

Countering Holocaust Denial in Arab and Muslim Societies: A New Approach

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On October 20, 2006, Robert Satloff, Akbar Ahmed, and Gregg Rickman addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Satloff is the Institute's executive director and author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands \(templateC04.php?CID=255\)](templateC04.php?CID=255). Dr. Ahmed is the Ibn Khaldun chair of Islamic studies at American University and former Pakistani high commissioner to Great Britain. Dr. Rickman is special envoy for monitoring and combating anti-Semitism with the State Department. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ROBERT SATLOFF

Of all the forms of anti-Semitism in Arab societies, Holocaust denial is one of the most pernicious and widespread. Generally it takes one of three forms: outright denial, Holocaust glorification, and Holocaust minimization or trivialization. One does no favor to Arabs by exempting them from this history, whatever its connection to their political dispute with Israel. And because jihadists' conspiracy theories target a coalition of "Crusaders and Jews," exempting Arabs from Holocaust history certainly does America no favor either.

While extremists are not likely to change their minds, millions of Arabs still have unformed views and are receptive to the lessons of history. The question is how to approach them. If one really wants to alter Arab perceptions of the Holocaust, then it is useful to frame it as an Arab story—preferably a hopeful, constructive, and positive story. So began the search for an Arab who saved a Jew during the Holocaust.

The Holocaust, although overwhelmingly a European story, is an Arab story too. The Germans and their allies only briefly controlled North Africa, home to more than half a million Jews; but during this period of control—June 1940 to May 1943—the Nazis, Vichy French collaborators, and their Italian fascist allies applied many of the precursors to the Final Solution. These included not only laws depriving Jews of property, education, livelihood, residence, and free movement, but also torture, slave labor, deportations, and executions. There were no death camps, but many thousands of Jews were consigned to more than 100 brutal labor camps, many of which were solely for Jews.

Only about 1 percent of Jews in North Africa—between 4,000 and 5,000—perished under Axis control in Arab lands, compared with more than half the Jews of Europe. But had U.S. and British troops not pushed Axis forces from the

African continent by May 1943, the Jews of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and perhaps even Egypt and Palestine almost certainly would have met the same fate as the European Jewry.

In all of this, Arabs played a central role. Indeed, Arabs' actions were not too different from those of Europeans. With war waging around them, most were indifferent. A percentage collaborated, including Arab officials in royal courts, Arab guards in labor camps, and those who went house to house pointing out where Jews lived. Without the help of local Arabs, at all levels, the persecution of Jews would have been virtually impossible. However, there were also those Arabs who risked everything to help Jews.

Arabs welcomed Jews into their homes, guarded Jews' valuables so Germans could not confiscate them, shared with Jews their meager rations, and warned Jewish leaders of coming SS raids. The sultan of Morocco and the bey of Tunis provided moral support and, at times, practical help to Jewish subjects. In Vichy-controlled Algiers, Muslim preachers gave Friday sermons forbidding believers from serving as conservators of confiscated Jewish property. Not one Arab broke ranks.

There were also remarkable stories of rescue. These include the story of Si Ali Sakkat, who opened his farm to sixty Jewish escapees from an Axis labor camp and hid them until liberation by the Allies. There was also Khaled Abdelwahhab, who scooped up several families in the middle of the night and took them to his countryside estate to protect one of the women from the predations of a German officer bent on rape.

There is also strong evidence that the most influential Arab in Europe—Si Kaddour Benghabrit, the rector of the Great Mosque of Paris—saved up to one hundred Jews by having the mosque's administrative personnel give them certificates of Muslim identity, with which they could evade arrest and deportation. These men, and others, were true heroes.

One question worth addressing is why there is a hesitancy to acknowledge these heroes. One reason for this is the conflict with Israel over the past fifty years, but it is not Israel alone that has fueled Arab anti-Semitism. After all, if Arabs made such a clear distinction between Jews and Zionists, then why were 99 percent of Jews in Arab lands compelled to leave in the years after Israel's founding? It is important to note that those small remnant communities of Jews still left in Arab lands are themselves among the least likely to talk about what happened during World War II for fear of stirring additional animosity.

These stories—both those of Arab heroes and of villains—are extremely important. Arabs need to hear them. They especially need to hear them from their own teachers, preachers, and leaders. Americans also have a responsibility to help open Arab minds to this forgotten chapter of their history. In the post–September 11 era, investing in tolerance—both at home and abroad—is really a national security issue.

AKBAR AHMED

Among the Righteous is an outstanding achievement and has provided a tremendous service to those looking for new breakthroughs in dialogue. With the help of this book, non-Muslims can see Muslims as human rather than cardboard stereotypes, and Muslims can see themselves also as fully human, acting at times with heroism, with courage, with indifference, even with cruelty.

Holocaust denial is tasteless, ignorant, and unacceptable. Anti-Semitism must be fought wherever and whenever it is found. To fight it effectively requires an understanding of "Islamophobia," which itself feeds Muslim anti-Semitism. A much more concerted effort must be made to build bridges and convert anger and hatred into friendship and reconciliation.

Images so often become the reality. This new book serves as a powerful vehicle to shatter stereotypes. It tells a historical story of societies under siege and on the cusp of change. At the same time it tells the story of Arabs

overcoming the challenges of colonialism, offering heroic accounts of individuals risking their lives and making a difference.

GREGG RICKMAN

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has remarked that “anti-Semitism is more than just a historical fact; it is a current event.” Today’s anti-Semitism is marked by violence, conspiracy theories, and Holocaust denial. Through the telling of stories of Arabs who risked their lives to save Jews, *Among the Righteous* seeks to change the way in which Arabs see Jews, themselves, and history.

The trajectory of Muslim-Jewish relations need not spiral into the abyss. That Muslims and Jews can find common understanding is not only possible but has already been accomplished through great bravery and selflessness. New generations need to be inoculated against bigotry through education based in tolerance. In order for freedom and democracy to prevail, anti-Semitism in all its forms must be prevented. Only through open talk about commonalities and differences between faiths can we begin to address tensions and misunderstandings.

Even the horrors of war could not extinguish simple human generosity. Heroic choices made by some Arabs during the Holocaust provide an important lesson. Polish writer Stanislaw Krajewski asked the question, “What behavior is possible in an ‘anti’ world, in which ‘anti’ values reign supreme?” Many of the stories in *Among the Righteous* provide a resounding answer to this question.

This rapporteur’s summary was prepared by Nathan Hodson. ❖

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