

Interview: Robert Satloff

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Articles & Testimony

Charley J. Levine interviewed Robert Satloff for the April 2007 issue of Hadassah Magazine. The following is the text of that interview.

Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, is a leading expert on Arab affairs and United States-Middle East relations. His recent book, [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories of the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands \(/node/7873\)](#) (Public Affairs), has generated worldwide interest, including among Muslims. Based on Satloff's research, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, has nominated Tunisian Khalid Abdul Wahhab for recognition as a Righteous Gentile. He will be the first Arab ever confirmed for such status.

Q. Why has the world focused so little on the Holocaust in North Africa?

A. The Holocaust, for understandable reasons, has been understood principally as a European phenomenon: Fascists led by the Germans exterminating European Jews. Only in the last couple of years [have] survivors from North Africa begun to receive recognition and the opportunity for compensation from the German government.

Q. Which North African countries were affected?

A. The principal areas [controlled by Germany, Vichy France and Fascist Italy] were Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya. There were no extermination camps, but the persecution that existed in Europe in all the other ways extended to [Jews in] these countries. For example, there are only two places...where Jews were stripped of their citizenship: Germany and Algeria.

Q. Can you offer specific cases?

A. Quotas on Jewish students in school were more severe in North Africa than they were in France. There were over 100 labor camps in these countries [to which] thousands of Jews were sent. The yellow star was imposed in Tunis. There were confiscations, deportations, executions. Numerically, however, it doesn't begin to compare to the experience in Europe.

Q. Why were North African Jews able to escape relatively unscathed?

A. First, the war was over in [North Africa] by mid-1943, so there was simply less time to implement genocide. Second, to have transported Jews to the European death camps, one would have [had] to send them by air or ship them across the Mediterranean, which [was] impossible in wartime. However, there is extremely compelling evidence to suggest that if the war [had] taken a different turn, the Jews in this part of the world would have shared the same fate as the Jews in Europe.

Q. Was the Arab populace generally supportive of Nazi goals, neutral or friendly to Jews?

A. Regarding Holocaust guilt, I am quite clear. The answer is no: Arabs did not live in countries where they controlled their national decisions, nor did Arabs en masse collaborate. A majority were indifferent.

Q. Did the Germans have collaborators in North Africa?

A. There was an incredibly large minority who participated, who were perpetrators and collaborators. At all levels of government, from senior positions to ordinary people, virtually none of the labor camps could have operated if they didn't have Arab guards, trains that took Jews to labor camps, Arabs working them. Local Arabs also went door to door with SS squads in Tunisia pointing out where Jews lived. [However,] there was indeed the third group, obviously smaller in number, who decided to help or even to rescue Jews. My book focuses on what choice individual Arabs did make.

Q. How did you discover an "Arab Schindler"?

A. Khalid Abdul Wahhab lived in the Tunisian coastal town of Mahdia. He was a leader of the town who took it upon himself to be one of the interlocutors [with] the occupying powers. He met a German officer who was planning on raping a Jewish woman. The woman and her family had already been evicted from their home and had sought refuge with several other families in an olive press factory. Khalid got there late at night and banged on the door insisting the family go immediately with him. For the rest of the evening, he ferried them back and forth in his car, [getting] everyone in that factory to a farm he owned. He kept them there for six weeks until the end of the German occupation.

Q. How did you uncover this story?

A. It was initially told to me by the then-11-year-old daughter of the woman in question. The woman was living in a retirement complex outside Los Angeles. I was living in Morocco. I hired a professional interviewer from the Shoah Foundation to take her testimony. I went to Mahdia and found her childhood friends. They told me, yes, Khalid Abdul Wahhab took the family off to the farm.... Later, I met someone from one of the other families to whom Khalid also provided refuge.

Q. Why have we never learned this chapter of history?

A. First, we didn't look too hard. Next, Arabs don't tell this side of the story and certainly they didn't want to be identified as those who rescued Jews. And so this part of history is largely airbrushed from Arab history books. Arabs are also prevented from understanding their history by their authoritarian governments.

Q. Are there deeper historical complexities at play here?

A. Finding such heroes could have a powerful political value for both Arabs and Jews. For Arabs, the idea of recognition of righteous Arabs confounds the deniers.... It also empowers those people who are subject more than anything else to ignorance more than conscious denial. Among Jews, Israelis, it offers a more real understanding of Arab choices during the Holocaust.

Q. What do you think drives the Holocaust denial of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

A. The common Muslim narrative is that Israel was created as a way to expiate European guilt. Many Muslims don't want to discuss the Holocaust at all, since it is a slippery slope: If you start discussing the Holocaust, you end up validating Israel. [According to the Muslim way of thinking,] even if one agrees there was a Holocaust, it was the Europeans who were guilty, yet it was Muslims who paid the price. By arguing the Europeans don't have anything to be guilty of, Iran means that no one has to feel guilty when they destroy Israel.

Q. Can it work?

A. We should take it very seriously. Ahmadinejad is not just the most brazenly anti-Semitic leader since World War

II, and not just someone talking about exterminating another member state of the United Nations, which should be a threat to all member states. He is the head of a country of 80 million people, a serious industrial power telling the world he has the motive, he has the intention and he is...trying to acquire the means.

Q. Do authoritarian Arab regimes make your message much harder to disseminate in those societies?

A. There are reasons to think that people of good will in Arab countries may take a second look, may recognize that they don't want to be in the same Holocaust denial boat as Ahmadinejad. I just spent three...remarkable days in Cairo. I gave several public lectures, four nationally televised interviews and even an address in Arabic at an official meeting of the Arab League. This meant many of the Arab League ambassadors heard my message concerning the Arab role in the Holocaust and the importance of this for Arab education, genocide prevention and why this should be in Arab educational curricula.

Q. How were you received?

A. I don't want to exaggerate; people didn't throw rose petals when I was walking through Cairo's streets. There was very heated discussion. The Syrian ambassador got up and said let's talk about the real genocide -- against the Palestinians. But the bottom line is, this is progress. This is a conversation that hasn't happened in 60 years in these countries. ❖

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