



RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND **ANTISEMITISM**



THE FAILURES OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE UN

**SPECIAL
REPORT
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INTRODUCTION

Religious intolerance and antisemitism have persisted as significant challenges throughout history, evolving in form but maintaining their destructive impact. While international institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the framework of international law have ostensibly been created to safeguard human rights, their inability—or unwillingness—to take decisive and forceful action against hate, prejudice, and discrimination has exacerbated the problem. Despite lofty declarations and conventions, their track record in combating religious intolerance, particularly antisemitism, is marred by inconsistency, inaction, and political expediency.

This booklet will critically examine religious intolerance and antisemitism through the lens of international law, focusing on how global institutions have failed to address these issues effectively. It also explores the need for stronger, enforceable mechanisms to combat hate and discrimination.

DEFINING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND ANTISEMITISM

Religious intolerance refers to the unwillingness to accept or respect the beliefs, practices, or existence of other religious communities. It manifests in systemic discrimination, social ostracization, and violent persecution.

Antisemitism, a specific form of religious intolerance, targets Jewish communities through prejudice, stereotypes, and hostility. Defined by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), antisemitism includes traditional tropes about Jewish conspiracy, economic control, and modern expressions such as denying the Holocaust or equating Zionism with racism.

Although these definitions are universally acknowledged, international efforts to address them have often been undermined by weak enforcement mechanisms, political biases, and a reluctance to confront systemic issues.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ANTISEMITISM AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE



Antiquity and Early Religious Prejudice

Religious intolerance is not a modern phenomenon; it has been deeply entrenched in human history. From the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians and Jews to forced conversions during the spread of Islam and Christianity, religious discrimination has long been used to consolidate power and enforce social conformity. However, antisemitism has remained uniquely pervasive and virulent.

In medieval Europe, Jewish communities faced expulsion, violence, and scapegoating, often tied to economic resentment or accusations of "blood libel." This systemic hatred was institutionalized in laws restricting Jewish rights and enforced by religious and political leaders alike. While these practices were deeply unjust, they often went unchallenged because no international framework existed to protect minority rights.

MODERN ANTISEMITISM AND THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a transformation in antisemitism, as pseudoscientific racism and nationalism framed Jews as an existential threat to societal “purity.” This culminated in the Holocaust, where six million Jews were murdered under Nazi Germany’s genocidal policies. The unprecedented scale of the Holocaust led to the creation of international institutions like the UN and the adoption of human rights conventions aimed at preventing such atrocities in the future.

Yet these institutions have repeatedly failed to enforce their mandates. The Nuremberg Trials punished a few key perpetrators but failed to confront the global systems and ideologies that allowed the Holocaust to occur. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) promised freedom from discrimination but has largely remained aspirational, with no binding enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance.

THE UN AND ITS ROLE IN FAILING TO COMBAT HATE

LOFTY PROMISES, LITTLE ACTION

The UN has often declared itself the guardian of human rights, yet its record on religious intolerance and antisemitism is far from commendable. Resolutions condemning racism and discrimination are regularly passed, but their impact is minimal without meaningful enforcement. For example, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted in 1965, requires signatories to outlaw hate speech and promote equality. However, its implementation is patchy at best, and member states face no real consequences for failing to comply.



SELECTIVE OUTRAGE AND POLITICAL BIAS

The UN has been accused of inconsistency and political bias in addressing religious intolerance, especially antisemitism. Despite adopting the Durban Declaration in 2001 to address racism, the Durban conferences have often been criticized for devolving into forums for anti-Israel rhetoric, detracting from broader efforts to combat antisemitism. Many Jewish organizations and nations have boycotted these conferences, citing their failure to address global antisemitism constructively.

Moreover, the UN's Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has been repeatedly accused of disproportionately targeting Israel while ignoring egregious human rights abuses elsewhere. This selective focus undermines the credibility of the UN as a neutral arbiter in combating religious intolerance.

FAILURE TO ADDRESS RISING ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism is on the rise globally, manifesting in hate crimes, vandalism, and conspiracy theories spread both online and offline. Despite this alarming trend, the UN has done little beyond symbolic gestures. For instance, while International Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed annually, no concrete measures have been implemented to counteract the spread of Holocaust denial or online hate speech targeting Jews.

Additionally, the UN's reliance on non-binding resolutions and voluntary cooperation from member states ensures that efforts to combat antisemitism remain toothless. Countries that fail to address hate crimes or propagate state-sponsored antisemitism face no tangible repercussions.

THE LIMITATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

WEAK ENFORCEMENT MECHANISMS

International law relies heavily on the voluntary participation of sovereign states, which undermines its ability to address systemic issues like religious intolerance. While conventions like the Genocide Convention (1948) and the ICERD exist, enforcement depends on the political will of states. This is evident in the lack of accountability for countries that violate these conventions, as seen in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar or the ongoing discrimination against Uyghurs in China.

INADEQUATE RESPONSES TO HATE SPEECH

Hate speech is a critical driver of religious intolerance and antisemitism, yet international law has failed to address it effectively. The UN's Plan of Action to Combat Hate Speech (2019) is largely a collection of recommendations with no binding commitments. Meanwhile, hate speech flourishes online, with tech companies often evading responsibility for moderating content.

FRAGMENTED FRAMEWORKS

The absence of a cohesive global strategy to combat antisemitism and religious intolerance has led to fragmented efforts. Regional initiatives, such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, have made progress in tracking and addressing hate crimes. However, without a unified international framework, these efforts remain limited in scope.

THE HUMAN COST OF INACTION

The consequences of inaction are devastating. Religious intolerance fosters division, marginalization, and violence, eroding societal cohesion. Victims of antisemitism and other forms of religious hatred face psychological trauma, economic disadvantages, and physical harm. On a broader scale, unchecked intolerance creates fertile ground for extremism, undermining global security.

The Holocaust stands as a stark reminder of what happens when international institutions fail to act decisively. Despite the UN's promises of "never again," genocides and mass atrocities—whether in Rwanda, Bosnia, or Myanmar—have continued to occur, underscoring the ineffectiveness of international mechanisms in preventing hate-fueled violence.

A CALL FOR STRONGER ACTION

BINDING LEGAL MECHANISMS

International law must move beyond symbolic declarations and adopt binding mechanisms to combat religious intolerance and antisemitism. This includes imposing sanctions on states that fail to protect minority rights and creating an independent body to investigate hate crimes and religious discrimination.



ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MEMBER STATES

The UN and other international organizations must hold member states accountable for propagating or tolerating hate. This includes establishing mechanisms to monitor compliance with conventions and imposing penalties for violations. Member states should not be allowed to hide behind sovereignty to justify inaction or complicity.

TECH REGULATION

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REFORMING THE UN

To address accusations of bias and inefficiency, the UN must undergo significant reform. This includes depoliticizing its human rights mechanisms and ensuring that antisemitism is addressed consistently alongside other forms of intolerance.



CONCLUSION

The persistence of religious intolerance and antisemitism underscores the failure of international law and institutions like the UN to fulfill their promises of protecting human rights. While declarations and conventions abound, their impact is undermined by weak enforcement, political bias, and a lack of accountability.

To combat these issues effectively, international institutions must adopt stronger, binding mechanisms and demonstrate the political will to confront hatred in all its forms. The lessons of history demand nothing less. If the international community continues to prioritize rhetoric over action, it risks perpetuating a cycle of prejudice and violence that undermines the very principles it claims to uphold.

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Elie Wiesel

"At the time of the liberation of the camps, I remember, we were convinced that after Auschwitz there would be no more wars, no more racism, no more hatred, no more anti-Semitism. We were wrong. This produced a feeling close to despair. For if Auschwitz could not cure mankind of racism, was there any chance of success ever? The fact is, the world has learned nothing. Otherwise, how is one to comprehend the atrocities committed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia..."

Montesquieu

"Religious wars are not caused by the fact that there is more than one religion, but by the spirit of intolerance... the spread of which can only be regarded as the total eclipse of human reason"