

Robert Satloff Responds to Deborah Lipstadt's Review of *Among the Righteous*

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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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.



Articles & Testimony

On December 10, 2006, Institute executive director Robert Satloff sent this letter to Deborah Lipstadt, the Dorot professor of modern Jewish and Holocaust studies at Emory University, in response to her review of Dr. Satloff's book [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories of the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=255>) in that day's [Washington Post Book World](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/07/AR2006120701877.html) (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/07/AR2006120701877.html>).

Dear Professor Lipstadt,

Thank you very much for your kind and generous review of my book, *Among the Righteous*, in today's *Washington Post*. I appreciate the warm words you expressed for me personally and the institution I direct as well as your compliments regarding the importance of the book I wrote.

Given the high regard in which you are held among historians of the Holocaust, I was especially pleased with your thumbs-up affirmation of both the accuracy and the importance of the stories I told in my book. As you noted, the history of the Holocaust's long reach into Arab lands has been "oft-ignored" by historians. Not being an expert in the history of the Holocaust, I prize the endorsement you gave to one of my principal findings, which you echoed when you wrote: "In short, Arabs behaved like many Europeans during the Holocaust: Some helped Jews; others persecuted them or benefited from their persecution; the majority looked the other way."

As for your critique of the rationale I offered in writing the book as being "a bit naïve" and "noble but misguided," I would reply as follows:

First, your review opens by stating that "[Satloff] believes that if contemporary Arabs knew about Arabs who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, they would reject the Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism that are now so prevalent in the Arab/Muslim world." That is quite a high bar for any author to set for himself and, if that is what my mission was, I would indeed have been both naïve and presumptuous. Indeed, if I was driven by a belief that my book could open the minds of those people who, in your words, have the "irrational hatred" of the most extreme Holocaust deniers—the David Irving (and worse) of the Middle East—then it would indeed have been a foolish exercise.

But after reading your review, I went back to look for that stated objective in my book. What I found was a far more

modest statement of the rationale for my book: “Recapturing these lost stories from the Holocaust’s long reach into Arab lands offers people of goodwill among each community—Arab and Jewish—a way to look through the lens of one of the most powerful narratives in history and see each other differently” (p. 9). The key phrase there is “people of goodwill.” Unless you believe that all Arabs suffer from an irredeemable “irrational hatred”—that is, unless you believe that there are no “people of goodwill” in Arab societies—than I suggest there is a sizable audience of Arabs to whom the message of my book may have substantial political impact.

Second, I fear your comment may stem from a misreading not just of my stated rationale for the book but of the scholarly arena I know best, contemporary Arab politics. From your deep, personal experience, you have learned that one cannot change the minds of committed deniers just by presenting the facts of history; similarly, from my experience of twenty-five years studying the Middle East, I have learned that not all people in Arab societies are alike, that they are not all cut from the same ethnic, religious, cultural, social and historical cloth.

Yes, Arab societies have more than their share of close-minded extremists, of both the secular and religious varieties. But it is also true that the majority of Arabs are not close-minded extremists or crazed radicals; their knowledge of the Holocaust may be colored by ignorance and passive acceptance of an omnipresent, al-Jazeera-tinged, popular culture that equates Jews with Nazis, but that is not a divinely ordained reality. Among many of them, the potential to open minds is very real. And the pursuit of that objective is, I believe, very urgent. After all, these are the people on whom we in the West are depending to beat back the ideological challenge of radical extremism.

I appreciate the uphill battle we face in countering prejudice but your review suggests that there is nothing for us to do but accept that the way things are is the way things have to be. On that, we apparently disagree. Just as it was not naïve to believe that—with the perseverance of outstanding educators like yourself—the people of Germany could, within a generation, recognize the enormity of the crime committed against the Jewish people and ask atonement from the victims and their heirs, so too it is not naïve to believe that “people of goodwill” among in Arab countries could—with the perseverance of educators like myself—begin to think differently about their understanding of the Holocaust, their relationship with the Jewish people, and their role in history.

Please accept my best wishes.

Cordially, Robert Satloff ❖

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