

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism
Intervention for Session 1
As prepared for delivery by Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin
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Having just come from Auschwitz, I understand the importance of this Conference and the opportunity today that I have to speak about the urgency of ensuring proper responses by national leaders and government officials to anti-Semitism. Seeing the remains of that factory of intolerance, hate and death, I believe we cannot be reminded enough of the real consequences of not protecting universal human rights in the OSCE region. We must tirelessly work to build understanding between different communities to prevent future acts of prejudice and injustice.

I believe the first responsibility in this regard rests with governments and officials, as they can greatly influence the domestic climate for tolerance and respect. This can occur through a variety of ways, foremost when elected and governmental leaders visibly speak out against acts of intolerance. Leaders must make it clear that anti-Semitism is a threat to democracy.

Elected leaders like myself are naturally attuned to the will of their constituents. We like to get re-elected. Yet there is a danger of being too differential to populist concerns, what can, in worst-case scenarios, lead to harassment, intimidation and even physical violence. We must therefore provide leadership on issues like anti-Semitism and intolerance and clearly state our beliefs that these sentiments are unacceptable. Collectively, we must raise our expectations for our leaders to be involved. It is a risk worth taking. If we lead with resolve, we can impact the overall health of our societies. In short, we must act courageously and speak out boldly.

I am reminded of the actions of Turkish leaders after the horrible Istanbul bombings last November. Not only did Prime Minister Erdogan publicly denounce the two synagogue bombings, but he also met with Jewish leaders, reportedly a first in the history of the Republic. Seeing pictures from the funeral on that rain-drenched day, the caskets were draped with the Turkish flag, an honor normally reserved for soldiers or civilians who paid the ultimate price for their country. The message was unmistakable: despite being a predominantly Muslim country, Turkish leaders made clear this was not an attack on Jews, but rather an attack on Turks who happened to be Jewish, who were victimized because of their religion. Turkey has set an example for us all, and with its bold moves for EU accession and continued to progress toward the improving the treatment of its religious and ethnic minorities, it is working to create government policies that promote tolerance and non-discrimination. I salute the Turkish Government for unequivocally condemning the hateful acts perpetrated against the Jewish community in that country.

National and local community leaders clearly have a role to play in speaking out. In the United States, after 9/11, President Bush visited a mosque in Washington, DC, and made clear that those evil acts did not represent Islam. Locally, I similarly met with Muslim leaders in my district in Baltimore, Maryland, after September 11th to show my support for their community.

In addition to speaking out against incidents when they occur, we must all ensure our domestic laws can properly deal with these criminal acts. We must ensure law enforcement is doing everything possible to prosecute the perpetrators of these hateful acts. In the OSCE context, many participating States responded to the spike of anti-Semitic violence, recognizing the unacceptability of the trend. The French National Assembly passed laws enhancing penalties for crimes motivated by anti-Semitism. The new laws doubled prison sentences for crimes of a “racist, anti-Semitic, or xenophobic” nature, as well as created special training programs for judges. France backed up its statements with funding, which demonstrates its real commitment, and budgeted serious amounts to improve the security of Jewish community establishments.

Other countries are acting as well. The German Bundestag recently issued a resolution denouncing anti-Semitic violence, and in Canada a similar resolution has been introduced. The U.S. Congress has recently funded an ethics center at the U.S. Naval Academy, which is in the district I represent. In another U.S. military initiative, a new generation of military leaders will now visit concentration camps, like Auschwitz, and be inspired to never again allow injustices of this magnitude to occur.

Yet even under the most favourable conditions, instances of bigotry can manifest themselves. The question is how can we measure levels of intolerance in our societies? Opinion polls and community surveys can discern inclinations and prejudices, but when dislike transforms into actions of hate and crosses the threshold of criminal acts, we must have mechanisms in place to track these occurrences.

I am proud to say that the United States has been monitoring hate crimes and compiling the information into a yearly report since 1990. This enables policymakers to track trends and then develop strategies to address these findings. Without a monitoring mechanism, how can officials intelligently move forward? Without the capability to recognize when communities are being targeted, how can governments provide a credible level of protection for likely victims?

I am proud to note that in the OSCE region efforts are underway to increase the tracking of manifestations of anti-Semitism and intolerance in all participating States, and to forward these statistics to ODIHR for compilation and publication. The OSCE Permanent Council just last week came to a consensus decision that all participating States will gather information on crimes related to anti-Semitism or intolerance. I urge all countries to genuinely fulfil this commitment, while also working with NGOs, so that the most complete picture can be obtained.

Let us not forget that the burden to monitor and track incidents of anti-Semitism and intolerance rests first with participating States. I therefore trust ODIHR will receive robust support from all OSCE countries, so it can fully execute this task while not sacrificing its good programming in other areas. We should also support collectively strengthening OSCE’s capacity to gather information from each of our participating States, share best practices, and offer help to States in developing effective strategies to fight anti-Semitism. Participating States should strive to implement these commitments as soon as possible, so we can begin to understand the nature of the problem and craft practical solutions.

However, collecting data is only a starting point, creating the basis for future action. We must not confuse our efforts here today to be the victory against anti-Semitism. Today's meeting is historic and a tremendous statement of our resolve to fight this evil, but we will be judged by how we follow up on these discussions and debates. Each of our States must be committed to develop an action strategy to combat anti-Semitism. That strategy should be open to review with regular oversight by parliament. The NGO community must be a resource used by each State. The OSCE's capacity to assist States in this effort needs to be focused and strengthened.

In closing, Mr. Moderator, the first way to promote tolerance is to fight intolerance. By speaking-out forcefully when instances of bigotry and hate arise at home, we can make certain that acts of intolerance will not be entertained or sanctioned. Remembering the horrors of Auschwitz and other grotesque examples of hatred, I genuinely hope States will leave today fully committed to combat intolerance and discrimination.

Thank you.