



Hollande's stand on anti-Semitism impresses delegation

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Canadian participants in a meeting last week with French President Francois Hollande came away impressed with the French leader's sincerity and determination to address the terrorism and anti-Semitism that has France's Jews on edge.

Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and MP and former justice minister Irwin Cotler said Hollande was empathetic to the concerns of the country's Jews and was forthright in discussing the threat posed by French-born jihadists returning from Syria.

"Hollande spoke about the barbaric attack on the Jewish museum in Belgium" and about the protection of Jewish schools, synagogues and other community buildings, Cotler said in a telephone interview from Jerusalem.

Cotler and Benlolo were part of a 20-member delegation assembled by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, which met with Hollande prior to officially inaugurating a historic exhibition at the UNESCO's Paris offices. The exhibit, mounted by historian Robert Wistrich, is titled, *People, Book, Land: The 3,500 Year Relationship of the Jewish People to the Holy Land*.

The exhibit was sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Center along with the governments of Canada, Israel, the United States and Montenegro, and launched last week after pressure from Arab countries forced its cancellation in January.

Benlolo said the reception by French officials and Hollande at the Élysée Palace was warm and welcoming. The delegates were anxious to express their concerns about the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels by a French gunman, who killed four people.

“Hollande believes there are more than 1,000 French nationals who went to fight in Syria and joined radical groups,” Benlolo recounted. Three hundred remain. Many came back and he’s concerned about their radicalization and if they will take action against the Jewish community.

Mehdi Nemmouche, the man accused in the Brussels attack, is believed to have spent 2013 fighting with Islamic radicals in Syria.

Hollande assured the delegates that he is working closely with intelligence and security services to track returning jihadists and to ensure the safety of the country’s Jews.

“I believe Hollande was very sincere,” Benlolo said.

“The Jewish community received substantial grants to secure their schools and synagogues,” Benlolo added.

Cotler, who has visited France three times in the last six months, said “people spoke well of Hollande and his genuineness, his commitment to combat anti-Semitism, to bring perpetrators of anti-Semitism to justice and his appreciation of jihadist acts as threatening to French Jews and France alike. He took the position that it’s a joint struggle, a part of the protection of French democracy and all of France.”

During the meeting, Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Wiesenthal Center, told the president “we meet at a pivotal time in history, when the Jewish community and France’s democratic values are under unprecedented attack by the forces of extremism both from the far right and from extreme Islamist purveyors of religious intolerance and murder.”

He applauded Hollande and his predecessor, president Nicolas Sarkozy, for denouncing an earlier terrorist attack in Toulouse that claimed the life of a rabbi and four children. But he lamented the failure of Muslim religious leaders to condemn the attacks.

Meanwhile, Cotler was effusive in his description of the Wistrich exhibit, which he called “historic.”

“It is a remarkable dramatization of history and heritage, of people, book, land, memory and state,” he said.

In 24 panels, it traces Jewish history back to the patriarch Abraham, through Moses, King David and all the way through to the struggle for Soviet Jewry, the birth of Zionism and the reconstitution of the State of Israel.

The exhibit, which will run for nine days, had been scheduled to open last January. Pressure from 22 Arab countries, who argued it would prejudice the peace process, prompted UNESCO to cancel it.

Responding to that decision Rabbi Hier stated, “It is ironic, that while the Arab League was trying to kill this exhibition and all the attention was focused on Paris, the UN headquarters in New York is hosting an exhibit entitled, Palestine, based entirely on the Arab narrative, which was not criticized as an interference with Secretary [John] Kerry’s mission.”

Following public criticism from Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird and U.S envoy Samantha Power, the exhibit was rescheduled to open last week, but with the name “Israel” removed from the title and replaced with “Holy Land.” UNESCO also required the removal of an image of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which had been part of the initial exhibit prepared by Wistrich, a professor of European and Jewish history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.