The UN antisemitism report’s achievements and shortcomings

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Suggesting that the United Nations – a notorious inciter against Israel – could produce a valuable report on global antisemitism seemed farfetched. This however is what Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed has done. Also remarkable is that the author hails from the island state of the Maldives, a Muslim country. He has been living in exile since 2012.

The unprecedented report – still officially in an “advance unedited version” – was positively received by Israel’s UN Representative Danny Danon and several Jewish organizations. Yet a balanced position is called for. One should praise what is good and mention what is missing in the report.

As to the merits: The report mentions that antisemitism is global and it exposes antisemitic tropes. It states that the perpetrators of the hatred of Jews include white supremacists, neo-Nazis, members of radical Islamist groups as well as leftists. The report also discusses the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement without taking a clear position. The rapporteur mentions the claims that the BDS movement is fundamentally antisemitic. He also brings up counterclaims from BDS supporters that it is not.

The report correctly points out that predominant antisemitic attitudes differ between various regions. Shaheed could have added here that they also differ substantially between individual member countries of the European Union. The major percentages of antisemitism among hate crimes in the US and Canada are also mentioned. So is the increase in antisemitic acts in various European countries. Online antisemitism receives attention as does the infringement by some governments of religious freedom.

The rapporteur gives extensive attention to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism and considers it a valuable non-legal tool in the fight against this hatred. As far as the recommendations go, the rapporteur urges “states, civil society, the media and the United Nations to follow a human rights based approach to combating antisemitism.” He stresses correctly that the primary responsibility of addressing acts of intolerance and discrimination lies with states including their political representatives.” 

What is missing from the report belongs to two categories. The first is issues which are de facto taboo in a report of the UN. The second concerns subjects which could and should have been mentioned. The main item in the taboo category is the huge role played by the UN and associated organizations in promoting antisemitism. Their focus is on hatred of Israel. As a result, the rapporteur could not explicitly mention that there are three major types of antisemitism: religious, nationalistic-ethnic and anti-Israeli hatred.

A SECOND major taboo subject at the UN is linking antisemitism to the Muslim world. Muslim states make up a large percentage of UN members. They are the major single force in the UN’s antisemitic hate-mongering activities. Even a superficial look at global antisemitism makes it clear that by far the largest threat to world Jewry comes from parts of the Muslim world. It is only there that one finds heads of states promoting extreme antisemitism. The ADL Global study found that 49% of Muslims are antisemites.

When the report refers to Muslim crimes or incitement, it uses the following expressions: “radical Islamist groups,” “violent Islamist-extremist ideology,” “Islamist terrorists” and “radical Islamist ideologies.” The word “Muslim” only appears in the text in describing victims or people who have been attacked. In reality, the dividing line between Islamists and Muslims is far from clear. Many crimes against Jews have been committed by Muslims who had no specific identification with political Islam. 

Another major issue which might be taboo as well, but which should be mentioned in any full-fledged report on antisemitism, is that this hatred is an integral part of Western culture, or alternatively, that it is profoundly interwoven with it. Yet another issue, which perhaps is taboo but is far too important to ignore, is antisemitism in Socialist parties. In the British Labour Party, which many now consider institutionally antisemitic, it expresses itself both as classic antisemitism and anti-Israelism. In many other Socialist, social democratic or labor parties, it exists mainly as anti-Israelism. 

The prime issue lacking from the report, which should have been mentioned, is major quantitative information about antisemitism in the world. An indicative figure can be found from the ADL’s Global study which puts the world’s figure for classic antisemites at about 1.09 billion people. This translates into 75 antisemitic adults per Jew, including babies. A second quantitative figure of major importance is that at least 150 million adults out of about 400 million in the EU consider Israel’s behavior like that of the Nazis.

Christian antisemitism isn’t mentioned explicitly in the document, which refers as antisemitic the attribution of “collective guilt for the murder of Jesus to Jews.” We know from various ADL studies that hundreds of millions believe this false accusation. From the ADL Global study we learn that 24% of Christians are antisemitic. Nor does the report include the finding of the ADL that conspiracy theories are the antisemitic tool most used globally. An antisemitic trope which should have been mentioned is the frequent use of the word “Jew” as a synonym for an evil person. Many more issues could be added. 

None of this should overshadow the great appreciation for the courage shown by Mr. Shaheed. He has opened up an avenue which should not remain without major follow-ups.