



Institute for  
Freedom of Faith  
& Security in Europe



Conference of  
European Rabbis

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### ***For immediate release***

**(Munich – June 17, 2021) — Religious hatred often begins in schools. Today the Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security in Europe (IFFSE), initiated by the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), hosted a virtual meeting on how religious hatred can be countered in both schools and the educational sector.**

In the online discussion of the Institute for Freedom of Faith & Security in Europe (IFFSE) moderated by the prestigious security expert Peter Neumann, from King's College London, the President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER), Moscow's Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, spoke of a great shadow cast on Europe by religious hatred that is dangerous for society as a whole.

The Vice-President of the umbrella organisation of Jewish organisations in France (CRIF), Yonathan Arfi gave an insight into the situation in the French education sector. "Schools play a central role in the fight against religious hatred", Arfi stressed. In recent years, however, many Jewish pupils in France have switched to private schools. The background is stigmatisation and attacks. Arfi also recalled the attacks carried out by Mohammed Merah, who killed three Jewish children, their teacher and three soldiers in Toulouse in 2012.

Marcus Scheff, CEO of impact-SE, an organisation that analyses schoolbooks and curricula for compliance with UNESCO-defined standards on peace and tolerance, underlined the power that textbooks hold. "They can serve to either increase the tolerance or intolerance of societies". He looks with great concern at the Middle East region, especially at the Palestinian territories. "School books there are a blueprint for radicalisation and extremism", he warned. Values to be taught such as moderation, tolerance and peace-making are completely absent from these textbooks. Even though there has been progress in the curricula in the region and these values are being taken up by some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, there are still negative examples, Scheff underlined. In Turkey for instance, under President Erdogan, a radicalisation of the curriculum is taking place in which jihad is glorified in schools and an aggressive neo-Ottomanism is taught as a central value. Iranian textbooks call for the demonisation of Jews and Israel and convey Iran's hegemonic claim in the region.

Monika Hohlmeier, member of the European Parliament and former special rapporteur of the Committee on Terrorism, condemned the Palestinian Authority's failure to act against incitement in textbooks and insisted that educators receiving EU-funds abide by UNESCO standards against hate. She called on the EU's executive body to ensure funds promote peace and tolerance in schools. "It has to be ensured that all third entities only use Union funds to provide for textbooks and teaching material that reflect common values and fully comply with UNESCO standards promoting peace, tolerance and co-existence in school education". She emphasised that teaching tolerance should be a priority for every European government, and that no government should allow this vital task to be "outsourced" to third countries.

Yonathan Arfi illustrated how important it is to overcome stereotypical narratives and also to convey historical contexts correctly, using the example of how the Holocaust is addressed in French schools. Teachers often reported that they encountered protests from pupils during lessons on the Holocaust, Arfi explained. Many students had the impression that enough is enough with the memory of Nazi crimes. "But there is a need for exchange, also about the commemoration of historical events," he

warned. Moreover, Jews are often treated only as victims; their positive contributions to French and European culture are rarely a topic at schools.

In general, the issue of hate and false narratives in the educational sector continues to be underestimated. It requires an urgent change of course across the education sector and more engagement.

Peter Rosengard, who founded and chairs Since 9/11, a UK charity which teaches students about the events, causes, and consequences of 9/11, demanded that teaching tolerance and harmony, respect and peaceful coexistence should be the basis of any curriculum. “Just as we are currently vaccinating the world against Covid-19, we must also vaccinate the world against hatred”, he said.

“The most important goal of school education must be to convey a sense of complexity to reconquer lost territories in schools”, Yonathan Arfi pointed out. This also applies to current topics such as the Middle East conflict.

“Education is a crucial key, because everything in life is shaped by the impressions and experiences one gathers as a child”, Chief Rabbi Goldschmidt said. “At the same time, it must be ensured that religious education does not hurt any child, but takes other faiths into account”. The President of the Conference of European Rabbis called also for a better education of religious leaders. “Hate and false narratives increase the danger of growing extremism and terrorism. Therefore, not only students but also religious leaders must be taught the fundamental principles and values of Europe”, he underlined.

**END**

#### **About IFFSE**

The newly founded Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security in Europe (IFFSE) is a joint initiative of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) and brings together Europe’s leading thinkers and policymakers to discuss ideas for combating religious extremism and terrorism over here. As an interdisciplinary think tank, IFFSE aims to strengthen social cohesion, security and tolerance in Europe. This will be achieved through the promotion of peaceful coexistence, integration and positive citizenship; fostering moderate religious practices and safeguarding religious freedoms; mobilising religious leaders to play an active role in improving the security of their communities and countering the abuse of religion; collaborating with governments, civil society and the private sector to combat hate crime, extremism, radicalisation and terrorism both on and off-line.

More information on IFFSE: <https://iffse.eu/>

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