

How not to prevent a second Holocaust

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The fourth Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism, which is scheduled to be held in Jerusalem this month, is a very important international conference. Fighting anti-Semitism, hatred of Israel, Islamism, anti-Zionism, and the distortion of the Shoah are obviously extremely timely and significant topics, given the genocidal threats from Iran against Israel, the growing hostility toward the Jewish state in many countries in Europe, and throughout the Arab and large parts of the Moslem world, and the recent attempts to delegitimize the hereto-accepted narratives of World War II and the Holocaust throughout post-Communist eastern Europe.

Given the Forum's significance and the fact that it was created and continues to be hosted by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the question arises as to why Israel has invited ministers from countries known for promoting the distortion of the Holocaust and the canard of historical equivalency between Nazism and Communism to an event dedicated to fight anti-Semitism and prevent a possible 'second Holocaust'? Are politicians or representatives of countries known for their efforts to whitewash their own pro-Nazi legacy allies in the fight against Holocaust denial and distortion of history? Some tiny and not powerful countries have learned to pay lip-service to Israel while promoting the above-mentioned Holocaust distortion in their own countries. This is currently the case in Hungary and Lithuania.

In December 2009 at the last meeting of the Global Forum I participated in the efforts to expose and condemn Lithuanian anti-Semitism. In a working group, Professor of Yiddish Dovid Katz and I, supported by British MP John Mann, criticized

Lithuanian anti-Semitism and Holocaust distortion. Our words fell on deaf ears and we were shocked and chagrined when the featured guest speaker, the Foreign Minister of Lithuania, failed to address this issue at all, and whitewashed the serious problems his country faced in this regard.

Now, in May 2013, a representative of the Lithuanian government has again been invited as an honored guest to address the fourth Global Forum. Are there no other, more worthy, countries to invite, when it comes to fighting anti-Semitism and unfair criticism of Israel? Was our criticism in December 2009 completely useless?

After the program for this month's conference was publicized, Efraim Zuroff, the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Israel office, said senior government officials from Lithuania, Greece, Hungary and Ireland should not be allowed to attend – much less speak at – the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism.

The opportunity to address the conference by visiting dignitaries should be a prize given to people who are leading the fight against anti-Semitism, and not to individuals representing countries in which the problem is among the worst in Europe, if not the worst.

This was not the first time that the well-known Nazi-hunter had drawn attention to this problem. In December 2009 Zuroff already criticized the invitation of the then Lithuanian Foreign Minister:

I am referring primarily to the invitation to Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Usackas to participate as a special guest of the forum, but also to the presence there of two right-wing Hungarian politicians, Zsolt Semjen and Zoltan Balog, both of whom have made very negative comments about Hungarian Jews.

It is somehow both predictable and shocking that high-ranking

representatives of these same countries, Lithuania and Hungary, are again slated to deliver speeches at the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism. They will, of course, not deal with the failures of their own countries since 2009. They will not apologize for a reburial – replete with military honors – of a minister who served in the Nazi puppet government of Lithuania. Nor will they change their radical nationalist policies, including anti-Semitism, in both countries like the equation of red and brown (“Prague Declaration”) or the toleration of anti-Semitic and far-right parties like Jobbik in Hungary.

The same holds for Greece. Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn was supported by Prime Minister Samaras and a member of that anti-Semitic party was elected by the Greek Parliament to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). A Hungarian extreme right politician from Jobbik was also elected to that very EU body. In March 2013 anti-Semitic and anti-Roma, racist journalist Ferenc Szaniszló was awarded a prestigious state-sponsored Hungarian award for journalists, the Táncsics prize, given under the auspices of Minister of “human resources.”

Why should Israel honor such countries and governments at an event dedicated solely to fighting anti-Semitism?

The Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism is probably the largest gathering of scholars, activists, politicians, philanthropists, citizens, bloggers, journalists and others in the pro-Israel and anti-anti-Semitism tent. But distortion of the Holocaust remains a key indicator for knowing who Israel’s true friends are, and who are its enemies. Ignoring this in 2013 is shortsighted and self-defeating, just as it was in 2009.