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Antisemitism in Europe: Should We Worry?

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

In November 2022, the European Union (EU) issued an Annual Update to its overview study on antisemitism (covering 2011-2021) that suggests an ongoing rise in antisemitic incidents. Understanding some of the dynamics may help to show what the EU can and cannot achieve in its fight against antisemitism. Other countries, including Singapore, also need to keep an eye on such developments to maintain social resilience and cohesion.

COMMENTARY

In a brief video on Twitter, the European Commission President Ursula van der Leyden issued the EU's first-ever [strategy on combatting antisemitism](#) and promoting Jewish life in Europe in October 2021. It is too early to tell what success this initiative will achieve; reports on its implementation will appear in 2024 and 2029, but current statistics suggest the strategy is very much needed.

The [2022 Annual Update](#) to the Overview of Antisemitic Incidents 2011-2021 records a rise of such incidents in the EU. This is issued by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). As the report makes clear, it is hard to get precise figures, partly because while every member state must report meaningfully, the methods of collection and recording is different across the countries. As such, we cannot simply compare data across countries.

Moreover, it generally relies upon official statistics, but looks at unofficial data where it is available. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that many incidents go unreported. According to the [2021 update report](#) (covering 2010-2020):

“The inadequate recording of hate crime incidents, including those of an antisemitic nature, coupled with victims’ hesitance to report incidents to the authorities, contributes to the gross underestimate of the extent, nature and characteristics of antisemitism in the EU.”

The 2022 update report notes that low numbers can signify a lack of reporting, ineffective recording systems, or a lack of capacity to identify antisemitism. This goes hand in hand with the [FRA’s finding](#) that hate crime overall is underreported.

Antisemitism: Left, Right, Islamic?

In the West, there is much talk about what is termed a “[New Antisemitism](#)” indicating a left-wing motivation associated with anti-Zionist tendencies. Many also suggest that antisemitism is rising in Europe driven by the rise of extremist Islamic actors engaging in antisemitic acts. In media reporting and some academic analyses, these two often seem to outweigh the traditional assumption that antisemitism is a right-wing affair.

Not every country breaks down data in the same way, but Germany does it to show motivations when possible. For Germany, the Annual Update shows, consistently, that crimes “with a presumed antisemitic motive” are overwhelmingly associated with the right-wing thinking. For instance, in 2021, out of 3,027 crimes recorded, 2,552 were seen to be associated with right-wing perpetrators, compared to six from left-wing actors, 57 associated with a religious ideology, and 127 with a foreign ideology, and 285 not attributable. This is far from unusual, with well over a thousand attacks every year associated with right-wing motivations.

While Austria only collects data on right-wing incidents, these have risen from 2011-2021 with the last year showing the second highest number overall. As most countries do not collect this data, it is hard to generalise, but it seems problematic to highlight left-wing and Islamic antisemitism when the only available data shows an overwhelming right-wing problem.

Of course, in many other places globally, and especially in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in [Southeast Asia](#), it may be [Islamic antisemitism](#) that is more prevalent, but the right-wing narratives should not be ignored.

Why Antisemitism is dangerous

In her speech, van der Leyden noted that antisemitism did not just target Jews, but was also a threat to “our democracies, our values, our society,” noting that “it is a threat to all of us.” As the Martinique thinker [Frantz Fanon](#) had noted long ago, based upon what he was told by his philosophy teacher, Black people should pay attention when antisemitism is aired because it was a threat to them too. Antisemites, particularly those on the right, do not simply target Jews and Black people. They also threaten liberals, trade unionists, democrats, Chinese and other ethnic groups, and human rights advocates, because it all too often comes in a package of prejudices.

While this report focuses on the EU, [the USA](#) has also seen recent and deadly [attacks on Jewish communities](#) including synagogues. The amalgamation of far-right nationalist extremists associated with the assault on the US Capitol, white Christian

supremacists, and a broad coalition of actors often termed the alt-right, which has shown itself to have wide and deep support, has [often manifested antisemitism, including the behaviour of figures](#), in their rallies.

In political influence, in conspiracy theories, and in views on social media, antisemitic groups in both the EU and the US have a massive global influence. It would be naïve to suppose that their sentiments are not reflected elsewhere.

How to combat Antisemitism

The EU's [plan to combat antisemitism](#) as outlined by van der Leyden and on its website has three goals: to step up the fight against antisemitism; to foster Jewish life in the EU; and to preserve the memory of past atrocities particularly through education. She suggested that the EU would create a network of Young European Ambassadors for Holocaust Remembrance. Young people are best placed to share the message of the atrocities of the Shoah with their peers. This is important as Holocaust denial is prominent on the far right and has traction online.

Education needs to be key in the efforts, not only in teaching history correctly, but in developing both knowledge and empathy in the [context of interreligious literacy](#). This will not just tackle antisemitism, but other prejudices including Islamophobia; indeed [the FRA](#) puts its work on this in relation to this wider aim. Europe's example demonstrates that simply robust legislation will not, by itself, counter antisemitism.

While Singapore remains a very [safe place for Jews](#) in a global context, [recent incidents](#) suggest that the country cannot just rest on its laurels, and beyond [reviewing security](#) on religious sites, it must actively be engaged in monitoring sentiments across different parts of the community and proactively developing its interreligious literacy and social cohesion resilience.

*Paul Hedges PhD is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies for the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. His most recent books are *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (California, 2021), and *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (Bloomsbury, 2021).*

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg