

Country Visit: Norway
Report of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office
on Combating Anti-Semitism
Rabbi Andrew Baker
September 11-13, 2016

ENGLISH only

Background

Norway has a small but well-integrated Jewish community, albeit with a complicated Holocaust-era past. Unlike its Scandinavian neighbor Denmark whose citizens helped rescue the vast majority of its Jewish population from Nazi deportations or neutral Sweden whose Jews were safe from German persecution, the Norwegian puppet state actively assisted in the roundup and transfer of about a third of its 2,100 Jews to Nazi death camps.¹ Fifty years would pass before a government commission was established to address the unresolved claims of Jewish victims and their heirs. One outcome of that commission was the establishment of the Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, which includes a permanent exhibition on the Holocaust in Norway and which also serves as a research center collecting data on the current state of antisemitism and other prejudices in the country. Today, there are about 1,000 Jews who are formally affiliated with the communities in Oslo and Trondheim, with perhaps another 300-1,000 unaffiliated Jews in the country.²

This current visit to Norway follows a previous country visit undertaken in June 2012. At the time of that visit there were several concerns that were voiced by leaders in the Jewish community and others that were cited in our report. At the time the community was nervous about the general lack of security at its synagogues and community buildings and reluctance on the part of authorities to address this. Nearly all Jewish youth in Norway attend the country's public schools. This is not the common practice in many other European countries where (state-supported) Jewish schools are more frequently the norm. A survey of these Jewish students revealed a picture of frequent harassment by other students in the classroom and teachers who were often indifferent or incapable of addressing it. This came as a surprise to the Education Ministry and even to some of the Jewish parents, who were unaware of the situation or at least at how widespread it was. Additionally, the Jewish community often felt itself burdened by a strong anti-Israel animus that was regularly displayed in media reports and in the words of the country's political leaders. A survey conducted by the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities in 2012, reported that 38 percent of the population considered the Israeli treatment of Palestinians to be analogous to the Nazi treatment of Jews during the Second World War.³

¹ "Norway." Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005460>

² "The Jewish Community of Norway." European Jewish Congress.

<http://www.eurojewcong.org/communities/norway.html>

³ "Antisemitism in Norway? The Attitudes of the Norwegian Population Towards Jews and Other Minorities." pp. 7.

Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities. May 2012. Accessed January 2017.

<https://www.hlsenteret.no/publikasjoner/antisemitism-in-norway-web.pdf>

The Current Situation

Today there are significant, positive changes to report.

While there was some increase in security assistance to the Jewish community following our 2012 report and recommendations, the Norwegian Government became truly cognizant of the dangers following the 2015 shooting death of a volunteer security guard at the synagogue in Copenhagen. Since then, Jewish leaders report, there is a regular, daily police presence at Jewish buildings.

Conversations with diplomats in Oslo, including the current Israeli Ambassador, suggest that there has been a marked decrease in the strident, anti-Israel rhetoric since a new coalition government between the Conservatives and Progress Party took power in 2013. The Center against Antisemitism, which considers the conflation of Jews with the State of Israel to be the major challenge, also reports a decrease in the volume of critical and biased media reporting on Israel since then. A new survey now in preparation will indicate whether popular attitudes may have changed as a result.⁴ Jewish community leadership also believes this has improved the general atmosphere.

The Center against Antisemitism also maintained that the media generally ignored positive stories about Jews. It also took aim at some of the public programs of the Norwegian Church for a bias against Israel that contributed to negative views of Jews.

Jewish community leaders also report that they have developed their own program to allow people to register incidents of anti-Semitic hate crimes and hate speech via the community website. This is modeled after something already in use by the LGBT community. Although absent research data the evidence is largely anecdotal, it is widely believed that most of these anti-Semitic incidents—as was the case of student harassment in the public schools—are coming from parts of the country's large Muslim population, estimated at 100,000-185,000, or as high as four percent of the total population.⁵ Jewish leaders offer examples of inflammatory sermons delivered by some of the imams in Norway, which describe Jewish control of the media, Jewish conspiracies behind the 9/11 attacks, and praise for the actions of the Nazis.⁶ The Muslim population is ethnically diverse and encompasses Pakistanis who came as immigrants in

⁴ "Population survey: Attitudes towards Jews and Other Minorities." Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities. Accessed January 2017. <http://www.hlsenteret.no/english/research/jewish-history-and-antisemitism/Population%20survey%3A%20Attitudes%20towards%20Jews%20and%20Other%20Minorities/index.html>

⁵ "Norway." The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050. Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. Accessed January 2017. http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/norway#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2013

⁶ "Action plan against antisemitism 2016-2020." pp. 13. Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. Accessed January 2017. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/dd258c081e6048e2ad0cac9617abf778/action-plan-against-antisemitism.pdf>

the 1990s, Somali refugees, Iranians who were fleeing the religious tyranny of the Ayatollahs, Bosnians escaping the Yugoslav war, and Turkish migrants. With some the Jewish community has good relations, and Jewish leaders say these Muslims share their concerns about antisemitism.

Jewish community leaders note that with such a small population, very few Norwegians will have any firsthand knowledge of Jews. Holocaust education has increased in the schools, and it also includes the “White Buses” program which takes young teenage students to see concentration camp sites in Germany and Poland. However, while praising these programs, Jewish leaders say they do not correlate to any reduction in antisemitism.

One small program the community has initiated is called, “Pathfinders,” which is funded by the government and modeled after a similar program developed to acquaint Norwegian students with the indigenous Sami people. A handful of high school graduates are identified, who then receive a year of training—ten months in Israel and a month each in the United States and in Oslo—after which they spend a year speaking about Jewish life to high school students around the country. It is believed that this “peer to peer” personal sharing will serve to break down stereotypes and increase understanding in ways that traditional educational lessons cannot.

They also note—as they did four years ago—that Norway retains a ban on ritual slaughter. This law dates to the 1930s and was anti-Semitic in its origins and intent. Thus, the community must import kosher meat, although the government does exempt it from import taxes.

Norway’s Jewish scene also includes an active Chabad Lubavitch Rabbi. He described a very public activity they mounted in the center of Oslo. They had commissioned the writing of a new Torah scroll, which was ceremoniously completed by the scribe in Norway. The scroll was displayed in a procession along the main pedestrian street and followed by a concert. The rabbi reported that some 300-400 Jews participated in the events and thought that many of them may not have been otherwise engaged in Jewish community life. He spoke positively about the security provided by authorities and their overall cooperation. However, he was disappointed that the Norwegian media largely ignored what should have been a very upbeat story.

Developing a Government Action Plan

Perhaps the most significant change has been a 2015 Parliamentary decision calling on the government to develop a comprehensive action plan to combat antisemitism in Norway. This action plan was in the final stages of preparation at the time of our visit and has since been officially presented.⁷ The Members of Parliament spearheading this legislative initiative were concerned both about the security of the Jewish community in the aftermath of the

⁷ “Action plan against antisemitism 2016-2020.” Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. Accessed January 2017. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/dd258c081e6048e2ad0cac9617abf778/action-plan-against-antisemitism.pdf>

Copenhagen attack and the experience of Jewish students as revealed in the above-mentioned survey. Similar efforts in Parliament were unsuccessful, but this time they succeeded.

Government responsibility for developing the action plan was in the Ministry for Local Communities. But an inter-ministerial working group was established that also included representation from the Ministries of Children and Equality, Education, Justice and Foreign Affairs. The working group met monthly, and it included a study trip to the United Kingdom to observe how the UK government and civil actors addressed antisemitism in that country. It also held two seminars with representatives of the Jewish Community. They knew they must address the security concerns of the Jewish community, but realized that their task was much larger than just this. It should also address the problems of anti-Semitic attitudes and lack of knowledge about Jews in the society at large. They recognized the importance of data collection of hate crimes and the need for properly identifying anti-Semitic incidents among them. They also understood the importance of addressing the problem of increasing anti-Semitic discourse on social media.

Those involved in developing this action plan worked in close coordination with the Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities. The Center's 2012 survey on antisemitism in Norway did much to describe and quantify the problem four years ago. A new survey, currently being compiled, will track developments in the intervening four years as well as take on some new measurements. It will increase its data sampling among minority groups including Muslims in Norway as well as conduct focus groups to secure a more detailed picture of their attitudes toward Jews. This should allow them to observe distinctions based on age, gender and ethnic origins. It will also seek to provide a better account of the attitudes and experiences of the small Jewish community. If the development of successful programs to combat antisemitism require a clear knowledge of the sources of the problem, this survey work should prove especially helpful.

The Center has also conducted a study of antisemitism in the media between 2010 and 2016, which was scheduled for release at the same time as the action plan. The study was based on an examination of key words and phrases and covered both mainstream (primarily print) media and internet postings. While it did not find significant problems with mainstream (edited) newspapers, it did take note of the frequently anti-Semitic posting in online reply and comment sections. One high profile case involved a 2014 report from state television's Washington correspondent on "Jewish control" of the American media.

The action plan to combat antisemitism in Norway can be summarized as follows:

1. Develop teaching materials for schools and training for teachers
2. Create school projects on promoting democratic competence, confronting racism and antisemitism
3. Provide support for the Pathfinders program
4. Provide increased financial support for the Jewish museums in Oslo and Trondheim
5. Provide financial support for the Jewish cultural festival in Trondheim

6. Establish a specific category of anti-Semitic hate crimes registered for use in all police districts
7. Conduct an attitude survey on antisemitism in Norway (underway by the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities)
8. Undertake a pilot project to monitor antisemitism on the internet and in the media
9. Establish a research program on contemporary antisemitism and Jewish life at Norwegian universities
10. Provide grants for doctoral and post-doc studies on preventing antisemitism and group enmity in schools
11. Continue international engagement on fighting antisemitism in organizations such as IHRA and the OSCE/ODIHR

MP Hans-Olav Syversen, who spearheaded the Parliamentary efforts calling for the government action plan, also chairs the Budget Committee in the Parliament, and he has offered personal assurances that the necessary funds to implement the action plan will be provided. He noted the importance of addressing the problem of antisemitism as a unique phenomenon requiring its own program, rather than as part of a more generic anti-discrimination agenda.

Concluding Comments

Observing the situation in Norway on the occasion of my previous country visit in 2012, one found a set of serious problems and concerns that were cause for alarm. These included inattention to the Jewish community's security needs, a strong anti-Israel animus on the part of the political elites and a significant segment of the general public, and a growing pattern of harassment of Jews and particularly of Jewish students in the public schools coming largely from parts of the Muslim community that had been undetected or willfully ignored. The problems themselves have not disappeared. But the collective response of the Norwegian government as I have witnessed on this current visit is enormously gratifying and surely a model for other OSCE participating States to emulate. Now that the security concerns have been identified and acknowledged, they are being addressed to the satisfaction of the Jewish community. The other problems cannot be so easily or quickly remedied. But the genuine and successful call by Parliamentary leaders for a comprehensive action plan and the full response by the government to develop it are surely reasons to be hopeful. I very much hope that as this action plan is implemented in the months ahead we will be able to see progress. And as the implementers themselves have the tools to measure its success (and failures) they should be in a position to push ahead with what works and correct what doesn't. While Norway is a small country within the wide OSCE region and boasts a very modest Jewish community, it is positioning itself in the vanguard of combating antisemitism.

Meetings with Official and Civil Society Representatives

Ervin Kohn, Jewish Community in Oslo / Norwegian Center against Racism

Hans-Olav Syversen, Members of Stortinget

Geir Sigbjørn Toskedal, Members of Stortinget

Rabbi Shaul Wilhelm, Chabad Lubavitch, Oslo

Michal Rachel Suissa, Center against Antisemitism, Oslo

Per Antonsen, Center against Antisemitism, Oslo

Ambassador Roald Næss, Foreign Ministry

Henrik Malvik, Foreign Ministry

Ambassador Robert Kvile, Foreign Ministry

Bjoern Olav Megard, Ministry of Local Government and Modernization

Hanne Marie Myrvold, Ministry of Local Government and Modernization

Wegger Strømmen, Foreign Ministry

Peder Nustad, Center for the Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities

Anton Weiss-Wendt, Center for the Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities

Vibeke Moe, Center for the Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities