

Muslim leaders visit concentration camps as part of effort to combat Holocaust denial

By Jeff Diamant

Saturday, August 21, 2010; B02

The scenario might have seemed unlikely: prominent Muslims and Jews from the United States, crossing the Atlantic in mournful, spiritual solidarity to visit two Nazi concentration camps. Together.

The trip to Dachau and Auschwitz was meant to combat the rise in Holocaust denial that has popped up in various Muslim and non-Muslim circles around the world -- and online -- in recent years.

"The best way to convince someone about the truth of something is to let them see it for themselves and experience it for themselves," said Rabbi Jack Bemporad of the Center for Interreligious Understanding in Carlstadt, N.J., who organized the trip. "I feel that it was important to take Muslim leaders who have a really significant following in the American Muslim community."

Some of the eight imams on the week-long trip, which ended Aug. 12, had worked with Jewish groups in interreligious dialogue. Only one of the eight, Yasir Qadhi of New Haven, Conn., academic dean for the [AlMaghrib Institute](#), had been quoted in 2001 doubting the extent of the Holocaust, but he recanted long before the trip, saying his past views were based on misinformation.

On their return, the imams released a statement citing the deaths of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, among 12 million Holocaust deaths overall. It added, "We condemn any attempts to deny this historical reality and declare such denials or any justification of this tragedy as against the Islamic code of ethics." In interviews, the imams said the trip affected them deeply.

"The experience was overwhelming," Qadhi said. "It was a very moving experience for all of us imams, in particular myself. I had never seen anything like this. I was just overwhelmed throughout the entire trip. I was just overwhelmed at the sheer inhumanity of it. I could not comprehend how such evil could be unleashed."

Like other imams, he said the historical truth of the Holocaust should not be distorted by the past 60 years of tension in the Middle East.

"Politics should not play a role in historical facts," Qadhi said. "Whatever happened post-Holocaust should not diminish the evil that was the Holocaust. . . . The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very complicated. Let's leave anti-Semitism out of it."

Some said the trip's most emotional part was seeing collections of victims' hair, suitcases and belongings.

"Almost everybody was in tears," said Muzammil Siddiqi of the Islamic Society of Orange County, Calif.

"I laid a wreath of flowers there at the wall and recited the words from the Koran, which says killing one person is like killing all of humanity and saving one life is like saving all of humanity. I said, 'Here it feels part of us were killed. It's part of our human brothers and sisters.' "

The imams said they also were moved by meetings with Holocaust survivors, and by seeing their tattooed numbers.

During the trip, which was sponsored by the [Konrad Adenauer Foundation](#) and the Center for Interreligious Understanding, the imams also met with the Roman Catholic cardinal of Krakow and the chief rabbi of Poland, who held a dinner for them on the first night of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Some participants, including Hannah Rosenthal, the State Department's special envoy to monitor and help combat anti-Semitism, said they thought the trip was historically important.

"I know of no other time that a group of imams experienced the camps, and prayed at the camps, and came out with a strong statement that condemns Holocaust denial, Holocaust justification, Holocaust comparison and anti-Semitism," Rosenthal said. "I know of no other time that's happened in history." The sight of Muslims praying at Dachau stopped other passersby in their tracks, she said.

History aside, the trip -- like all pilgrimages to concentration camps -- was emotionally devastating, said Bemporad, the rabbi.

"It was painful," he said. "One of the most painful things was to see these imams, all pretty intelligent and sophisticated, absolutely bawling like children. They couldn't get over it, especially when they saw these children's clothes and children's shoes by the tonful. It was really poignant."

-- Religion News Service

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2010 The Washington Post Company