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Canada Gets Tough on Anti-Semitism

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The government of Canada took an historic step yesterday by signing the Ottawa Protocol to Combat Anti-Semitism. By doing so, it recognized anti-Semitism as a pernicious evil and a global threat against the Jewish people, the State of Israel and free, democratic countries everywhere. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper has noted, "Those who would hate and destroy the Jewish people would ultimately hate and destroy the rest of us as well."

The protocol is a declaration that hatred of this nature will not be tolerated in this country. It sets out an action plan for supporting initiatives that combat anti-Semitism and provides a framework for other nations to follow.

It also sets out a vibrant definition of anti-Semitism which, for the first time in history, links anti-Semitism to the denial of the right Jewish people have to their ancestral home land -- the State of Israel. This, in fact, is what sets post-World War Two anti-Semitism apart from its historic roots. Today's anti-Semitism is all about denial: denial of the legitimacy of Zionism as a Jewish movement to reclaim the land of Israel; denial of a Jewish history in connection to the holy land and, in particular, the centrality of Jerusalem to the Jewish people; denial of the Holocaust (while at the same time accusing Jews of Nazism); and denial of Jews to live free of anti-Semitism, hate and intolerance.

In announcing the Protocols, Foreign Minister John Baird has expressed his government's unequivocal support for the State of Israel. In referring to this week's turmoil at the United Nations and the Palestinian threat to unilaterally declare a state, Baird said, "Canada will not stand behind Israel at the United Nations, we will stand right beside it. It is never a bad thing to do the right thing."

According to Baird, more and more countries are refusing to participate in the UN conference dubbed "Durban III" -- otherwise known as an anti-Semitic hate fest which began as a human rights forum in South Africa in 2001; the forum ultimately degenerated into an anti-Semitic slinging match in which repressive Arab and African countries blamed all the problems facing their own countries and the world on Israel. The governments of France, New Zealand and Poland (today) joined Canada and 10 other western nations this week by declaring they will not take part.

Unquestionably, the Government of Canada's stance on Israel is based on the principle of standing by your friends -- especially when they are democracies and advocates for human rights. Most Jewish leaders would agree that Israel is indeed Canada's greatest ally in the fight against hate and intolerance.

But the fight against hatred and anti-Semitism must be won here in Canada as well. The Ottawa Protocol is mostly the result of a report published this summer by a Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism which was comprised of leading Canadian politicians who volunteered their time to probe the increasing and alarming tide of anti-Semitism in Canada.

In a letter accompanying the report, Chairs of the Inquiry Panel and the Steering Committee Mario Silva and Scott Reid wrote, "The Inquiry Panel's conclusion, unfortunately, is that the scourge of anti-Semitism is a growing threat in Canada, especially on the campuses of our universities." The report cites numerous examples of anti-Semitism on various campuses including the infamous incident in 2009 when Jewish students at York University were chased and barricaded themselves in the Hillel lounge while a mob outside taunted them with anti-Semitic slurs. The list of examples is quite long and disturbing.

Universities should take note of the report and the signing of the Ottawa Protocols. They should put an immediate end to hateful and fallacious events like Israeli Apartheid Week; they should state unequivocally that freedom of speech should not be abused to provide a cover for anti-Semitism; they should ensure that Jewish students feel welcome on campus and that their learning environment should be freed from anti-Israel occurrences and finally, universities must become accountable for allowing their private property to be venues for hateful conduct among students.

The Ottawa Protocol to Combat Anti-Semitism is a template for every Canadian to consider. But it is especially a document of significance for universities that have allowed themselves to become vehicles of hatred and complicit in its promotion. As my friend, Professor Irwin Cotler said last night at the Ottawa signing ceremony, anti-Semitism is not only the longest known form of hatred in the history of humanity -- it is the only form of hatred that is truly global.

Every person of conscience should take note of the Ottawa Protocols and never forget the lessons of the Holocaust when the world was silent.