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Ugly bedfellows : populism and antisemitism

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UGLY BEDFELLOWS: POPULISM AND ANTISEMITISM

*Leon Saltiel**

Introduction

The rise of populism in many countries around the world, and particularly in Europe, is a great cause of concern for the World Jewish Congress (WJC), an organisation founded in 1936 to give voice to the interests of Jews and Jewish communities who were subject to the unprecedented threats of Nazism, fascism and the rise of bigotry, intolerance and antisemitism. During the Second World War, WJC staff in Geneva worked hard to save endangered Jews under Nazi occupation by organising escape plans, producing and distributing fake passports, providing humanitarian assistance, circulating news, and coordinating rescue operations.

Following the Holocaust, the WJC has prioritised universal respect of human rights, religious coexistence, education, interfaith dialogue, and the fight against antisemitism and all other forms of discrimination, and been very engaged in all efforts to build a robust and effective UN human rights system. The WJC was one of the first NGOs to be given a UN ‘consultative status’ as early as 1947, and its experts were important stakeholders in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the two International Covenants on Civil and Political

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Rights (ICCPR) and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). For example, amendments to article 26 of the UDHR on the right to education, calling for education that strengthens ‘respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms’ and that promotes ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups,’ were made possible through the advocacy efforts of WJC delegates.¹ In addition, the WJC played an important role in advocating for and shaping the content of other important UN documents, such as the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the 1981 UN Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion and belief.² Today, the WJC represents more than 100 Jewish communities and institutions around the globe, as the principal voice representing the organised Jewish world.³

Populism Feeding Antisemitism

Populism is a convenient but simplistic political device that divides society into two homogenous but competitive camps: ‘we’ and ‘them.’ Assuming that people are a complete and undivided unity, populism becomes anti-pluralist and anti-liberal, recognising neither individual rights nor checks and balances. Consequently, it has a strong anti-minority component, against minorities of all kinds, real or imaginary. Make no mistake: populism and antisemitism go hand-in-hand. Populism is based on an ‘irrational conspiracy fantasy’. It claims that democracy is fake and blames some groups of citizens for all problems,

¹ Riegner, Gerhart M., *Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, 180–181.

² *Ibid.*, 190–193.

³ For more on the history and contribution of the WJC, see Rosensaft, Menachem Z (ed.): *The World Jewish Congress, 1936–2016*, New York: World Jewish Congress, 2017.

demonising them as ‘enemies of the people’. This group is often the Jews, who are scapegoated for all the world’s ills, and are implicated in conspiracy myths, which erode the basic fabric of our societies. These include many stereotypes, including Jews controlling the world; running the media, governments and the economy from behind closed doors; the charge of deicide (Jews killing Jesus); being child-killers and practising the blood libel, and so on.

As British sociologist David Hirsh has asserted, ‘We cannot understand contemporary populism without understanding its relationship to antisemitism’. He continued: ‘It is not accidental that antisemitism is making a comeback as populism elbows its way back into mainstream politics. This fact is hugely consequential, not only for Jews but for anybody who wants to participate in the defence of democratic life.’⁴ Regrettably, populist rhetoric and arguments are becoming ever more commonplace in mainstream political life in many nations around the world.

Antisemitism puts ‘the Jews’ at the centre of all that is bad in the world but, with a terrible irony, antisemitism itself has nothing to do with Jews but it acquires a symbolic nature, even a mystical essence. Antisemitism is a main component of antidemocratic politics⁵. It does not only concern Jews, it concerns all citizens. As the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his *Réflexions sur la question juive*, translated in English as *Anti-Semite and Jew*, published shortly after the liberation of Paris from the Nazis, the antisemite is ‘a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews, to be sure, but of himself, of his own consciousness, of his liberty, of his instincts, of his responsibilities, of

⁴ Hirsh, David, “Why Antisemitism and Populism Go Hand-in-Hand”, *The Times of Israel*, 14 May 2019, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-antisemitism-and-populism-go-hand-in-hand/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵ Saltiel, Leon, “Anti-Semitism should concern us all”, *Politico*, 20 June 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/anti-semitism-should-concern-us-all/> (accessed 16 September 2022).

solitariness, of change, of society and of the world – everything except the Jews⁶, and Sartre goes on to say that ‘If the Jew did not exist, the antisemite would invent him.’⁷

Pope Francis expressed similar thoughts when he denounced populism and closely linked it with antisemitism and other forms of hatred and intolerance. The Pope said that populism ‘is born of “selfish indifference” and provides fertile terrain for hatred, including antisemitism.’ In addition, he decried the recent ‘barbaric resurgence of antisemitism’ and said populism provides an ideal breeding ground where ‘hate rapidly grows.’⁸

Antisemitism has a unique ability to morph, adapt and thus persist through time. It can be found on the left or on the right, and it can be related to all kinds of extremist or populist ideologies. Indeed, antisemitism, the hatred of Jews, has been a disease in all societies throughout the centuries and has been described as history’s ‘oldest hatred’.⁹

History teaches us that when respect and diversity are challenged in a society by ultra-nationalist and populist worldviews, minorities, and the Jews in particular, are the first ones to suffer. The Jews are an ancient diasporic people, the archetype of a minority, coexisting with many different nations throughout the centuries. This coexistence has been rather turbulent, ranging from pages of glory and prosperity to the darkest periods such as the Spanish Inquisition, the Tsarist pogroms, or the Holocaust. In that way, the Jews have often been described as the ‘canary in the mine’, feeling the malaise in a society first and providing

⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, New York: Schocken Books Inc, 1948, 53.

⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

⁸ “Pope: Populism Is Fertile Ground to Foment Anti-Semitism”, *Associated Press*, 20 January 2020, <https://apnews.com/08ed0eee4e597d154f9ab059bfc7c65b> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁹ Mann, John, *Antisemitism: the Oldest Hatred*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

an early warning for dangers that linger in the near future. If Jews do not feel comfortable where they reside – and are even contemplating leaving – all should take note quickly and act forcefully.

Historically, Jews have been well-integrated in the countries where they have lived and have contributed significantly to the advancement of human civilisation: scientifically, philosophically, economically, culturally and/or politically. Thus, antisemitism as a rejection of the Jewish identity is also a rejection of the Jewish contribution to humanity. How can one be proud of human achievement if we allow the contributions of Einstein, Freud, Modigliani or Spinoza to be rejected? In these terms, antisemitism is a blow at the heart of world civilisation and of humanity itself. By fighting against antisemitism and discrimination of minorities, one is standing up for human progress, prosperity, and achievement for all.

Resurgence of Antisemitism

In recent years, the antisemitism virus is only getting stronger. As the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) notes, 'Antisemitism can be expressed in the form of verbal and physical attacks, threats, harassment, discrimination and unequal treatment, property damage and graffiti or other forms of speech or text, including on the internet.'¹⁰ The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has developed a working definition of antisemitism that includes eleven specific examples of the variety of antisemitic manifestations.¹¹ This complex

¹⁰ "Antisemitism - Overview of Data Available in the European Union 2008–2018." European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 12 May 2020, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/antisemitism-overview-data-available-european-union-2008-2018> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹¹ See "Working Definition of Antisemitism", International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism> (accessed 18 May 2022).

nature makes antisemitism difficult to measure, quantify and effectively monitor. It constantly adapts and transforms itself, adopts new language and paradigms related to each circumstance and period, while keeping its main principle intact: the Jews are to blame for everything.

Virtually every opinion poll and study in the last few years has regrettably confirmed a surge in racist and xenophobic manifestations around the world, in particular a rise in antisemitic feelings and perceptions. According to the French interior ministry, in 2018, antisemitic incidents in the country rose sharply by 74% compared to the previous year.¹² In 2019, antisemitic acts in the country increased by another 27%.¹³ According to crime data from the German government, in 2018 there was a 60% rise in physical attacks against Jewish targets, compared to 2017.¹⁴ In Canada, violent antisemitic incidents increased by 27% in 2019, making the Jewish community the most targeted religious minority in the country and signalling a new record.¹⁵ Unprecedented number of antisemitic incidents were documented in 2019 in the Netherlands, with a 35% increase compared to 2018,¹⁶ and in the United States, with a 12% increase.¹⁷

¹² Peltier, Elian, “Sharp Rise in Anti-Semitic Acts in France Stokes Old Fears”, *The New York Times*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/world/europe/paris-anti-semitic-attacks.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹³ “France Reports 27% Increase in Anti-Semitic Acts”, *The Times of Israel*, 26 January 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/france-reports-27-increase-in-anti-semitic-acts/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁴ “Anti-Semitism: Germany Sees ‘10% Jump in Offenses’ in 2018”, *BBC News*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47223692> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁵ Lazarus, David. “Canada Sees 27% Rise in Violent Anti-Semitic Incidents in 2019”, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/canada-sees-27-rise-in-violent-anti-semitic-incidents-in-2019> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁶ Liphshiz, Cnaan, “Record number of anti-Semitic incidents documented in the Netherlands in 2019”, *The Times of Israel*, 18 February 2020,

Furthermore, in 2018, in the largest ever survey of Jewish opinion, covering twelve European countries and involving almost 16,500 Jews, FRA found that 90% of respondents felt that antisemitism was growing in their country and 30% had been harassed. An alarming 38% had considered emigrating, a distressing fact considering that Jews have lived and contributed to European civilisation for millennia.¹⁸

Two UN reports presented at the UN General Assembly in October 2019 both sounded the alarm about a worrying rise of antisemitism in all parts of the world. The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, identified antisemitic-motivated violence as ‘toxic to democracy and mutual respect’ and urged states to adopt a ‘human-rights based approach’ to combat the hatred of Jews.¹⁹ The Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, noted a resurgence in antisemitic violence targeting Jews, including hate crimes, hate speech, harassment, intimidation, Holocaust denial, antisemitic vandalism and the use of antisemitic symbols all around the world, and called on all UN member states to take concrete actions to combat and to prevent manifestations of antisemitism.²⁰

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/record-number-of-anti-semitic-incidents-documented-in-the-netherlands-in-2019> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁷ “Antisemitic incidents in the US reached the highest on record in 2019, ADL says”, *CNN*, 12 May 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/12/us/antisemitic-incidents-highest-2019/index.html> (accessed 18 May 2022)

¹⁸ Henley, Jon. “Antisemitism Rising Sharply across Europe, Latest Figures Show”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/15/antisemitism-rising-sharply-across-europe-latest-figures-show> (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, to the UN General Assembly, A/74/358, 20 September 2019.

²⁰ Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, to the UN General Assembly, A/74/25, 30 July 2019.

In May 2022, Dr. Shaheed released his Eight Point Action Plan to take action to combat antisemitism.²¹

The shocking attack against the synagogue in Halle, Germany in October 2019, during Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, is a case in point: although the intentions of the attack were clearly antisemitic, victims were a passer-by and a client in a Turkish restaurant. Antisemitism not only targets Jews, it also targets our values, democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, the basic fabric of our societies.

Rise of Populist Parties in Europe and Elsewhere and their Antisemitic Tendencies

Populism has entered mainstream politics in Europe and around the world and more and more political parties with far-right, anti-liberal and nationalist agendas are gaining power. In Germany, the AfD party (Alternative for Germany) won 10.3% of the vote during the 2021 German federal elections and received 83 seats in the German parliament, losing 11 seats from 2017 but still keeping an important stake. One of AfD founders and a senior political figure, Björn Höcke, described the Berlin Holocaust Memorial as ‘a monument of shame in the heart of the capital,’²² but, shockingly, an internal party arbitration

²¹ Taking Action to Combat Antisemitism: Follow-up Action Plan for Advancing the Implementation of the Recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in his 2019 Report to the UN General Assembly, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/ActionPlanChanges-May2022.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2022).

²² Dearden, Lizzie. “German AfD Politician ‘Attacks Holocaust Memorial’ and Says Germans Should Be More Positive about Nazi Past”, *The Independent*, 19 January 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/germany-afd-bjoern-hoecke-berlin-holocaust-memorial-shame-history-positive-nazi-180-turnaround-a7535306.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

court found that he had not ‘intentionally violated the party’s values’.²³ Another AfD elected official, Thomas Tillschneider, claimed in a speech in 2018 that the German Jewish community is using ‘Islam’ to create ‘multicultural conditions in Germany’ with the goal of ‘weakening German culture,’ and ‘ultimately the abolition of our people.’²⁴

France has similarly seen an increase in populist voices, both from the right and from the left. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen, made it to the second round of the 2022 French presidential elections, receiving 41.45% more than what she received in the previous elections. While she continues to campaign for ‘the themes of allegedly uncontrolled immigration and the internal threat from militant Islam,’ she has skilfully distanced herself from the overt antisemitism and vulgarity of her father, Jean Marie Le Pen.²⁵ In parallel, a lot of antisemitic expression has been observed during the yellow vest protests in the country.²⁶

A hopeful development comes from Greece, a country that suffered a long and deep economic recession in previous years. This dramatic drop in the standard of living gave rise to populist and extremist political parties, the most notorious of which is the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn. Its political platform, newspaper, and website consistently promote

²³ “Despite Holocaust Remarks, AfD Lawmaker Björn Höcke Allowed to Remain in Party”, *DW News*, 9 May 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/despite-holocaust-remarks-afd-lawmaker-bj%C3%B6rn-h%C3%B6cke-allowed-to-remain-in-party/a-43715394> (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁴ Gensing, Patrick, “Antisemitism: Flammable Conspiracy Legends”, *The ARD News*, 9 November 2019, <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/verschwoerung-antisemitismus-101.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁵ Lichfield, John, “Marine Le Pen: a Populist Who Will Never Win the Popular Vote,” *UnHerd*, 11 October 2018, <https://unherd.com/2018/10/marine-le-pen-populist-will-never-win-popular-vote/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁶ See Williamson, Lucy, “Gilets Jaunes: How Much Anti-Semitism Is beneath the Yellow Vests?”, *BBC News*, 19 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47286576> (accessed 16 September 2022).

antisemitism, Holocaust denial, racism, and xenophobia.²⁷ In parliament, the group has often spoken out against the democratic regime, attacked Greek political leaders, the media, and minorities, and spread antisemitic libels and conspiracies. In September 2015, Golden Dawn received 7% of the vote but then plummeted and did not enter parliament in July 2019, as a result of consistent opposition from mainstream political parties and the media. A court case, linking its leaders with ordering the murder of a left-wing activist and branding the group as a ‘criminal organisation,’²⁸ concluded in October 2020 with a guilty verdict and its top cadres are currently in jail.²⁹

Throughout 2020 and 2021, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several antisemitic incidents have been recorded at demonstrations against pandemic prevention measures in many cities around the world, which deny or trivialise the Holocaust. These included the comparison of COVID-19 restrictions to those imposed by the Nazis, or to that of the current ‘unvaccinated’ slogan with the protestors wearing yellow stars and emulating the ones Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany. A stunning reversal of victims and perpetrators takes place when Corona virus deniers/anti-lockdown demonstrators see fit to

²⁷ Facebook and Twitter have suspended the party’s accounts. See Cuddy, Alice, “Twitter Blocks Account of Greece’s Far-Right Golden Dawn Party”, *Euronews*, 5 January 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/01/05/twitter-blocks-account-of-greece-s-far-right-golden-dawn-party> (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁸ “Anti-Semitism in Greece: A Country Report,” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/anti-semitism-in-greece-a-country-report> (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁹ Helena Smith, “Greek court jails Golden Dawn leaders as it rejects calls for delay”, *The Guardian*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/22/greek-court-rejects-bid-to-delay-jailing-of-golden-dawn-leaders> (accessed 18 May 2022).

compare themselves to resistance fighters like the Scholl sisters, or even Anne Frank.³⁰

In the Muslim world, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, and populist rhetoric still find fertile ground. State-sponsored media regularly features TV shows, newspaper articles or cartoons with vile antisemitic connotations. This happens in a region with very few or hardly any Jews, which makes antisemitism a tool of political manipulation. For the Islamic Republic of Iran, antisemitism serves as ‘a central foundational component to the [state’s] ideology.’³¹ Former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who took pride in being labelled ‘antisemitic,’ has claimed that Jews ‘rule the world by proxy.’³² A recent study found that school textbooks in the Middle East still promote incitement to hatred or violence against Jews, women and other minorities or religious groups.³³

³⁰ Christoph Hasselbach, “Coronavirus: How German protesters are trivializing Nazi-era persecution”, 28 November 2020, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-how-german-protesters-are-trivializing-nazi-era-persecution/a-55753236> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³¹ Weinthal, Benjamin, “Iran is the ‘world’s chief trafficker in antisemitism,’ says US monitor”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/us-agency-irans-regime-propagates-and-tolerates-antisemitism-626223> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³² “In shakeup, virulently anti-Semitic Malaysian PM submits resignation”, *The Times of Israel*, 24 February 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-shakeup-virulently-anti-semitic-malaysian-pm-submits-resignation>

³³ See “ADL Analysis Finds Saudi School Textbooks Still Teach Anti-Semitic Incitement and Hatred”, Anti-Defamation League, 19 November 2018, <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-analysis-finds-saudi-school-textbooks-still-teach-anti-semitic-incitement> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Contemporary Manifestations of Antisemitism

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ancient antisemitic libels were awakened, coupled with modern conspiracy myths, religious intolerance, and populist exploitation. This unprecedented situation unleashed a ‘tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering,’ in the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres.³⁴ The old libels of Jews poisoning wells and being responsible for the Black Plague found renewed popularity and were linked with conspiracy myths that the Jews created, spread or are taking advantage of the virus as a way to become rich or even control the world. From Argentina³⁵ to Yemen,³⁶ these absurd theories found fertile ground. No country was immune. Notorious antisemitic texts, like the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, were also cited to express a populist, simplistic, and conspiratorial explanation of developments.³⁷

³⁴ UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 Hate Speech”, 8 May 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-08/appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³⁵ “Argentine journalist: Coronavirus was created by rich Americans and Israelis”, *The Times of Israel*, 7 April 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/argentine-journalist-coronavirus-was-created-by-rich-americans-and-israelis/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³⁶ “The Jews, U.S. Are Behind Coronavirus Pandemic; We Should Unite in Jihad against the Jews; Enmity towards Them Is an Identifying Characteristic of Muslims”, MEMRI, 20 March 2020, <https://www.memri.org/tv/yemen-houthi-leader-mahbashi-friday-sermon-coronavirus-jews-american-aggression> (accessed 18 May 2022) and “Coronavirus Is Part of a Plan by the Jews, Israel, U.S. to Control Mecca, Medina”, MEMRI, 16 March 2020, <https://www.memri.org/tv/friday-sermon-yemeni-scholar-ibrahim-ubeidi-coronavirus-jewish-plan-control-mecca-medina> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³⁷ See, for example, Cohen, Ben. “The Return of Populist Anti-Semitism”, *Israel Hayom*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/04/26/the-return-of-populist-anti-semitism/> (accessed 18 May 2022) and Friedburg, Edna,

The same sentiment was corroborated by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, who remarked that antisemitic hate speech had risen alarmingly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis. He went on to say that he was ‘extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities.’³⁸

With many governments realising the dangers of antisemitism and taking measures to combat it in the public sphere, antisemites have found a cunning way around it. Instead of vilifying the Jews as individuals, they now attack Israel, as the Jewish collective. This new form of antisemitism, often dubbed ‘Anti-Zionism’ and disguised as legitimate political expression, carries with it all the antisemitic stereotypes of the past: Israel is portrayed as being a bloodthirsty, manipulative, untrustworthy state, the only country in the world with no legitimacy to exist among the family of nations. Others try to dilute the horrors of the Holocaust by comparing Israeli counter-terrorism actions to the Nazis. Israel, as a thriving democracy, is – and should be – open to all criticism. However, when this criticism becomes obsessive, unbalanced, and biased, and when Israel is held to different standards

“Hatemongers Exploiting Coronavirus Pandemic to Push Anti-Semitism Worldwide”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 5 May 2020, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/5/5/21248296/anti-semitism-anti-immigrant-racism-bigotry-pandemic-holocaust-museum-edna-friedberg> (accessed 18 May 2022).

³⁸ “Rise in antisemitic hatred during COVID-19 must be countered with tougher measures, says UN expert”, 17 April 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/04/rise-antisemitic-hatred-during-covid-19-must-be-counterred-tougher-measures> (accessed 18 May 2022)

that other democratic states, it often hides the antisemitic motives behind it.³⁹

As the usage of the internet continues to expand with billions having access to the World Wide Web, the online sphere has become a fertile ground for the dissemination of antisemitic and other hateful messages, inspired by populist, xenophobic and intolerant ideologies. Social media networks, with billions of active monthly users, have become the largest supplier of hate speech and the go-to platform for expressions of bigotry against minority groups. The perceived anonymity of this medium lowers inhibitions and fosters an environment in which racist and discriminatory language can flourish. In addition, the online space allows for a rapid dissemination of this harmful content, moving it from the fringes to the mainstream, leading to the gradual social acceptance of such material. This is a grave cause for concern, even more so as this social acceptance is not only confined to the online sphere, but often translates to the world at large, inciting and motivating perpetrators to action, such as carrying out antisemitic and racist attacks against individuals and houses of worship, sometimes with murderous consequences.⁴⁰

One of the first studies of its kind, a 2016 report published by the WJC in collaboration with Vigo Social Intelligence, entitled ‘The Rise of Antisemitism in Social Media,’ gauges and measures the extent of racism and bigotry in the online sphere. The study analysed tens of millions of posts in twenty languages on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, blogs, and other forums. It found that more than 382,000

³⁹ See, for example, Colter, Irwin, “Making the World ‘Judenstaatrein’”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 22 February 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/op-ed-contributors/making-the-world-judenstaatrein> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Chavez, Nicole et al. “Pittsburgh Synagogue Gunman Said He Wanted All Jews to Die, Criminal Complaint Says,” *CNN*, 31 October 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/28/us/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting/index.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

antisemitic posts were posted to social media platforms over the course of that year – an average of more than 43.6 posts per hour, or one post every 83 seconds.⁴¹ Worryingly, these numbers would be higher if this study was conducted today, as the usage of social media has increased, and populism and extremism have reached mainstream politics in many countries around the world.

A July 2022 report of UNESCO and the United Nations, supported by analysis by researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute, in partnership with the World Jewish Congress found Holocaust denial and distortion present on all social media platforms.⁴²

Addressing the Scourge

Building social cohesion and combating antisemitism and polarisation are the main pillars behind the work of the World Jewish Congress, which is engaged in a number of initiatives briefly highlighted below:

- The WJC is convinced of the importance of education as a means to building a robust citizenry, with a strong belief in democracy and fundamental freedoms and immunity from extremist and hurtful ideologies. The hatred and ignorance

⁴¹ “The Rise of Anti-Semitism on Social Media: Summary of 2016,” study produced by the World Jewish Congress in collaboration with Vigo Social Intelligence, available at <https://worldjewishcongress.us2.list-manage.com/track/click?u=19ae4a24c6127732d059baebf&id=2558dcc20a&e=c15703e023> (accessed 18 May 2022). A follow-up study on “Anti-Semitic Symbols and Holocaust Denial in Social Media Posts: January 2018” is available at <https://worldjewishcongress.us2.list-manage.com/track/click?u=19ae4a24c6127732d059baebf&id=551a138af4&e=c15703e023> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴² “UN report: Oxford analysis reveals up to half of Holocaust-related content on Telegram denies or distorts facts,” available at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2022-07-13-un-report-oxford-analysis-reveals-half-holocaust-related-content-telegram-denies-or> (accessed 16 September 2022).

unleaded during the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed a serious deficit in education policies around the world. In that respect, the WJC has partnered with UNESCO to sponsor a series of workshops organised by UNESCO and OSCE/ODIHR in order to train education policy officials on how to counter antisemitism through education. In 2019, three such workshops were conducted with participants coming from more than sixty countries in all regions of the globe⁴³ and several follow-up activities are being developed.

- The fight against online hatred, which uses the power and reach of social media to propagate insidious messages, has become a priority of our work. The WJC has joined a number of international initiatives on this topic, building close working relations with many of the internet giants to develop guidelines, policies and tools to fight this phenomenon. It is our conviction that the digital and the analogue worlds do not exist in parallel to each other, but are deeply intertwined, because the people/users act both analogically and digitally. It is important to combat hate in both worlds, and laws and human rights standards applied to offline should also apply to online.⁴⁴
- The WJC is involved daily in advocacy, diplomacy and other outreach activities, raising awareness, informing decision-makers around the world, cooperating on joint projects with

⁴³ “International Workshop for Policymakers ‘The Role of Education in Addressing Anti-Semitism’”, UNESCO, 2 December 2019, <https://en.unesco.org/events/international-workshop-policymakers-role-education-addressing-anti-semitism> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴⁴ For more, see Barak-Cheney, Yfat/ Saltiel, Leon, “‘Unfriending’ Online Hate: The Contribution of the World Jewish Congress,” Universal Rights Group, 8 November 2019, <https://www.universal-rights.org/by-invitation/unfriending-online-hate-the-contribution-of-the-world-jewish-congress/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

relevant actors, expanding the circle of like-minded actors, and advocating for concrete policy change where needed. The WJC also actively engages with multilateral stakeholders, such as the United Nations, participating in all relevant UN forums such as the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and UNESCO. We also closely cooperate with other UN bodies and agencies, in both Geneva and New York, such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Special Procedures and other international organisations and actors, which have a mandate that relates to antisemitism, to jointly develop programs and initiatives. We also work with our affiliated communities around the world, giving them tools and advocating on their behalf with governments and other organisations to address any issues they may have. In addition, the WJC reaches out and builds coalitions with many other civil society actors, organisations, communities, and youth groups.

- The WJC has inaugurated a series of international conferences with the participation of Special Envoys and other high-level government officials mandated to combat antisemitism and intolerance. We facilitate the exchanges of these officials with the Jewish communities, as well as dialogue between themselves for better coordination, sharing of ideas and best practices, and evaluating progress in the shared fight against antisemitism. In 2019, the WJC held two such sessions, in Bucharest during the Romanian EU Presidency and in Munich,⁴⁵ while online sessions took place during 2020 and

⁴⁵ “Special Envoys and Coordinators for Combating Antisemitism (SECCA) reconvene in Germany under auspices of WJC”, World Jewish Congress, 29 October 2019, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/special-envoys->

2021. In 2022, in person events took place in Jerusalem and Prague.

- The WJC consistently calls upon all governments to take strong actions to combat antisemitism by, for example, appointing a national coordinator, creating a national action plan, integrating Holocaust education and education against antisemitism in national curricula, improving data-gathering on hate crimes, providing funding for the security of Jewish communities, and the adoption of the IHRA definition on antisemitism in its totality as a practical guide for law enforcement, educators, prosecutors and judges, and other policy makers to identify the different facets by which antisemitism can manifest itself and to inform their work on this topic.
- The WJC puts great importance on the education of policy makers and diplomats in order to fight antisemitism. Antisemitism is a complex phenomenon, and one needs to study it carefully in order to effectively combat it. In this regard, the WJC has launched a series of educational and training workshops on antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust for diplomats, policymakers, and other officials. More than sixty Ambassadors and diplomats participated in the first two workshops,⁴⁶ in Geneva and Paris, which proved to be very useful. In February 2022, the World Jewish Congress, in partnership with the Holocaust and the United Nations

and-coordinators-for-combating-antisemitism-secca-reconvene-in-germany-under-auspices-of-wjc-11-5-2019 (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴⁶ “WJC hosts first-ever seminar series on Holocaust memory and antisemitism for UN Geneva and UNESCO diplomats and ambassadors”, World Jewish Congress, 19 January 2020, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/wjc-hosts-first-ever-seminar-series-on-holocaust-memory-and-antisemitism-for-un-geneva-and-unesco-diplomats-and-ambassadors-1-0-2020> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Outreach Programme of the Department of Global Communications and UNESCO organized a virtual briefing on Holocaust education and remembrance addressed to members of UN missions in Geneva and New York and UNESCO delegations in Paris.

- In an effort to combat Holocaust denial and distortion, in particular online, the WJC has developed, in partnership with UNESCO, the website [AboutHolocaust.org](https://www.aboutholocaust.org), an online resource with basic facts about the Holocaust that can easily be accessed and shared on social media. From 27 January 2021 – International Holocaust Remembrance Day – when Facebook users search for terms associated with the Holocaust or denial of it, the social media platform prompts them to visit [AboutHolocaust.org](https://www.aboutholocaust.org), where they are referred to comprehensive and reliable information on the genocide of European Jewry, as well as the mass killings of other national, ethnic, and political groups by Nazi Germany and its accomplices during World War II.⁴⁷ Since 27 January 2022, this tool is also available for TikTok users.⁴⁸ In addition, the WJC supports UNESCO and the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme initiative to develop research, guidance and resources to

⁴⁷ “WJC partners with Facebook to provide comprehensive Holocaust education resource to Facebook users”, World Jewish Congress, 27 January 2021, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/world-jewish-congress-partners-with-facebook-to-provide-comprehensive-holocaust-education-resource-to-facebook-users> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁴⁸ “WJC, UNESCO partner with TikTok to offer comprehensive Holocaust education resource to its global community”, World Jewish Congress, 27 January 2022, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/wjc-unesco-partner-with-tiktok-to-offer-comprehensive-holocaust-education-resource-to-its-global-community> (accessed 16 September 2022).

strengthen educational responses to Holocaust denial and distortion online.⁴⁹

- The WJC is very active in interfaith relations, realising that building inclusive societies and combating hatred is a common fight that no one group can win on its own. We have spearheaded dialogue between the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – as well as other faiths.⁵⁰ We believe that interfaith cooperation can make an important contribution to peace and to better understanding worldwide. Interreligious engagement can bridge divides, inspire people, and emphasise our common humanity and shared values. There is a very big role for faith leaders of all religions to play and we need to build coalitions, reach out across the aisle, to design common actions to combat hate and division. The President of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald S. Lauder, during a recent speech at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, prioritised the fight against hate, racism, and all forms of religious intolerance, as well as the safeguarding of freedom of worship, by stating that ‘the campaign against racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Christian attacks will be infinitely more effective if it is united. Christians should lead the defence of Jews and Muslims. Muslims should lead the defence of Christians and Jews. Jews should lead the defence of Muslims and Christians. And we must all stand together against racism.’⁵¹

⁴⁹ “Q&A: New research to map Holocaust denial and distortion online”, UNESCO, 9 March 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/news/qa-new-research-map-holocaust-denial-and-distortion-online> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵⁰ “Inter-Faith Dialogue”, World Jewish Congress, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/focus-areas/inter-faith-dialogue> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵¹ “WJC President Ronald S. Lauder calls for unity in fight against hate in address to Vatican officials”, World Jewish Congress, 8 November 2019,

- In addition to advocating for the interests of Jewish communities, fighting antisemitism, and preserving the memory of the Holocaust, the WJC believes that it is important to highlight the positive Jewish experience and contribution to world civilisation. Honouring the historic Jewish role in society is important not only to fight prejudice and bigotry but also to strengthen the position of minorities in every nation. A December 2018 Special Eurobarometer report found that only 3% of Europeans claim to be very well-informed about the history, customs and practices of Jews in their own country.⁵² It is important to close this knowledge gap, so it is not filled by stereotypes, false narratives or ahistorical interpretations. To that effect, the WJC is part of the ‘Networks Overcoming Antisemitism’ (NOA) project, co-funded by the European Commission, which has as one of its aims to ‘diffuse positive narratives through socio-cultural educational activities including cultural festivals, school-based programmes, film and social media campaigns using new resources and scaling up existing good practice.’⁵³
- Last but not least, the WJC believes it is our duty as Jews to speak up on behalf of other vulnerable populations and stand in solidarity with them. In this respect, we consistently speak out in support of persecuted minorities around the world. At sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, for

<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> (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵² “Special Eurobarometer 484: Perceptions of antisemitism”, January 2019, https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2220_90_4_484_ENG (accessed 18 May 2022).

⁵³ “Networks Overcoming Antisemitism,” <https://www.noa-project.eu/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

example, the WJC has spoken out 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.⁵⁴

All people are threatened by the rise of populism, extremism, and intolerance. Antisemitism is a primary manifestation of this phenomenon but not the only one: all citizens are potential targets, and this challenge requires a concerted response and action. We must try to build coherent societies, based on cooperation, humility, and dignity. Only by working together can we guarantee a better future for us, our children, and the generations to come.

⁵⁴ See, for example, the March 2020 HRC session, “WJC Takes to UNHRC Floor to Advocate for Human Rights,” World Jewish Congress, 19 March 2020, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/world-jewish-congress-takes-to-un-human-right-council-floor-to-advocate-for-minority-rights-3-4-2020> (accessed 18 May 2022).