Participation of European Muslim Organisations in Holocaust Commemorations

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Introduction

The Holocaust was truly a European tragedy, but it had, and continues to have implications for the entire world, and while Jews were by no means the only victims, it is their victimisation and Muslim reaction to the Holocaust that I wish to discuss.

The attitude of the Muslim world and of Muslim organisations in Europe therefore reflects this reality. It is viewed by many Muslims, particularly Arabs, as a tragedy of Europe’s making, but in this context it becomes important to note that European Muslims are of mixed origin, with those of Turkish, South East Asian and North African origin predominating. Those of Arab origin are in the minority within Europe.

Many Arab Muslims may argue that Europe’s murder of its Jews led to mass suffering within the Arab world, and among the Palestinians in particular. The Holocaust therefore serves for them as a reference point by which comparisons are made with the Palestinian Naqba.

However, this analysis focuses on three aspects of Muslim reaction to the Holocaust within Europe: to national and locally organised Holocaust commemoration, which takes place increasingly on 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz; local and often small commemorative initiatives, which may take place in the context of school programmes, or as part of Jewish Muslim dialogue; teaching the Holocaust in school systems and Muslim students’ reactions to that process.

Given that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish tragedy, it may be simplistic and over optimistic to expect Muslim communities to participate in its commemoration. Moreover it was a European tragedy in which the Muslim world played only a very small part. Muslim countries were only involved because they were occupied by Nazi forces or their allies, as in North Africa, the Balkans and the Muslim republics.
of the Soviet Union. Muslims therefore suffered from occupation in the same way that other occupied people suffered. It is true that there were Muslim recruits to the ‘Third Reich’, particularly those who heeded the call from Haj Amin Al Husseini, and the anti-Soviet volunteers from Muslim Central Asia. They fought with the Wehrmacht, and some were involved in war crimes and the mass killings of Jews and other war crimes. But while Nazi propaganda was beamed in large quantities to the Arab and Muslim world in an effort to sway public opinion against Jews, Muslims generally suffered as other occupied people. They were however aware of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and the Holocaust, as the Arab language media reported on it as fully as the western media, as Litvak and Webman have made clear.¹

Research by Yad Vashem in Israel, and by Robert Satloff, also now identifies Muslims who saved, or otherwise assisted Jews under Nazi occupation, putting themselves in danger in the process. Like those who saved Jews in Europe they constitute only a small minority of the populations from which they came (Satloff 2006).

In some ways it is therefore understandable that Muslims living in Europe wish to play no part in memorialising or commemorating the Holocaust. Moreover the Palestinian narrative dominates contemporary Muslim discourse, allowing little to intrude that is not viewed as Zionist propaganda.

That however is to take a narrow view, and one which is informed by the antisemitism of the Islamists and the Arab nationalists of the War and post War era. It is also noteworthy that the centre of Holocaust denial propagation has shifted in recent years from the American and European far right to the Muslim world, with Iran elevating it to the level of foreign policy, in their effort to try to undermine one important reason for the existence of the State of Israel.

International Commemoration

Two major international agreements mark and commemorate the Holocaust: the UN 2005 General Assembly Resolution on Holocaust Remembrance, which designated 27 January as the International Day of Remembrance and called on member states to develop educational programmes ‘which will inculcate future generations with the lessons of the Holocaust in order to prevent future acts of genocide’; the 2000 Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, by which signatory states committed to implement national policies and programmes in support of Holocaust education, remembrance and research (Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust 2000; UN General Assembly 2005). The Forum established the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF), with a rotating chairmanship, which is head-quartered in Berlin.

¹Recent books on this subject include: Herf (2009), Johnson (2010), Litvak and Webman (2009), Kuntzel (2007), Dalin and Rothmann (2008).
Jewish communities and Israel of course commemorate *Yom Hashoah* on 27th Nisan, which usually falls at the end of April.

So far 31 countries have joined the ITF, and formal relationships have been established with a further three. Apart from Turkey and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (both observer countries), they include no Muslim, or Muslim majority states.

The UN does not monitor Holocaust commemoration, so it is not possible to judge what initiatives are being carried out by member states, although in 2010 the UN did extend their Outreach Programme to include an Anne Frank Twitter Campaign, aimed at young people around the world. In October 2007, the General Conference of UNESCO agreed to explore the role it could play in promoting awareness of Holocaust remembrance through education and in combating all forms of Holocaust denial. The resolution was adopted in recognition of the UN 2005 resolution, and the subsequent resolution which condemned Holocaust denial (UNESCO 2007a, b).

Other international agreements to memorialise the Holocaust include a resolution passed by the European Parliament in 2005, which notes the rise in antisemitism, that the Holocaust has been seared on the consciousness of Europe and that it poses a risk to overall security. It calls for remembrance activity, education and school programmes to be carried out with “the utmost historical vigour” (European Parliament 2005).

A later European Parliament resolution in 2009, noted that while “millions of victims were deported, imprisoned, tortured and murdered by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes during the 20th century in Europe…the uniqueness of the Holocaust must nevertheless be acknowledged” (European Parliament 2009).

The Council of Europe notes in its booklet on ‘Teaching Remembrance – education for the prevention of crimes against humanity’, that ministers of education meeting in 2002 at the invitation of the French chairmanship of the ITF decided to set aside a “Day of Remembrance” as from 2003 in all schools in their respective countries to commemorate the Holocaust and give thought to ways of preventing such events from recurring. It further notes that the date for such commemoration is to be left to individual states (Council of Europe 2009).

In carrying out its mandate on tolerance and non-discrimination, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights publishes a multi language guide to preparing Holocaust memorial days, which provides teachers with practical examples of commemoration and suggestions for schools’ activity. It also publishes an overview of good governmental practices by member states. (OSCE/ODIHR and Yad Vashem 2006; OSCE/ODIHR 2006, 2010).

Lastly, the Polish government holds an annual commemorative religious service at Auschwitz, which is attended by states’ representatives and the invitation list is extensive, but only one Muslim state, Turkey, has participated in these

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2 http://twitter.com/UNandHolocaust.
commemorations, although it boycotted a conference organised by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in August 2010.

Thus memorialisation of the Holocaust is mandated by international agreements, and governments have now begun the process of commissioning and publishing educational material, and constructing commemorative activity. And yet many European Muslims resist the process.

**Muslim Reactions to Holocaust Commemoration**

One Middle Eastern perspective was recently provided by Gilbert Achcar, a professor at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies, in a series of interviews following the publication of his book, ‘The Arabs and the Holocaust’ (Achcar 2010a).

Achcar suggests that western-style outright Holocaust denial is marginal in the Arab world. He notes that many Arabs have a more complex relationship with the Holocaust, and believe its reality is amplified by Zionism, or that they are so exasperated by Israel’s existence that Holocaust denial becomes a form of retaliation (Achcar 2010c). He does however admit that opinion polls attest to the rise of denial (Telhami 2010).

It is possible to make three comments about national and international Muslim organisations in general terms. The first is that they are not bound by international and diplomatic agreements or protocol. Turkey, a secular Muslim country would have been invited to Auschwitz memorial meetings as a state. It is one which borders Europe, is a member of the OSCE, and an aspirant member of the EU. In some senses it was therefore incumbent on Turkey to participate in the Auschwitz commemoration.

The second is that there are good grounds for suspecting that some of the most active and prominent Muslim organisations in Europe are Islamist bodies (in the sense that they are influenced by the radical ideologies of Al Banna, Maududi and others), or are at least led or influenced by Islamists. Given that the core ideology of Islamism (in both its Arab and south east Asian variations) incorporates antisemitic themes as core values, it is unlikely that they would participate in Holocaust commemorative events. In Italy, for example, Muslim leaders attend national and local commemorations, as described briefly below, but the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood – aligned Union of Italian Islamic Communities (Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia) do not.

The third is that not all states have national representative Muslim bodies. Several governments have sought to assist and fund the establishment of a unitary Muslim organisation, but with singular lack of success. Muslim participation in Holocaust

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3 For example, the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwah and Research, the Brussels based Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe.

4 Email to author, Archivio del Pregiudizio, Milan, 20 April 2010.
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commemoration tends therefore to be limited to non Islamist or moderate clerics and community activists.

However, quantifying any Muslim participation is difficult as no records are maintained or published, and indeed there is no reason why there should be any record of their participation. In some European states, particularly in northern Europe, the number of Muslims is very small as a percentage of the population as a whole and governments may not seek close or specific engagement with their Muslim communities, or attempt to incorporate their leadership and membership, in such activity, to the extent that others do.

It is therefore not easy to monitor Muslim groups’ participation in national Holocaust commemoration events. The country where Muslim groups’ participation is the subject of most government and media attention is the UK. Indeed, the British government had made it the cornerstone of its relationship with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB): ‘participate in Holocaust Memorial Day and the government accept you as a legitimate partner; refuse to do so and the government will not deal with you’ has been its argument.

To date, the MCB, the largest and the most representative of the many Muslim communities and tendencies in Britain, has found one excuse after another not to attend. Between 2001 and 2007, the MCB proclaimed that it would not attend the national event because it only dealt with the Shoah, deliberately avoiding the fact that the Shoah constitutes only one half of the national remembrance activity. The other half focuses on Rwanda, Cambodia and Srebrenica, the Serb mass murder of Muslims. In 2007 however, it decided to participate, but withdrew again in 2009, in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza after Israel’s Operation Cast Lead incursion (Majendie 2005).

A second specious argument has been that the MCB will not attend unless Israel’s so-called ‘mass murder’ of Palestinians in 1948 is also recognised.

It is known that these arguments have been advanced forcefully within the MCB Executive by the Deputy General Secretary, Dr Daoud Abdullah and others aligned with Islamist ideologies, including the recent former General Secretaries, Sir Iqbal Sacranie and Dr Mohammed Abdul Bari (inthenews 2007; Cooper and Cooper 2008; Stuart 2009).

The MCB does though acknowledge the Holocaust: it does not align itself with the Holocaust denial camp. A statement issued in 2009 stated that “the MCB does not wish to minimise the tragedy of the holocaust or demean or disturb its annual memorial.”

However, non Islamist members of the MCB Executive have attended over the years, in defiance of MCB policy, suffering no retribution.6

In 2010, the former MCB spokesman, Inayat Banglawalla, attended, in the company of a prominent member of the Jewish community who is engaged in Muslim Jewish dialogue, although his public persona rests on fiercely anti Zionist views.

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5 For example, see interview with Sir Iqbal Sacranie, then MCB General Secretary, BBC Panorama, 21 August 2005.

6 For example, MCB Executive members Afzal Kahn and Sheikh Abduljalili Sajid, among others, attended on several occasions.
Other British Muslims also attended this year, including representatives of Quilliam, the campaigning anti-radical group founded by former leaders of Hizb ut Tahrir, British Muslim Forum, and the Chairman of the Muslim Conservative Forum.

A telephone poll among Jewish community leaders in the other main European countries produced varying responses, as below.

In the Netherlands and Germany, Muslim organisations participate in the national Auschwitz commemoration on 27 January, as do leaders of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy (Centro Culturale Islamico) and the Italian Muslim Intellectuals Association (L’Associazione Intellittuali Musulmani Italiani). In Drancy France, Imam Hassan Chalghouni has participated in local commemorations, and in Paris Dalil Boubakeur of the central mosque participated in commemorations in 2006. Neither they nor others however have done so since. Many Jewish communities however seem unaware of Muslim participation in their national memorial meetings, although several have reported that individual Muslims may have done so unheralded, perhaps because they were friends with Jewish communal leaders⁷ (Trend 2009).

Muslim Leaders Address the Holocaust

In parallel to the national events, there may be many local events carried out with the encouragement and assistance of central government or its agencies, but it seems that only the UK makes any attempt to record these. Muslim participation in these events seems more likely to reflect local Muslim attitudes to engagement in civil society. Elsewhere, it seems that there is little engagement in local events. Reports from Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany suggest that this is the case.

Personal testimonies by Muslim religious leaders who have visited the concentration camps are still a rarity, but they carry some force. In August 2010, eight American Muslim leaders visited Dachau and Auschwitz under a newly launched scheme by American Jews, funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the New Jersey-based Center for Interreligious Understanding. The programme is designed both to educate and to counter Holocaust denial, and at least one of the participants, who had previously called the Holocaust a hoax, spoke of how moved he had been by the overwhelming experience (JTA 2010b).

In the United Kingdom, a prominent Muslim and aspirant leader of the Muslim Council of Britain, Mohammed Amin, reflected on his 2009 visit to Auschwitz in company with five other members of the Muslim Jewish Forum of Greater Manchester on his personal blog. He wrote that

The shadow of the Holocaust has haunted my life. I grew up with images of the concentration camps on television. I was 10 when Adolf Eichmann was captured, tried and hanged, and about 16 when ITV showed ‘The Investigation’ by Peter Weiss, a play consisting solely of

⁷ Correspondence with Jewish community leaders in France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, April–May 2010.
readings from the testimonies of prisoners and camp guards from the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial. The impact of the words is shown by the fact that I remember the play more than 40 years later... My younger daughter visited Auschwitz a few years ago as part of a school visit organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust........ The evil that was perpetrated at Auschwitz and the industrial scale of the Holocaust must never be forgotten. Holocaust denial is not limited to neo Nazis, and is sometimes found amongst Muslims. Accordingly I was particularly pleased to learn about the French Muslim website on the Holocaust (Amin 2009).

That Muslims helped Jews under Nazi occupation is noted above and has been emphasised recently by one Muslim community activist in the United Kingdom. Robert Satloff’s Among the Righteous – Lost Stories From the Holocaust’s Long Reach into Arab Lands was the inspiration for British Muslim activist Fiyaz Mughal to initiate and co-write The Role of Righteous Muslims specifically for a Muslim audience.

In his introduction, Mughal, who is British born but of Pakistani origin, wrote that “there are many stories of positive Muslim and Jewish interaction, even at the darkest moments in history” and that “Whilst the politics of the Middle East may block such stories out of the public narrative, there is a duty on us all to ensure that they get their rightful place in our social and educational narratives” (Mughal and Rosen 2010).

**Teaching the Holocaust**

At schools’ level however teaching about the Holocaust is part of the national curriculum in many countries, and Muslim children will learn about it whatever the views of their parents. However, as Georges Bensoussan (in the Lost Territories of the Republic) has shown there is evidence from France, and elsewhere, that teachers in schools with large numbers of Muslims, ignore this for fear of antagonising these Muslim pupils (Brenner 2002).

A poll ordered by the French Ministry of Education revealed that only 8% of pupils know the meaning of the word ‘Shoah’, the location of the Vel d’Hiv (the Paris site from which French Jews were deported in 1942), and the number of Jews who died during the War. According to a poll by French newspaper, Le Figaro, 37% of high school students think that less than two million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and 21% could give no figure at all (ITF 2006c; Le Figaro 2008).

In 2006, the ITF sought to learn the state of Holocaust teaching among its member states and issued a questionnaire in which the responsible departments of state were required to record the extent of Holocaust teaching. Clearly each respondent state had different issues to confront in teaching the Holocaust, but some noted that it was mandatory, although it was taught within the context of other subjects in some states.

In the French response it was pointed out that teachers use the Hebrew expression Shoah rather than the Holocaust, to point out the specificity of the Jewish genocide, although the massacres of other victims of the Nazis (Gypsies, homosexuals,
Jehovah’s witnesses, Slavs) are mentioned as well. While there is currently no obstacle to teaching the Holocaust in France, three major difficulties were pointed out: the lack of time for teaching the subject when teachers have difficulties in finishing the wide programmes in the ninth and the eleventh and twelfth grades; the lack of real academic education for teachers; the opposition and or rejection of a minority of students, mainly Muslim ones in some suburbs, of a class specifically on the Jews and the Holocaust (ITF 2006c).

One initiative designed to address the problem in France, and denial emanating from the Arab world, is The Aladdin Project which translates standard reference books on the Holocaust into Arabic, and which toured 10 Arab cities early in 2010 with the assistance of the French Foreign Ministry. At each of the venues discussion groups were held with readings from Primo Levi’s ‘If This Is A Man’. The Project’s website also contains educational material in Arabic, Farsi and Turkish.\(^8\)

In the Austrian response, it was noted that the “definition of the Holocaust comprises the annihilation of European Jewry, but also the persecution of other groups/minorities (Roma and Sinti, euthanasia) as a result of the racist ideology of National Socialism.” Also that “learning and teaching about the Holocaust has to take into consideration the individual narratives that are transmitted within families and different parts of civil society as well as the official narrative until the 1980s that reduced Austria’s role during National Socialism to its being the first victim of Nazi Germany” (ITF 2009).

In other words, Austria now confronts its role as a perpetrator, but perhaps still somewhat tentatively. However it too has to contend with some opposition within its Muslim population.

“... the fact that a noteworthy Muslim community lives in Austria becomes a motive to develop adequate teaching methods and to strengthen teachers’ methodological skills as well as their knowledge. This has to be seen in the framework of human rights’ education and antiracist education” (ITF 2009).

In the Norwegian response, the increasing awareness of Holocaust issues and remembrance is noted and that teacher training is intensified as a consequence, although teaching the subject is not yet mandatory. As with other reporting states, the Holocaust is defined as “the extermination of the Jews by the Nazi regime during the Second World War.” In noting the difficulties of teaching the subject, the following is recorded: “Different views on the situation in the Middle East. The current political situation in the Middle East has made it more challenging, but also more important, for teachers to convey the distinction between current events and history” (ITF 2005).

In Switzerland, “the Holocaust is defined as the persecution and extermination of the Jews of Europe by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War.” Because education and control of the school curricula are decentralised, “the impact of Holocaust education is hardly measurable”. But “In a school

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which is becoming more and more multicultural, the remembrance work mentioned above encounters new difficulties. European history is not always perceived as a common heritage. The unicity of the Holocaust is sometime challenged against the background of current international politics (situation in the Middle East)” (ITF 2006a).

In noting this difficulty the Swiss response goes on to explain that “Pedagogical tools, in order to help students with non-European background and different identities and family histories understand the reality of the Holocaust, have yet to be devised and created” (ITF 2006a).

The German response notes that the Holocaust is taught to every student in German schools and that Holocaust denial is a marginal problem. However, it too states that “there are difficulties and new challenges”, which suggests that teachers there also encounter difficulties with teaching Muslim pupils (ITF 2006b).

Other states which completed the questionnaire reported no difficulties about teaching the Holocaust, other than time constraints and the lack of suitable educational material, a reflection possibly of the absence of Muslims in their countries.

The questionnaire was distributed in 2006 and has not since been updated but the lack of teaching aids is being addressed, in part, by the distribution of teaching aids prepared by the International Task Force, as will the imminent publication of a handbook and guide for teachers on the role of historical sites in Holocaust education and human rights education by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency.9

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, in partnership with the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, have now translated and distributed their books for high school students to eight member states, with a further three to come and this will go some way towards ensuring that the facts of the Holocaust are uniformly taught.10

Several states also send high school children to Auschwitz Birkenau or other extermination camps. This has happened in the Netherlands, occasionally in Germany and in France and the UK. In Poland, all high school pupils visit Auschwitz which is the Polish national site which commemorates the Nazi mass murder of Poles. But almost all countries have a Holocaust museum or memorial, which students visit at some point.

Both the Netherlands and the UK have Anne Frank centres. In the former, the Anne Frank House also acts as the main centre for anti-racist campaigning as well as providing educational material for schools. In the UK, the Anne Frank centre takes mobile exhibitions to schools and public libraries. The Holocaust Educational Trust performs the same task but on a larger scale, as well as taking regular parties of high school students to Auschwitz, as part of a government funded educational programme.11

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Most EU states have Holocaust museums which cater to school parties, and run programmes for students. In all of these, Muslim students will participate. The Second World War has not only been the major element in modern European and World history, but one in which the consequences are a matter for all, but especially Europeans, to live with.

The lessons of the Holocaust carry universal messages. They show what racism, and denigration and demonisation of the other lead to, and young Muslims ignore these lessons at their peril.

Assessment

That Muslims, and particularly Arab Muslims, are interested in the Holocaust is obvious; it is constantly referred to in their media. But the overwhelming consensus is that while it did take place the number of Jewish deaths is exaggerated by Israel and its Zionist supporters. Moreover there is consensus around the idea that Europe promotes Holocaust commemoration to divert attention from Middle East tension and Israel’s perceived war against Palestinians.

Holocaust inversion and minimisation in the Muslim world have been examined elsewhere, but Iran’s promotion of denial has gathered pace with the launch of the HoloCartoon website, which is clearly aimed at a youthful audience within the Muslim world, and debates on prime time television programmes (Al-Alam TV 2010; JTA 2010a). Attempts to promote denial in Europe are stamped on fairly quickly by the criminal justice agencies, such as that, for example by Dutch Muslims (Reuters 2010).

The reality is that however much Muslims may not wish to participate in Holocaust commemoration it is a defining aspect of European history, and they will have to participate if they wish to live in, and be considered Europeans. It is not possible to force representatives to attend memorial meetings but their children will have to study the Holocaust at some point in their education.

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