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Leaders of Belgium's religious communities band together

By Martin Banks

New Europe (10.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/30qt7Rp> - Leaders of Belgium's Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities have joined forces to condemn the rise of hate crimes both in the country and elsewhere in the world.

The informal group, which includes the European Jewish Community Centre, the Executives of the Muslims of Belgium, and the Chapel for Europe – have joined forces ahead of the 23-26 May elections to the European Parliament as some fear that there will be a surge in support for populist and nationalist parties who usually target religious minorities.

"We, the people of all creeds, are deeply concerned at the rise of hate crimes in our society. Recent elections across the democratic world and the polls ahead of the upcoming national and European elections are showing that populism, nationalism, and radicalism are on the rise on both ends of the political spectrum...This reflects a growing rejection of the idea of an open, tolerant, and inclusive society – one which we cherish and value deeply," the group said in a statement, before adding, "We reject this rejection. It is our duty to raise awareness to the danger of extremism. It is our duty to say loud and clear that we Jews, Christians, and Muslims stand together as guarantors of each other's beliefs. We stand together in our commitment to diversity. We stand together to march against hate."

The attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand has intensified concern over a tech-savvy and global brand of neo-Nazi terrorism. A recent UN report said Belgium must tackle the root causes of present-day racism faced by people of African descent.

The United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent carried out a fact-finding visit to Belgium. Michal Balcerzak, the chair of the working group, said Belgium needs to adopt a far more comprehensive national action plan against racism.

A recent Eurobarometer poll said that perceptions among Europeans on Antisemitism are "very divided." While most Europeans consider antisemitism to be a problem in their country, 4 in 10 actually do not consider it to be an issue on the national level.

In the UK, Islamist-inspired terrorism remains the single biggest threat to national security. According to the British Home Office's statistics released last year, only four out of 18 attacks stopped by the police and security services between March 2017 and December 2018 were designated as far-right plots.

Nazi rhetoric and Holocaust denial: Belgium's alarming rise in antisemitism

Report shows 39% of Belgian Jews have been harassed, with some fearing to wear the kippa in public

By Jennifer Rankin

The Guardian (09.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2YsA2rD> - The doors of the Jewish Museum of Belgium, in Brussels, never used to be locked during daytime visiting hours. That all changed after a day in May 2014 when a jihadi gunman shot dead four people during an attack on the museum in one of the country's most shocking terrorist atrocities.

Nearly four years after the attack, antisemitism has again been making headlines in Belgium, a country that symbolises Europe's diversity. Not only is the capital, Brussels, home to the EU institutions and Nato, Belgium is made up of three linguistic groups (French, Dutch and German), making it something of a laboratory for European compromise.

However, last week the annual Kantor Centre report on global antisemitism concluded that, apart from France, "Jews do not experience anywhere [else] in the EU as much hostility on the streets as they do in Belgium".

Organisations monitoring anti-Jewish hate in Belgium report a steady increase in antisemitic incidents, such as vandalism, Holocaust denial and verbal abuse, as well as a rise in conspiracy theories and Nazi rhetoric. The Belgian government-backed Centre for Equal Opportunities said it had handled 101 cases of antisemitism in 2018, up from 56 the previous year.

The Kantor study followed alarming findings from the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency. It found 42% of Belgian Jews had considered emigrating in the last five years, one of the highest proportions in the 12-country survey and only slightly behind France and Germany. Some 39% of Belgian respondents said they had experienced antisemitic harassment in the last year.

The grim findings come as no surprise to Ariella Woitchik, the director of legal and public affairs at the European Jewish Congress, based in Brussels. "Even if you are not personally subject to an antisemitic incident, you hear it everywhere from your friends in schools, places at work. People cannot walk in the streets of Brussels with a kippa on the head."

She thinks antisemitic abuse is getting worse in schools. "In the public schools in Belgium the biggest insult and the most widespread insult is 'Jew'". Facing hostility, more parents are moving their children into Jewish schools, she says. "They do not even have a choice to be honest, they are forced into a very, very difficult dilemma: you leave your kid in a public school and your kid is a target, or you put him in a Jewish school and the school is a target, so it is a very difficult situation."

Jewish buildings, including now the museum, are tightly secured, with cameras and double doors that can only be opened from the inside. Soldiers patrol outside Jewish schools. "My three year old, she asked me 'Mummy, why do we have soldiers in front of the school'," Woitchik recalls. "How am I supposed to explain that?"

Against this backdrop, Jewish organisations are intensifying long-established efforts to promote understanding of religion and culture.

"After the terrorist attack on the 24 May 2014 the Jewish Museum decided not to close in on itself, but to become more and more than ever a place for culture, but also for dialogue," said Bruno Benvindo, the museum's director of exhibitions. "That was really a statement, a deliberate choice to answer this terrorist attack."

The victims of that attack are not forgotten. At the entrance is a sparkling bronze plaque to commemorate the four people who died. They were Myriam and Emmanuel Riva, an Israeli couple celebrating a wedding anniversary with a trip to Europe. The volunteer guide Dominique Sabrier, and Alexandre Strens, who worked in the museum's communications department, were also murdered on what should have been an ordinary working day. "Victims of a cowardly murder by a terrorist in this place," records the plaque.

The French jihadist Mehdi Nemmouche was sentenced to life in prison earlier this year for their murders.

The building was closed for more than two years after the attack, while the museum's permanent collection travelled to different locations across the city.

"It was a very traumatic experience for all Belgian people," said Benvindo, who joined the museum's staff in 2017. "We didn't want only to become a memorial, but we wanted to remain a place for culture, a dynamic, living institution."

Located in an elegant Brussels townhouse, the Jewish Museum is close to the picturesque Place du Grand Sablon, a magnet for tourists drawn to the gothic 15th-century church, antiques market and luxury chocolate shops. A short stroll from the tourist bustle, the museum is a treasure trove of Jewish history and culture. One floor features a display of filigree silver spice holders, brass candlesticks and old books with cracked spines, while choral music plays. It also showcases contemporary culture, with a recent exhibition on Amy Winehouse.

The museum, which has 16,000 books on Jewish life and culture, has expanded its traditional educational programme. About 5,000 school children visited last year. Some took part in the "Meet a Jew" workshop, which is aimed at 14-18 year olds and seeks to tackle stereotypes. Other workshops offer children the chance to learn about Jewish culture and history, both religious and secular traditions.

This weekend, the museum expects to host 250 people for a kosher Moroccan meal to mark Iftar, the end of the day's fasting during Ramadan. As well as quizzes about Jewish and Muslim traditions, the evening will end with a gospel choir concert.

Jewish organisations cannot do everything by themselves, community groups stress. The European Jewish Congress wants to see improved training in schools, so teachers are able to manage situations when children refuse to follow lessons about the Holocaust, which the EJC says is becoming more common.

Raya Kalenova, the vice-president of the EJC, stresses that antisemitism is hardly unique to Belgium, referring to the outpouring of hate online to the shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, to what she calls the "openly antisemitic" British Labour party. France and Germany are among European countries that have seen a sharp rise in attacks on Jews, threatening "the very values on which the union was built", according to the FRA.

Five years ago, political leaders across Europe thought the EJC was exaggerating, she says, but now there is greater understanding of the threat. "We are worried today, not only for Jewish people, but we are worried for our society," she says. "Attacking Jews means attacking and destabilising democratic society."

Belgian ban on kosher slaughter has Jews worried about what comes next

By Cnaan Liphshiz

Jewish Telegraphic Agency (04.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2AB19qS> - Antwerp's Jewish community was still recovering from its Holocaust-era devastation when Wim van den Brande's grandfather opened one of Europe's largest kosher slaughterhouses.

Since its establishment in 1966, the Kosher Poultry factory grew together with the local Jewish community, which numbered only a few thousand people after Nazis and their collaborators murdered most of the Jews in Flanders — the Belgian region whose capital is Antwerp.

By the end of last year, van den Brande's factory was processing 80,000 chickens a month — a testament to how the region's Jewish population has more than quadrupled to 20,000 since 1945.

But all that ended last month, when a law banning methods used in ritual slaughter went into effect, forcing van den Brande, who is not Jewish, to fire his 10 employees and close up shop, in the hope of moving his factory to Hungary.

For van den Brande, 42, and hundreds of meat industry professionals, it means "an attack on traditions and on an entire industry," he told JTA.

It has less immediate implications for Antwerp's Jews — who can simply switch to importing customs-free kosher meat from elsewhere within the European Union trading bloc. Yet many of them view the law both as a declaration that they are not wanted in Belgium, and as the opening shot of further hostile action.

"On the ground, it makes little difference. We still have meat," said Nechemiah Schuldiner, a leader of the Shomre Hadas Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp. "The problem is the message it sends. It tells Jews: We don't want you here."

Schuldiner fears the law, which he considers a ban, is a "prelude to a ban on importing kosher meat," and a move heralding "new restrictions, be in on milah or other elements of Jewish life." Milah is the Hebrew word for circumcision of men.

The new law requires all animals be stunned before they are slaughtered. Jewish and Muslim religious laws require animals be conscious at the time of their slaughter. Jewish leaders also fear the same political forces — animal and child welfare activists, in league with anti-immigration groups — will move to ban ritual circumcision, performed by Jews and Muslims.

Michael Freilich, editor in chief of the Antwerp-based Joods Actueel Jewish magazine, disagrees that the law is a sign Belgian Jews were unwanted. The Flemish authorities, he said, have paid "a great deal of attention to the Jewish community and its needs." But, he added, the methods for ritual slaughter are "too unpopular" in Flanders for the government to ignore.

The law in Flanders was born of a 2014 public debate about the slaughter of animals by Muslims in unregulated slaughterhouses. In Western Europe recently, animal welfare and

child welfare activists have found unlikely allies in individuals and politicians critical of the impact of mass immigration to Europe by Muslims.

Jewish customs, similar to Muslim ones but ignored or tolerated for decades, have become collateral damage of this alliance.

In the Netherlands, a fringe animal welfare party in 2011 submitted a bill proposing a ban on all slaughter performed without stunning. It passed in the lower house, largely thanks to the support of the anti-Islam Party for Freedom. The Dutch senate reversed the ban in 2012.

In 2013, Poland's parliament passed a similar ban amid growing discontent in the predominantly-Catholic nation over the arrival of millions of Muslims into the European Union, of which Poland is a member. The Polish High Court reversed the ban in 2014.

Meanwhile, Denmark's parliament is preparing to vote on a resolution calling to ban non-medical circumcision of boys. The resolution began as a petition started by a small group of anti-circumcision activists but gathered tens of thousands of signatures in the kingdom, whose government has one of Western Europe's most restrictive policies on immigration from the Middle East.

In this context, the law passed in Belgium "is clearly only the beginning," said Ari Mandel, an Antwerp Jew who in 2011 opened Kosher4U, an online store that specializes in shipping kosher products to remote European Jewish communities, such as in Sweden and Norway.

"We're talking about a domino effect. Kosher slaughterhouses can move but moving appears to be a temporary solution, a stay of execution," he added.

Mandel also noted that Antwerp's Orthodox communities have some of the world's strictest kashrut standards, making their rabbis and congregants distrust foreign labels.

Ritual slaughter of animals is allowed in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ukraine and Russia, where the vast majority of Europe's Jews live.

Five European Union member states — Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania and Slovenia — have blanket bans on ritual slaughter. So too do three other non-EU countries in Western Europe: Norway, Switzerland and Iceland.

In Belgium, it is currently illegal only in Flanders, or the Flemish Region, which is one of three states that make up the federal kingdom. Another region, Wallonia, will impose a ban in September. Austria and Estonia also enforce strict supervision of the custom that some Jews there say makes it nearly impossible.

No country in Europe currently forbids nonmedical circumcision of boys.

If Europe is seeing a domino effect where Jewish customs are collateral damage, then communities should consider adapting some of those customs to weather the storm, suggested Michael Freilich, the Jewish paper's editor.

"There is halacha, and Jews are beholden to it," he told JTA, referring to rabbinic law. But some kosher practices also stem from "customs and rabbinical politics" and can be adapted or reformed.

Notably, some Orthodox rabbis permit post-cut stunning – a technique in which animals' necks are cut almost at the same time as they are knocked unconscious. Another

potential concession may come from modern stunning methods, including carbon dioxide, that do not injure the animal in ways prohibited by Jewish law.

“Honestly, I’ve not been able to get rabbis to give me very compelling explanations as to why some of these solutions aren’t halakhically acceptable,” said Freilich, who is Orthodox and who opposes government restrictions on ritual slaughter.

But some of the rabbis, he said, “told me that they couldn’t sanction certain solutions because doing so would expose them to attack from hardliners.”

These talks “changed my way of thinking about the kosher meat issue,” Freilich added.

As more and more European governments restrict kosher slaughter, Freilich said “the need to adapt Jewish customs to the new reality will grow, and I think we’ll see movement.”