

JTA
The Global News Service of the Jewish People
30 August 2010

Rumors sully Jewish response to imams' trip to Auschwitz

By [Ron Kampeas](#) · August 30, 2010

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Eight imams bowed in prayer before a sculpture at Dachau vividly representing the Jewish dead of Europe. It's a picture worth a thousand words of reconciliation and understanding.

Yet even before its appearance in the Jewish media -- on the front page of the Forward for a story about American imams visiting two concentration camps in Europe -- it was muddied by internecine Jewish sniping and rumor-driven misapprehensions.

Abraham Foxman, the Anti-Defamation League's national director, questioned the propriety of a U.S. government official joining the trip, which was sponsored by the New Jersey-based Center for Interreligious Understanding and the German think tank Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Defenders of the trip and some liberal pundits all but accused Foxman of anti-Muslim bias, and rumors swirled that the ADL was conspiring with conservatives to discredit moderate Muslims.

The brouhaha -- now more or less resolved -- is a signal of how fraught the tensions over a planned Islamic center near the site of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan have made Jewish-Muslim relations. The uproar also threatened, for a moment, to scuttle the triumph of a statement by the eight American Muslim leaders repudiating Holocaust denial and condemning anti-Semitism.

It all started when Foxman heard about the Aug. 10-12 trip of the imams to Dachau and Auschwitz from Poland's chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich, and contacted the U.S. government official joining the group to counsel her against participating.

In Foxman's call to the official -- Hannah Rosenthal, the State Department's envoy on combating and monitoring anti-Semitism, as well as a colleague of Foxman's from her days at the helm of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs -- Foxman said his "personal, private advice" was that she should deal with government missions only.

"Why is there a need for a State Department official to accompany them?" Foxman said. "There is so much to do in anti-Semitism; she should not take a role on an NGO trip."

The trip was organized by Rabbi Jack Bemporad, the director of the Center for Interreligious Understanding, and Marshall Breger, an Orthodox Jew and former Reagan administration official who teaches law at Catholic University and organizes interfaith dialogue programs.

Rosenthal rejected Foxman's counsel.

"If everyone was as lucky as I am to have this job, they would do it their own way," Rosenthal said. "I did it my way."

In the rumor mill, the conversation between Rosenthal and Foxman morphed into speculation that Foxman was pushing an anti-Muslim agenda.

It didn't help that Foxman had grabbed headlines in late July for saying that the Islamic Center planned for the Ground Zero area, which will include a mosque, should be relocated out of sensitivity to the families of 9/11 victims. Though he coupled that call with a condemnation of bigoted attacks on the center's organizers, it was the suggestion to relocate that received attention.

Following his conversation with Rosenthal, rumors circulated alleging that Foxman had said the participating imams were "bad," that he had advised Schudrich to boycott the trip and that he had lobbied the White House to nix Rosenthal's participation. Foxman flatly denied all the allegations.

The media picked up the rumors, which seemed to be reinforced by another rumor: that Steven Emerson, who heads the Investigative Project and is known for warning about the dangers of Islamic extremism, also lobbied against the trip. At Harper's Magazine, Scott Horton suggested on his No Comment blog that Foxman was part of a neoconservative agenda to delegitimize Islam.

"The real question is why would Abe Foxman be so troubled by the prospect of a group of prominent American imams bearing witness to the Holocaust and declaring that Holocaust-deniers violate the Islamic code of ethics?" Horton wrote.

Noting Foxman's opposition to the Islamic center's location, he wrote, "Does it get in the way of Foxman's larger current agenda?"

The online magazine Salon and the influential news website Talking Points Memo aired similarly themed pieces.

But closer examination showed the rumors were unfounded.

Schudrich said the ADL had not lobbied him about the trip. Rather he had been alerted by "friends" -- he would not name them -- about past controversial statements by at least one of the imams. Schudrich asked a contact from the ADL to check out the statement, and the ADL reported back that the participant in question had since moderated his views.

Even more bizarre was a rumor that Foxman had objected to associations between some of the imams and the Islamic Society of North America, an umbrella body. Some conservative Jewish groups insist that the Islamic Society has not shed its militant roots from decades ago, but Foxman has vocally defended the society as an appropriate interlocutor.

Meanwhile, the ADL publicly welcomed the trip in a statement.

"We are delighted a group of imams recently visited two camps in which the Nazis implemented their final solution for the extermination of European Jewry," the ADL statement said. "We are hopeful that through this experience the imams can now help educate Muslims in America and abroad about the horrors of the Holocaust, its lessons for today, and the perniciousness of Holocaust denial."

Emerson also was the victim of rumors: He never lobbied against the trip. Rather, he had been asked by one of the groups organizing the trip -- he would not say which one -- to run a background check on three of the participants. Ultimately Emerson noted that the imams' collective statement on the Holocaust was "impressive," although he objected to what he said was a false equation of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

The imams' statement condemned Holocaust denial and "anti-Semitism in any form," and said American Muslim leaders have a responsibility to fight bigotry.

"With the disturbing rise of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hatred, rhetoric and bigotry, now more than ever, people of faith must stand together for truth," it said.

Yasir Qadhi, a Connecticut-based teacher who leads seminars on Islam across the United States and was on the trip, said he was more determined than ever to work closely with Jewish groups.

"If we're serious about 'never again,' if one group is stigmatized, the others have to stand up for each other," he said. "Groups that are prone to be Islamophobic also are prone to be anti-Semitic."

The challenge, Qadhi told JTA, is "how do we work together despite our differences because we do have political issues."

This shows why the trip was so important, said Rosenthal, whose father was a Holocaust survivor.

"I knew the experience at Auschwitz and Dachau would be transformative," she said.

Rosenthal said she now considers the controversy as closed, and looks forward to when the imams will appear on Capitol Hill next month to relate their experiences.

Schudrich said it is important to reach out to Muslims like Qadhi, who earned notoriety 10 years ago when he questioned the Holocaust's veracity -- a statement he has recanted and now says he deeply regrets.

"People who said something unacceptable 15 years ago, these are the people who we want to go there," Schudrich said. "They need to see this."

In the meantime, Foxman is preparing to release an ADL report, planned long before the controversy, on what he called "intensified levels" of anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States.

Foxman noted ruefully that the same engine of rumor and Internet speculation driving such bigotry had helped smear him a bigot for opposing a trip for imams that he never really opposed.

"How did this become fodder for all kinds of speculation and issues?" he asked. "That's the new world we're in."

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