



17 November 2020

WJC High-level Side Event on Antisemitism to the 75th UNGA

17 November 2020, 10.00 EST/16.00 CET

With the United Nations now in its 75th year, we are reminded of all that led to its foundation, of how its origins are tied, without a doubt, to the devastating experience of the Holocaust and the Second World War. From this utter destruction, the UN emerged not only as a beacon of hope, but also as the result of a shared understanding that such a forum was necessary for the maintenance of international peace and security.

Today, we are reminded of the importance of international cooperation, of multilateralism, of what we can achieve when we work together. But we also know that this international order, that fundamental human rights need our strong and unwavering support in order to be maintained. So today, we are also reminded of the work that lies ahead.

This year of commemoration is set against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, and the multiple crises it has brought about. Of course, it is still too early to know the full extent of the pandemic's effects. However, we see it accompanied by the erosion of democratic values, the rise of conspiracy myths, and widespread economic hardship.

In short, we see the development of conditions which are ripe for antisemitism to thrive. Though antisemitism has been on the rise for years, we are now at a critical juncture. The way we respond to this moment will determine the safety not only of the world's Jewish communities, but also of the viability of the world's pluralistic, democratic societies.

Antisemitism is a global challenge that requires a global response. It neither stops at national borders, nor does it exist in only one language. This is why the current effort by the United Nations and the World Jewish Congress to further the discussion on antisemitism is so important.

Deepening cooperation in this regard is a priority for the German EU Presidency and for the German Presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance, the IHRA. For the last twenty years, the IHRA has united governments and experts to strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and research worldwide.

Antisemitism is not only an international problem, however. It is also an adaptable one. Antisemitic conspiracy myths are malleable and are easily repackaged to fit the times – we see this now during the coronavirus pandemic, for example. But the way antisemitism is manifested also morphs. Today’s fight against antisemitism exists in a world where Holocaust denial and distortion are also on the rise.

Whether online or off, whether intentional or not, Holocaust denial and distortion chip away at what we know to be historical truth. They allow antisemitism to inch towards the mainstream. The issue of Holocaust distortion in particular, because it is more difficult to identify, requires special attention.

Holocaust distortion is a critical threat to the future of Holocaust memory. Allowing distortion invites not just the erosion of our understanding of the Holocaust and its significance. It helps sustain an environment in which Holocaust denial, antisemitism, conspiracy myths, and dangerous forms of nationalism can thrive.

For this reason, the German Presidency of the IHRA has established a Global Task Force Against Holocaust Distortion to identify and promote strategies for countering distortion. Similarly to antisemitism, it is essential that we not only raise awareness of the dangers of distortion, but also that we can better identify and respond to it when it appears. The IHRA is therefore developing recommendations for policymakers to strengthen awareness of distortion, its forms and challenges in addressing it.

At the core of this effort is the recognition that this, too, is an international challenge. It requires both international cooperation and greater public and political awareness. To this end, the Task Force aims to work closely with the United Nations, UNESCO, the European Commission and the other Permanent International Partners as well as the IHRA’s membership. Together, we can form an international coalition against the growing trend of distortion, which provides dangerous fodder to antisemitism.

The fight against antisemitism, against Holocaust denial and distortion, requires building a shared understanding of what antisemitism is, of its mechanisms, of its disastrous effects. Practical tools like the IHRA’s three working definitions – of antisemitism, of Holocaust denial and distortion, and of antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination – can provide mutual starting points for discussion. They can serve as educational and awareness-raising tools, sensitizing individuals and institutions to the existence of these phenomena and the mechanisms behind them.



In this way, we can work towards a world that remembers the Holocaust, towards a world without genocide. This is a world of pluralistic, democratic values, a world where antisemitism has no place. No one country or organization can arrive there alone.

History has taught us what can happen when antisemitism reaches the mainstream. Antisemitism is not a Jewish issue. It is an issue for all societies in which it grows.

Together, let us build a broader and stronger coalition to stop it.