

Submission from B'nai B'rith International to Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, for inclusion in the report to the General Assembly on anti-Semitism:

B'nai B'rith International is the world's oldest Jewish humanitarian, advocacy and social action organization, with a grassroots presence around the world. B'nai B'rith has been active at the UN since the founding of the world body in San Francisco in 1945. The organization has had ECOSOC accreditation since 1947 as a lead agency of the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations (CBJO), and has an engaged presence in New York at UN Headquarters, Geneva at the Human Rights Council and Paris at UNESCO, amongst other UN duty stations.

We thank the Special Rapporteur for dedicating an important report to anti-Semitism and its effects on Freedom of Religion and Belief. This examination is welcome, if long overdue.

B'nai B'rith is increasingly alarmed at the rising anti-Semitism that we have witnessed over recent years. As a Jewish organization with membership in dozens of countries throughout the world, we often receive reports on anti-Semitic incidents globally, some of which are included in this overview.

We are not least disturbed by a rise of anti-Semitism in the United States, home to the largest diaspora Jewish population. It would be a mistake to believe that this is an entirely new phenomenon; it is not. Jews have for years been the most attacked faith community according to U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) statistics. However, the number of hate crimes and bias attacks is intensifying. Whereas anti-Semitism was once present but on the margins, many in the U.S. Jewish community now perceive anti-Semites as being increasingly emboldened. Hate speech online has flourished, as has incitement to violence, and the response from social media companies has been woefully inadequate.

For the first time in the lifetimes of many American Jews, there is a real concern for the safety of the community as members go about their daily lives and even as they seek to pray. This was demonstrated, of course, by the horrific 2018 attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which killed 11 Jewish worshippers during Sabbath services, and the 2019 shooting at the Poway Chabad congregation near San Diego, California, during Passover, in which one worshipper was murdered.

The unease felt within the Jewish community is not only caused by the hateful rhetoric and violence perpetrated by racist extremists on the right, but also the rise in anti-Semitism on the left. For years, the discriminatory Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has found voice on an array of college campuses throughout the country. Historically, boycotts have been a tried-and-true tactic of anti-Semites to intimidate, isolate, stigmatize and harm the Jewish community. While in modern times it is not deemed acceptable in most places to call for economic warfare against Jewish-owned businesses per se, calling for boycotts of the sole nation-state of the Jewish

people—and anyone considered to be associated with it—has become an alternative that feeds off of, and projects, the same hatred. As in the past, what starts as calls for boycotts does not end there, and, true to form, various campuses that have seen BDS resolutions proposed have seen other incidents of anti-Semitic hate crimes.

Beyond the BDS movement, we have also been appalled that anti-Semitic language has been on display now even by individual representatives in the U.S. Congress. Such a reality would have been unthinkable just a few short years ago.

Internationally, we remain particularly concerned with anti-Semitism in Europe. European anti-Semitism is rising and is a phenomenon of the right and the left. The levels of societal anti-Semitism in Europe have long been high compared with the U.S. One unique reality in Europe which we have not seen as prominently in other regions is the creeping of this anti-Semitism into legislation in ways that have a direct effect on the ability of the Jewish community to freely practice its religion.

Officials in different countries on the continent have targeted kosher slaughter and male circumcision. Circumcision of sons eight days after their birth, mandated in the Bible, represents the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Kosher slaughter of animals for consumption is also an important function within the Jewish community. Without it, observant Jews cannot eat meat, and it is difficult to sustain a community in places where there kosher dietary options are severely limited.

The viability of the Jewish community in any place where either kosher slaughter or male circumcision is banned is put into serious doubt. Yet this has not stopped legislators throughout the continent from moving forward with laws and regulations targeting both essential practices.

These long-term issues are trumped, however, by acute concerns for the *physical* safety of the Jewish population in Europe. Jews in many European countries have been made to feel deeply insecure and vulnerable. They have faced frequent violence, primarily from immigrants who come from Arab or other Muslim-majority countries where hatred of Jews is statistically commonplace but also from far-right extremists and neo-Nazis. In many countries, Jews require guards outside their synagogues, schools and other community institutions. In some cities, Jews no longer feel comfortable appearing in public spaces wearing a skullcap (kippa or yarmulke) on account of the persistent threat of violence. In May of this year, the German official in charge of fighting anti-Semitism suggested that Jews would be unwise to wear a kippa in certain parts of Berlin for fear of violent attacks. Following the Holocaust, successive German governments have sought to safeguard and reinforce the rebuilding Jewish community and come to terms with the horrific legacy of the most documented and systemic genocide in history—one borne of millennia of inculcated anti-Semitism. That a mere 74 years since the German capital was liberated from the hands of the Nazis, Jews would once again be under threat in Berlin is a failure on multiple levels. But the problem extends far beyond Berlin and Germany.

France, home to the largest population of Jews in Western Europe, is repeatedly the scene of attacks on both living and dead Jews (including cemetery and memorial desecrations), notwithstanding the expressed solidarity of national leaders. In 2018, Mireille Knoll, an elderly woman, was murdered, as was a retired kindergarten teacher, Sarah Halimi, in 2017; in 2015, four innocents were killed in a hostage-taking at the Hypercacher kosher supermarket in Paris; in 2012, a teacher and three children were killed by a Frenchman of Algerian descent at a Jewish school in Toulouse; and in 2006, a young Jewish man named Ilan Halimi was tortured to death.

In Central and Eastern Europe, meanwhile—in places like Hungary, Poland and the Baltics—too often we have observed relics of more “old-fashioned” anti-Semitism: anti-Jewish caricaturing and conspiracy theories, associating Jews with undue control of money and responsibility for political problems domestically and globally, revisionism of the history of the Holocaust and even (particularly, but not only, in countries that were home to Nazi-allied regimes and movements) glorification of past fascists.

The eastern side of the continent does not hold a monopoly on such offensive themes, though: This year, the UNESCO-recognized Aalst Carnival, in Belgium, featured a float with grotesque caricatures of Hasidic Jews, one with a rat on his shoulder, atop bags of money, while a song played about “Jews getting extra fat.” Major sporting events in Europe have repeatedly been marred by some fans chanting violently anti-Semitic cheers.

Government officials throughout Europe speak about the importance of the Jewish community to their countries, but these pledges by themselves have proven ineffective and the situation continues to worsen. The result is that many Jewish communities in Europe grow smaller each year as Jews leave for places more hospitable, mostly to Israel—though it remains violently besieged by Islamist extremists doctrinally committed to the destruction of the Jewish state—or to North America.

In the predominantly Arab, Muslim states of the Middle East, the threat is not so much focused, at least directly, on the local Jewish community, most of whose members were forced to flee to Israel long ago (although there are a few states that still have a small Jewish population remaining). Rather, governments in the region have inculcated hatred of the Jewish polity, Israel—but also “Zionists” and “Jews” in general—some utilizing shocking anti-Semitic language and tropes, for generations. This festers not only in government-run media, but also on social media networks. It is a threat to the Jews living in Israel and to Jews throughout the world, whether still in the Middle East or, as we have noted, in Europe. In Iran, although a sizable Jewish population remains, frequent and open calls of “death to Israel,” along with recurring displays of the mocking or denial of the Holocaust, legitimize genocide and create an obvious environment of fear and hostility. In the Palestinian territories, political leaders, educational textbooks, religious preachers, press outlets and more all frequently deny Israel’s and Israelis’ right to exist, and their historical roots, and glorify gruesome acts of indiscriminate terrorism against Jewish civilians.

Even in faraway Malaysia—not party to Arab-Israeli disputes—Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has said he is “glad to be labeled anti semitic,” wrote that “the Jews are not merely hook-nosed, but understand money instinctively,” and that “Jews are ruling the world by proxy” and could be defeated by the world’s Muslims. This year, Malaysia forfeited its opportunity to host the World Paralympic Swimming Championship over its insistence—in overt bigotry and renunciation of the very values of sporting and humanitarianism—that it would bar disabled athletes who are citizens of Israel.

Certainly, anti-Semitism is also a concern in Latin America. Anti-Semitism on social media has an important impact in Latin America. Research done in countries with large Jewish communities like Argentina, Brazil, Panama and Chile show that Facebook and Twitter are used to attack and insult the Jewish community, Jews individually and Jewish organizations. The most dramatic violence that has occurred in the last few years was in March 2016, when David Fremd, a Jewish businessman, was stabbed to death in Uruguay by a “lone wolf” who shouted, “Allah is great!” while stabbing Fremd. The murderer has been jailed for life.

The Jewish community in Chile is suffering from ongoing anti-Semitic attacks, which are encouraged and sponsored by some extremist members of the local Palestinian community (the largest in Latin America, at 400,000). Pro-Palestinian media and both Palestinian and pro-Palestinian congressmen have attacked Israel and supporters of Israel, and the Jewish community must always be on alert because the harassment is unceasing.

There is also the problem of government-level anti-Semitism in the region—first and foremost in Venezuela. The Venezuelan government is not only stridently aggressive in its posture towards Israel but also traffics in anti-Semitic sentiment domestically through disputed president Nicolas Maduro’s officers, media and academia. The once thriving Venezuelan Jewish community has shrunk dramatically during the rule of Hugo Chavez and of Maduro due to both the government-sponsored anti-Semitism and rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic conditions.

No less alarming, Venezuela is a haven for the Hezbollah terrorist group, with the assistance of the movement’s patron Iran, so the wider region too is threatened by the fact that violent Middle Eastern radicals can obtain passports to travel with ease across Latin America. Hezbollah pledges Israel’s destruction and has been complicit in acts of deadly violence around the world.

Iran and Hezbollah have already attacked Jews in the region. The Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) bombing in Buenos Aires and the Israeli Embassy bombing in Argentina (25 and 27 years ago, respectively) are still open wounds. The ongoing impunity of the perpetrators remains profoundly painful for Argentina’s Jews. Both attacks, however, were possible because a local anti-Semitic element enabled the attackers. The unsolved assassination of AMIA bombing prosecutor Alberto Nisman is another (and newer) open wound. He was murdered in January 2015 because of relevant accusations he had made against the then-government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

Immediately after his death, an orchestrated effort to tarnish his reputation and credibility was on display in Argentina and the use of anti-Semitic canards in public discourse was commonplace among those opposed to justice for the AMIA victims.

Argentina is the home of the largest Jewish community in Latin America. According to the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA)—the Jewish umbrella organization in the country—there were about 400 anti-Semitic incidents reported in 2017 and the number in 2018 was more than 2,000 (most of these were related to anti-Semitism in social media, but other types of incidents were recorded as well). In February, Chief Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich was brutally attacked at his home in Buenos Aires, and in May, Rabbi Eli Chamen was assaulted on the street while walking home from synagogue on the Sabbath.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that anti-Semitism remains a systemic problem within the UN itself. Welcome attention over recent years to Holocaust commemoration cannot compensate for mistreatment of the world body's only majority-Jewish member—the Middle East's only pluralistic democracy—and for indifference to the plight of contemporary Jews, especially in Israel.

UNESCO's Executive Board and World Heritage Committee have in the recent past been exploited to foster false narratives whereby the Jewish people have little or no connection to holy places such as the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron and even Jerusalem's Western Wall and Temple Mount, the most sacred site in Judaism.

The General Assembly has had an obsessive focus on Israel, singling it out for criticism far more than the rest of the world combined. The General Assembly could not even bring itself to condemn the terrorist group Hamas, which brutally rules over Gaza and has destabilized the region for years through suicide bombings and rocket attacks against civilians in Israel. To ensure that no attacker of Israelis would be repudiated, the assembly recently formalized a double standard—requiring a two-thirds majority for a condemnation of Hamas (but only a simple majority for rote condemnation of Israel).

For its part, the Human Rights Council has tasked OHCHR with creating a blacklist of companies doing business in territories that Israel captured in the defensive Six-Day War of 1967. The unprecedented and unparalleled blacklist is not explicitly a call to sanction, because only the Security Council has that right, but is clearly meant to strengthen anti-Israel and anti-Semitic BDS campaigns. The council itself epitomizes anti-Jewish double standards, as Israel alone is the target of a permanent agenda item (Item 7) negatively scrutinizing its record apart from all other countries. The number of resolutions, “commissions of inquiry,” and special sessions relentlessly attacking Israel all point to a selective and obsessively biased focus on the one Jewish state amongst the nations.

We hope that the report for which this contribution is made will not shy away from the serious deficiencies that are plainly evident at the UN when it comes to anti-Semitism. To do so would be a glaring omission and open the report to criticism that it might serve as a cover for anti-Semitism that has festered at the world body over decades.

Tackling anti-Semitism is a highly difficult process, and the first task is to define the problem, which is exactly what the intergovernmental International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has done. Its working definition of anti-Semitism (<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/index.php/working-definition-antisemitism?focus=antisemitismandholocaustdenial>), which increasingly has been embraced by the global mainstream committed to meaningfully tackling anti-Jewish bigotry, is critical to understanding what constitutes anti-Semitic speech and actions. We encourage the UN to uphold and promote the working definition—especially its acknowledgement of anti-Israel demonization and anti-Zionist delegitimization as foremost modern-day forms of anti-Semitism—not least as the UN itself is a partner organization of IHRA. We also urge additional countries throughout the world to adopt the IHRA working definition.

While B'nai B'rith is troubled by the persistence of anti-Semitism globally, we remain optimistic that this scourge can be better combated if moral leaders stand up for what is right, if publics are led to recognize the Jewish people as an integral and cherished part of the international community, and if diverse institutions unite to jointly combat the collective threat posed by this pernicious hatred.