

TESTIMONY OF CHAIRWOMAN KATRINA LANTOS SWETT

U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

BEFORE

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN
RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

ON

“ANTI-SEMITISM: A GROWING THREAT TO ALL FAITHS”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

FEBRUARY 27, 2013

Introduction

I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning about the growing challenge of anti-Semitism, particularly on the continent of Europe, and how the U.S. Commission on International Freedom, or USCIRF, views this serious problem.

Before I continue, let me acknowledge the crucial importance of this Committee and these hearings. It is through such hearings that Congress and the American people can better understand the disturbing phenomenon of anti-Semitism. It is a persistent, age-old hatred unto itself but also serves as a warning sign of malignant forces that pose other dangers to society and the cause of freedom, including but not limited to freedom of religion.

In light of today's hearings, it is fitting to note that just three days ago, last Sunday, Jews around the world celebrated the annual festival of Purim. As related in the Biblical Book of Esther, Purim is the story of how the Jews of the Persian Empire nearly 25 centuries ago faced the danger of imminent extermination at the hands of Haman, the king's prime minister. This ancient threat represents the first known plot to destroy the Jewish people. Through a dramatic turn of events, Haman's plans were thwarted and the Jewish people were delivered from destruction.

It is indeed ironic that in today's Persia, which we now call Iran, its current leaders follow in Haman's footsteps by expressing their own form of anti-Semitism and their avowed determination to "wipe Israel off the map." Top officials have denied the reality of the Nazi Holocaust, the most serious effort in history to obliterate the Jewish people. As the daughter of Holocaust survivors, I can testify how surreal it is for a people to have to defend themselves in this day and age not only against hateful attitudes and behavior, but also against those who try to dissuade others from believing that six million human beings died for the sole "crime" of being Jews.

Unfortunately, anti-Semitism remains a phenomenon that knows no national boundaries. I was recently confronted with this reality during an official USCIRF visit to Egypt. Recently unearthed 2010 comments by President Morsi that urged Egyptians to "nurse our children and grandchildren on hatred for Jews and Zionists" and another interview in which he referred to Jews as the descendants of "apes and pigs" underscore the depth to which Egyptian society is infused with these deplorable attitudes. When confronted on these comments, Egyptian officials with whom we met attempted to divert the discussion to attacks on the state of Israel.

These two examples serve to underscore how deep, abiding, and seemingly intractable anti-Semitism remains. Yet I believe that if people of good will come together and resist this evil wherever it arises, the simple vow, "never again," can become a reality. In order to make this a reality we must heed the injunction of my late father, Congressman Tom Lantos who said: "The veneer of civilization is paper thin; we are its guardians and we can never rest."

Through vigilance and wakefulness the good news is that in the decades following the Holocaust, Europe has made progress in the struggle against anti-Semitism. The enormity of the

Holocaust compelled Europe's peoples to begin the critical task of self-examination, confronting hateful actions stemming from poisonous attitudes and beliefs which permeated Europe for nearly 17 centuries, helping to demonize a people and preparing the way for the unthinkable. This painful realization of how homegrown hatred sowed the seeds for genocide remains a significant force in Europe today.

Eastern Europe

Yet even today, nearly seventy years after the Holocaust, the fact remains that across Europe, from east to west, anti-Semitism lives.

In Russia, despite significant improvements from the Soviet era, skinhead groups have engaged in violence against Jews in the name of nationalism. I visited Russia on behalf of USCIRF just last year. We heard how high levels of xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism, often result in violent and sometimes lethal hate crimes. We have seen increased prosecutions in Moscow and no anti-Semitic rhetoric from the Russian government. However, the government has not addressed these issues consistently, especially regarding crimes against other ethnic and religious minorities.

In Belarus, the government has failed to identify or punish the vandals of Jewish memorials, cemeteries, and other property. Rather than moving decisively against such activities, government officials, including President Lukashenko, and the state media have encouraged future hatred through their own anti-Semitic utterances.

In Hungary, my parents' native country, the leader of its third largest political party recently urged the government to create a list of Jews who pose "a national security threat." This ominous suggestion evokes chilling memories of some of Hungary's darkest days under Nazism, when hundreds of thousands of Jews were carefully identified and then killed or deported to their death. There is no place for such talk in civilized societies. I was pleased to see the strong response by the Hungarian government, Parliament and leading opposition party in condemning this statement.

Western Europe

In Western Europe, we saw disturbing signs of heightened anti-Semitism in streets, towns and cities in various countries beginning in our new century. It has taken a number of forms, often escalating from verbal abuse to physical attacks, and from desecrating Jewish synagogues and cemeteries to firebombing Jewish schools.

Since 2000, anti-Semitic graffiti increasingly has appeared across Europe's great cities, from London to Paris, Berlin to Madrid, and Amsterdam to Rome. Over the past decade, synagogues were vandalized or set ablaze in France, Hungary, Sweden and Poland.

In some cities, physical attacks on Jews and Jewish property have led its Jewish residents to try to hide their ethnic and religious identity. In Malvo, Sweden, attacks have caused increasing

numbers of Jews to leave their homes. A generation ago, there were 2,000 Jews in Malvo; today there reportedly are fewer than 700.

While assaults continue to occur across the continent, they appear to be a particular problem in France. Last year was one of “unprecedented violence” against French Jews, according to a recent report by the security unit of France’s Jewish community. According to the report, there were 614 anti-Semitic incidences in France in 2012, compared to 389 in 2011.

Earlier this month, a woman was arrested in Toulouse, France after trying to stab a student at the Ohr HaTorah Jewish day school, the same school where four Jews were shot and killed in March 2012 by a French gunman of Algerian descent on a motorcycle.

Perpetrators and Enablers

The perpetrators of these acts largely are individuals or members of groups who are deeply hostile to democracy and pluralism. Some are neo-Nazis who express their admiration for Adolf Hitler. Others are racist skinhead groups active in many countries. Many are violent religious extremists who distort the religion of Islam to suit their own intolerant political aims.

Compounding the problem are four critical factors.

First, while the number of Europeans participating in anti-Semitic acts is miniscule, nearly every recent survey on anti-Semitism in Europe shows that negative attitudes towards Jews among Europe’s population remain surprisingly widespread.

Second, these surveys show that to an alarming degree, at least some of this bias against Jews masquerades as criticism of the state of Israel. While no country is beyond reproach for its particular policies, when criticism takes the form of language that seeks to delegitimize a nation, demonize its people, and insist on applying to that nation’s conduct standards to which no other state is held, then we must call it what it is: anti-Semitism. Highlighting this double standard back in 1968, a non-Jewish writer, Eric Hoffer, put it well when he said that “other nations when victorious....dictate peace terms but when Israel is victorious, it must sue for peace.” He added, “Everyone expects the Jews to be the only Christians in this world.”

Third, European governments initially were slow to respond to the threat posed to Jews and even now, according to a number of Jewish community leaders, public officials, often at the local level, remain reluctant to identify publicly the ideological or religious identity or motivation of some of the perpetrators.

Finally, as USCIRF has documented and articulated, a number of European governments along with certain political parties are complicating matters by supporting initiatives that single out certain Jewish religious practices for restriction. In at least four countries – Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland – kosher slaughter is flatly banned. Authorities and political forces in Norway and Germany also have tried to ban infant male circumcision.

To be sure, the driving force behind such restrictions – which also affect Muslims -- is not primarily anti-Semitism per se. It is more directly related to a tendency in some Western European countries to replace monolithic state religions with monolithic secular ideologies. In both instances, past and present, Judaism and other minority belief systems are left on the outside.

Nonetheless, the drive to ban kosher slaughter and circumcision evokes tragic images of much darker days for Jews in Europe. At the very least, such efforts reveal a chilling indifference to the Jewish historical experience in Europe.

The end result is that the atmosphere throughout Europe today is one in which Jewish communities feel insecure and threatened and the general population seems dangerously complacent and even comfortable with widespread, open manifestations of anti-Semitism.

Solutions

Clearly, anti-Semitism in contemporary Europe, while not nearly as virulent as in the past, has persisted, even in well-established democracies. It has led to religious freedom violations, ranging from governmental actions limiting religious practices to private actors perpetrating violent acts in Europe's cities against Jewish individuals and property.

Denouncing such hate is crucially important to show that “never again” will the forces of democracy and freedom turn their back on Jewish communities when they face the scourge of anti-Semitism. The Executive and Legislative branches of our government, along with USCIRF, can play an important role pressing other countries to condemn hatred of the Jewish people.

Speaking for USCIRF, I can confirm that our Commission continues to monitor, report and raise its voice against anti-Semitism. We have engaged the State Department on these issues, recommending increased U.S. government efforts to combat anti-Semitism in places we report on, such as Egypt, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Belarus, and Venezuela.

To address the challenge of anti-Semitism, we have urged the United States to pursue a range of actions. We have recommended that the U.S. government act bilaterally and in concert with others to denounce state-sponsored acts of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial promotion campaigns wherever they occur. We also have recommended that the United States urge other governments to take all appropriate steps to prevent and punish acts of anti-Semitism, including condemning such acts, while vigorously protecting freedom of expression. We also have urged that these efforts should not just be reactive, condemning hateful rhetoric and actions after the fact, but also proactive, working to counteract anti-Semitic rhetoric and other organized anti-Semitic activities so they will not happen again. We met on several occasions with the U.S. State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal, to learn more about how we can help support this vital agenda.

Over the past decade, the United States has helped combat European anti-Semitism through its support of initiatives through the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), resulting in groundbreaking work on this front. Many Members of Congress, including the Chair

of today's hearing, were instrumental in helping establish the OSCE's tolerance work. USCIRF, including its Commissioners and staff, also participated in these efforts.

Through these endeavors, the OSCE-participating states agreed to establish several mechanisms to address anti-Semitism, intolerance and related human rights issues. The landmark OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism held in Berlin in April 2004, with its Berlin Declaration, was particularly significant. Again, many of the members here today, including the Chair, as well as USCIRF Commissioners, attended the Berlin conference. The OSCE has since convened more than ten high-level and expert conferences on these issues.

Further, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in late 2004 appointed three Personal Representatives, with one of them tasked specifically to monitor anti-Semitism, and two others to monitor intolerance toward Muslims, Christians, and members of other religions. Rabbi Baker, who follows on the next panel, currently serves in this OSCE capacity to combat anti-Semitism. Rabbi Baker has been particularly active, visiting numerous OSCE countries and issuing reports that were posted on the OSCE website. USCIRF has recommended that the United States encourage other OSCE-participating states to issue invitations to the Personal Representative on anti-Semitism, as well as the other representatives, which would enable them to raise issues of concern directly with government officials, as well as hold direct meetings with NGOs and community and religious leaders.

The OSCE also has created an institution within its organization. A new Tolerance Program within the OSCE human rights office was established in 2004 to monitor and encourage compliance with OSCE commitments to combat xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, as well as promote freedom of religion or belief.

Clearly, these efforts of the OSCE, Europe's largest human rights body, are positive examples of Congressional leadership and initiative creating a coalition of the willing to condemn anti-Semitism.

Thanks to this leadership on Capitol Hill, along with the work of USCIRF and numerous NGOs, the world spotlight is being trained on acts of violence or discrimination. When such acts target members of a particular group because of who they are and what they believe, European governments are now being challenged as never before to view them as anti-Semitic acts, not mere hooliganism, requiring unequivocal responses.

Yet, despite this progress, the struggle against anti-Semitism in Europe continues. In addition to humanitarian concerns, there are at least two other reasons to focus our attention on how Europe and its people are treating its Jewish communities. First, in some of the same environments in which Jews face limits to freedom and threats to their well-being, so do members of other minorities. And second, some of the same violent forces which target Jews in Europe also oppose democracy and freedom for all.

Seen in this light, the fight against the ancient scourge of anti-Semitism is also a struggle for the basic values and principles of liberty against the forces of tyranny in every form. It is the fight to preserve the best of civilization and ensure the continued march of human progress. In that

fight, all of us must be engaged. The stakes are far too high not to take a firm and resolute stand for freedom and decency.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify today.