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Anti-Semitism: A Growing Threat to All Faiths

*U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04), Chairman
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and Global Health Hearing
Chairman's Opening Statement
Feb. 27, 2013*

Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us this morning. I particularly want to welcome representatives of a number of European countries. After the hearing, I look forward to meeting with them to hear their views on how the evil of anti-Semitism can be more successfully addressed.

At a Congressional hearing I chaired in 2002, Dr. Shimon Samuels of the Wiesenthal Center in Paris testified and said, "The Holocaust for 30 years after the war acted as a protective Teflon against blatant anti-Semitic expression (especially in Europe). That Teflon has eroded, and what was considered distasteful and politically incorrect is becoming simply an opinion. But," he warned ominously, "cocktail chatter at fine English dinners can end as Molotov cocktails against synagogues."

In response to what appeared to be a sudden, frightening spike in anti-Semitism in several countries, including my own, we first proposed the idea for a conference on combating anti-Semitism under the auspices of the organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Convinced we had an escalating crisis on our hands, we teamed with several OSCE partners to push for action and reform. Many of the people and NGOs present in this room played leading roles. Those efforts directly led to important OSCE conferences on combating anti-Semitism in Vienna, Berlin, Cordoba, and Bucharest. In each of those, participating states have made solemn, tangible commitments to put our words into action. In some countries, progress has indeed been made, yet the scope and outcome of anti-Semitic acts have not abated in others, and in some nations it has actually gotten worse. That is why we are here today, to re-energize efforts to vanquish the highly disturbing resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe.

Unparalleled since the dark ages of the Second World War, Jewish communities on a global scale are facing verbal harassment, and sometimes violent attacks against synagogues, Jewish cultural sites,

cemeteries and individuals. It is an ugly reality that won't go away by ignoring or wishing it away. It must be defeated.

Thus, we gather to enlighten, motivate, and share ideas on how not just to mitigate this centuries-old obsession, but to crush this pernicious form of hate.

From our first panel of witnesses we are going to hear how anti-Semitism directly threatens not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims, and democracy and civil society. When we fight anti-Semitism it is not only a matter of justice for Jewish fellow-citizens, but also of standing up for Christianity, and for Islam, and for the possibility of decent living itself. We all have a direct stake in the fight against anti-Semitism.

This is tragically clear in the Middle-Eastern countries where the government propagates anti-Semitism as an official or quasi-official ideology. These governments incite anti-Semitic hatred of Israel in order to distract the people from their own tyrannical rule, from their own abuse of human rights, denial of democracy, economic corruption. Sadly, it works. We see this in governments as varied as those of Iran and Egypt, Pakistan and Syria and Saudi Arabia, and the list doesn't end there.

Tens of millions of people who live in these countries are in this sense suffering from anti-Semitism. Few of them are Jewish – most are Muslim, millions are Christian. It's true that, to some degree or other, many of the people in these countries have bought into the evil of anti-Semitism, but many have not.

From our second panel, we are also going to hear reports from a number of European Jewish leaders who will be able to tell us about anti-Semitism in their countries, how the governments are responding, and whether these responses are effective. Sadly, in much of Europe, the harassment of Jews, including verbal and physical violence, continues to increase, and a recent Anti-Defamation League study shows that anti-Semitic attitudes are widespread in Europe and getting worse in many countries.

One thing the witnesses will address is whether elected officials are fulfilling their responsibility to speak out publicly against any expressions of anti-Semitic hate. When national leaders fail to denounce anti-Semitic violence and slurs, the void is not only demoralizing to the victims but silence actually enables the wrongdoing. Silence by elected officials in particular conveys approval – or at least acquiescence - and can contribute to a climate of fear and a sense of vulnerability.

In this respect, I want to recognize the leadership Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has shown in the fight against anti-Semitism. Prime Minister Orbán has taken his government into the vanguard of those fighting anti-Semitism in Europe. He has declared a 'zero tolerance policy' against anti-Semitism and seen that anti-Semitic incidents are promptly followed by high-level official condemnations, sometimes by him, sometimes by other officials. There is still far too much anti-Semitism in Hungary, and it is cultivated by the viciously racist Jobbik political party. But I am glad that the Hungarian government has responded vigorously, protecting its Jewish citizens by strengthening legislation and law-enforcement, education and Holocaust remembrance.

Another point we will have to consider is whether the countries are collecting reliable hate crime information. We can't fight anti-Semitic crimes effectively unless we have reliable information on them. The most recent figures from the U.S., for example, which are collected by the FBI, showed that Jews, less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, are the victims of 63 percent of religiously-targeted hate crimes.

An additional concern is the importance of Holocaust education. If we are to protect our children from the dark evil of anti-Semitism, we must reeducate ourselves and systematically educate our children. While that starts in our homes, the classroom must be the incubator of tolerance. It seems to me that only the most hardened racist can remain unmoved by Holocaust education and remembrance. Only the most crass, evil, and prejudiced among us can study the horrors of the Holocaust and not cry out: Never again!

Yet another concern is the rise of a "new" anti-Semitism, which tries to pass itself off as legitimate criticism of Israel, but which demonizes, delegitimizes, and applies double standards against Israel – former Soviet "refusenik" Natan Sharansky's "3 Ds." In any case, this form of anti-Semitism appears to be spreading among European social-democratic and leftist parties, as well as among Muslim immigrants from the Middle East, and I'd like to hear your views about the most effective ways to expose it for what it is.

I look forward to hearing the witnesses' ideas as to what Congress and the U.S. government can do to help. We need to work together with you to light a fire under our government, under European governments, and intergovernmental organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

It will be helpful to hear your thoughts on the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, which was created by an amendment I offered in 2004. Also about the improving the excellent work Rabbi Andy Baker and the OSCE, where I and other members of the Helsinki Commission were successful in making the fight against anti-Semitism a priority – and I think the OSCE and other intergovernmental organizations need to be re-energized on this issue.

Finally, any thoughts on legislation are welcome, for example ideas that could be taken up in the Combating Anti-Semitism Act which I am preparing to re-introduce, or in the Interparliamentary Coalition for Combating Anti-Semitism, where I am a member of the Steering Committee. One possible initiative is for a day on which heads of state or government can each visit a major synagogue in their national capitals and make a statement on threat that anti-Semitism poses to all of us.