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Five Insights from the Fifth World Holocaust Forum

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The fifth World Holocaust Forum was held in Jerusalem on January 23, 2020, with the participation of 47 world leaders – an unprecedented number when compared with previous forums – marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some of the countries that exhibited a unified front against antisemitism are not expected to stop criticizing or condemning Israeli policy in other international forums. Therefore, it is important to address concrete arguments against Israeli policy seriously, while avoiding as much as possible labeling them as tainted with antisemitism. In addition, Israel should establish a direct line to government representatives of those countries to demand concrete and determined action against antisemitism. Moreover, Israel should establish dialogues with the representatives of diaspora Jewish communities as part of a long term process of strategic thinking about the State of Israel’s role in dealing with rising antisemitism. One issue that should be discussed in these dialogues is the development of a response to the challenge of the receding memory of the Holocaust. The Israeli establishment should likewise expand cooperative efforts with civil society organizations beyond the area of Holocaust remembrance.

The fifth World Holocaust Forum was held in Jerusalem on January 23, 2020, with the participation of 47 world leaders – an unprecedented number when compared with previous forums. Marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the event was entitled “Remembering the Holocaust, Fighting Antisemitism.” The World Holocaust Forum was established in 2005, to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and since then has convened to mark significant milestones in Holocaust commemoration. The second forum (2006) marked 65 years since the Babi Yar massacre in Kiev (where the Nazis murdered 33,000 Jews in two days). The third forum (2010) and the fourth forum (2015) convened to mark the 65th and 70th anniversaries of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, respectively. Although the number of leaders who participated in the fifth forum in Jerusalem was greater than the number at previous events, previous forums, held in Poland (twice), the Czech Republic, and Ukraine also hosted an impressive number of world leaders (including Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Jacques Chirac).

The driving force behind the forum is Dr. Moshe Kantor, a Jewish businessman who founded the World Holocaust Forum Foundation and since 2007 has served as the elected president of the European Jewish Congress, the body that organizes, unites, and connects Jewish communities in Europe. This is in addition to his other representative roles on the Yad Vashem Council and the World Jewish Congress.

An analysis of the exceptional event in Jerusalem, which momentarily positioned Israel and the Jewish people at the center of the world stage, yields five principal insights.

1. Israel is not isolated in the international arena

Against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the BDS movement works relentlessly to impose consumer boycotts, academic boycotts, financial divestment, and economic sanctions against Israel, with the aim of isolating it internationally. From time to time, Israelis suffer the repercussions of this negative campaign. In the areas of culture and sports, the movement's achievements have attracted media attention, while in other areas (such as academia) achievements cannot be measured or quantified due to lack of transparency and multiple intervening variables. The attendance of multiple leaders from dozens of states at the Forum in Jerusalem clearly indicates that Israel is not politically isolated.

Nevertheless, participants' support for combating antisemitism should not be interpreted as unqualified support for Israel, particularly relating to the state's policies vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, the impressive presence of Israel's allies at the Holocaust Forum is not expected to influence future criticism of Israel, or their votes in important UN bodies or other international organizations. Precisely in this context, leaders' participation at the Holocaust Forum makes a significant contribution to the vital separation between antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israel's behavior.

2. The gap between the establishment and the street

The Forum was held against the background of a significant increase in antisemitic incidents around the world. This gap, between the establishment that is able to unite under the banner "Never Again" and the street that is marked by increasing radicalism, was most poignantly reflected in the remarks of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who noted: "I wish I could say that we Germans have learnt from history once and for all. But I cannot say that when...Jewish children are spat on in the schoolyard ...when crude antisemitism is cloaked in supposed criticism of Israeli policy...when only a thick wooden door prevents a right wing terrorist from causing a bloodbath in a synagogue in the city of Halle on Yom Kippur."

The ability of world leaders to continue to adopt a united front against antisemitism is questionable, in light of surveys that show that the decided majority of European Jews feel an increase in antisemitism in their country, and one-quarter of French millennials have never heard of the Holocaust. This is not unique to Europe. In the United States, polls reveal that two-thirds of millennials do not know what Auschwitz is, 22 percent of millennials have never heard of the devastation of European Jewry in the Holocaust, and there is a significant increase in antisemitic attacks and expressions.

3. Nonstate actors in the international arena

Although the World Holocaust Forum is the initiative of a private individual active in the leadership of several civil society organizations, the Jerusalem event managed to reach such impressive dimensions due to cooperation with Yad Vashem and the Israeli establishment. Without the cooperation between the Forum, Yad Vashem, and President Reuven Rivlin, the results would likely have been more modest.

This cooperation attests to the power and limitations of civil society actors in the international diplomatic arena. On one hand, convening the Forum provides clear evidence of the power of these actors, who can drive processes that influence not only the agendas of heads of state, but also the global media, which provided exceptional coverage of the event. On the other hand, the need for cooperation with a state actor illustrates the limitations of civil society and the primacy of state actors in the international arena.

4. Memory plasticity

Along with the presence of many leaders at the Jerusalem event, the absence of Polish President Andrzej Duda was glaring. Duda did not attend due to Israel's decision not to allow him to address the conference, despite the decision to allow President Putin to speak, and against the background of the conflicting Russian and Polish narratives regarding each country's historical role during the Second World War, and the Holocaust. The Polish President, who already initiated concrete legal steps to lower the perception of active Polish participation in Nazi crimes, argued that the Forum's organizers presented an inaccurate view of history, noting that the words of Vladimir Putin are a "complete distortion of historical truth."

In contrast, the Russian President (who is reportedly on friendly terms with Dr. Kantor), used the Forum to emphasize, in defiance of the absent Polish president, that it was the Soviet Union that brought about the liberation of Europe from the Nazis, stating that "death factories and concentration camps were served not only by the Nazis, but also by their accomplices in many European countries." Not surprisingly, Putin avoided noting

that the Nazi contravention of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact between the Soviet Union and Germany played a decisive role in spurring the Soviet Union to action.

The struggle over narratives took an interesting turn two weeks after the event, when Yad Vashem (February 3) issued an apology for the historical inaccuracies included in the event. The conflicting narratives and the noteworthy – and commendable – apology by Yad Vashem, raise questions regarding possible political interests behind the Forum and the selective memory of the Holocaust, now and in the future.

5. The Forum in an international relations perspective: realpolitik and constructivism

Even though the realpolitik approach to international relations, which emphasizes states' interest-driven approach, is sometimes viewed as opposed to the constructivist view that emphasizes states' socially-driven action, the convening of the Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem reflects the strength of both approaches. The gap between the scope of antisemitic incidents in some of the countries that participated in the Forum (be it in elected officials' rhetoric or weak action against antisemitic manifestations) and the firm stance expressed by the Forum's participants against antisemitism demonstrates that realpolitik considerations guide countries in positioning themselves as part of the in-group of states that condemn antisemitism. Israel's adherence to its refusal to allow the Polish President to deliver a speech, even though Auschwitz-Birkenau is in Poland, illustrates Israel's realpolitik considerations signaling Russia's strategic importance to Jerusalem at this time. Simultaneously, the investment of time and resources made by many world leaders in attending the Jerusalem Forum demonstrates the power of social values in motivating states to act.

In considering these points, the Israeli establishment should consider a number of alternatives. Since some of the countries that exhibited a unified front against antisemitism will not cease to criticize Israeli policy in other international forums, Israel must relate seriously to concrete arguments against the state's policies, and avoid, as much as possible, dismissing them as tainted by antisemitism. In addition, and following the presence of the foreign leaders in Jerusalem, Israel, bolstered by factual data on current expressions of antisemitism, should establish a direct line to these government representatives to demand concrete and determined action against the phenomenon. In parallel, and against the background of rising antisemitism, Israel should establish dialogues with the representatives of diaspora Jewish communities as part of a long term process of strategic thinking about the State of Israel's overall role in dealing with antisemitism. One issue that should be discussed in these dialogues is the development of a response to the challenge of the receding memory of the Holocaust. Finally, the Israeli establishment should expand cooperative efforts with civil society organizations beyond the area of Holocaust remembrance. A prominent area in which such cooperation can bear tangible results is the deadlocked process with the Palestinians.