

Why Arabs Should Learn About the Holocaust

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Articles & Testimony

The vow of “never again” taken by virtually all nations after the Second World War remains unfulfilled.

I recently left Cairo with a team from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum after convening a series of Holocaust remembrance events in the region. These events were held with Emirati and Egyptian partners in the context of the official Holocaust commemoration day set by the UN.

At one of the events, organized with the Egyptian group Drop of Milk, Ruth Cohen—a spry 92-year-old survivor of the Auschwitz death camp—told her story of courage, resilience and hope to a group of 40 Egyptian students at the historic Adly Street Synagogue. At another event, co-sponsored by the American and German embassies, Cohen was joined by celebrated Egyptian physician Dr. Nasser Kotby, who told the audience the inspiring story of his uncle, Dr. Mohammed Helmy, the only Arab officially recognized for risking his life to save Jews during the Holocaust.

These events in Egypt followed two others in the UAE. One was in Abu Dhabi, where the minister of culture hosted the Emirates’ second annual Holocaust remembrance event with students at Zayed University. The other was in Dubai, where Cohen shared her personal story with members of the small but growing Jewish community at a festive Sabbath dinner in a prominent hotel.

Indeed, these events are the latest in more than a decade of effort by the museum to build partnerships across the Middle East to engage local Arab communities in discussion of the relevant lessons of the Holocaust. From Morocco to Saudi Arabia, the museum has worked with scholars, experts, journalists, government officials and civil society leaders to make sure that Arabs are part of the vibrant global conversation about the continuing relevance of one of history’s greatest crimes.

Why? Why should Arabs today care about terrible events that occurred long ago in a faraway place? This is a reasonable question, one that parents and teachers are themselves asking in light of announcements that the UAE

and Morocco are now preparing to include discussion of the Holocaust, alongside other genocides, in their educational curricula.

The answer is simple yet profound. In my view, the reason Arabs should learn about the Holocaust—the effort by Nazi Germany to exterminate the Jewish people, which led to the killing of 6 million innocents, including 1.5 million children—is that its lessons apply to all peoples. Here are three.

First, the fact that one of the world's most advanced, cultured and developed nations—the nation of Beethoven and Goethe—could commit genocide on an industrialized scale is a bracing warning that any society could lose its anchor and replace law and morality with hatred and senseless violence. It is a reminder that every society, every culture, every nation needs strong guardrails to ensure that it never falls into the abyss as did Germany and its fascist partners less than a century ago.

Second, the Holocaust did not happen overnight. What ended with the industrialized murder at Auschwitz began years earlier, with politicians, editors and civic leaders blaming the Jews for Germany's severe economic problems. Then came discriminatory laws, expulsions from schools, confiscation of property, deportations to labor camps—the drip, drip, drip of hatred that moved neither the good people of Germany nor the good people of other “civilized” countries to collectively intervene at some point and shout “Stop.”

The Nazis took this silence for consent, moving on from bias to persecution to murder. As the vast majority remained silent, millions were shot in mass graves, starved in ghettos, worked to death in labor camps and exterminated in gas chambers. It is a reminder of the need to speak up early, whenever societies respond to difficult social and economic problems with racial, religious or ethnic hatred. The Holocaust shows that waiting can be fatal.

Third, the Holocaust may have been a unique moment in terms of the enormity and depravity of Nazi evil, but it was regrettably not unique in terms of blinding hatred leading to mass atrocity. Out of the Holocaust a new word was coined—“genocide,” the purposeful effort to exterminate a people—to describe an idea so heinous that special international law was developed to prevent it from happening to other people in other parts of the globe. Sadly, evil has so far proved resilient, as the tortured Tutsis, Rohingya and others can attest.

The Arab world itself has seen the gassing of the Kurds in Halabja, the burning of villages of Darfur and the merciless Daesh campaign to annihilate Yazidi men and enslave their women. The commitment that virtually all nations took when the horrors of the Holocaust were fully revealed—the vow of “never again”—remains unfulfilled. Learning about the Holocaust is necessary for Arabs to join with the rest of the world in efforts to keep that profound promise.

But, say many Arabs, other crises, closer to home, make a more urgent claim to our attention. From Syria to Yemen, millions of Arabs are suffering unspeakable horrors; from Libya to Lebanon, states have collapsed and chaos reigns; and the list of victims of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is now nearly a century old, continues to mount. All of that is true and accurate. All of that demands action. But none of that gives Arabs an exemption from their responsibilities as global citizens. There are enough hours in the day—and enough days in the school calendar—to address both the Middle East's issues and the world's; human issues that cry out for our collective attention.

For the past 20 years, both independently and with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, I have traveled across the Middle East to provide opportunities for Arabs to join the global campaign to counter ethnic, religious or racial hatred by learning about the Holocaust and the genocides that have occurred since. I have traveled from Arab capital to capital to listen to young people and high-ranking leaders, engaging openly and directly with their questions and concerns.

Despite the often-bloody images that come from the Israel-Palestine conflict, I remind them that the fight between Israelis and Palestinians is, at its core, a political conflict. I further remind them of something that most know but rarely speak about—that, despite today's bleak reality, this is a conflict that leaders could eventually resolve with a

political solution. Genocide, a fate that has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands in Arab lands, is something very different—it is irrational, senseless murder, born of irrational, senseless hatred. We should not confuse the two.

Thankfully, more and more Arabs are agreeing with this view. From the Atlantic to the Gulf, partners are working with us to present Holocaust remembrance events; young people are reading Holocaust books, watching Holocaust films, and going online to learn Holocaust history. As a result, they are increasingly questioning the racial, ethnic or religious hatred they see around them. They do this without sacrificing their commitment to the other causes they defend. They have come to realize that one does not undermine the other.

My hope is that this view eventually becomes common across Arab societies. Until then, we and our local partners will continue to convene these special events in cities across the Arab world and provide more opportunities for Arabs to join the global campaign of “never again.”

Robert Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute and the author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](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>). This article was originally published on the website of the Riyadh-based paper Arab News. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2255041/why-arabs-should-learn-about-holocaust>) ♦

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