



United States Delegation

OSCE High Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding – Follow-up to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance Opening Plenary Session

As delivered by Congressman Eric Cantor,
Head of the Delegation of the United States
Bucharest, Romania
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Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of the entire U.S. delegation, I would like to thank our Romanian hosts and OSCE Chair-in-Office Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos for organizing this meeting and for your commitment to combating anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance.

This is an important and necessary meeting that continues the critical work that commenced in Vienna, Berlin and Cordoba

The United States places great importance on combating anti-Semitism around the world. Included in the American delegation today are Gregg Rickman, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat anti-Semitism and Christian Kennedy, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues. Their presence here demonstrates that President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are committed to fighting anti-Semitism worldwide. The United States supports international organizations like the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and the OSCE in order to promote Holocaust awareness and remembrance as a tool of teaching tolerance and understanding for the next generation.

I have the distinct honor of serving as a United States Congressman from the State of Virginia. Virginia has a long and enduring tradition of religious freedom and was the home to Thomas Jefferson, one of America's greatest presidents.

While he has been remembered worldwide as the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson considered authoring the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom to be one of his greatest accomplishments. The ideal enshrined in the Virginia Statute's

language is as pertinent today as it was pioneering in 1786. It stated: "...no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief."

How far is the world from reaching this ideal?

It is in the spirit of Jefferson's legacy that all of our nations have convened here in Bucharest.

I would first like to focus our attention on global anti-Semitism, a unique phenomenon that is on the rise. Anti-Semitism is not merely prejudice against an ethnic group within a given locality. Instead, it mushrooms to include absurd world-wide conspiracy theories and the demonization of Jews as a people wherever they live. If the past is indeed prologue, the current escalation in anti-Semitism not only spells danger for Jews but for all people. As history has shown us, the hatred may begin with the Jews, but it never ends with the Jews.

The OSCE's status as the world's largest regional security organization gives us the platform to take a courageous stand. It is my hope that years from now, we will look back on this conference as a time when we seized the moment and met great problems with even greater resolve.

For hundreds of years leading up to the Holocaust, demonization of Jews was a staple of European society. It set the stage for the 20th century's most shocking and barbaric tragedy. Now again anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head. Anti-Semitic messages abound in the media and on the internet, emanating from hate groups, and various Muslim extremists. The vitriol is more dangerous now than ever before because of its ability to reach untold millions around the world instantaneously. Despite these problems, freedom of expression is a human right for which we must maintain our respect and commitment.

Indeed today's anti-Semitism is manifested by an increased number of violent attacks against Jews and synagogues in Europe and elsewhere and by the pervasiveness of wildly anti-Semitic conspiracy theories alleging, for example, that the World Trade Center was destroyed by a "Jewish plot," and that Jews are responsible for the continued spread of AIDS as well as the tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004. There is also a plague of irrational holocaust denial, including that promulgated by a head of state, sweeping across the Arab and Muslim world and beyond, despite the living memory of Holocaust survivors, and the overwhelming amount of historical evidence.

The modern State of Israel, born of the holocaust, is often singled out for rebuke from other nations. Why is there so little understanding of its need to protect the lives of its endangered citizens? Why single out Israel for a given action, as some British academics recently did, while ignoring countries that habitually perpetrate horrific deeds with impunity?

This is but one manifestation of an impossibly high standard applied uniquely to Israel.

It's one thing to criticize or condemn a policy of the Government of Israel. But as former Secretary of State Colin Powell described three years ago at the OSCE conference in Berlin, "the line is crossed when Israel or its leaders are demonized or vilified, for example by the use of Nazi symbols and racist caricatures."

Fair treatment of Israel must be embraced if a conference dedicated in large part to combating anti-Semitism is to mean anything. The slandering of Israel, the homeland of the Jews, contributes to the spike in anti-Semitic crimes in all of our countries today. Anti-Zionism is but anti-Semitism cloaked in new garb. Each time someone sees a photo of the Israeli military's reaction to terrorism with no regard for the terrorism that precipitated it, the poison spreads.

As we in the OSCE refocus our attention on commitments made at prior meetings, steps must be taken to guard against indifference to injustice, no matter who is the victim. We must strive to ensure Muslims in the OSCE region are not marginalized, stereotyped or discriminated against. Empowering moderate Muslims who reject terrorism and extremism may provide the best antidote to the disease of radical Islamic terrorism.

Christians are also suffering from both direct and indirect forms of discrimination. Discriminatory religion laws with onerous registration requirements repress peaceful religious belief. This is particularly true of those laws which set up multi-tiered layers of qualification which mete out privileges and rights for majority faiths only to eclipse and restrict minority religious groups.

In the 1990 Copenhagen Document, the OSCE participating States broke new ground when we recognized discrimination against Roma. Since then, Roma have been elected to the European Union Parliament as we heard today, and Romani plaintiffs have been successful before the European Court of Human Rights. In spite of this progress, there is much more left to do.

In Cordoba, the U.S. stressed the importance of hate crimes data collection. While many participating states have made marked improvement, there are still significant gaps in collection, analysis of statistics, and legislation. Ultimately this will help us progress beyond intolerance and overcome hate, misperceptions and discrimination.

In closing, I'd like to quote Elie Wiesel who said, "When a person is a victim of injustice that person should become the center of our universe."

Thank You.