

Simone Rodan-Benzaquen  
Managing Director  
American Jewish Committee Europe

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
December 12, 2023,  
Addressing the Scourge of Antisemitism in Europe**

**A rising issue that exploded after October 7th.**

As the Director of 8 European offices, and with my diverse European background — born in Germany to Romanian parents, who has lived in Switzerland, educated in the UK, and now residing in France — I have a good understanding of the challenges facing Jewish communities and the continent at large- and I can say that I have never seen the level of antisemitism that we are currently facing.

Over the past twenty years, the rise of antisemitism in Europe has become a growing concern. AJC Europe has been among the first organizations to alert governments and express concerns about the alarming threat of rising antisemitism. Our message has always been that this scourge should not be seen as a series of isolated acts but as a deep-rooted phenomenon that endangers not only Jews but society as a whole.

Already in 2022, two polls conducted by AJC in [France](#) and [Germany](#) showed that 64% in both countries think antisemitism is a growing problem.<sup>1</sup>

The causes of antisemitism in Europe are multiple, but importantly, the rising antisemitism seems to be the symptom of a crisis in the current system of liberal, pluralist democracies around the world. Democracies thrive on shared values, political debate, and compromise. Majorities and minorities must respect one another. And everyone, while leaving space for debate, should at least rally around a shared vision, finding common ground for ideals rather than focusing on divisions.

However, we are living in a time of identity politics, conspiracy theories, and lies. The ties that once united our societies — truth, an idea of the common good — are falling apart. Dialogue and compromise, the essence of our communities, are becoming dysfunctional. Radical rhetoric from both the left and the right has become the political language of the day, aided — and, one might argue, provoked — by the echo chambers of Big Data and social media.

Extremists, whether religious or political, subscribe to exclusive ideologies based on the conviction that they possess the absolute truth. In a time of instability and change, they seek purity and authenticity, as argued by the French author Marc Weitzmann. Whether it's Islamists striving for religious purity, the far right striving to be “true Frenchmen” or “true Germans,” the far left seeking to rid the world of “imperialists,” or so-called antiracists who

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Antisemitism-survey-in-France-and-Germany-2022.pdf>

have perverted the noble cause and have created categories of “oppressed” and the “oppressors”, Jews are- and always have been- the perfect outsider and scapegoat.

### **Antisemitism is multifaceted**

The work of the American Jewish Committee in Europe has also been crucial in helping to understand the different forms of antisemitism, which are multifaceted.

There is, of course, the traditional far right, characterized by the proliferation of white-nationalist conspiracy theories and revisionist Holocaust-denial, both online and offline. While growing populist movements across the continent are rarely openly antisemitic, some even position themselves as protectors of the Jews. Yet, they often maintain a certain ambiguity, never fully distancing themselves from their antisemitic acquaintances. There is also, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe, a concerning trend of historical revisionism. It is particularly distressing to see a resurgence of Holocaust distortion, often by individuals and in regions that should be more aware. Legislation in Poland has intended to defend the nation’s honor, and is widely viewed as obstructing critical analysis of the Holocaust period. In cities like Sofia and Budapest, skinheads and neo-Nazis have organized marches to commemorate fascist-era leaders and events, though these are not government-endorsed.

But for Jewish communities, primarily composed of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, these issues are more than historical debates. They fundamentally undermine their present-day sense of comfort and security.

Antisemitism has also become deeply entrenched in certain segments of the left, particularly in the far left, where an irrational aversion to Israel has fostered the adoption of antisemitic attitudes. Prominent examples include former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Insoumise party in France, which in particular since October 7th has made the demonization of Israel and even of Jewish institutions and individuals, an every-day phenomenon.

In some cases, antisemitism emerges even among those who purport to protect minority rights. French historian Pierre-André Taguieff describes this new form of antisemitism as an ideological framework where Jews are not seen as an enemy race, but rather as proponents of a supposedly racist ideology of Zionism. This narrative enables antisemitism to be cloaked in the guise of anti-racism or anti-fascism, resulting in the exclusion and targeting of Jews.

In Western Europe, a significant amount of antisemitism arises within minority groups, notably parts of Muslim communities. Nearly all violent antisemitic attacks in Europe over the past 20 years have been committed by radicalized Muslims.

Understanding antisemitism requires therefore a multifocal lens, recognizing that its varied sources are often interconnected. For instance, the “day of anger” demonstration in Paris in 2014 brought together an unusual mix of people — “ultra-Catholics” against same-sex marriage, the far right, elements of the far left, and young people from immigrant backgrounds — united in their chant of “Jews, out of France!” and “Jews, France is not yours!” This event serves as a poignant reminder of how disparate groups can converge in their shared antisemitism.

### **October 7th is a turning point**

Recently, after October 7th, we have also observed neo-Nazi conspiracy newspapers praising the far-left politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon for his stance against Israel and Jews. Similarly, on social media, there has been an increase in pro-Hamas content that is being supported and

disseminated by far right and far left accounts, as several internal studies conducted by AJC in Europe have concluded.

Several countries, including Qatar, Iran, Turkey, and Russia, have also engaged in activities that exacerbate and even promote antisemitism in Europe, utilizing a range of tactics. From leveraging traditional media outlets to disseminating narratives that fuel antisemitic sentiments, to financing religious institutions in Europe, which, in some cases, have been linked to the spread of extremist ideologies, to the use of social media bots to amplify divisiveness. The spread of misinformation has contributed to the rise of conspiracy theories and unfounded accusations against Jewish communities, thereby deepening existing antisemitic prejudices in European societies. An illustrative recent example were the 250 blue Stars of David which appeared on buildings in Paris and its suburbs after the October 7th attacks. As it appears now, the graffiti operation is linked to a longstanding Russian propaganda network known as Doppelgänger.

The issue of antisemitism has been prominent over the past two decades, but the terrorist pogroms of October 7th mark a significant turning point. The surge in antisemitic acts since then is stark in both quantity and intensity. In Germany, nearly 1000 antisemitic incidents have been reported since October 7, a 320% increase compared to the rate of incidents in 2022.<sup>2</sup> In Austria, there has been a rise of 300% antisemitic hate crimes<sup>3</sup>. The situation in the U.K. and France is even more alarming. According to CST, a British Jewish security organization, antisemitic incidents in Britain in the month following October 7 more than quintupled compared to the previous year, reaching the highest level ever reported. In London, antisemitic incidents increased by 1,350% between October 1 and October 18, compared to the same period last year.<sup>4</sup> In France, the month after October 7 saw more than 1,500 antisemitic attacks,<sup>5</sup> a figure surpassing the total of 436 incidents reported in the entirety of 2022. This surge marks the highest number of antisemitic hate crimes in France since World War II.

But the issue extends beyond the sheer number of incidents. The manner in which antisemitism is expressed — with violence and brazenness — is equally concerning. It's as if the horrific terrorist pogrom in Israel has awakened a latent hatred and antisemitism passion. A similar pattern emerged in 2012 following the attacks by Islamist terrorist Mohamed Merah in Toulouse, where he killed three children and a father, sparking a wave of antisemitic attacks across France.

This time, following the terrorist pogrom in Israel, the scale of antisemitism has escalated significantly across the continent. A disturbing video recently went viral of passengers on the Paris Métro chanting, "F— the Jews and f— your mother, long live Palestine, we are Nazis and proud of it."

This incident highlights that antisemites appear to have no shame or fear of repercussions. Consequently, many European Jews live in fear, adopting strategies to conceal their Jewish identity. An AJC survey conducted before October 7th revealed that one in three French Jews had started avoiding any outward signs of their Jewishness. 49% of French Jews reported avoiding certain neighborhoods, a figure rising to 63% among those who visibly display their religious affiliation. Additionally, 60% of respondents said they often ask their

---

<sup>2</sup> According to RIAS: <https://www.report-antisemitism.de/monitoring/>

<sup>3</sup> According to the Antisemitism Reporting Office of the Vienna Israelite Community (IKG) : [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20231022\\_OT0031/antisemitismus-meldestelle-signifikante-zunahme-antisemitischer-vorfalle-in-oesterreich-seit-hamas-massaker](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20231022_OT0031/antisemitismus-meldestelle-signifikante-zunahme-antisemitischer-vorfalle-in-oesterreich-seit-hamas-massaker)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/oct/20/antisemitic-hate-crimes-in-london-rise-1350-since-israel-hamas-war-met-says>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/14/anti-semitic-acts-in-france-rise-to-1-500-since-october-7\\_6253987\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/14/anti-semitic-acts-in-france-rise-to-1-500-since-october-7_6253987_4.html)

children to avoid certain areas, 55% advise them against wearing distinctive signs, and 45% suggest concealing their Judaism. A significant 55% of French Jews also reported feeling more at risk during Israeli-Palestinian confrontations.<sup>6</sup>

Since October 7th, these concerns have intensified. It is increasingly common for Jews to hide their identity, remove mezuzot, and even alter Jewish-sounding names on doorbells and delivery apps to avoid being targeted.

The situation on college campuses and social media in Europe also demands attention. In several universities, since October 7, there have been numerous instances of antisemitism, often fueled by extreme left groups under the guise of anti-imperialism. Student organizations have had a difficult time getting clear responses and reactions from university presidents in some cases.

Furthermore, the conflict initiated by Hamas has exposed significant issues with social media platforms in general, particularly in their handling of content promoting violence. A study conducted by Generation Lab found that spending just 30 minutes on TikTok daily can increase the likelihood of a user holding antisemitic views by almost 20%.<sup>7</sup> While the EU has much more stringent laws, particularly since it has voted the Digital Services Act (DSA) which imposes significant obligations on social media platforms, particularly regarding content moderation and the handling of illegal or harmful content, the situation still has not significantly improved. Since October 7th, the EU has opened an investigation into X to ensure compliance with the DSA. This investigation aims to ascertain whether X has adequately managed content related to these events, including the removal of illegal content. But stronger and faster action is needed.

The urgency to address the recent rise of antisemitism in our societies also stems from its profound impact on the stability of our democratic models. Antisemitism is harmful not only to Jews but also, by extension, to the core values we cherish in our democracies. It is precisely for this reason that our societies must unite and mobilize against this phenomenon. A recent poll by Crif, the French umbrella organization of the Jewish community, indicates that 71% of the general population in France believe the rise of antisemitism since October 7th poses a threat not just to Jews, but to society as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

This aligns with findings from AJC's 2022 polls, showing that a significant portion of the French and German population (73%) consider antisemitism a problem for the entire society, not just for Jews. The persistence of this sentiment post-October 7th provides a foundation for governments to build upon, offering a glimmer of reassurance.<sup>9</sup>

## **European Countries' Efforts to Address Antisemitism**

In response to the growing threat of antisemitism in Europe over the past decades, governments have initiated several policies to counteract this menace and ensure the safety of Jewish life. AJC has been at the forefront of collaborating with governments in these efforts.

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fondapol.org/app/uploads/2022/03/fondapol-study-antisemitism-in-france-edition-2022-legrand-rodan-benzaquen-sebban-becache-reynie-03-2022.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/antgoldbloom/status/173025552738201854>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.crif.org/fr/content/crif-sondage-le-regard-des-francais-sur-le-conflit-israelo-palestinien-et-ses-consequences>

<sup>9</sup> <https://data.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Antisemitism-survey-in-France-and-Germany-2022.pdf>

A primary focus has been to deepen understanding of this phenomenon and its real-life implications for Jewish communities in Europe, who fear for their security, well-being, and future. As early as 2014, AJC was the first in France to collaborate with the national think tank, Fondapol, to survey the Muslim population. This was a crucial step towards comprehending antisemitism emanating from parts of the Muslim community, a sensitive yet essential issue.

Another critical aspect is understanding the hatred of Israel and its relationship to antisemitism. It is widely acknowledged that demonization, double standards, Holocaust inversion etc. with relations to Israel is often a cover for antisemitic hatred, disguised as legitimate political critique. Recognizing this nuance is key to addressing the roots of contemporary antisemitism. This has become ever more important since October 7th where even seasoned politicians in Europe have crossed the line by using terms like “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” to speak of Israel’s military defense against Hamas in Gaza.

This recognition led the majority of European governments to adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism. Even the discussions around this decision have been enlightening, educating the public and lawmakers about antisemitism’s multifaceted nature.

This development has prompted many governments to think about how to implement the IHRA definition concretely at various levels: judicial, educational, and legal. In some countries, it is used for training police, prosecutors, teachers, and in educational materials. This tool has also been adopted beyond government use, by local authorities (with some mayors and football clubs or other sports associations endorsing it).

The European Commission adopted a comprehensive strategy in October 2021 — the EU strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life. This marked the first time such measures focused on prevention, protection, education, and research were laid out. This initiative encouraged national governments, where such strategies were not previously in place, to start developing their own. For example, Bulgaria and Hungary began consulting with Jewish organizations and international experts, including AJC, to draft new strategies. Unfortunately some countries, such as Belgium, a founding member of the EU, have not yet submitted a national plan.

Regarding national strategies — a process that some began even before the EU Commission’s initiative — efforts have included allocating new resources to secure Jewish sites and appointing national coordinators to combat antisemitism, as seen in France, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands.

The importance of reporting cannot be overstated. The level and quality of reporting antisemitic acts across Europe have varied greatly. While some countries publish annual reports, others do not, and reluctance to report antisemitic acts within Jewish communities complicates this. In France, for instance, about 80% of Jews do not report antisemitic experiences to the police, hindering accurate data collection.<sup>10</sup> Thankfully, many NGOs are working closely with law enforcement and victims to improve this situation.

## **What more must be done ?**

In terms of policy, **the first step** is an unequivocal condemnation of antisemitism and its proponents, and the implementation of a comprehensive plan to combat it, from a clear zero tolerance policy to targeted civic education. The development of the U.S. National Strategy

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://ajcfrance.com/sites/default/files/fondapol-study-antisemitism-in-france-edition-2022-legrand-rodan-benzaquen-sebban-becache-reynie-03-2022.pdf>

to Counter Antisemitism, which the American Jewish Committee has contributed to, is encouraging. Drawing from our experience in Europe, AJC notably brought European special envoys for antisemitism to the US, to share best practices.

In Europe, we have long suffered from insufficient political response. When AJC first approached French officials in the early 2000s, such as President Chirac, to discuss antisemitism, it was dismissed as mere hooliganism. This denial only allowed the problem to grow. In the face of rising violence and antisemitic crimes, a similar lapse would be catastrophic for any country. It is essential to establish a clear zero tolerance policy across all sectors, including on college campuses, in the streets, and on social media platforms. It has been interesting to see for example that when there has been clear and determined action by authorities, such as shutting down anti-Israel demonstrations, because of the harm caused to Jews, antisemitic expression has been reduced (Germany and France are good examples). Since October 7th it has become clear that governments need an emergency plan when faced with such antisemitic outburst- that can be actionable across all boards.

**Second**, is it important for governments and policy makers to confront all forms of antisemitism and to unequivocally and completely depoliticize the issue. Those who see and fight antisemitism only on one side, and ignore it within their own ranks, are not truly combating antisemitism but are merely engaging in politics. The various sources of antisemitism should be openly identified and combatted for what they specifically are. We have suffered in Europe from politicians who refuse to name the causes, thereby hiding their inaction behind general, comfortable rhetoric instead of tackling the difficult issues in a specific and focused manner.

**Third**, we must stop making excuses or justification and listen to the victims. The Jewish community has spent too many years feeling abandoned by large parts of society, who have offered excuses ranging from “this is just the importation of the conflict” to “they bring it upon themselves,” “it is happening because of Israel,” or “we are not antisemitic, just anti-Zionist.” Calls for genocide, calls for violence cannot be justified or explained under any circumstance. When faced with bigotry, the priority should be to listen to the victims, not the voices of denial and doubt.

**Fourth**, engaging civil society and building coalitions is essential. Antisemitism is not solely a problem for Jews; it is a societal issue. If left unchecked, it will spread and potentially destroy all that it encounters. It is symptomatic of a more profound crisis: the weakening of dialogue and compromise between different segments of society and the radicalization of political and religious spectrums. Effective combat against antisemitism requires a united front, bringing together diverse groups, including political factions from the right and left, and Jews and Muslims working together.

**Fifth**, a crucial strategy in combating antisemitism involves a transformative approach to education, including by understanding that a certain pervasive culture in universities has become problematic and inadvertently fosters environments where antisemitism can thrive under the guise of political or progressive ideologies. We need educational systems that not only integrate comprehensive Jewish history and culture but also encourage open dialogue and critical thinking about complex topics, including Jewish identity, the history of Israel, and the nuanced nature of antisemitism.

**Sixth**, it is vital to address the roles of Iran and other malign actors that support Hamas and operate in Europe. *The Times* reported that half a dozen 10 UK-based groups with direct ties

to Tehran were active in pro-Palestine marches in London, displaying Iranian propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Governments have committed resources to combat antisemitism but have often fallen short in firmly condemning and banning foreign organizations that propagate antisemitism within our societies.

Neither the EU nor the UK have yet designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization, despite the fact that the IRGC has posed a direct and immediate threat to Jewish communities. Attacks in Greece and Germany have been thwarted, and intelligence agencies have continuously alerted Jewish communities to persistent threats. Listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization would send a clear signal to the Islamic Republic that its activities, considered as terrorist on European soil, cannot continue without being held accountable. This would also criminalize any affiliation with the IRGC, preventing any meetings, commercial, or financial activities.

The same goes to the Middle East proxies of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, whose malign activities are not limited to the region but go beyond, especially in Europe. A recent letter was sent to European leaders by the Israeli Minister of Diaspora affairs containing evidence of terrorist activities carried out by Hamas members and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in major European cities. We, AJC, have warned for a long time that Hamas, together with Hezbollah constitute a concrete threat to Europe and should also be considered terror organizations, enlisted as such.

Another concern has been the involvement of foreign actors, whose objective has been to disturb democratic processes and eventually impose their own autocratic or radical Islamist model on Europe. This has been the case of Russia, Qatar, China, Iran, Turkey. There is a significant amount of literature on how foreign state and non-state actors conduct influence operations. These operations have largely been online, as we have seen during the Coronavirus crisis. But there is also an anti-Semitism aspect to it, as the latter has been used in foreign influence operations to stoke division and spread hate. These are long-term threats that governments should certainly be mindful to thwart.

**Seventh**, hate speech on the internet and social media absolutely must be countered. While there have been initiatives especially at the EU level, such as the Digital Services Act, forcing platforms to take off any illegal contents, the internet cannot remain a lawless realm where hate propaganda freely infiltrates the public sphere. Numerous studies have demonstrated the direct impact of social media on the rise of antisemitism and even violence. We must acknowledge that words can be lethal; hate speech often escalates into hate action. This pattern was tragically evident in the case of the Jewish school children's killer in Toulouse and the Hypercacher terrorist, and has still been at play.

And **finally**, it is crucial to address both the symptoms and underlying causes of antisemitism. Antisemitism can be seen as a symptom of a broader societal illness, encompassing conspiracy theories, polarization, radicalization, and the weakening of the democratic ideals and identity of our societies. This involves identifying and addressing those who seek to divide and destroy our societal models, both from the outside and the inside. This realization led AJC Europe to organize "Le Sursaut" (the "Wake Up Call") as early as 2015, a significant event that brought together over 1000 civil society activists, politicians, heads of state, and policymakers across Europe. The aim was to confront Islamist and political extremism and populism, and to reinforce democracy and democratic debate. We must courageously tackle challenging issues, including those related to immigration,

---

<sup>11</sup> "Revealed: The Iran-linked groups feared to be stirring up tension over Israel", Fiona Hamilton, Charlie Parker, *The Times*, November 3, 2023

integration, and identity – the 3is.

Combating antisemitism effectively requires an all-encompassing societal effort. Antisemitism has plagued Europe for centuries, long before the founding of the U.S., leading to the death of millions of Jews and the devastation of the continent. It is our hope that America's experience with antisemitism will be much shorter and less harrowing than Europe's.