

Testimony by James Kirchick before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
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Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for the invitation to speak with you today about a subject the importance of which cannot be understated: the rise of global antisemitism.

Just over 20 years ago, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe promulgated its Berlin Declaration, in which it stated that “anti-Semitism, following its most devastating manifestation during the Holocaust, has assumed new forms and expressions, which, along with other forms of intolerance, pose a threat to democracy, the values of civilization and, therefore, to overall security in the OSCE region and beyond.” Not since the end of the Second World War has this observation been more pertinent. The growing scourge of antisemitism, I will argue today, constitutes a major threat to the liberal world order America has led for some eight decades.

One would have hoped that the largest single-day massacre of Jews since the Holocaust would have resulted in an outpouring of sympathy for the Jewish state and the Jewish people. While that has been the case in some quarters, the October 7th, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel also ignited an explosion of antisemitism here in the United States and around the world. On elite American college campuses, student demonstrators have echoed the terror group’s call for the destruction of Israel and harassed Jewish students and their allies. In May, less than a mile from this building, a pro-Palestinian activist shot and killed two employees of the Israeli embassy outside the Capital Jewish Museum, where they had attended a reception for young diplomats. During last year’s parliamentary elections in France, a left-wing lawmaker asserted, in respect to

supporters of Israel's military campaign against Hamas, that "Gaza has shown that, no, we do not belong to the same human species."

This is just a small sample of the antisemitic bilge that has rippled across the OSCE region in the wake of the October 7th pogrom, a grisly repertoire featuring hostile rhetoric, discriminatory initiatives, and outright violence. In the United States, while Jews represent 2% of the population, they account for 69% of all religiously-motivated hate crimes, according to the FBI. A poll published earlier this month found that more than a fifth of British adults hold entrenched antisemitic views, with a similar number of young Britons saying that the October 7th massacre was justified. I will spare you the recitation of polls surveying antisemitic attitudes in other OSCE member states but suffice it to say that the overall situation is dispiriting.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine any other identity group being subjected to this sort of widespread, intense hatred in the aftermath of such a horrific slaughter. Ordinary Russians do not endure anything near this level of vituperation as a result of the actions of the Putin regime, nor are Chinese people made to answer for the depredations of the Chinese Communist Party's oppression of the Muslim Uyghur community in Xinjiang province. Unlike Jewish cemeteries and synagogues, Chinese burial sites are not routinely desecrated and Russian Orthodox Churches do not require 24-7 security. More than any other group, Jews are held responsible for the sins of their fellow Jews. There is clearly something different about antisemitism, something that makes it especially conducive to the practice of collective blame.

The root of this quality, I would argue, is the conspiratorial nature that characterizes much antisemitic belief. Other bigotries — racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual — tend to posit the *inferiority* of the out-group. They denigrate the way a certain people look, the smell of their food, their hygiene, their sexual practices. Members of these allegedly inferior groups are said to behave in ways that validate their inferiority — they are prone to violence, they are lazy, they reproduce at alarming rates.

Antisemitism is unique in that, while offering its own set of characterological prejudices, it purports the targets of its ire as occupying a *superior* place in society. Antisemitism proposes something more ambitious than the routine prejudices that emerge wherever two peoples are forced to live side-by-side. It propounds the *idea* of an international cabal that secretly manipulates the world to the detriment of mankind. The Jews, according to the most common antisemitic conspiracy theories, are not lazy and downtrodden. They are conniving and powerful. They control international finance, the media, the entertainment industry, academia, and governments — the latter not necessarily directly but through their hefty monetary contributions. Yes, the Jews may have repulsive physical features like other undesirable races, but their craftiness elevates them to a higher level of iniquity, making them all the more dangerous.

Antisemitism, it could be said, is the original conspiracy theory. Whether their propagators know it or not, any system of thought or explanation of events positing the nefarious role played by secretive global elites — the basis of most modern conspiracy theories — owes a significant debt to antisemitic conspiracy theories, the most influential of which is the early 20th century Tsarist Russian fabrication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Purporting to be the minutes of a

meeting of Jewish leaders plotting to control the world, the document played a significant role in the development of European antisemitism that culminated in the Holocaust. It continues to be a bestseller in much of the Muslim world and informs the thinking — wittingly or not — of a growing number of people throughout the West. As the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut has said, “Conspiracy thinking is again taking over simple minds, and conspiracy leads sooner or later to the *Elders of Zion*.”

Antisemitism is the most protean, adaptable, and insidious conspiracy theory the world has ever known. One can hear of anti-Jewish conspiracies in nearly every part of the world, in places with large Jewish populations and in places where no Jew exists for hundreds of miles. Theories that blame a small group of people for the world’s problems easily lend themselves to unscrupulous political actors on both ends of the political spectrum. Indeed, one of the enduring strengths of antisemitism is its ideological versatility, with autocrats exploiting it to consolidate power and erode democratic institutions. On the right, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has turned the philanthropist George Soros into his own Emmanuel Goldstein, the lightly fictionalized version of Leon Trotsky and target of the daily Two Minutes Hate in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*. Denouncing Soros on the campaign trail in 2018, Orbán declared that “We are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world.” On the left, what Karl Marx referred to as the financial “hucksterism” of the Jews has been updated to reflect the supersession of identity over class politics, with “Zionism” — the belief in a Jewish right to self-determination in their ancient homeland — becoming interchangeable with Nazism. In a

dichotomized moral universe in which all human relations can be reduced to oppressor vs. oppressed, Jews are categorized as “white” and their right to a nation-state is singularly intolerable.

The main form that anti-Semitism takes in the West today is an obsession with the wrongs, real or perceived, of Israel, and the attendant belief that its supporters in the Jewish diaspora exercise nefarious control over the levers of international politics, media, and finance in order to manipulate public opinion. Tucker Carlson, the popular right wing podcaster, claims Israel is systematically killing Christians, accuses American Jews of disloyalty, and has hosted guests who question or deny the Holocaust. (Carlson, somehow even less subtle than Orbán has called Ukraine’s Jewish President Volodymyr Zelensky “sweaty and ratlike, a comedian turned oligarch, a persecutor of Christians, a friend of BlackRock.”) To take just one of countless examples on the other side of the ideological spectrum, Rutgers University associate professor of women’s and gender studies Jasbir Puar has popularized the term “pinkwashing” to portray Israel’s acceptance of LGBT people as a conspiracy to obscure its oppression of Palestinians. Her latest book, *The Right to Maim*, academically peer-reviewed and published by Duke University Press, attacks Israel for *sparing* the lives of Palestinian civilians, impugning its military for “shooting to maim rather than to kill” so that it may keep “Palestinian populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them.”

A recent high profile case upon which the unholy synergy of conspiratorial left and right anti-Semitism has converged is that of the late financier and sex criminal Jeffrey Epstein. In July, the FBI announced that Epstein neither possessed a “client list” of men for whom he allegedly

procured underage women nor did he blackmail said individuals. This has not stopped a bevy of dishonest political entrepreneurs from insinuating that not only was Epstein guilty of these things, but that he did them behalf of Israel. The Epstein morass is an antisemitic conspiracy theorist's dream what with its black book of global elites, a Jewish financier, and sexual perversion. Surveying the ideologically diverse crew of individuals who have glommed onto this aspect of the case, the only thing that seems to unite them is a belief that the Mossad tapped a Jewish American sex criminal to operate an international pedophile ring for the purpose of blackmailing powerful individuals on behalf of a foreign country.

Antisemitism is an intellectual and societal disease that thrives upon economic distress, xenophobia, political uncertainty, ethnic chauvinism, weakening democratic norms, and the rise of conspiratorial modes of thinking. The prevalence and potency of antisemitism is a reliable barometer of a societal health, and several external factors do not bode well. At the macro level, the declining global position of the United States — in terms of its hard military and economic power relative to rising challengers, its status as a credible beacon of liberal democratic values, and its overall influence on world affairs — will create the conditions for antisemitic attitudes to grow. American leadership of the free world, has, in addition to ensuring Israel's security, underwritten the liberal world order that has served as a guarantor of Jewish life and safety since the end of the Second World War. As America's global leadership role diminishes, authoritarian states like Iran and Russia, and Islamist movements committed to the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews, will fill the void. A worldwide rollback of liberal democracy would be terrible for humanity, but it will be especially terrible for Jews.

Domestically in the United States, political polarization and the collapse of public trust in institutions play an overlooked role in the rise of antisemitic sentiment. It is the American values of pluralism, religious tolerance, and respect for the individual that have made this country the safest and most supportive place for Jews in their over 5,000-year history. The “Golden Age” of American Jewry, an era that began in the 1950’s and ended shortly after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks (when blaming Israel for the attacks and American Jews for the subsequent war in Iraq became acceptable in polite company) was also the era during which Americans held their institutions of authority in high esteem. Today, with the vast majority of Americans distrusting the mainstream media, academia, and politicians of both parties, many turn to alternative sources of information, which often offer conspiratorial answers to America’s problems. Declining trust in our sense-making institutions has created fertile ground for the rise of a new discourse, increasingly popular among the young, that sees no problem in peddling hoary tropes about malign Jewish power.

In preparing for this testimony, I read many of the documents that the OSCE has produced on the subject of antisemitism over the years. Much of it is written in bureaucratese and speaks of “eradicating” antisemitism. This is a noble goal, but it is a utopian one. Loathing of the Jew — the world’s oldest hatred — is an intrinsic feature of mankind. It will never go away because it serves a basic human need: to explain a fearful and complicated world, to locate a scapegoat for whatever ails us. The best we can hope for in combatting antisemitism is mitigation.

If there’s one message I would like to leave you with today, it is that antisemitism starts but never ends with the Jews. Without exception, societies where antisemitism is prevalent are either

failed or on their way to failure. Such societies do not just threaten Jews. It was a fanatical, conspiratorial antisemitism that transformed Europe's most advanced society into an industrial strength killing machine that provoked the most destructive conflict in the history of mankind. The main source of instability in the Middle East is Iran, a ruthless theocracy for which antisemitism is a foundational principle.

Ultimately, the degree to which antisemitism becomes a problem in the OSCE region hinges on the strength of the antibodies within our societal DNA to protect pluralistic and liberal values, and on our confidence in standing up for those values around the world.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering your questions.