



THE PR OFFICE ^{PRO}

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Iceland's declaration of war on Judaism



Michael Freund

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Incredibly, the proposed law would not only ban the circumcision of male infants, but would criminalise the act and make it punishable by up to six years in prison.

Iceland's authorities might as well hang a large sign in the arrivals terminal at Reykjavik airport, saying "No Jews or Muslims allowed".

Indeed, the very idea of a European country aiming to outlaw a foundational Jewish religious rite that has been performed for millennia is both hair-raising

and heartbreaking and cannot be allowed to stand.

If you are wondering why a seemingly domestic Icelandic issue is worthy of making a big fuss, consider the possible ramifications beyond the tiny island.

As Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, correctly pointed out: "While the Jewish population in Iceland is small, we cannot ignore the dangerous precedent this sets within Europe and the implications it has on Jews' ability to carry out our religion in an open and free manner".

Simply put, should the bill become law, it will inevitably lead to similar measures in other European countries, which would deal a devastating blow to the right of every individual to serve his Creator as he or she sees fit.

Proponents of the measure claim that circumcising an infant violates the rights of the child, and that circumcision should only be performed once the boy is old enough to "understand what is involved

in such an action." The hypocrisy of this stance is as transparent as some of the glaciers and ice caps that cover more than 10 per cent of Iceland's land area.

After all, if the issue truly relates to the rights of the child, then why hasn't Iceland also taken steps to ban ear-piercing of youngsters by their parents?

The fact that some of Iceland's representatives have decided to single out circumcision rather than banning all forms of cosmetic procedures on children belies their assertion that it is intended purely to protect the young.

In addition, it is difficult not to view this episode as yet another example of mounting European antisemitism, albeit in the guise of defending children's rights.

Furthermore, given Iceland's treatment of Jews over the past 150 years, one would expect the country to tread a little more carefully.

In 1853, Iceland's parliament turned down a request by the king of Denmark to allow Jews to reside in the country. While this was reversed two years later,

that was only because Iceland wanted to entice Jewish merchants to immigrate in order to boost the economy.

Nearly a century later, in 1938, when Austrian Jews were trying to flee in the wake of the rise of Nazism, Iceland refused to allow them entry, callously leaving them to their fate.

During the Second World War, there were Icelanders in the Waffen SS who fought for Germany, while others served in concentration camps.

With such a dubious national record, Iceland should be ashamed of itself for even considering a ban on circumcision.

There can be no justification for remaining silent in the face of this antisemitic act.

It betrays Israel and world Jewry to take steps to underline the repercussions that would follow.

A boycott of travel to Iceland by itinerant Jewish tourists, as well as downgrading bilateral relations between Iceland and Israel, would be a good place to start.





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Publication: Al Arabiya

Date: 04.03.18

1/5



Top rabbi praises ‘refreshing’ Saudi remarks on ‘horrors of Holocaust’



In January, an **email** was sent by a top Muslim official in Saudi Arabia that made Jewish communities worldwide pause and take notice.

The message, addressed to the director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, has arguably become the **single most important development** in relations between Jewish and Muslim religious leaders in recent history.

In it, the head of the Riyadh-based Muslim World League, Dr. Mohammad al-Issa, acknowledged the “horrors of the Holocaust.”

The genocide “could not be denied or underrated by any fair-minded or peace-loving person,” Dr. al-Issa wrote.





Publication: Al Arabiya

Date: 04.03.18

2/5



Dr. Mohammad Alissa, Secretary General, Muslim World League, and the President of the International Organization of Muslim Scholars. (Supplied)

Reading the high-profile statement from his Munich headquarters was Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the President of the Conference of European Rabbis - the primary Orthodox rabbinical alliance in Europe.

Describing the remarks as "refreshing," Rabbi Pinchas tells Al Arabiya English how they were received in Europe.

"They marked a clear and welcomed break with the region's past," he says, adding that Dr. al-Issa managed to inverse a narrative commonly believed about the Middle East.

"The Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted in the creation of two distinct narratives of two people totally disconnected and ignorant of each other. Dr. al-Issa's gesture is an important step in the direction of the Muslim World understanding and accepting the narrative of Jewish history."

The catalyst for change

As well as being well-received among Jewish communities, some were able to **connect the dots**.

The statement had come against a backdrop of sweeping reforms in Saudi Arabia, which include a re-energized crackdown on hate speech and a pledge by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to **"destroy extremism and return to moderate Islam."**

Commenting on this, Rabbi Pinchas says he "wishes Prince Mohammed much success in his quest to define radicalism and bring back reason, moderation and peace to the Middle East."



Publication: Al Arabiya

Date: 04.03.18

3/5



Rabbi Pinchas gives examples of the work Muslim and Jewish leaders are doing together.

A crucial point within the rabbinical alliance's manifesto is that "religious communities should police themselves and lead the fight against religious radicalism," Pinchas says.

He believes interfaith communities can work across borders to achieve this, mentioning the Muslim-Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) - created to unite "leading Imams and Rabbis of Europe to coordinate the campaign for religious freedom and the fight against Islamophobia and anti-Semitism together."

The MJLC was, in fact, created with support from the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue – a Saudi-founded inter-governmental organization.

Pinchas gives an example of the work Muslim and Jewish leaders are doing together: "We are currently protesting the new Icelandic law criminalizing circumcision and our united voice is more effective."



"The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the most important conflict in the Middle East," Pinchas tells Al Arabiya English.

But amid efforts by religious leaders to pacify and integrate Jews and Muslims at a community level, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lingers at the forefront.

Rabbi Pinchas addresses this at length, but first points to Syria.

"Today, more people are killed in just one day in Syria, than during a whole year in the West Bank and Gaza," he says, despite this statement largely being dependent on the length and intensity of bombing campaigns across Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, which vary year to year.

But his point is this: "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the most important conflict in the Middle East.





Publication: Al Arabiya
Date: 04.03.18
4/5



"Nevertheless, the conflict remains, and it must be resolved," he says, providing three points on what he believes will facilitate peace.

They can be read within the full transcript of the interview below.

Full Interview with Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of Conference of European Rabbis

Al Arabiya English: The Saudi-based Muslim World League chief, Dr. Mohammad al-Issa, recently commented on the Holocaust. How was this high-profile statement viewed received among the international Jewish community?

In the context of the Middle East, where caricatures featuring Jews as Nazis are ubiquitous, and countries such as Iran host festivals to celebrate an exhibition of Holocaust caricatures and fugitive Nazi scientists are engaged in the Arab struggle against the young State of Israel, Dr. al-Issa's comments are refreshing as they mark a clear and welcomed break with the region's past.

AAE: Al-Issa recently agreed to visit tour the US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Is this an important step in the process of legitimizing Muslim discussion of the Holocaust?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted in the creation of two distinct narratives of two people totally disconnected and ignorant of each other. Dr. al-Issa's gesture is an important step in the direction of the Muslim World understanding and accepting the narrative of Jewish history.

AAE: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has recently discussed the need for the kingdom "return to moderate Islam," as part of efforts to "destroy extremism." What are your thoughts on this?

Everyone or almost everyone today is opposed to extremism. The question arises, however, of what divides moderate Islam and extreme Islam? Is it the Hijab, as defined by French and Belgian law? Or is it circumcision or the Halal slaughtering practice, as suggested by many European far right parties and secularists?

I don't believe so. The definition of extremism is very simple. It is the denial of a person's right to lead a dignified and liberated life, as defined by them, because of some form of coercion, be it through violence or other means.

Osama bin Laden was an extremist and taught an extremist interpretation of Islam. Because of him, the modern world is unrecognisable. Secret bank accounts are a relic of the past and airport security results in the need for innocent people to disrobe as airport staff are pressed to safety at all costs.

I wish Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman much success in his quest to define radicalism and bring back reason, moderation and peace to the Middle East.





Publication: Al Arabiya

Date: 04.03.18

5/5

AAE: To what extent do you believe religious communities must take the lead in tackling radicalization?

After the attack against Charlie Hebdo in 2015, the Conference of European Rabbis published a manifesto at the WEF in Davos proposing that religious communities should police themselves and lead the fight against religious Radicalism.

A. Religious leaders are the most important ingredient of a religious community. They must be educated in European schools, where respect and tolerance of difference is an integral part of the curriculum.

B. The donation dollar should be transparent and not come from organizations promoting extremism.

C. There should be an officer from within the congregation who is tasked with monitoring extremism. This is because it is only a scholar from within the faith community who can detect when traditional, religious texts are manipulated as a tool to recruit suicide bombers and terrorists.

We distributed our proposals throughout the EU and two countries, Austria and France, have incorporated these suggestions as the law of the land.

It is always the same story. When we do not self-regulate, the Government are forced to introduce new regulations.

I believe that it would be much better to have this as an accepted practice of religious communities rather than a state law.

AAE: In your view, can interfaith communities work together across borders to achieve this?

Yes, I believe they can do. Under the auspices of the KAICIID, we have created the MJLC, the Muslim-Jewish Leadership Council, uniting leading Imams and Rabbis of Europe to coordinate the campaign for religious freedom and the fight against Islamophobia and anti-Semitism Together, our voice is amplified and stronger. For example, we are currently protesting the new Icelandic law criminalising circumcision and our united voice is more effective.

AAE: What's your future visions for peace in the Middle East, do you predict any progress in the near future between the Israelis and Palestinians?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the most important and bloody conflict in the Middle East. Today, more people are killed in just one day in Syria, than during a whole year in the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, the conflict remains, and it must be resolved.

The following three points will facilitate the process of a peace settlement:

1. Strong leaders on both sides
2. The new Palestinian State should be based on sound economic footing, to ensure that it develops into stable country, such as Bahrain or United Arab Emirates, and not one that is poverty-stricken and conflicted, such as Sudan or Yemen.
3. A superpower should be positioned as guarantor for both sides as concessions are made for peace. At present, it seems that the US is very reluctant to play this role, and in the current political climate, I don't think that Russia or China can fill the US's shoes.





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Publication: Jewish Tribune
Date: 07.03.18

CER prize awardees named

Philip Fagel

The Conference of European Rabbis has named the awardees of two prizes in its forthcoming annual ceremony in Brussels. The Lord Jakobovits Prize of European Jewry will be conferred jointly on the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani and European Commission First Vice President Frans Timmermans. The recipient of the Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize is to be Ruta Vanagaite, the Lithuanian novelist who is credited with breaking taboos in Lithuanian society about collaboration during World War II.

The Lord Jakobovits Prize is to be

awarded to both President Antonio Tajani and Vice-President Timmermans for their long-term support of the Jewish community. They have fought tirelessly for an open and free Europe, and Vice-President Timmermans was influential in establishing an ombudsman focused solely on fighting anti-Semitism at a pan-European level. At a time of rising tension throughout Europe and as xenophobic ideologies are gaining momentum, the prize, which honours those who have shown support to European Jewry, has never been so important. King Felipe VI of Spain was the previous recipient of the award in 2016.

Novelist Ruta Vanagaite has been

honoured for her service to Holocaust remembrance as well as her series of novels that are changing perceptions about the role of the Lithuanian people's approach to Jews during WWII. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy won the first edition of the Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize in 2017.

President of the Conference of European Rabbis, Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, said: "It is an honour that we have three such prestigious recipients of our highest accolades. Vice-President Timmermans and President Tajani have both worked tirelessly to ensure that we can practise our religion in an open and tolerant society."

The prizes will be awarded on May 23rd in the Great Synagogue of Europe in Brussels, which survived the Holocaust and was dedicated as a focal point for European Jews in 2008.

Rabbi Riccardo diSegni, Chief Rabbi of Rome and Vice President of the CER, commented on this year's recipient of the Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize:

"Ruta Vanagaite's advocacy in Lithuania is unparalleled in bringing to the fore issues regarding the Holocaust in Lithuania. It is fitting that she is receiving the Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize as she too has faced backlash for her vital work."





Publication: Jewish Weekly
Date: 08.03.18



Lithuanian Author Ruta Vanagaite to be awarded the Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize

The Conference of European Rabbis is set to award its two most high-profile prizes in a ceremony in Brussels in May. The Lord Jakobovits Prize of European Jewry will be awarded jointly to President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani and European Commission First Vice President Frans Timmermans. The Rabbi Moshe Rosen prize is to be awarded to Ruta Vanagaite, the Lithuanian novelist who is credited with breaking taboos in Lithuanian society about collaboration during World War II.

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