Why we need Deborah Lipstadt as U.S. special envoy to combat anti-Semitism

Opinion

By Menachem Z. Rosensaft

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It was bound to happen. Even though neither the Russian invasion of Ukraine nor the heroic Ukrainian resistance to the invasion is in any way, in the words of a much-overused phrase, a “Jewish issue,” someone was bound to blame “the Jews” for the carnage.

Addressing a recent conference of the Pan African Solidarity Network in Dakar, Senegal, South African National Assembly member Nkosi Zwelivedile Mandela, a grandson of Nelson Mandela’s, declared that the “drums of war in Ukraine” were beaten by the ever-popular (but utterly fictional) “global military-industrial complex” that includes “neo-Nazis in Ukraine,” NATO members “intent on advancing cold war politics,” and, wait for it, “the Apartheid Israel dogs of war.”

Never mind that Israel had nothing whatsoever to do with the Russian invasion, which Mandela chose not to even mention. Never mind that Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has tried to end the bloodshed by being an intermediary between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. Mandela and other anti-Semites like him — and make no bones about it, Mandela is an anti-Semite — won’t let facts get in the way of their hatred of Jews.

But wait, Mandela referred to Israel, not to Jews. Except of course, to paraphrase World Jewish Congress President Ronald S. Lauder’s question to the late Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez, who does anyone think lives in Israel? Martians? The fact is that the obsessive demonization of the State of Israel has become one of the 21st century’s principal incarnations of increasingly unrestrained anti-Semitism.

Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi, a senior leader of Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi movement, is even more explicit in his virulent Jew-hatred. Speaking on Lebanese television, he declared: “I think that what happened in Ukraine is the result of the evil-doing of the Jews. This is proof that when a Jew is the leader of a country, it results in war.”

Mandela and Al-Houthi are far from alone. Jewish university and college students are being terrorized on campuses around the world by pro-Palestinian — read anti-Israel — activists, including professors and lecturers, who attack them viciously for merely wanting to identify
as Jews. Universities in the United Kingdom, to give only one representative example, reported 111 anti-Semitic incidents for the 2020-2021 academic year, as opposed to 70 during 2019-2020. “Jewish people are unfairly targeted all the time and it is exhausting just presenting as Jewish on campus,” said one student.

The UK experience is reflected in other countries. According to one recent report, 2021 saw an average of more than 10 anti-Semitic incidents every day around the world, with more than half of these occurring in Europe. The report noted that expressions of anti-Jewish bigotry now also included “anti-Semitic conspiracy theories accusing Jews as spreaders of the pandemic to control the world.”

The carnage taking place in Ukraine and the resulting refugee crisis are certain to make an already distressingly bad situation significantly worse. The ADL points out that: “Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, extremists and anti-Semites across the ideological spectrum have used the war as fodder for promoting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Emanating from classic anti-Semites and white supremacists, as well as QAnon influencers and Proud Boys acolytes, classic tropes of Jewish power, financial control and ‘abuse’ of the Holocaust narrative abound online. In just a few short weeks, tens of thousands of social media users have been exposed to these dangerous lies.”
All of which brings me to the reason for this article. Seven months ago, President Biden nominated historian Deborah Lipstadt to serve as U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. Virtually every American Jewish leader and organization of consequence has enthusiastically endorsed her appointment.

But because this position has been elevated to the rank of ambassador, it requires Senate confirmation. Despite the fact that Lipstadt, a highly respected and widely admired scholar with impeccable academic credentials, enjoys broad bipartisan support, her nomination has been stalled in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by one senator who is offended by a single tweet for which she has apologized.

In the interest of full disclosure, I do not write as an uninterested observer. I have known Lipstadt for over 35 years and we are friends. We served together on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, and she has graciously written blurbs for two of my books. And it is precisely because I know her well that I am able to vouch not only for her intelligence and accomplishments but, as important if not even more important, her absolute decency and uncompromising integrity.

“Jew-hatred can be found across the entire political spectrum,” Lipstadt said at her confirmation hearing. “One finds it among Christians, Muslims, atheists and sadly, even a handful of Jews. One finds it in Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and even in countries with no Jews. I am an equal-opportunity foe of anti-Semitism. Unless one is willing to fight Jew-hatred wherever one finds it, one should not be a nominee for this position.”

Given the ever-growing threat posed by white supremacists, neo-Nazis, Jihadists, Holocaust distorting conspiracy theorists, and other anti-Semites, it is imperative for Deborah Lipstadt to be allowed to serve in this position. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee should report her out without further delay so that she can be confirmed by the full Senate.

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