

“The Holocaust Was an Arab Story Too”: Holocaust Remembrance in the Arab World

المحرقة كانت قصة عربية أيضاً: إحياء ذكرى "الهولوكوست" في العالم العربي

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

The Washington Institute’s executive director reflects on this year’s wave of remembrance events in the region, including his remarks at two landmark programs in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

From Rabat to Manama, this week saw an unprecedented series of events marking the UN-recognized International Holocaust Remembrance Day in cities across the Arab world. The first-ever official commemoration occurred in Cairo on January 24, cosponsored by the U.S. embassy and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Ambassador Jonathan R. Cohen [delivered remarks \(https://eg.usembassy.gov/ambassador-cohens-remarks-to-commemorate-international-holocaust-remembrance-day/\)](https://eg.usembassy.gov/ambassador-cohens-remarks-to-commemorate-international-holocaust-remembrance-day/) at the event, along with USHMM director of international educational programs Tad Stahnke and head of the Cairo Jewish community Magda Haroun.

On January 27, the first-ever event with Arab ministerial participation was held in Abu Dhabi, cosponsored by the Emirati Ministry of Culture and Youth, the U.S. embassy, the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA), and USHMM. Remarks were delivered by Emirati minister of culture and youth Noura al-Kaabi, Israeli ambassador Amir Hayek, U.S. charge d’affaires Sean Murphy, AGDA program director Nickolay Mladenov, and USHMM’s Tad Stahnke.

A featured element of both programs was the local premiere of *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust’s Long Reach into Arab Lands*, a [2010 documentary \(https://youtu.be/-H5N36UViqI\)](https://youtu.be/-H5N36UViqI) first broadcast in the United States on PBS. Shot on four continents and based on [the book of the same name \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/among-righteous-lost-stories-holocausts-long-reach-arab-lands\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/among-righteous-lost-stories-holocausts-long-reach-arab-lands), the film chronicles Dr. Robert Satloff’s search for Arabs [who protected Jews](#)

<https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/among-the-righteous>)

during the Nazi, Vichy, and Fascist persecution campaigns in North Africa, shedding new light on the wider history of Arab-Jewish relations during World War II.

Dr. Satloff delivered [remarks in Arabic \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/almhrqt-kant-qst-rbyt-aydaan-ahya-dhkry-alhwlwkwst-fy-alalm-alrby\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/almhrqt-kant-qst-rbyt-aydaan-ahya-dhkry-alhwlwkwst-fy-alalm-alrby) after each film screening. The following is an English translation:

The Holocaust Was an Arab Story Too

For me, this event is the culmination of twenty years of effort. Twenty years ago next month, I moved with my late wife and children from Washington to Morocco and began the adventure you saw on this film. This was five months after the attacks of September 11—at a time when many Americans were moving west, we were moving east. It was an unforgettable experience.

I traveled with a mission: to learn what really happened in Arab countries during the three years that Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Vichy France controlled North Africa.

I traveled with an idea: that within this history, there were lost stories of Arabs who saved Jews from persecution and death.

And I traveled with a hope: that those positive stories, along with the full picture of the different roles that Arabs played during that terrible time, would unlock the door to an honest, open, candid discussion with Arabs about the Holocaust. That is because only with an honest, open, candid discussion—such as the one we are having today—can we fulfill the requirement that the United Nations has set out for this day: to remember what happened and to recommit ourselves to the promise of “Never Again.”

As you can see, I learned that the Holocaust was an Arab story too. When I say that, let me be clear—I do not mean that Arabs have responsibility for the Holocaust. That is false and wrong—it is slanderous. The Nazis are responsible, along with their collaborators and partners.

What I mean is that a story whose main setting was in Europe also happened in Arab lands—racial laws, confiscation of property, forced labor, hostage taking, deportation, execution. And that, just as in Europe, ordinary people in Arab lands played roles. A certain number helped the persecutors, a larger number watched from the sidelines, and a small group risked their lives to protect Jews. In fact, based on my research, the percentage of rescuers compared to the total number of Jews killed in Arab lands was almost exactly the same—no more, no less—than it was among Europeans.

Why is this important? We know that the core lesson of the Holocaust is universal: that genocide can happen anywhere, and that we need to act early against hate and intolerance before it becomes a source of violence and terror. I believe these stories are important because they show that the history on which this lesson is based is, in many ways, universal too.

[In Cairo]

Think of Egypt—a great country with a full, rich history. One chapter of that history is the Battle of al-Alamein, one of the most pivotal moments of World War II. As we now know, it is a moment that meant the difference between life and death for tens of thousands of Egyptian Jews.

[In Abu Dhabi]

Think of the Emirates, a young country only now celebrating fifty years since its founding. But your country now sits on the United Nations Security Council and shares with some of the world’s oldest countries the same profound

obligation that has motivated leaders since the organization was founded in the ashes of the world war and the Holocaust.

We all can learn from the horror, the evil, and the tragedy as well as from the courage, the faith, and the hope. And together, we can work to fulfill the promise of “Never Again.”

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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