peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It does so by, inter alia, countering antisemitism and hatred, advocating for the rights of minorities and spearheading interfaith understanding.

Antisemitism is a grave threat to the attainment of SDG 16, undermining the prospect of peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. Antisemitism concerns us all because it poses a threat to the most fundamental values of democracy and human rights.

As the world's "oldest hatred," antisemitism exposes the failings in each society. Jews are often the first group to be scapegoated but, unfortunately, they are not the last. Hateful discourse that starts with the Jews expands to other members of society and threatens the basic fabric of modern democracies, rule of law and the protection of human rights.

Antisemitism is on the rise globally. Virtually every opinion poll and study in the last few years paints a very dark picture of the rise in antisemitic sentiments and perceptions. As examples:

- According to the French interior ministry, in 2018, antisemitic incidents rose sharply by 74% compared to the year before.¹ In 2019, antisemitic acts in the country increased by another 27%.²
- According to crime data from the German government, in 2018 there was a 60% rise in physical attacks against Jewish targets, compared to 2017.³
- In Canada, violent antisemitic incidents increased by 27% in 2019, making the Jewish community the most targeted religious minority in the country.⁴

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/world/europe/paris-anti-semitic-attacks.html>.

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/france-reports-27-increase-in-anti-semitic-acts>.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47223692>.

⁴ <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/canada-sees-27-rise-in-violent-anti-semitic-incidents-in-2019>.

- A record number of antisemitic incidents were documented in the Netherlands in 2019, with a 35% increase compared to 2018.⁵
- During 2019, a 12% increase of antisemitic incidents was recorded in the United States.⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ancient antisemitic libels have also been reawakened, coupled with modern conspiracy myths and religious intolerance. The old myths of the Jews poisoning the wells and being responsible for the Black Plague have found renewed popularity and are linked with conspiracy myths that the Jews created, are spreading, or taking advantage of the virus as a way to become rich or control the world.⁷

Consequently, Jews worldwide have become increasingly afraid to openly express their identity or practice their religion freely amid fear that violence may be directed towards them, a direct violation of SDG 16. The question before us then becomes what measures should be enacted by governments in order to attain the values embodied by SDG 16.

Examples of Good Practices

The goal of attaining lasting peace and justice in society becomes possible only in a world free from prejudice, hatred and discrimination. The goal is a lofty one, but attainable if broken down into specific actions by national and local governments. In the following pages, some good practices to counter such hatred will be outlined; the list is by no means exhaustive. As the WJC is the umbrella organization representing Jewish communities worldwide, our focus will primarily be on combating antisemitism, yet we wish to emphasize that many of the measures described may be adapted to other groups experiencing discrimination as well.

Defining, Monitoring and Combatting Antisemitism

One of the first essential steps to creating a peaceful and inclusive world is identifying what poses a threat and what we are fighting against. In this regard, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has provided a very useful working definition of antisemitism. Twenty-five

⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/record-number-of-anti-semitic-incidents-documented-in-the-netherlands-in-2019>.

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/12/us/antisemitic-incidents-highest-2019/index.html>.

⁷ See, for example, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/04/26/the-return-of-populist-anti-semitism/>, <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/jews-are-being-blamed-for-the-coronavirus/>, and <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/5/5/21248296/anti-semitism-anti-immigrant-racism-bigotry-pandemic-holocaust-museum-edna-friedberg>.

governments so far have adopted this definition, most recently Serbia and Argentina.⁸ This document is a practical tool enabling governments, parliaments, local authorities and courts to explain and monitor the diverse and complex manifestations of this phenomenon and cooperate more effectively in eradicating it. Moreover, Greece was the first country to adopt IHRA's Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion,⁹ a move that others should follow.

Several countries have taken praiseworthy additional steps, such as establishing and funding institutes tasked with collecting data on hate crimes, naming special envoys to combat antisemitism and developing national strategies to support this aim. More countries should take similar measures.

Combating Extremism

Right-wing extremism can take many forms, ranging from the glorification of Nazi collaborators, Holocaust denial or distortion to the dissemination of conspiracy myths or recent attempts to interfere with online Holocaust commemorations.⁶ Some positive examples to deal with this scourge include:

Bulgaria: For the last 17 years, thousands of neo-Nazis from across Europe came to Sofia to celebrate Holocaust-era General Hristo Lukov. A ban on the event instituted by Sofia mayor Yordanka Fandukova was upheld by the courts as a categorical rejection and condemnation of manifestations of extreme nationalists and xenophobes, which divide society, cause fear and anguish in minorities and incite violence.¹⁰

Greece: As a result of a lengthy economic recession, there was a rise in populist and extremist political parties, the most notorious of which is the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. Its political platform, newspaper and website consistently promote antisemitism, Holocaust denial, racism and xenophobia.¹¹ In September 2015 elections, Golden Dawn received 7% of the vote. However, a consistent condemnation and opposition mounted by mainstream political parties and the media, as well as a court case linking

⁸ <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-and-charters> and <https://www.boletinoficial.gob.ar/detalleAviso/primera/230279/20200608>.

⁹ <https://www.ekathimerini.com/246294/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-adopts-ihras-definition-of-anti-semitism-holocaust-denial>.

⁶ <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/493895-holocaust-memorial-event-zoom-bombed-with-hitler-images>.

¹⁰ <https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/02/23/cancellation-of-2020-lukov-march-welcomed>

¹¹ Facebook and Twitter have suspended the party's accounts. See <https://www.euronews.com/2018/01/05/twitter-blocks-account-of-greece-s-far-right-golden-dawn-party>.

its leaders with ordering the murder of a left-wing activist and branding the group as a “criminal organization”, caused the party’s popularity to plummet. It was unable to enter parliament in July 2019.¹²

Education

In order to combat antisemitism and build more inclusive societies, the WJC believes that honoring the contributions of Jewish communities to society is important, not only to fight prejudice and bigotry, but also to strengthen the position of minorities within every country. Furthermore, it is important to educate people about the Holocaust and the dangers of extremism and antisemitism.

In an era that is rife with disinformation, schools need to spend more time teaching youngsters critical thinking, media and research skills so that they will be better able to distinguish between truth and propaganda, reliable versus unreliable sources.

Getting to know and understand the Other has often proven most effective in debunking stereotypes, which is why an emphasis on education is a key element in combating hatred: gaining insight into the history, culture, values of a member of any group goes a long way to promoting better interfaith and intercultural understanding. Some positive examples of measures taken include:

United States: To counter increased antisemitism, Holocaust denial and ignorance of the Holocaust, the US Congress has adopted the “Never Again Education Act” to provide federal funding to expand Holocaust education in the United States.¹³

Lithuania: The Lithuanian Parliament unanimously voted to mark the year 2020 as the “Year of the Vilna Gaon and the History of the Jews of Lithuania” to honor a famous local Torah scholar known as Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman Kramer. Rather than simply erecting a monument in his name, the government has decided to focus on raising the awareness about his life, legacy and impact on the community.¹⁴

Switzerland: In order to increase awareness about Judaism and combat ignorance, misunderstandings and stereotypes, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities launched the “Likrat” project in 2002. With the support of the Swiss Confederation, young Jewish volunteers meet with

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/21/greece-sun-has-set-on-far-right-golden-dawn-murder-defections>.

¹³ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/943/text>.

¹⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/graves-guilt-and-genius-inside-lithuanias-struggle-with-its-checkered-past>.

high-school students in their schools where any questions can be asked. Due to the program's success, other countries emulated the program, such as Germany, Austria and Moldova.⁷

Germany: Since Jews today make up only 0.2% of the German population, the Central Council of Jews in Germany has piloted a program called "Meet a Jew." Supported by the German Federal government, it aims to prevent and debunk stereotypes by encouraging people to meet face to face to ask about their beliefs, customs and values.⁸

Legislation

Legislation is another key aspect in the fight against antisemitism and discrimination. Laws must protect society's most vulnerable, such as members of minority groups, and apply equally to everyone. Moreover, these laws must be enforced and perpetrators prosecuted. Adequate provisions must be made for the protection of individuals for their physical safety, their houses of worship, schools, cemeteries, etc. In addition, those who incite hate, distort or deny historical facts, including the Holocaust, or those who promote violent extremism, whether online or in person, should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

While laws exist to ensure that all citizens feel equally safe and supported, in some cases laws can contradict the free exercise of religion, such as restrictions on religious slaughter or circumcision.¹⁵ Such measures can severely inhibit the rights of Jews and other minorities to practice their religion freely in the countries they live in, customs and traditions that have been followed across the world for centuries.

One major area where legislation is urgently needed is to stop the spread of online hate. Social media sites are frequently used to disseminate extremist tropes and antisemitic conspiracy myths. Propagation of these myths can also translate into violence and physical attacks on members of minority groups, including Jews. In order to deal with the rise of hate which has been observed on these platforms, parliaments in both **Germany** and **France** have adopted strong legislation with stringent fines.

In October 2017, the "Network Enforcement Act" (NetzDG) came into effect, adopted by the German Bundestag, which obliges operators of for-profit social networks to delete "obviously criminal content" within 24

⁷ <https://www.likrat.ch/en/>.

⁸ <https://www.meetajew.de/en/>.

¹⁵ For example, <https://rabbiscer.org/religious-practice-is-severally-under-threat-in-every-european-country-warns-europes-leading-rabbi/> and <https://www.swissjews.ch/en/religion/kosher-meat/the-ban-on-shechita-in-switzerland/>.

hours of receiving a complaint. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in fines of up to 50 million euros.¹⁷ In addition, on 19 February 2020, the German government approved a bill to crack down on hate speech on social media websites, requiring companies to immediately report hate crimes and other dangerous posts to the police.¹⁹

In May 2020, the French Parliament likewise adopted legislation to fight online hate speech, seeking to compel social networks and other online actors to remove hateful content within 24 hours or face steep fines.²⁰

Legislation in Germany and France follows the European Union Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, which was adopted in May 2016 in cooperation with major social media companies.²¹ The WJC has been working with individual companies, encouraging them to take their own measures to better monitor and flag inappropriate content, revise their community standards and remove dangerous material.

The Role of the United Nations in Combating Antisemitism

As outlined above, individual countries are taking laudable steps, but collective action and direction remains key. Hence the importance of the United Nations in spearheading international efforts to combat antisemitism. To achieve a society of which peace and equality are the foundations, the UN needs to take an unequivocal stance against antisemitism and other forms of hate. The UN has primary role to play in advocating that antisemitism is not only a Jewish issue, but a human rights issue, which the international community as a whole has a responsibility to combat.

While we recognize that several steps have recently been taken by the UN to address this scourge, there remains a need for the UN to better address it by mainstreaming antisemitism and making it a priority throughout the organization. The WJC also continues to urge the UN to appoint a special under-secretary general to monitor and combat antisemitism.

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-implements-new-internet-hate-speech-crackdown/a-41991590> and <https://www.mondaq.com/germany/social-media/918622/german-government-introduces-new-bill-to-amend-germany39s-hate-speech-act-establishing-new-requirements-for-social-networks-and-video-sharing-platforms>.

¹⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-government-approves-hate-speech-bill/a-52433689>.

²¹ http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/l15t0388_texte-adopte-seance and http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/rapports/cion_lois/l15b2062_rapport-fond.pdf.

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en.

The Role of the WJC in Attaining SDG 16

Through its actions, the WJC is deeply committed to the attainment of SDG 16. A few examples will be highlighted below:

- The WJC believes it is the duty of every Jew to speak up on behalf of other persecuted minorities around the world. At sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, for example, the WJC has protested against the plight of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East, the plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar, the persecution of people with albinism, and the increase of online hate against Christians, Muslims, Jews and other groups.²²
- The WJC is also convinced of the importance of education as a means to build a robust citizenry. The WJC had recently partnered with UNESCO on a series of workshops to train education policy makers on how to counter antisemitism through education.²³
- The WJC is also at the forefront of efforts to foster interfaith relations, guided by the knowledge that building inclusive societies and combating hatred is a battle that no one group can win on its own.²⁴ Interreligious engagement can bridge divides, inspire people and showcase our common humanity and shared values. As emphasized during a recent speech at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the President of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald S. Lauder, declared that “the campaign against racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Christian attacks will be infinitely more effective if it is united. Christians should lead the defense of Jews and Muslims. Muslims should lead the defense of Christians and Jews. Jews should lead the defense of Muslims and Christians. And we must all stand together against racism.”²⁵

Recommendations

Concrete measures taken by different countries are essential to the creation of a safe and just society. Having strong institutions promoting the fight against all forms of discrimination is the best way to protect

²³ See, for example, the March 2020 HRC session, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/world-jewish-congress-takes-to-un-human-right-council-floor-to-advocate-for-minority-rights-3-4-2020>.

²³ <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-trains-policy-makers-over-60-countries-addressing-antisemitism>.

²⁴ <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/focus-areas/inter-faith-dialogue>.

²⁵ <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/wjc-president-ronald-s-lauder-calls-for-unity-in-fight-against-hate-in-address-to-vatican-officials-11-5-2019>.

human rights and ensure lasting peace and the security of all citizens. As outlined above, measures can take a number of different approaches, including:

- mainstreaming antisemitism within the UN and its bodies as a human rights issue, ensuring that it is considered and addressed in all relevant discussions;
- adopting and implementing the IHRA working definition of antisemitism;
- tightening and strictly enforcing existing legislation;
- ensuring that laws do not interfere with the free exercise of religion;
- monitoring and reporting hate crimes;
- acting swiftly in response to hate speech online;
- increasing focus on Holocaust education;
- highlighting positive contributions of Jewish life and culture;
- supporting interfaith dialogue.

The UN, other relevant organizations and civil society, including the WJC, must encourage states and other relevant stakeholders to adopt such measures to effectively combat antisemitism, along with other forms of hatred, in order to strengthen democratic institutions, protect human rights and achieve the vision embodied in SDG 16 of a peaceful, just and inclusive society free from fear and violence.