

Why you should be skeptical of Israeli government's anti-Semitism reports

It's important to monitor hate crimes, but the reports illustrate the difficulty of measuring incidents on social media and the findings seem to reflect interests, not reality

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Yaakov Haguel, acting director of the World Zionist Organization, offered cabinet members a harsh and emotive assessment Sunday as he presented what he called “an important and comprehensive survey on anti-Semitism.”

That it was a report thin on methodology and data did not stop him from declaring, according to a press release, “The Jewish people and the State of Israel will lose contact with millions of Jews around the world if something isn’t done with regard to European governments and the world.

“Jews are afraid; they are assimilating and taking cover,” he said “Anti-Semitism is on the rise and European governments and the world is ignoring this. Israel’s government is also responsible for world Jewry.”

And then came the presentation of another report on anti-Semitism to the cabinet, this time presented by Naftali Bennett, speaking in his capacity as Diaspora affairs minister. That report is entitled “Report on anti-Semitic Trends and Incidents for 2017.”

According to Bennett’s report, 2017 was a record year in terms of the number of anti-semitic incidents in Great Britain, with Germany also seeing a number of “serious incidents.”

His ministry’s official website, which posted the report, sends readers to a more extensive write-up on the topic on the Arutz Sheva website (also known as Israel National News), a network associated with religious Zionism.

Citing unnamed surveys, that post claimed that “more than 50 percent of refugees in Western Europe hold anti-Semitic views.”

There are now numerous reports of “spiking anti-Semitism in Europe,” “a record number of incidents” and “a new rise in anti-Semitism.” However, even a cursory review of the “data” on which these reports are based and their comparison to other reports ought to raise some questions, or the suspicion that the two documents – which were presented ahead of Saturday’s commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day – are less scientific reports.

They appear to be more public relations tools that are meant to justify agencies whose existence is arguably questionable – the Diaspora Affairs Ministry and the World Zionist Organization.

Consider the statements attached to their publication. Two of Haguel's statements are particularly noteworthy. "Israel is responsible for world Jewry." Is it? Shouldn't Jews around the world be asked if they agree with that statement?

He then said that "Jews are assimilating." One need only ask if this is a result of anti-Semitism, which he warns against, or a natural corollary of life outside Israel, where the majority populations are not Jewish.

Even the most significant words of WZO's acting director, according to which anti-Semitism is on the rise, can be disputed. To do this, one should look at another report – the one published on the previous Holocaust Remembrance Day by the Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, at Tel Aviv University.

This report showed a 12 percent decline in the number of violent attacks committed in Europe with an anti-Semitic basis. The report noted that this decline reflects a continuing trend, mainly in the decline in violent incidents that were registered in key countries, in terms of the size of their Jewish populations and their international standing.

On the other hand, the Kantor Center's report noted a "continuing rise, often dramatic, in visual and verbal expressions [of anti-Semitism], mainly on social networks and at demonstrations." It stated that this cannot be quantified, concluding that "even though the number of incidents has declined, the prevailing sense among Jews is that things are bad – and that's the most worrisome feature."

Indeed, it's hard to argue with emotions, but the professional integrity of the Kantor Center prevented it from providing the media with dramatic headlines indicating a "sharp rise" in anti-Semitism.

One doesn't need to look far in order to find contradictions in the current furor. While Haguel's report showed one thing, Bennett's presented the opposite. His report states that in France the government is taking determined steps to prevent expressions of anti-Semitism, including a government-sanctioned program to combat racism and anti-Semitism. This has borne fruit, with a drop last year in the number of incidents.

So what's going on here? A drop? A rise? Are governments ignoring the phenomenon or combating it? It depends how you count an "anti-Semitic incident," who's counting, who is presenting it and what his interests are.

Looking again at the WZO report, the data raises the suspicion that someone was looking hard for ways to present the numbers in a manner that might

sound alarm bells, as is worthy of a week ending in Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Eighty percent of people surveyed around the world “were exposed to incitement against Jews in the media or on social media”; 70 percent were affected by anti-Semitic events last year”; and “78 percent experienced anti-Semitism in recent years.”

It’s hard to argue with such superficial, general and unscientific statements.

But it’s surprising that only 80 percent were exposed to incitement – anyone with access to Facebook could be considered someone exposed to incitement, not only of the anti-Semitic kind.

Second, one could ask if every anti-Semitic response by some woolly-headed ultra-nationalist is necessarily an anti-Semitic “incident” and every exposure to it an anti-Semitic “experience”. If so, then the more hours one spends in front of a computer screen, particularly reading anonymous comments, the more one can be considered someone deeply affected by anti-Semitic content.

How should one relate to the data indicating that 59 percent of respondents across the world thought politicians in their countries were somewhat anti-Semitic? This is certainly not scientific research.

“The situation is deteriorating daily, spreading to new countries,” Haguel wrote in his dramatic summarization of the report’s findings. “We see the WZO playing a key role in preserving Jews and their identity around the world, and in helping welcome and acclimatize [immigrants] to this country.”

Herein lies the not-so-secret vested interest lurking behind the current round of cries bemoaning anti-Semitism. The WZO needs to show that it is still needed in 2018. Who if not this organization will work to preserve Jewish identity and settle Jews from around the world in Israel?

It’s regrettable that state agencies belittle the public’s intelligence. It’s also lamentable that they contribute to producing fake news, confusion and such deceptions as these.

The topic is too important to be left in the hands of politicians and PR officers.

It’s certainly important to be concerned by data that is not based on telephone interviews or social media. It’s better to rely on police reports, public security or internal affairs departments in different countries, as well as interviews with local Jewish community leaders and people who are more connected to events on the ground.

But still, let there be no doubt. Even without these surveys, there is no room for optimism. Anyone visiting Jewish communities in Europe knows that in 2018 there are places where it's uncomfortable for Jews to wear a kippa. Traditional hatred of Jews has been joined in recent years by threats coming from extremist elements among Arab migrants, whose hatred toward Israel because of the Middle East conflict is morphing into anti-Semitism.

One shouldn't take an extreme stance and shut one's eyes to these reports. But the worrisome situation requires serious analysis, thorough and accurately collected data. It should be done by independent researchers using scientific tools and accepted methodologies.