

Taking Him On

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Articles & Testimony

As he travels through his lands, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad delivers a daily speech, each time in a different city, during which he proposes reexamining the Holocaust and putting to "scientific test" the claim that 6 million Jews were annihilated by the Nazis. It is important to point out, by the way, that none of the other senior leaders of the Islamic Revolution has so far been drawn into the same kind of anti-Semitic rhetoric as Ahmadinejad, and most distance themselves from his theories that verge on Holocaust denial, or at least aim to reduce its terrible dimensions.

In the Jewish world, and of course in Israel, Ahmadinejad's declarations are rejected and condemned, but ludicrously, nobody seems to be seriously considering how to counter them. Israel, and primarily those Jewish leaders whose names are recognized on the international scene, ought to be telling Tehran something like this: "No sweat, let's sit down together and go over the research and statistics, and the enormous archives whose files contain the secrets of the Holocaust. And if we hurry, we may also manage to speak with survivors, the last witnesses of the horror who are still alive."

Israel and the world Jewish organizations simply need to switch disks. Instead of going head-to-head with Ahmadinejad, the patron of Holocaust deniers Roger Garaudy and David Irving, it would be better to offer to challenge him to a debate on neutral ground, where he could present his arguments and get a full response in real time.

If Ahmadinejad refuses to rise to the challenge, enough said. He will have proved to one and all that he has no interest in hearing the truth, and in future, his words will ring hollow.

But should he feel he has no way out of attending some such forum, whatever shape it takes, we are not short of talented advocates who could present the historical case, nor of shocking documentation to prove it.

There will be those who'll argue that Ahmadinejad would exploit any such platform to turn the lesson of the Holocaust on its head, to place all the blame for it on the European nations, and much like the Palestinians have always done, to argue that Europe had to atone for its crimes by compensating the Jews. Here, Ahmadinejad will say, the Jews were kicked into the Palestinians' lap and snatched the country from its rightful owners because Europe longed to be rid of them, if not through the crematoriums, then through Zionism. (Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas made a similar claim in the doctorate he wrote in Moscow in the 1970s.)

But it is not quite so simple, for the Holocaust did extend its influence into the Arab world and Arabs were involved in it. For example, as Robert Satloff, the Executive Director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, describes with breathtaking detail in his excellent, just published 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>)," concentration camps, deportations, torture and gas chambers awaited the Jews of North Africa too. The Holocaust did spread beyond the Mediterranean to lands under Muslim rule. As Satloff illustrates, the Holocaust is an integral part of the complicated history of Jews and Arabs in the East. The Arab countries may try to forget or to distance

themselves from it, but they cannot cancel it out altogether. The book provides a bounty of stories and testimonies showing to what extent Muslim Arabs collaborated in the crimes. Satloff embarked on his research with the goal of locating Arabs worthy of recognition by Yad Vashem as "righteous gentiles." He found a few good examples. In each case, the family members were not interested in receiving what they saw as the dubious honor of being recognized for saving Jews.

I should reveal for the sake of candor that Satloff and I have been friends for 20 years, as I serve as a Lafer International Fellow of the institute he leads. Yet that is no reason for me not to recommend his latest book. Everything that Ahmadinejad is trying to repress is in there. The Holocaust did not only take place in Dachau, Auschwitz and Buchenwald, but in appalling concentration camps in the middle of the Sahara desert, in the assault on Tunisia's Jews and in the execution of Nazi orders in Algeria and Morocco. Furthermore, Haj Amin al-Husseini, then the predominant Palestinian leader, and Rashid Ali al-Kailani in Iraq formed an alliance with Hitler. Arabs had a role -- marginal as it was -- in the Holocaust, and that is where the Iranian president must be guided first on his journey of re-education. In order to prepare Ahmadinejad and his representatives for that idea of jointly examining the true dimensions of the Holocaust, someone ought to translate Satloff's book into Farsi for him. Then the Iranian president will learn how hard it is to dismiss the historical facts, even within the Muslim world.

So let the Iranian president be invited to participate in an open debate, a public investigation. That is the right way forward for those who are seeking a dialogue with him. That way, things will be clarified.

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