



Pope Francis, shown speaking to Jewish leaders at Rome's Major Synagogue on Jan. 17, 2016, in Rome, has been an outspoken in condemning anti-Semitism.

COMMENTARY

## Pope Francis and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism

COMMENTARY: The 2019 Kantor Report found that 'Jews in some countries feel they live in a state of emergency' as violent incidents have increased throughout the world.

By Mark Banks – Posted 6/21/19 at 3:44 PM

Anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe, and a recent report published by Tel Aviv University (TAU) is sounding the alarm.

On May 1, TAU's Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry released its 2019 Kantor Report that analyzes worldwide anti-Semitic attacks and abuse. The extensive report found an increase of 13% in major assaults and violent incidents targeting Jews across the world throughout the previous year. The study also recorded the largest reported number of Jews killed (13) in anti-Semitic acts in decades (the analysts registered the Pittsburgh shooting as one, albeit tragic, case).

Two weeks after the Kantor Report was issued, on May 15, Pope Francis reminded the world that the Catholic Church's response to anti-Semitism remains relevant and important. Greeting the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ICJLC), the Pope [praised](#) the "good fruit" that Jewish-Catholic dialogue has borne since the 1965 publication of the Vatican II declaration [Nostra Aetate](#), regarding the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions.

In that document, the Church makes clear that Christ's passion "cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today," and it goes on to decry "hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone." In his comments to the group, the Pontiff acknowledged "the fight against the troubling regrowth of anti-Semitism."

Increased Concern

Commenting on the Kantor Report findings, its authors reported that “Jews in some countries feel they live in a state of emergency,” adding that, as a result, many Jews have “started questioning and doubting their association with places and societies they have lived in ... sometimes for centuries.”

The report notes that the rise in anti-Semitic manifestations occurred “most notably in Western Europe and North America.” And it is clear, above all from the [tragic events in Pittsburgh](#) — as well as the more recent shooting at the Poway Synagogue in San Diego, which left one woman dead — that incidents in the United States continue to be of great concern and require acute vigilance.

However, it is also clear, based on resident Jewish populations, that certain nations of Western Europe contributed a vastly disproportionate number of cases to the worldwide number of major anti-Semitic incidents; highlighting the more widespread nature of offenses in these countries.

In France, there has been an increase of 74% in reported incidents of anti-Semitism, according to figures from the Ministry of Interior, which the report cites. Anti-Semitic acts constituted half of all documented hate crimes in France. The most high-profile of such incidents was the brutal murder of Mireille Knoll, an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor, who was murdered in her own home in March 2018. The report quoted French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, who declared, “Anti-Semitism is spreading like poison, like venom. It is rotting minds; it is killing.”

In Germany, there was a 10% rise in anti-Semitic crimes, including a 70% rise in acts of violence. One notable incident was an attack on a kosher restaurant (“Shalom”) in Chemnitz last September, when 12 men in black masks attacked the site and beat up the owner. Since the release of the Kantor Report, official figures released by the German Interior Ministry have revealed a rise of 20% in anti-Semitic crimes, most of which were perpetrated by far-right groups. Such developments have prompted Germany’s government commissioner on anti-Semitism to say that he “cannot advise Jews to wear the kippah everywhere all the time in Germany.”

Similarly concerning reports have also emerged from Belgium, in which the number of anti-Semitic incidents doubled compared to the previous year. The report summarized, “Except for France, Jews do not experience anywhere in the EU as much hostility on the streets as they do in Belgium.” And in the United Kingdom, anti-Semitic incidents were reported to have increased by 16%, much of it attributable to the ongoing debate over anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, the U.K.’s main opposition party.

The Kantor Report also notes the anti-Jewish hostility and negativity of much of the media in the Arab countries, as well as the extreme rhetoric of certain Islamist preachers in the region. However, due to the small Jewish populations in these countries, although anti-Semitic propaganda in these nations is high, actual incidents of violence or assault are low. In addition to the complex and sensitive political situations across the region, these countries are therefore not straightforward examples.

## Personal Witness

In his own life, Pope Francis has demonstrated a great love and respect for the Jewish people. In the decades before his election to the papacy, Bishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio stood in steadfast solidarity with Argentina's populous Jewish community, most notably in his unswerving support for the victims of the [1994 AMIA Jewish Community Center bombing](#) in Buenos Aires that claimed the lives of 85 people, most of them Jewish. And through his active fostering of Jewish-Catholic relations, then-Cardinal Bergoglio also developed a long-standing friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, an Argentine biophysicist, with whom he co-wrote the book *On Heaven and Earth*.

As Pope Francis, this bishop from Buenos Aires has not wavered in his support for the Jewish community, accompanied by his unequivocal condemnation of all forms of anti-Semitism. In June 2013, three months into his papacy, during a meeting with a delegation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), Francis strongly affirmed, "Because of our common roots, a true Christian cannot be anti-Semitic," adding that the Catholic Church "firmly condemns hatred, persecution and all manifestations of anti-Semitism."

The following year, the Holy Father concluded his three-day pilgrimage to the Holy Land by praying at Jerusalem's sacred Western Wall. Later the same day he prayed before a crypt containing ashes of victims at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. In his remarks, the Pope cried, "Never again, Lord — never again!"

In 2016, following in the footsteps of his two predecessors, the Pontiff paid a solemn visit to Auschwitz, the former Nazi concentration camp where an estimated 1 million Jews and more than 100,000 others lost their lives.

In March this year, less than five months after the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue, in Pittsburgh, in which 11 people were killed, the Holy Father hosted members of the American Jewish Committee during their visit to the Vatican. In his comments, he [remarked](#), "A source of great concern to me is the spread, in many places, of a climate of wickedness and fury, in which an excessive and depraved hatred is taking root. I think especially of the outbreak of anti-Semitic attacks in various countries."

## Root Causes

Several overarching reasons are cited in the Kantor Report for this recent resurgence in anti-Semitism that Pope Francis referenced in his March address to the American Jewish Committee. First among these is a "growing ignorance and diminishing commitment" that current generations have with respect to knowing, remembering and expiating for the wrongs of the past, in particular with respect to the Holocaust. Furthermore, "classical anti-Semitism" has also been compounded by events in the contemporary political arena that provide "fertile ground for the growth of anti-Semitism." The report also notes the current

“crises of democracies,” “issues of national identity” and the impact of “right-wing parties and movements” as well as the prejudices of the “far left.” Throughout the report, the growth in expressions of anti-Semitism on the internet, much of it anonymous, is also discussed.

Regarding European immigration, the report states that “surveys show that the level of anti-Semitism among the Muslim population is higher than in the general society.” For Germany, the report cites findings from the Berlin police that revealed anti-Semitic crimes had doubled during the 2013-2017 period. According to *The Jerusalem Post*, police sources told the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel* that the rise in anti-Semitism was connected to the increased number of migrants from the Middle East living in the city.

However, such findings are placed alongside concerns regarding newly formed far-right groups, as well as the complex interplay between the far left, immigrant communities, academic circles and the anti-Zionist movement, all of which have “mainstreamed” the use of anti-Semitic terms.

The authors of the report acknowledge that Jews are far from the only minority group targeted for persecution, in particular citing worldwide persecution of Christians. With respect to anti-Semitism, they are also careful to caution, “let us exercise a sense of proportion, certainly not underestimating the situation, yet not overinflating it either.”

In his recent [address](#) to the American Jewish Committee, Pope Francis advocated interreligious dialogue and stressed the need for vigilance:

“History teaches us where even the slightest perceptible forms of anti-Semitism can lead: the human tragedy of the Shoah in which two-thirds of European Jewry were annihilated.”

The Holy Father encouraged the faithful to not tire of transmitting to children the foundations of love and respect, saying that “... we must look at the world with the eyes of a mother, with the gaze of peace.”

*[Mark Banks](#) is a freelance writer and editor. He has previously worked for the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need on its “Religious Freedom in the World Report.” He writes from London.*