US antisemitism far worse than reported, say Conference of Presidents leaders

May 31, 2021

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The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-antisemitism-far-worse-than-reported-say-conference-of-presidents-leaders/>

Antisemitism in the United States is even more pervasive than it appears, Malcolm Hoenlein, vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said Monday.

“It’s worse because the majority of incidents are not reported,” Hoenlein told The Times of Israel at a meeting with staff in Jerusalem alongside the Conference’s chair Dianne Lob and CEO William Daroff.

“We get reports all the time of it. I see it not only in my own community but from rabbis who call me and others. And often the police will not classify it as a hate crime because then the FBI has to come in, and the FBI doesn’t necessarily want to because it’s a lot of paperwork et cetera… But they’re encountering more hostility and the vast majority of incidents don’t go reported even though the number of reports is increasing sharply.”

There has been a drastic spike in antisemitism across the US surrounding the recent conflict in Israel and Gaza.

In New York City, amid dueling pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian rallies earlier in May, Jews were assaulted in the street. In the days following, Jews across New York posted on social media about being threatened, harassed or otherwise attacked for being Jewish. Synagogues in Florida, Illinois and Arizona were targeted. Two antisemitic incidents were caught on video in Los Angeles.

The antisemitic incidents have led some to refrain from wearing Jewish symbols publicly out of fear of being attacked.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations is the umbrella body on international and national issues for 52 US Jewish organizations.

“Antisemitism has really shaken up our community,” Hoenlein emphasized. “The sense of insecurity is pretty widespread, even among sectors that felt that they were not vulnerable to what Orthodox Jews were subject to, in terms of attacks on them because they were visible. Now we’ve seen it everywhere, people being stopped and asked, ‘Are you a Jew?’”

Calling it “pervasive across the country,” Hoenlein said that he is seeing the effects of antisemitism and hatred of Israel in academia, in politics, and in the media.

“We have Jewish members of faculties who are finding themselves and their jobs being put in danger because of being identified as pro-Israel, or not joining the anti-Israel onslaught,” he said.

In the political realm, Hoenlein pointed to New York City mayoral candidate Andrew Yang, who tweeted in support of Israel and condemned Hamas.

Under pressure from local pro-Palestinian activists and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Yang issued a retraction, saying that “my tweet was overly simplistic in my treatment of a conflict that has a long and complex history full of tragedies.” He added that he “failed to acknowledge the pain and suffering of both sides.”

Hoenlein also highlighted the May 28 New York Times front page, which featured photographs of the children killed in Gaza and Israel during the recent fighting under the title “They Were Just Children.” The newspaper does not typically put images of children killed by US forces on its front page.

“That one front page shook up the community and shook up everybody more than anything I remember recently in terms of *hasbara*,” or Israel advocacy, Hoenlein said.

Do Jewish lives matter?

Dianne Lob, Conference of Presidents chair, said much of the recent rise in antisemitism comes from the discourse on the left wing of the US political spectrum.

“I think we can’t underestimate the intersectionality piece,” she said.

“The language is very parallel to the Black Lives Matter language.”

Hoenlein agreed, and argued that the recent Gaza fighting marked an inflection point in using ideas around intersectionality against Jews. “I think it’s a very serious moment. I think it represents a shift in the tectonic plates. It’s a fundamental shift,” he said.

“I think because you’re targeting the collective Jew, the State of Israel, [claiming] that they oppress a people of color, and colonialism and all the code words that they were using in the woke culture and the cancel culture – a lot of which is antisemitic – to be applied against Jews,” he said.

“I have to say they did a good job of it, through intersectionality, building it up over time; it’s not that it just happened. We saw it in Ferguson, we saw it in other places where they made the link. But the war gave them an opening to portray Israel in this very negative way, and to hold to account people who would speak up for Israel even to the degree that they qualified what they could say on antisemitism.”

“We have seen how Black Lives Matter and others have been turned through intersectionality into anti-Israel movements, which have strong anti-Semitic components,” said William Daroff, Conference of Presidents CEO. “I think we have to separate the two but recognize the interrelationship between them.”

Hoenlein stressed the positive role US President Joe Biden played and the credit he deserves “for having stood up and set a tone in the administration defending Israel, but also on antisemitism.”

Our own story of oppression

Amid the disturbing trends they describe, the leaders of the Conference of Presidents believe they can and must play a role in addressing growing antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment.

“We see a lot of weaknesses on both sides,” said Hoenlein, “and the partisanship of extreme left and extreme right becoming more divisive, and the center being lost, and we have to do more to rebuild that, and to make this a bipartisan issue, not a partisan issue.”

Hoenlein said the Conference of Presidents is working to rebuild coalitions with other US communities, while demanding legislation that empowers law enforcement and local government to address antisemitism. He added that “opinion molders” need to be held accountable for what they say.

“Till now, they’ve been able to get away with a lot.”

For Daroff, it is crucial the US Jewish organizations fight the narrative that Israel is a “white-colonial bastion.”

He said Jews and supporters of Israel must put forth an alternative narrative that “there are brown and black people who are here, who are engaged, who have their own story of oppression and survival, as well as their own story in America.

“We marched arm in arm, we were discriminated against, there were neighborhoods we couldn’t live in. There were jobs we couldn’t have, there were lynchings of Jews, and to recapture that narrative and to ensure that we are not on the wrong side of those barricades, as the anti-Israel forces would like.”

Hoenlein said that the rise in antisemitism has alarmed some in America who haven’t been engaged with the issue in the past, and indicated that he is gathering leading media professionals to fight back against antisemitism.

“We have the best and brightest minds working in media that we can enlist. And now, for the first time they are willing to become part of it.”

He listed former executives of news corporations like NBC, CBS, and CNN, as well as “some of the biggest and most creative influencers, some of whom are not Jewish, who speak to 40 million people a day.”

The other major element of the response, they explained, was young Jews.

“Sending kids when they’re 18 on Birthright is great, but if you ignore them for the first 17 years, they’re not going to be prepared when they go onto campus,” Hoenlein said. “And our kids are often leaders in these movements and often fall victim to it. And even the good ones are afraid to speak up because they’re intimidated, because they don’t know.”

“We have to do much more to inreach within our community- students, especially on campus where they’re very vulnerable.”

On a hopeful note, Hoenlein stressed that “the vast majority of the American people are pro-Israel.”

“I think it’s true of Democrats and Republicans. You can see that in the Congressional votes. [But] they are weakening and that trend will continue if we don’t do something to spike it and spike it decisively.”