



Combating Antisemitism in the European Union

Katharina von Schnurbein

To cite this article: Katharina von Schnurbein (2016) Combating Antisemitism in the European Union, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 10:2, 283-287, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2016.1223276](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2016.1223276)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2016.1223276>



Published online: 30 Aug 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Combating Antisemitism in the European Union

Katharina von Schnurbein

Katharina von Schnurbein is the European Commission Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism. This article is adapted from her address to the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on July 14, 2016.

Rethinking the European Project

These are challenging times for Europe. We have taken for granted what we have achieved, and we have forgotten where we have come from — maybe not rationally, but certainly emotionally. The European Union has never been a love affair, but never has its foundation been questioned as it is now.

The coherence of our societies is today being challenged in a way that it was not in the past. Multiculturalism has failed just as much as the concept of *laïcité* — the idea of shunning religion from the public space. And now we are looking for new ways of living together and disagreeing well.

The people of Europe are anxious about their future and the future of their children, a reduction in their standard of living, and a diverse society challenging their traditions. They are experiencing insecurity about values they did not have to define up until now.

These fears are combined with a new fear of terror, and as a consequence, significantly increased security measures. Some five years ago, I heard an Israeli official in Brussels describing an incident in Israel in which a ten-year-old boy on a bus informed the driver that a man had just stepped off the bus and left his bag behind. The driver stopped the bus immediately; everybody got off and the bus exploded, but nobody was seriously injured. The official used this as an example of the ignorance and naïveté of Europeans with regard to security threats. I remember thinking, “Well thank God we don’t need this kind of thinking.” Now — only five years later — we are there.

For years, if not decades, Jews in Europe have been living with security fears. They send their children to school behind barbed wire and go to synagogues guarded by police. Many have long stopped wearing a *kippah* [skullcap] in public even if they are religiously observant. Somehow we have gotten used to

it. Now we have military presence in front of government buildings, in front of some schools, in populated areas, and in shopping centers—and that is difficult to get used to.

As we know from history, it always starts with the Jews but it never stops there.

* * *

The foundation stone of the European project is peace.

Recently, I saw an interesting picture online. It showed a timeline of European history. Centuries of war, war, war, war, until, on the far right end, a small section appeared labeled with the word “peace.” This tiny period in European history, approximately seventy years, is the story of the European community.

As we all know, Europe’s striving for peace evolved not out of a vacuum, but out of the ashes of World War II and the Shoah. On this, my latest trip to Israel, I again visited Yad Vashem, and it brought home once more the horrific crimes of the Holocaust and the responsibility for remembrance that we all carry. And we Germans carry it specifically.

Only recently, the voice of the six million, the most vocal defender of perpetuating the memory of the Shoah, Elie Wiesel, passed away. With his passing, not only did we lose a wonderful writer, professor, and political activist, but also, and most importantly, a teacher. Nobody tried as hard as he did to find words for the cruelties. He turned his memory into action; he turned the eternal slogan “Never Again!” into education and eventually received the Nobel Peace Prize for it. This is an honor he shares, by the way, with the European Union—the project for peace on the European continent. He recognized the resurgent threat and spoke up early against antisemitism raising its ugly head again in Europe in new forms.

Preventing and Fighting Antisemitism

I know that many in Israel and in some Jewish communities in Europe shake their heads at the high number of refugees who have reached Europe from Muslim countries. They fear a further increase in antisemitism, although this has not materialized until now.

A German Jew told me recently that he visited his father in an old folks’ home. They went for a walk past a refugee center where people were queuing. The father—a Holocaust survivor—paused and watched the scene for some time. Then he said: “They are just like we were—but they have better shoes.”

The leaders of the European Commission, just like political leaders in the member states, are well aware of integration challenges and, at the same time, of the need to proactively transmit our values. These include respect for the rule of law, democracy, equality between men and women, and also no tolerance for antisemitism.

I recently invited members of a Muslim organization (the Kreuzberg Initiative against Antisemitism) to a meeting with representatives of the twenty-eight Ministries of Justice and Interior to present their project of Muslims teaching Muslims about the Holocaust and antisemitism. For years they operated only among the Muslim community in Berlin; now they have received a grant from the German government to extend their activities across Germany, addressing Muslim refugees in particular.

We are stepping up our response to the current security threats in Europe. In the recent wave of terrorism, Jews have been targeted again and again. We witnessed it last year at the Hypercasher in Paris, the Jewish Museum in Brussels, and the synagogue in Copenhagen. The perpetrators are the same type as the terrorists who attacked Brussels again in March, only 300 meters from my office.

We have long said that the fight against antisemitism must not be left to the Jews. It is the responsibility of society at large; it is a human responsibility. When 8,000 Jews leave France per year and two antisemitic attacks are committed per day in that country, grief and sorrow are not enough. The ultimate goal of our actions must be that Jews in Europe can live without fear and live the lives they want to live—just like any other member of our society. So what are we doing to combat antisemitism?

Enforcing Legislation

In 2008, the Council of the European Union adopted legislation against racism and xenophobia, which, if implemented correctly, could serve as a level playing field on which to prevent and fight hate crimes and hate speech inciting to violence. This legislation includes the criminalization of publicly condoning, denying, or grossly trivializing the Holocaust in a manner likely to incite to violence or hatred, but only thirteen member states have currently adopted this part sufficiently. We are pushing for the correct application and have been taking concrete steps with the member states concerned.

Fighting Incitement to Violence Online

Antisemitic hate speech, and hate speech inciting to violence generally, have spread like a virus on social media in recent years. The proliferation of age-old antisemitic

stereotypes and conspiracy theories creates a vicious cycle, indoctrinating one generation after another. Freedom of speech is a lofty value in Western democracies, one for which we fought for centuries, but in Europe we decided to set limits when it comes to public incitement to violence and hatred. Despicable ideas do not remain locked in the head. Incitement to violence costs lives.

To counter the explosion of illegal hate speech online, on May 31, the European Commission concluded a code of conduct with the biggest IT companies (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Microsoft), in which they agreed to deal with all relevant illegal hate speech flagged within twenty-four hours and remove it where necessary. They agreed to review hate speech that violates European and national legislation and to support and train flaggers and NGOs that help them keep platforms clean.

We will work closely with civil society in the fall, including with leading European organizations monitoring antisemitism online, to measure progress. France and Germany have started to crack down on people who incite online and take them to court. I hope many EU member states will follow.

Education

Our third focus is education. This is a very delicate field, not only because it is long term, but also because the European Commission does not have direct competence in these matters.

We will work closely with member states to ensure that there is a more holistic educational approach to Judaism and to the contribution of the Jewish community to European culture and history throughout the centuries. Students should not only hear about Judaism in the context of the Shoah or the Middle East conflict. How can they understand the impact of the Shoah if they do not know about the richness and diversity of Jewish life that existed before it in Europe, or about the *shtetl* culture in Eastern Europe, or Vienna at the *fin de siècle* with Sigmund Freud, Theodor Herzl, and Arthur Schnitzler? Europe's flourishing Jewish life was also the pool from which the idea of Zionism arose and coexisted with Jewish Socialism and Orthodox Judaism. That Jewish life was, is, and will always be diverse is a lesson no child in Europe should miss.

Under the Europe for Citizens Program, the European Commission also supports Shoah remembrance initiatives, as well as those that promote the common history and values of the European Union. Some €4 million are invested in these projects annually.

The issue of education will also be central at this year's annual EU–Israel Seminar on Antisemitism this November in Jerusalem. This is the tenth year the seminar is

being held. Finally, we also support “teach the teacher” programs to help educators remove their own biases and equip them with the tools needed to face difficult situations in multicultural classrooms.

Building Coalitions

Broad coalitions are key, and this is the aim of my mission here. We encourage and enable the establishment of strong alliances consisting of civil society, international organizations, and state institutions to fight antisemitism in an effective and multifaceted way.

One of my priorities after my appointment last December has been to visit Jewish communities, and other actors fighting antisemitism in the member states. There are many good initiatives in member states, on the local level and among NGOs, but we do not work together. We need to look for commonalities, not dividing lines. We need to join forces on all levels. This is also the aim of my two-and-a-half-week mission here in Israel: to talk to politicians, government officials, NGOs, and researchers and see where we can create coalitions in the fight against antisemitism.

We must combat this in all its forms, whether coming from right-wing, left-wing, or religious extremism. We must tackle manifestations of the new antisemitism, and of antisemitism hiding behind anti-Zionism.

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini stressed recently the EU’s firm rejection of any attempts to boycott and isolate Israel. In the context of fighting antisemitism here in Europe, we are particularly worried about the discriminatory repercussions these activities might have on Jews, and in particular Jewish students across Europe.

During my visit to Israel, I had the honor of meeting Avi Primor in Tel Aviv. He once wrote a book about German–Jewish misunderstandings called *An allem sind die Juden und die Radfahrer schuld* [Jews and Cyclists are to Blame for Everything]. Indeed, the other day I saw a poster—part of a campaign against antisemitism in Germany—that said it all:

“Jews and cyclists rule the world. Why cyclists?!”