




Policy Brief

The Belgian Jews: To stay or not to stay?

VOCAL
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Introduction

Belgium, with a Jewish population of about 40,000, has witnessed an increase in antisemitism in the past few years with attacks on the internet leading the charge.

In 2012, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights commissioned a [survey](#) of discrimination and hate crimes against the Jews across 9 member states. It was a landmark compilation of the perceptions, fears and concerns of European Jews. Most importantly, it led to a strengthening of the conviction at the highest level of the European Union to address the issue and the appointment of Katharina von Schnurbein, the European Coordinator on combating antisemitism.

The second survey, the results of which will be released at the end of this year, has been extended to 13 member states and will build on the understanding of European Jewry and how discrimination, harassment and hate crime has impacted this minority.

The experiences of the Jewish community in Belgium has shown that antisemitism manifests itself in different ways and is therefore difficult to tackle because the space to express prejudice has evolved with the advent of social media, along with the prejudices themselves. According to [data](#) compiled by the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and Unia in Belgium, antisemitic incidents on the internet account for the largest proportions of reported incidents in 2016.

This is indicative of two things. First, the measurement of what constitutes a hate crime, how threats online are treated and whether they can be prosecuted in the way law enforcement prosecutes threats in the non-virtual world needs to be clearly defined and understood by society. In a [recent interview](#) with Vocal Europe, von Schnurbein said “the things that people write, would they actually say it into the face of somebody or not?”

Secondly, it is difficult to assess what the increase in online threats actually represent. Is it now simply possible for those with antisemitic beliefs to express themselves or are conspiracy theories converting more individuals?

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

A factor that does seem to play an important role is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and tellingly, in the 2012 [survey](#) about 90% of the respondents in Belgium and France reported that the Israeli-Arab conflict has a notable impact on their feelings of safety as Jews. Joël Rubinfeld, President of the Belgian League Against Anti-Semitism (LBCA), said that “if you want to fight antisemitism today, you have to identify which kind of antisemitism you are fighting. Today we are facing the antisemitism that replaces the Jew as an individual by the Jew as a state. It’s called anti-Zionism.”

This aspect of anti-Semitism, more political and ideological than religious, has made it difficult to frame the issue just as one of poor relations between different communities in Belgium and across Europe.

Von Schnurbein, for her part, has reiterated that “the leadership of the European Commission, First Vice President Timmermans and also Commissioner Jourová have been very clear that such violence is unacceptable and it is unacceptable to justify it whatever political opinion one might have with regards to the conflict in the Middle East.”

There are few conflicts that resonate so deeply beyond their borders and perceptions of the other, whether it is between Jews and Muslims or supporters and detractors of the current Israeli

government's foreign policy, hinder meaningful interactions about the actual country that communities share.

Rise of the far right

Politics closer to home, such as the rise of far right parties and movements, poses a more immediate threat as that brings with it an antisemitism that is more recognizable. "I don't see the future of Jews being bright in countries where you have a leadership infused with either far right ideas or illiberal nationalism. To say, to be Polish you have to be Roman Catholic, to me, that is denying your own history" said William Echikson, one of the founders of the International Jewish Centre and the Director of the European Union for Progressive Judaism office in Brussels.

In other words, antisemitism is part of a larger shift in European politics towards the right. Resembling other minority communities such as those that are LGBTQ, Roma and Muslim, Jews have as much to fear from populism and right wing nationalism as they do from anti-Israel or anti-Zionist sentiment. "This is part of the larger battle between intolerant xenophobic nationalist sides of Europe and the post war promise of cooperation in the EU and the protection of minorities. It would be a real defeat if Jews are forced to leave or feel so uncomfortable that they can't prosper here," Echikson said.

Interestingly, many far right parties have attempted to detoxify their brand by reaching out to the Jewish community. Traditionally seen as harboring antisemites, parties like the National Rally (RN), in France have sought to provide a political alternative for Jewish communities facing a rise in antisemitism. Ignoring the wishes of many Jewish groups, the leader of the RN, Marine Le Pen, took part in a march against antisemitism following the brutal murder of an elderly Jewish woman [this March](#).

It is yet to be seen whether such efforts will have any real traction, but Le Pen and her colleagues are betting on the fear in Jewish communities and the slow response of previous governments in acknowledging the existence of a problem. An alliance with Jewish groups could also [remove](#) the stigma around voting for the RN as it seeks to distance itself from party members who are openly antisemitic.

The European identity

The response of the European Union to the increase in antisemitism has not gone unnoticed and the appointment of von Schnurbein along with the [positive statements](#) by First Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Jourová is regarded as a step in the right direction. "There are a number of positive signs, beginning with Timmermans. His words are more eloquent and pro Jewish than any other political leader I have heard," said Echikson.

The uncertainty of the identity of minorities in Europe causes tension between communities. It is important that the definition of being European is flexible enough to include Jews, Muslims and all other minorities that feel threatened.

"Identity is something that moves all the time and is not static. As people are fragile in their identity, they always will find out somebody from the outside world who is responsible for his problems," said Paul Dahan, a psychoanalyst and the Director of the Judeo-Moroccan Center, in the Jewish Museum of Belgium.

Antisemitism may be part of a bigger agitation in the identity of Europeans and the extremes of political thought that blame the perceived outsiders as the cause of domestic problems. "For me, those saying they are the real Germans or real anything means nothing. Then they have to fight against all people that are different," said Dahan.

It is important that Jews feel that they are European or Belgian and have a stake in the future of their society and community. “There’s little idea that the EU identifies with Jews and wants to build a future for Jews in Europe. There is also a misunderstanding, given all the publicity about terrorist attacks and antisemitism. There are many countries in Europe where the situation for Jews has improved dramatically, beginning with France which was home to all the terrible terrorist attacks against Jews. Where the governments have progressively got stronger in recognizing their responsibility for Vichy and the Holocaust”, said Echikson.

The Holocaust

Education and awareness about the Holocaust could be key to increasing awareness but this requires a sustained effort across schools and workplaces. The Holocaust was “a trauma, not only for the Jewish community. But today in Germany you see antisemitism and racism. Most of the youth that are antisemites have no knowledge. You will always have a group of people who will just go to break windows and riot but they don’t really believe. They are there just for aggression, just as we see in football. The process is the same as people are frustrated due to unemployment, people who think there is nothing in this world. Frustrated people will try to find their way to express their violence,” according to Dahan.

Although most would agree that education, research and remembrance about the Holocaust should remain a vital part of the strategy, it would be difficult to make a substantial impact on antisemitic attitudes. With an increase in immigration, there are more people to reach out to.

“I am not confident that the local governments will be able to change this. They did not do it when they had 40 years to do it quietly, and when there was not a sudden increase. Today we have a huge wave of immigration. How will we succeed in educating them with this overwhelming income of immigrants when during the last years there was a much lower level of immigration?” Rubinfeld asked.

Holocaust revisionism and denialism is on the rise and according to professor Dan Michman, Head of the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem and Professor of Modern Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, “people say you’ve talked enough about the Holocaust and there are so many other atrocities. This has to do more with a global tendency, let’s say it is the competition of victimhood.”

As von Schnurbein pointed out, support for commemorating the Holocaust through remembrance events is high but we see antisemitism in the same societies. Education and awareness should continue to be part of the approach but as the types of hate crimes have evolved, it will not be enough to reverse the trend.

Future of the Jewish community

Different members of the Jewish community in Belgium, feel the immediate effects of antisemitism differently but it contributes to an overall understanding that there is an increase and a problem. Professor Michman explains that “there is this tension within Judaism between particularity and universalism” that is also evident in how Jewish communities interpret and understand the rise in antisemitism.

“Those who are more in the direction of assimilation and universalism feel more threatened because the ultra-Orthodox say antisemitism was there for all the time and it will go on. It is not nice to be spit on or beaten in the street, of course it is horrible on a personal level but on a general level we have always had it. That is the attitude we see in the ultra-Orthodox community. For others who are more integrated, it is major threat,” said Professor Michman.

Hate crimes raise the fear that one feels personally but they also have a spillover effect on the community to which one belongs. Those Belgian Jews that choose to leave for Israel or elsewhere “are leaving not because of antisemitism but because of the consequences of antisemitism. It is not a direct, but an indirect link. Antisemitism makes people more and more uncomfortable. Those people leave. Then others leave because there are fewer people and the institutions are weaker. Even if they didn’t experience antisemitism personally, they feel the consequences of antisemitism personally”, said Itsiq Benizri, representative of the Congrégation Israélite Sepharade Unifiée - Étz HAYIM in Brussels.

Interfaith relations

An emphasis on interaction and understanding between communities is also vital to bridging the gap between perceptions and realities. Dahan, for instance, spoke about how the Jewish Museum in Brussels tries to focus on outreach and how it is essential “to adjust the temperature between what we think and what we don’t know.”

To show how the two communities have much to share, Dahan is “preparing an exhibition here for next year about Jewish and Muslim relations in Morocco in the 20th century. It was working well and now how come there is a regression? I will bring people who will talk, and there will be movies and music. Arab music by Jewish musicians and Jewish music by Arab musicians. Just to show that at the end, everybody wins much more by meeting others and to stay close in the community.”

Such initiatives have been lauded in recent years as a way for local communities to feel connected and should be a vital component of any European level approach to improve the discourse. The [Salaam Shalom](#) initiative in Germany, for instance, is regarded as a model for future projects that focuses on local conditions and factors.

“From my perspective, the Muslim and Jewish culture is close. I keep kosher and it is hard to explain to someone who can always eat what he or she wants what kosher means. Now if you explain to someone who is Muslim, he also has restrictions, and knows what it is like to not be able to eat everything. This is just a very basic example. We can have very strong links but unfortunately it is the most difficult relationship,” said Benizri.

Belgian Jewry today

The reality for the Jewish community in Belgium is complicated and at a turning point. On the one hand, the European Union has clearly demonstrated its commitment to improving the safety and sense of belonging for Jews. The EU has acknowledged that there is a problem and has taken small but significant steps to tackle it.

On the other hand, Jews continue to emigrate and Jewish institutions such as schools, community centers and synagogues have had to take extra safety precautions. Many have gotten used to it and regard it as part of the new normalcy for the community.

It is difficult to reconcile the two points of view regarding the future of Jews in Europe. Rubinfeld and his organization, the Belgian League Against Anti-Semitism, use existing laws to remove people who express antisemitic views and actions from positions of power. Nonetheless, he says that “we are doing what we can but ... I feel like Don Quijote. It is very hard to say this but this is my reality. I know that I am fighting for a lost cause.”

For others like Echikson, Dahan, and von Schnurbein, the Jews have always been a part of Europe and they will remain so. Diverting resources and effort on the European, national and local level towards making them integral to Europe’s future is an indication that things are moving in the right direction.

As Echikson explained, “as a synagogue, we are spending a good part of our budget on security. That is not a good sign for Jews but I do feel that there is a place, and has been for thousands of years, for Jews in Europe. Just picking up and walking away is not the legacy I would like to leave.”

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