

The United Nations Addresses Antisemitism as a Human Rights Issue

A Historic Achievement

*Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, identifies antisemitism as a serious human rights problem with global scope in a [report](#) to the UN General Assembly in 2019. Its **conclusions** include:*

- Violence, discrimination and hostility motivated by antisemitism pose a **serious obstacle** to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief by Jews and are **“toxic” to democracies**.
- Antisemitism is a **global phenomenon, not confined to the U.S. and Europe**, as previous UN reports have suggested. Violent antisemitic attacks and rising antisemitic attitudes in the U.S. and Europe, including on college campuses, are of great concern, but so too are antisemitic incidents and literature demonizing Jews in **North Africa and the Middle East**, including the desecration of synagogues in Iran, and textbooks and media produced by **Saudi Arabia and Hamas**.
- **The frequency of antisemitic incidents appears to be increasing** in magnitude and the prevalence of antisemitic attitudes and the risk of violence against Jewish individuals and sites appears to be significant, including in countries with little or no Jewish population.
- The **sources of antisemitism** are varied, coming from the far right, from people motivated by radical Islamist ideology, and from the political left.
- There are circumstances in which **expressions of criticism of actions and policies of the government of Israel can constitute antisemitism**.

*Dr. Shaheed’s key **recommendations** include:*

- **All UN Member States should adopt, in full, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) [Working Definition of Antisemitism](#)**, which defines antisemitism and sets out examples, for use in education, awareness-raising and for monitoring and responding to antisemitic incidents.
- Governments should acknowledge the threat to stability and security posed by antisemitism.
- Governments should **prohibit** the commission of **antisemitic hate crimes** and should endeavor to identify, **document, and monitor antisemitic incidents**.
- **Governments should protect individuals** at risk of violence.
- Greater **education and awareness-raising** aimed at curbing the spread of antisemitic views is needed
- Governments, and the UN Secretary-General, should **create high-level focal points on antisemitism** and **enhance their outreach** to Jewish communities.

Significance of the Report

- This is the **first UN human rights report wholly dedicated to antisemitism**. In past cases where they have addressed antisemitism, UN human rights experts have felt compelled to compare it to other forms of identity-based hate. This report recognizes that antisemitism has unique characteristics and poses unique challenges.
- This report looks further into the varied sources of antisemitism than any UN body has done previously, clarifying more frankly than any prior UN report that right-wing extremists are a source, but not the only source, of contemporary antisemitic expression and acts.
- Dr. Shaheed recommends that all UN Member States **adopt the IHRA “Working Definition of Antisemitism”** because it can offer “valuable guidance for identifying antisemitism in its various forms” and serve “as a critical, non-legal, educational tool...” No UN report has ever recommended this important step before. The report also affirms that respect for the right to freedom of expression is vital, but “expression which draws upon antisemitic tropes or stereotypes, rejects the right of Israel to exist, or advocates discrimination against Jewish individuals because of their religion should be condemned.”

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- In the politicized context of the United Nations, Dr. Shaheed’s decision to address the subject of antisemitism, particularly as a stand-alone issue, is especially noteworthy and courageous. Decades ago, the United States and its allies worked hard to create the expert post that Dr. Shaheed occupies – the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the Human Rights Council. This report demonstrates that the many independent UN human rights expert monitoring mechanisms continue to have great potential to advance core U.S. human rights priorities worldwide.

Impact of the Report

Dr. Shaheed’s report has already had an outsized impact, both on the behavior of UN officials and on Jewish organizations and communities around the world:

- The UN General Assembly, comprising all 193 Member States, adopted a December 2019 resolution “noting” Dr. Shaheed’s report **“with appreciation”** and by consensus. It has been well-received by many governments and diverse non-governmental organizations. AJC has called it **“historic.”**
- High-level UN officials, including the UN Secretary-General and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, have increasingly characterized antisemitism as a human rights violation and amplified Dr. Shaheed’s alarm about the **dangers posed by rising antisemitism**, including its contemporary manifestations. So too have other UN human rights expert mechanisms.
- Jewish advocates and community representatives around the world are citing Dr. Shaheed’s report in their advocacy efforts, in particular **his recommendation to governments to adopt the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism in full.**
- Dr. Shaheed’s report and recommendations have been raised and endorsed at major UN events on combatting all forms of religious intolerance.
- Jewish civil society representatives that were previously (and justifiably) skeptical about the value to be gained from raising concerns about antisemitism with UN human rights monitors have expressed an interest in increasing their engagement with UN mechanisms as a result of Dr. Shaheed’s report.
- The consultations Dr. Shaheed carried out in preparing the report provided an opportunity for Jewish civil society representatives to raise the UN’s troubled record with respect to antisemitism in **face-to-face interactions** with high-level UN-system figures, who acknowledged their concerns.

AJC’s Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (JBI) carried out key activities to facilitate Dr. Shaheed’s research and report, including the following:

- JBI convened an **expert consultation on global antisemitism** in June 2018 in Geneva, Switzerland bringing experts on antisemitism together with the UN Special Rapporteur, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and other key UN human rights figures. They discussed the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, data on antisemitism, and governments responses to antisemitism. The Special Rapporteur published [JBI’s report](#) of the event on his UN webpage.
- JBI held [meetings on antisemitism in the United States](#), at the request of the Special Rapporteur, in April 2019 at AJC Headquarters. JBI brought the Special Rapporteur together with prominent experts on antisemitism and US-focused hate crime monitors, law enforcement officials, members of communities that have experienced antisemitism, representatives of Jewish organizations, and key AJC staff.
- At AJC’s 2019 Global Forum, JBI brought **representatives of Jewish organizations and communities from around the world together with the Special Rapporteur’s research team for discussions on global antisemitism.** These meetings provided the Special Rapporteur with information about a number of countries – from Latin America to Indonesia – that otherwise would not have been mentioned in the report.
- JBI staff provided the Special Rapporteur and his research team with contacts, resources, and guidance, and support in preparation for the creation of the report.