



Testimony of
Rabbi Yosef Konikov
Chabad of South Orlando
on
The Nonprofit Security Grant Program
and Protecting Houses of Worship:
A View from the American Jewish Community

Before a Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Response and Recover
And the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism

of the
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives

February 8, 2022

Thank you for allowing me to participate in today's hearing, and thanks also to our own House Representative, Chair Val Demings, for inviting me, and for all she does for our district and our great country.

My name is Rabbi Yosef Konikov, I am the senior rabbi at the Chabad Center for Jewish Life, serving the South Orlando Community.

22 years ago, I arrived here to further the mission of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, of sacred memory, who was actually honored by this Congress with its highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal, in 1994.

That mission, in which I engage together with thousands of colleagues across all 50 states, is to share the Torah's message of love for others, unity, kindness, charity and faith.

Today, at our center, people of all ages and from all backgrounds and walks of life, come to find strength, meaning and encouragement, to study, be inspired, and derive a true sense of community.

We are well known for our non-judgmental approach and accessibility.

This has been very exciting for me, especially since my own grandfather, also a rabbi, tried to do the same in Soviet Russia years ago, but was restricted, even persecuted, for his mere practice of faith. As antisemitism and communism didn't allow him to practice his religion openly, he fled to these shores, and thankfully found a wonderful country, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we can live in peace, and practice our religion freely and with pride, without fear or danger.

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But sadly, new realities are echoing the dangers of the last generation, albeit this time not from the government, but radicals and prejudiced misguided citizens. And these realities are causing many members of our community, and I know many others as well, to suddenly feel uncomfortable and even afraid to visit our center and enjoy its many offerings. And well beyond our own centers, I know people in today's

climate actually hesitate to openly observe our religion, to study with us, or just to come by to get inspired.

Suddenly, we've become occupied with trying to calm people from their immediate fears of physical threats. Each new attack on a place of worship only exacerbates their fears.

When I decided to be a rabbi, I never envisioned that contending with physical threats would be a part of my spiritual mission in the USA!

Take, for example, the recent attack on Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. The first reaction I heard from our community members was: "I'm so worried about them. My heart goes out to them."

But the next thing I typically heard was: "Rabbi, that could have been us!"

Indeed, there has been a disproportionate amount of incidents at facilities led and operated by my colleagues across the US.

And sadly, these events keep people away from Synagogue. They make people hesitate before bringing their kids to a place that is in truth the healthiest place for a child. This is so unfortunate.

(This is so unfortunate, especially given the zoom option for so many of the events during the week which we normally have in person, and our struggle to bring people back personally.)

Too often, people call me, and say: "Rabbi, I just want to check if the guard is there today, otherwise, I won't come."

As for us in Orlando, we not only read about antisemitism and hate, we, at Chabad of s Orlando, are regrettably on the front line of these incidents with too often hate crimes, bomb threats and more.

For example, just 2 weeks ago, in Orlando, Neo Nazis displayed flags, Nazi paraphernalia, attacked a motorist, used pepper spray on people and caused general security alerts.

Just a few months ago, this same group stationed themselves in front of our own Chabad Center for 3 hours, demonstrating with swastikas, other antisemitic signs and hateful speech, yelling and cursing, including making threats on loudspeakers, all with the sinister intention to intimidate and frighten everyone entering and exiting our Chabad Center, including many small innocent children.

Thankfully, law enforcement arrived. We would have wished they would send them away, but at least they were present and prevented any harm coming to our community members.

ADL's most recent Audit of Antisemitic Incidents in the United States recorded more than 2,100 acts of assault, vandalism and harassment, an increase of 12 percent over the previous year.

Our Center has been victim to other horrible real online threats, including, a series of phone threats, which have been swiftly and efficiently dealt with thanks to the sterling work of the FBI.

Just this week, as we were trying to give out free food to families with children, a woman who was volunteering on the car pick-up drive-through, turned to me and said: "Rabbi, I don't think this is safe. Anyone can drive through here and cause harm". Trying to reassure her, I responded: "You might be taking this too far. Someone can also do harm on your way home."

She responded: "I'm not afraid at home. I'm afraid here."

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The United States must help its citizens be protected, so they can practice their religion freely. Indeed, this is a cornerstone of the founding of this great nation.

As highly visible Jewish sites with the largest infrastructure of synagogues and educational and social centers across the US (over 2500 centers in all 50 states, more than 200 in the State of Florida

alone), the Chabad-Lubavitch movement represents and is regularly responsible for the spiritual welfare of millions, of men, women, and children at our sites and programs which impact and enhance communities in cities across our nation.

We need - better security, to help us, our congregants, and the wider community, as well as other communities around the country - deter, detect, delay and even defend ourselves from those who wish to cause us harm.

The NSGP grant is an amazing program, but it is a very competitive grant, and fewer than half of applicant sites were awarded nationally last year, in FY21.

We did receive the grant in FY2020, then COVID hit, and red tape has caused delays. Despite the award, we have not been able to implement the grant. In any event, one cycle/award is not enough to install all the physical items we need, even basically, or to cover the cost of licensed armed security officers. We have a great team helping us process the grant, FDEM – (The FL Dept of Emergency Management) has been very helpful but there are too many delays from FEMA and we remain unprotected and vulnerable as we were before the grant was awarded, a grant for which we remain grateful.

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So, to help improve this situation nationwide, and for all communities, we recommend Congress consider initial partial advances of funds to kickstart implementation of measures by approved parties. Although it is officially a reimbursement grant, advances (as are offered in Section E of the grant agreement) should be offered and allowed in order to accelerate the process.

It can hardly be overemphasized how time is of the essence in this matter and addressing it properly and effectively.

There should be solid time restrictions and scrutiny of FEMA and FDEM response times.

And a 36 month period of performance could be shortened if advances are not allowed.

At present, there is too much back and forth between FEMA and FDEM, and not enough consistency in requirements or clarity on documentation or format.

As the threat to houses of worship and other qualified venues increases, so too should the funding to keep our cities and communities safe. \$180 million appropriated FY2021 by congress was met by \$400 million in applications.

Perhaps \$500 million should be appropriated to protect these sites and ensure security for the homeland.

Additionally, it is important for local law enforcement to know there will be resources available to them should an incident require more response than they are prepared for under regular circumstances. Too often, it is understood from colleagues that there has been underwhelming response locally due to limited resources. And the perpetrators sense the soft response, which fails to discourage them as much as it should.

An emphasis by the Government about willingness to make resources available to change that, complete with oversight about its implementation, could go a long way.

I appreciate that our representatives in Washington, American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad) maintain close contact with officials at the Department of Homeland Security, SCN, the Conference of Presidents and other relevant contributors to a strong support for development and implementation of these programs. And we, across the nation, need this strength now more than ever.

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To quote The Rebbe again, who guided world Jewry and the post Holocaust generation through continued threats of antisemitism

worldwide and fear of annihilation of Jews in Israel, and always declared that Am Yisrael Chai, the Jewish people will survive and grow ever stronger and our trust in G-d is to remain steadfast:

Standing with the anticipation for a brighter era of world peace, the biblical promised time of redemption and tranquility, he said, we must stand proud and strong and continue to be the shining light and moral compass for the world around us.

And he repeatedly implored the government of the United States, built on the principles of faith, trust in G-d and justice, to stand by our side and the side of all its citizens to secure our rights to live in peace and without any fear of those who wish for our demise.

I stand here today as a representative of every Jew and shoulder to shoulder with every peace-loving citizen of this great nation to urge our leaders, our Government and its agencies to significantly increase its efforts and do everything in its power to secure our safety and our freedom so that we may continue to be a light to the nations in tranquility and in peace.

We hope to live in peace, as written in the Bible (Kings 1, 5:5), a passage quoted by our founding president George Washington to the early Jewish community in the United States, "Each shall live under his vine and fig tree and no man shall be afraid".

I eagerly await the fulfillment of the prophecy when "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and the world will know war no more." A time when there will be no hatred nor jealousy. "And the world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d", speedily in our days.

Thank you for your time, and for allowing me to share my thoughts and suggestions.

Rabbi Yosef Y. Konikov

Born in Worcester, MA, Rabbi Yosef Konikov received his Rabbinical Ordination with distinction from the Central Lubavitch Yeshiva of the United States in 1997, as well as from the Rabbinical College of Canada and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. He has served as a Community Rabbinic Intern in Sydney, Australia, as well as several locations in the United States, Europe and Africa.

While in Sydney, he created and established an acclaimed multimedia Theatrical Exodus Experience about the Biblical Jewish Exodus from Egypt, which has since become a popular Passover entertainment module, offered annually in many cities around the world.

In 1999, together with his wife Chani, he founded the Chabad Center in South Orlando, which includes a thriving Hebrew School that grew to the point of necessitating a second location, a large Preschool, the popular local "Gan Israel" Summer camp, and many other innovative and educational programs and activities benefitting local Jews and innumerable tourists. In 2009, he also founded what is today's leading private Jewish elementary school there.

An outstanding scholar and published rabbinic author and a scion of a prominent rabbinical and cantorial family, Rabbi Konikov is a founding member and senior executive of the Rabbinate of Central Florida, or RCF, which facilitates Kosher supervision and other important Jewish communal needs.

And in 2006, he successfully defended his right to practice religion by holding a Minyan prayer service in his Orange County home, the subject of a landmark court case. The United States Department of Justice intervened and became a joining party with the rabbi in "Konikov vs. Orange County FL". Today, Konikov's ruling by the United States Court of Appeals for The Eleventh Circuit in the above case is quoted in text books and by many courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rabbi Konikov and his wife, Chani (nee Borenstein), reside in South Orlando, along with their 7 children.

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