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The United Nations and Anti-semitism:
Perhaps Not What You Thought
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In mid-October 2019, against the background of increasing anti-semitic incidents - demonstrated most vividly in the shooting in Halle, Germany on Yom Kippur - Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, presented a report to the UN General Assembly entitled "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance," focusing on anti-semitism. The 19-page report, a comprehensive effort to deal with anti-semitism on a global scale, warrants attention not only because it carries importance for Israel and for Jewish communities around the world, but also because it is surprisingly professional and research-based. In contrast to the silence from the Israeli establishment, which has essentially chosen to ignore the report, Jewish organizations from around the world, including the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), embraced the UN report. This is an important example of how engagement with the UN can be constructive, Therefore, unless there are concrete and strong claims against cooperating with UN bodies, Israel should strive to present the UN with evidence-based facts and introduce its narrative on events within the UN purview.

In mid-October 2019, against the background of increasing anti-semitic incidents – demonstrated most vividly in the shooting in Halle, Germany on Yom Kippur – Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, presented a report to the UN General Assembly entitled "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance," focusing on anti-semitism. The Special Rapporteur is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council – notably one of the more biased UN organs vis-à-vis Israel. Thus, this report warrants attention not only because it carries importance for Israel and for Jewish communities around the world, but also because it is surprisingly professional and research-based.

The recent report is one of two annual reports this Rapporteur tends to deliver. The first 2019 report was entitled: “Restrictions Imposed on Expression on Account of Religion or Belief”; in 2018 the Rapporteur's work dealt with the relationship between freedom of religion and national security, and with state-religion relationships. Thus, in comparison to previous reports, a study dedicated solely to anti-semitism assumes particular

importance. As for the author, Shaheed assumed his mandate in 2016. Prior to that, among other positions, he held the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives twice. Shaheed has been said to demonstrate systematic bias toward Jews on the one hand, and to work closely with pro-Israel lobbying groups, on the other. In this context, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor claims to have written to the UN High commissioner for Human Rights, urging the body to investigate Shaheed's conduct and to replace him if necessary.

Shaheed's 19-page report on anti-semitism is a comprehensive effort to deal with this phenomenon on a global scale. Its findings and conclusions are anchored in the collection of data from a period of three months during 2019 (March to May), and is based on information gathered from state and non-state actors alike. The data collected covered almost 20 countries from North America, Central and Latin America, Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Australia. This technical aspect alone reflects two initial points: first, the research approach is field-grounded, inclusive, representative of almost all Jewish communities across the world, and presents up-to-date data findings; and second, the United Nations, given its 193 member states, access to state and non-state actors, and resolutions fleshing out the duties of Rapporteurs, is exceptionally well-suited to conduct this type of global research.

The report is distinguished by five central contributions:

1. A clear differentiation between three types of anti-semitism: anti-semitism rooted in white supremacist right wing ideology; anti-semitism rooted in radical Islamist ideology; and anti-semitism rooted in radical left wing worldviews. While such distinctions are not new, the Rapporteur's arriving at these distinct categories through deductive field research performed in such an eclectic group of countries validates the existence of all three types of streams. This also has important implications for developing a toolbox to deal with anti-semitism and fine-tuning the manner in which different manifestations of anti-semitism should be addressed.
2. The clear assertion that the phenomenon of anti-semitism appears to be on the increase and that the prevalence of anti-semitic attitudes is significant even in countries with little or no Jewish population. In this vein, the report notes the climate of fear that impairs Jews' right to manifest their religion, and emphasizes that discriminatory acts toward Jews are not limited to individuals but are also sometimes encouraged by laws and government policies.
3. Recognizing the phenomenon of significant under-reporting (for a variety of reasons) vis-à-vis the prevalence of anti-semitism across the globe. An important addition to this issue is the report's mention of a lack of contact between civil

- society entities monitoring anti-semitism and UN human rights monitors, which inhibits the UN's ability to play a more central role vis-à-vis anti-semitism.
4. The report's attitude towards the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-semitism, which it recognizes as a useful, non-legal, educational tool that "can offer valuable guidance for identifying anti-semitism" and its call to states to adopt it. The endorsement of a definition that has been deemed controversial by certain civil society groups (particularly supporters of the BDS / Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement) is important, especially given the Rapporteur's balancing reference to the IHRA assertion that criticism of the Government of Israel is not anti-semitic, unless it is accompanied by manifestations of hatred towards Jews or anti-semitic stereotypes.
 5. The report's treatment of BDS, which is limited to one paragraph (#18) out of a total of 89. Content-wise, the Special Rapporteur notes the very different perceptions regarding the legitimacy of BDS action. Within that is a reminder that the international law recognizes boycotts as constituting legitimate forms of political expression on the one hand, along with the condemnation of expressions accompanying boycotts rejecting the right of Israel to exist on the other. The Rapporteur's approach to BDS is thus helpful on two accounts: it raises a red flag regarding the slippery slope between the boycott of Israel and anti-semitic motives and manifestations while providing legitimacy to boycotts in general; and it assigns a healthy proportional weight to BDS in comparison to the larger phenomenon of anti-semitism and anti-semitic manifestations that affect Jewish communities across the globe.

To date, the Israeli establishment has essentially chosen to ignore this report: other than Israel's Ambassador to the UN, who issued an imprecise statement relating to the report (stating that the report asserts "that the BDS movement encourages anti-semitism," when no such assertion is made), no relevant Ministry has issued a press statement or sought to bring the report to public attention, Israeli or international. This includes Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs – which naturally deals with anti-semitism in that it affects Diaspora Jewry; or the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which is tasked with addressing BDS and which, almost simultaneous with the online publication of the UN report, released a study of over 90 pages inking BDS to anti-semitism.

In contrast to the silence from the Israeli establishment, Jewish organizations from around the world, including the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), embraced the UN report. Some proudly noted their engagement with the UN Special Rapporteur during the research process, and personally thanked him for his commitment. The choice of Jewish communities to cooperate with the Rapporteur – despite the problematic UN body that mandates his work

and despite his controversial background – is an important example of how engagement with the UN can be helpful to both sides.

Therefore, unless there are concrete and strong claims against cooperating with UN bodies, Israel should strive to present the UN with evidence-based facts and introduce its narrative on events within the UN purview. In addition, similar to the Jewish Diaspora, Israel should publicly endorse this report and strive to inject it into local and international public discourse. Doing so will foster much-needed recognition of the perils facing Jewish communities in the Diaspora; will poignantly display Israel's solidarity with Jewish communities across the globe; and will be a show of recognition towards the potentially positive role that the UN can play in Israel and Jewish-related affairs. Third, given Israel's role in looking out for the well-being of Jewish communities across the globe, the Israeli establishment and civil society should proactively strive to improve working relations with Jewish organizations dealing with anti-semitism, and heighten cooperation with the UN on this issue. A starting point for further consideration would be advocating for a high-level UN envoy on anti-semitism, as recommended by Ahmed Shaheed himself.