

A Crack in the Wall of Denial

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Articles & Testimony

When the United Nations considered a landmark resolution condemning Holocaust denial last month, the media missed a major story: One of the first delegates out of his chair to express support for "keeping memory alive" was the ambassador from Egypt.

This was a major breakthrough. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may be the world's most famous Holocaust denier, but he has only followed the model of a former president of Egypt -- Gamal Abdel Nasser -- who once said that "no person, not even the most simple one, takes seriously the lie of the 6 million Jews that were murdered." Just two years ago, Egypt took the lead in criticizing the original U.N. resolution establishing Jan. 27 as international Holocaust Remembrance Day.

To me, it came as no surprise that Egypt, leader of the Sunni Arab world, now supports a resolution targeted mainly against Iran. Just days before the U.N. vote, I returned from an eye-opening visit to Cairo where I delivered lectures on my book [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories From the Holocaust's Long Reach Into Arab Lands](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255>), which details the often-overlooked experience of the half-million Jews who lived in Axis-controlled North Africa. This was almost surely the first time anyone had spoken publicly in an Arab capital on the Arab role in the Holocaust.

I started my State Department-sponsored speaking tour in Cairo because of its dominant role in defining Arab popular culture - a culture in which anti-Semitism is a regrettably common feature. Despite Egypt's peace with Israel, much of the lurid anti-Semitic content in Arab books, magazines and television is disseminated from Cairo. I will return to visit other Arab countries later this year, but starting in Egypt, I decided, would ease my way everywhere else in the Middle East.

Over three intense days, I spoke at such celebrated state institutions as Cairo University, al-Ahram newspaper and the Diplomatic Institute of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. I did four nationally televised interviews on networks ranging from Egyptian state TV to popular satellite channels.

The most sensational event occurred at the headquarters of the Arab League, one of the last redoubts of Arab nationalism. There, Secretary-General Amr Moussa convened a meeting of Arab ambassadors and I delivered an address, in Arabic, on the Arab role in the Holocaust and the importance of including Holocaust education in Arab

educational curricula. If Arabs learned more about Auschwitz, I said, perhaps their response to Darfur and Halabja -- mass killings of non-Arabs in Arab lands -- would have been different.

Admittedly, Egyptians did not shower me with rose petals. Opposition media repeatedly attacked me. At the Arab League, the Syrian ambassador launched a tirade about the "real genocide" being inflicted by Israelis on Palestinians.

But overall, my audiences were intelligent, respectful and receptive to candid debate. Indeed, the view of official Egypt was generally fair and at times deferential, highlighted by a two-page review of my book in Rose al-Yusuf, a newspaper closely associated with President Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal.

The obvious question is: Why such a positive welcome -- in New York and Cairo -- to discussion of the Holocaust? The main answer, in my view, is Iran.

Today, Sunni Arab animosity to all things Persian and Shiite is deep, Sunni Arab fear of rising Iranian influence in the Middle East is palpable, and Sunni Arab desire not to be tarred with the same brush as the apocalyptic Shiite mystic who serves as Iran's president is real.

In this sense, we in the West have a moment of opportunity to take advantage of Sunni Arab anxiety about Iran to advance vital strategic, political and ideological objectives.

We should not be so naive as to think that one speech, one interview or one U.N. resolution will wipe away the anti-Semitism that is so deeply entrenched in Arab popular culture. But at the same time, we should not be so blinkered as to fail to see the possibility of building new forms of cooperation across old battle lines when the opportunity presents itself.

At the cultural level, this includes engaging Sunni Arabs candidly and frankly on once-taboo topics such as Holocaust denial. At the strategic level, this means challenging Sunni Arab leaders to build on their common interests with Israel and force a practical regional framework to counter Iran. My advice is, let's make the best of it.

Robert Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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