

Remarks at the UN High-Level Forum on Antisemitism

Ambassador Samantha Power

U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

U.S. Mission to the United Nations

New York City

September 7, 2016

AS DELIVERED

Thank you all. Thank you so much for coming.

And let me first thank our co-hosts – Canada, Israel, and the European Union – and let me welcome all of you who have come today from governments, the UN, academia, the high-tech sector, and civil society. I also saw a number of youth leaders here, which is perhaps most important of all. Thank you for coming to participate, to engage, and to learn. I'd also like to thank the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly for their leadership on this issue, and in particular for encouraging the UN and its Member States to hold discussions like these at the UN.

As has been noted, this is the second time that a meeting on antisemitism is taking place at the United Nations. Only the second time. The first historic meeting, which a number of you in this audience attended, was held in the General Assembly hall in January 2015, only weeks after the horrific terrorist attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris. In the same assembly chamber where, 40 years earlier, the General Assembly had adopted the infamous resolution declaring “Zionism is racism” – more than 50 countries and organizations, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, denounced antisemitism and committed to taking steps to stop it. Now, today, we are building on that unprecedented gathering. Today's forum includes a series of discussions with a range of nongovernmental actors on why antisemitism persists, how to identify it, and what we can do together to effectively confront this evil.

That antisemitism persists, and is in fact worsening in some parts of the world, is undeniable. The ambassadors from Israel and Canada have spoken to this, and the sheer geographic diversity of the hate is really quite striking. To give just a handful of recent additional examples, on July 1, a cement-filled bottle was thrown through the window of a local Jewish center in Santa Fe, Argentina with the message, “This is a warning, the next one explodes.” On June 22, a Jewish man was attacked by three people in Berlin, who shouted antisemitic slurs as they beat him. In many parts of the Middle East, the governments continue to include antisemitic rhetoric in their official statements and fail to condemn antisemitic acts and speech across their societies. When, in October 2015, an Egyptian TV host listed the mass killings of Jews over the course of history and asked an interviewee if “burning is the only solution for the Jews,” the government was silent. And in May, Iran played host to its second international Holocaust cartoon competition, displaying some 150 cartoons submitted by individuals from dozens of countries; the organizers opened the exhibition on May 14 – the anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence. We here in the United States are, of course, hardly immune to these problems. According to the most recent FBI report, Jews and Jewish institutions continue to be the biggest target of religiously motivated hate crimes.

While we face many challenges in confronting and combating antisemitism, three feel particularly critical to tackle in the context of today's forum.

First, we need to develop more effective tools to monitor and confront antisemitism online and in social media. As we all know, using symbols and codes to identify Jews, fuel stereotypes, and incite hatred is as old as antisemitism itself. It was a crucial part of Nazi propaganda, as it was in the 1937 exhibit that the Nazis sponsored in Munich called “The Eternal Jew,” which peddled conspiracy theories about a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy and vile stereotypes, such as cartoon images of devious-looking Jews hoarding bloody coins. More than 400,000 people visited the Munich exhibit in less than three months.

Today, as we’ve heard, we are seeing much of the same insidious iconography spread through new media. Consider the “echo” – a set of three parentheses placed around names of people online who are Jewish or believed to be Jewish. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists use the echo to identify Jews online, or as one antisemitic Twitter user described it, “It’s closed captioning for the Jew-blind.”

The echo is not merely an identification tool. Journalists, advocates, and others marked with it find themselves subject to a barrage of intimidation on social media, from images filled with tropes like the ones in “The Eternal Jew” exhibit, to taunts alluding to the Holocaust – like trails of dollar bills leading into ovens. Some individuals targeted have even received rape and death threats. One journalist received an animated GIF of Hitler with the caption, “Don’t you miss me?” Another received an image of his disembodied head held aloft, with Orthodox locks photoshopped onto his sideburns, and a kippah as a crown. The harassment has led multiple journalists to abandon their social media accounts altogether, while their attackers maintain their anonymity and continue to target others.

In responding to such harassment, we of course must be mindful of protecting freedom of speech, even in some of its most hateful forms. But we can and must come up with more effective ways to leverage the openness of the Internet to empower those who are targets of such harassment to fight back. We also must do more to lift up the virtual voices of those who wish to counter such bigotry, like non-Jews who began to place the echo around their own names in a show of solidarity.

Second, we must insist on maintaining a distinction between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitism. Governments, civil society groups, and citizens have the right to criticize the actions and policies of the State of Israel, as they have the right to criticize the actions and policies of the United States and all Member States of the UN. What is not legitimate is conflating criticism of Israel’s government with criticism of the Jewish people or Judaism. Yet the lines between the two are often blurred. For example, at an October 2015 rally in Malmö, Sweden – which had been organized to protest Israel’s policies – some participants chanted “slaughter the Jews.”

We have seen these lines blurred in the United States, including on college campuses. In February, not far from here in Brooklyn College, a group of student activists interrupted a faculty meeting demanding that all Zionists be removed from campus. In February 2015, when a Jewish student applied to join the Student Council’s judicial board at the University of California, Los Angeles, fellow students asked her point blank in an interview whether she could be unbiased, given the active role she played in the Jewish community. On the UC Berkeley campus, swastikas have appeared multiple times in recent years, including in March 2015, together with the graffiti, “Zionists should be sent to the gas chamber.”

Now, we must be careful not to label or conflate legitimate criticism of Israel as antisemitic, as such unfounded accusations may chill speech, unfairly marginalize those with distinct points of view, and, paradoxically, distract from the much needed efforts to combat such hatred. At the same time, governments and civil society groups – including those that may be critical of Israel’s policies – have a responsibility to swiftly and unequivocally condemn instances in which such criticism crosses over into attacks on the Jewish people, or if it tries to hold all Jews responsible for the policies of the State of Israel.

To this end, we urge all governments to work together with civil society groups and experts in their respective countries to draft and adopt a working definition of antisemitism, which makes clear this distinction, as well as the centrality of freedom of speech. While a definition will not offer a panacea to this problem, it will provide a key tool for educating people about antisemitism, identifying antisemitic acts, and eventually for holding accountable those who carry them out.

This brings me to the third challenge I want to highlight today. We must underscore the fact that antisemitism poses a threat not only to Jews, but to the principles of pluralism, diversity, and the fundamental freedoms that we hold most dear. Time and again throughout history, we have seen that when the human rights of Jews are violated, the rights of others are not far behind. This is true in the case of individuals – as we have seen how the people who troll Jewish journalists and disseminate antisemitic memes on social media also routinely target minority groups such as immigrants and, increasingly, refugees.

It is also true for governments. Consider the case of Hungary, where in 2015, a foundation planned to build a statue honoring Balint Homan, a government minister who championed antisemitic laws in the thirties and who, in the forties, called for the deportation of Hungarian Jews, an estimated 420,000 of whom were murdered in Auschwitz and other camps. And just last month, the Hungarian government bestowed one of its highest honors on Zsolt Bayer, a virulently antisemitic columnist. These actions have occurred against a backdrop of growing antisemitism in the country, reflected in part by the rise of the extreme ethnic nationalist Jobbik party, which refers to the Holocaust as the “Holoscam.”

In addition to being profoundly alarming in and of itself, this growing antisemitism has gone hand in hand with rising xenophobia and other forms of bigotry. Hungary’s prime minister has openly declared his desire “to keep Europe Christian” by barring Muslim refugees who come seeking sanctuary from mass atrocities and persecution, and he’s fanned popular fears by claiming that all terrorists in Europe are migrants. And both Homan in the thirties and forties – and Bayer in recent decades – mixed their antisemitism with the hatred of other minorities; Bayer once wrote of the Roma, “These animals shouldn’t be allowed to exist.”

Yet from Hungary we can also draw important lessons about how to effectively push back against antisemitism – and it is with this point that I wish to conclude. The planned statue to Balint Homan was never erected. A widespread coalition of Hungarian and international organizations, faith leaders, and governments came together to signal their opposition – persuading the Hungarian government to withdraw its support. I’m proud that American civil society organizations and government officials were part of this effort – including many of you here in civil society, and including U.S. Envoy for Combatting and Monitoring Antisemitism and the U.S. Envoy for Holocaust Issues, both of whom are also here with us today. Their engagement is one of the many reasons we continue to urge other countries to create a ranking position for monitoring and combating antisemitism within their own governments. But these envoys were far from the only U.S. government officials involved in the effort; as President Obama said recently, our government made clear that the statue was, “not a side note to our relations with Hungary – this was central to maintaining a good relationship with the United States.”

And while the Hungarian government may have given an award to Zsolt Bayer, organizations, civil society groups, and governments have rightly expressed their disapproval and dismay. So have more than 100 individuals who have received honors over the years from the Hungarian government – including some of the country’s most renowned economists, historians, politicians, poets, filmmakers, and scientists – who have returned their awards in protest.

Let me close, then, by reading from a few of the statements that they gave upon returning their awards.

Former parliamentary commissioner for the rights of national and ethnic minorities Jenő Kaltenbach wrote: “With this you rendered dishonorable and unacceptable both the award itself and the one bestowing it. How you hold yourself to account for this is your business. How I choose to live with this is mine.”

András Heisler, the president of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, wrote: “I value diversity, not destructive extremism. As a civil activist I received the award, and as a responsible Hungarian citizen I am returning it.”

City mayor Tamás Wittinghof simply posted a picture of his award on Facebook with the caption: “Now we say goodbye to each other.”

And Hungarian-American Katrina Lantos Swett, who many of you know, who had received her award for setting up an organization in Budapest to defend minority rights, said she could not share an award with a man who “deserves censure, not honor, for his loathsome writings and speech.” Katrina named the rights organization she founded after her father – Tom Lantos – the only Holocaust survivor to have served in the U.S. Congress, and a lifelong champion of human rights.

These efforts – which I find very moving – show us that when governments are willing to stand up and speak out in the face of antisemitism, rather than stand by, even hatemongers take notice. And when civil society groups and citizens partner in these efforts – and make clear that such hatred poses a threat not only to Jews, but to the pluralism, rights, and freedoms that we hold as sacred – these efforts are exceptionally more effective.

Imagine, for just a moment, how much violence – against Jews and other minorities – might have been avoided if similar efforts had been undertaken in the past. Imagine all of the hatred and suffering that we can prevent if we come together in such an effort today.

I thank you.



USUN.STATE.GOV



This site is managed by U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York City and the Bureau of Public Affairs in Washington, DC. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.

[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [White House](#) | [Other U.S. Government Information](#)

Note: documents in Portable Document Format (PDF) require Adobe Acrobat Reader 5.0 or higher to view, download Adobe Acrobat Reader.