

# Teaching the Holocaust in the Arab World

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Apr 12, 2021

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Ali al-Nuaimi is chairman of Hedayah, the UAE's leading institution in the fight to counter violent extremism.



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El Mehdi Boudra is founder and chairman of Mimouna, an organization of Moroccan Muslims committed to preserving the culture and heritage of the country's Jewish community.



Brief Analysis

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**A remarkable panel of Arab educators, activists, and civic leaders share their experiences with breaking regional taboos and formulating effective ways to teach youths about genocide.**

**O**n April 8, Holocaust Remembrance Day (*Yom HaShoah*), The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Ali al-Nuaimi, Zeina Barakat, and El Mehdi Boudra. Nuaimi is chairman of Hedayah, the UAE's leading institution in the fight to counter violent extremism. Barakat is academic coordinator for the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Europa-Universität Flensburg. Boudra is founder of Mimouna, an organization of Moroccan Muslims committed to preserving the heritage of the country's Jewish community. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Ali al-Nuaimi

**M**emorializing the victims of the Holocaust is crucial. Although the global community should reflect on how successful it has been at implementing justice for the victims, the fact is that hate motivated by religion, race, and ethnicity continues to materialize around the world. What is needed is a new narrative that targets the hearts and minds of all, especially the new generation. For instance, an international summit could be organized to discuss how to overcome failures on this issue.

In the Arab world, the older generation operated in an environment where speaking about the Holocaust was tantamount to betraying Arabs and Palestinians. Public figures failed to speak the truth because a political agenda hijacked their narrative. Yet a tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust targets not only Jews, but humanity as a whole. Therefore, public figures and scholars should be encouraged to discuss the Holocaust and protect common human values while leaving political differences aside. Morocco was one of the first movers in this direction, followed by small initiatives in Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

Going forward, all stakeholders in educational, religious, and community leadership need to be engaged on this issue. In the UAE, the minister of education formed a committee that decided to include the history of the Holocaust in school curricula starting with the next academic year, in autumn 2021. The UAE has also planned conferences where Holocaust survivors can share their experiences with Arabs. Such ideas can help officials and citizens take hold of the narrative and raise awareness among a younger generation that is open to inclusive peace and understanding. They can also bolster efforts to overcome extremist activities aimed at dividing the Middle East and negating the peace process.

In the wake of the Abraham Accords, young Emiratis have been engaging with Israelis on their own initiative using social media platforms such as Clubhouse. These interactions have gone beyond online networking and materialized in the real world, leading Israeli visitors to come to the Emirates. The UAE is striving to engage with the rest of the region, promote a new model of cooperation with Israelis, and foster a society that prizes diversity. The region and its allies should capitalize on the momentum generated by the peace accords and proactively engage stakeholders through platforms such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization.

## Zeina Barakat

**I**t is important for Palestinians to learn about the Holocaust, but several obstacles have prevented this from happening. One key problem is that there is not enough literature on the Holocaust in Arabic, so anti-Semitic books have filled the vacuum.

Other obstacles unique to the Palestinian case relate to the reality of occupation as well as issues connected to education, religion, psychology, and society. Palestinians believe that studying the Nakba—their term for the “disaster” of 1948—should precede education on the Holocaust. They also view the Holocaust as one of the causes behind the ongoing problem of Palestinian displacement, conflict, and resentment. Indeed, Palestinian society continues to suffer psychologically from the wounds of defeat in 1948 and 1967. Moreover, religious education continues to present Islam and Judaism as irreconcilable, while Holocaust education advocates are marginalized in Palestinian society, even suffering threats and attacks.

Despite these obstacles, experience has shown that taking active measures to overcome them can change minds about the Holocaust. For example, when Palestinian students were taken on a series of visits to Auschwitz and Buchenwald, they were moved by what they saw and gained empathy for victims and the horror of their experience. They also learned that one can appreciate different tragedies in their own context, and that comparing the Holocaust with the Nakba is a mistake because they are fundamentally different experiences. Educating Palestinians about the Holocaust helps them respect historical truth, understand the need to avoid repeating such tragedies, and fight anti-Semitism.

To further advance Holocaust awareness and impede the spread of extremism, Arab countries should include mandatory courses on Holocaust education and invest in museums to enlighten the public about genocide and mass atrocity. For their part, civil society organizations should organize activities that connect people from diverse backgrounds to fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Likewise, the religious establishment needs to improve religious literacy and awareness on this issue.

Lastly, given that the Holocaust remains a taboo topic for many Palestinians, it is important to present students with well-researched literature and contextualize the event within the larger history of genocide. This historical contextualization makes it easier for Palestinian youths to break the taboo and discuss the topic. Palestinians need to internalize the notion that empathizing with victims of genocide—including Jews, who were the principal victims of the Holocaust—does not mean sacrificing their pursuit of justice for their own cause.

## El Mehdi Boudra

The Jewish community in Morocco has deep historical roots, allowing Muslims and Jews to coexist there in relative peace for years. During the Second World War, the country hosted Jewish refugees from Europe.

Despite these good relations, however, Holocaust denial was able to penetrate the younger generation in Morocco. To counter such sentiments, public figures and civil society organizations worked to reshape the narrative. In 2009, King Mohammed VI became the first Arab leader to openly recognize and condemn the Holocaust as a dark chapter in human history. Meanwhile, Moroccan organizations such as Mimouna have organized campaigns, curricula, and conferences to raise awareness about the Holocaust and educate Muslims. This experience could serve as a foundation for educational efforts in the wider Arab world—there is now greater space in Morocco and abroad for nonstate actors to change the narrative on Holocaust history, a stage previously dominated by government-controlled voices.

Another obstacle to spreading awareness in the Arab world is that many residents see the Holocaust as an isolated bit of European history rather than understanding the global treatment of Jews during the Second World War. Yet even as countries seek to educate Muslims about the Holocaust, they also need to educate Jews and other people about Muslims who saved refugees during that time. The younger generation needs more tools to properly understand the event—not just translations of Western works that tell the story of the extermination of European Jews by European fascists, but also books that tell stories from the Arab world, using Arabic idioms to explain what happened in Arab countries during the Holocaust.

Social media platforms in Morocco present another challenge given the prevalence of online hate speech and anti-Semitism. Accordingly, young people should be encouraged to create their own content, and popular public figures should visit Holocaust sites and make statements condemning hate and anti-Semitism—all of which can have a very powerful impact on youths.

Lastly, Arabs and Muslims are deeply moved by stories of terrible humanitarian disasters affecting Muslims around the world, such as the mass atrocities in China, Syria, and Burma. Therefore, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Mimouna are jointly organizing an exhibit that will showcase the Holocaust alongside other cases of genocide as a shared human tragedy.

*This summary was prepared by Ilari Papa. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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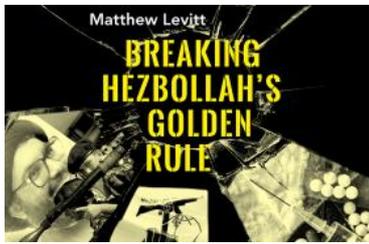
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