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Imam: Holocaust denial cannot be Islamic cause

Local Muslims visit Holocaust museum

by Andrea Barron
Special to WJW

Eight days after Iran held a two-day conference denying the Nazi Holocaust, Washington-area Muslim leaders gathered at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to honor the memory of Jews murdered during the Shoah.

Standing before the eternal flame in the D.C. museum's Hall of Remembrance, they lit candles to remember Jewish suffering.

Muslims "have to learn from the lessons of history and to commit ourselves, never again," said Imam Mohamed Magid of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) in Sterling.

Joining him were American University professor Akbar Ahmed, who helped arrange the visit on Wednesday of last week, museum director Sara Bloomfield, three Holocaust survivors, ADAMS president Rizwan Jaka and representatives from the Council on Islamic-American Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the Arab American Institute.

Magid, whose father had been a mufti of Sudan, had heard about the Teheran conference on his car radio. He wanted to go beyond condemning the event by organizing a delegation of Muslim leaders to declare their solidarity with Jewish victims.

"No Muslim anywhere has the right to turn Holocaust denial into an Islamic cause," the Sudanese native said. "I applaud the Jewish community for making sure humanity never forgets how the Nazis murdered Jews, gypsies and disabled people, including more than 1 million children. They set an example for the rest of us on how to make people more aware of horrors like the genocide in Rwanda and slavery."

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad saw the Tehran meeting, which brought together Holocaust deniers from all over the world including former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, as a vehicle to delegitimize the state of Israel, which he wants to see "wiped off the map."

Bloomfield said she was proud to be standing with her Muslim friends at an institution devoted to history and committed to confronting hatred. Ahmed agreed, but also emphasized that "hate is not only about hating Jews or anti-Semitism, but also about Islamophobia, the hatred of Islam."

The Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, Ahmed is a longtime activist in interfaith dialogue. For the past two years, he and Judea Pearl, the father of slain Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, have led public dialogues nationwide on Muslim-Jewish reconciliation. Last June, he led a conversation at the museum on "How to tackle Anti-Semitism and Anti-Americanism in the Muslim world."

Nihad Awad, CAIR's executive director of the Council on Islamic-American Relations, said "misguided people" are wrong to question whether the Holocaust took place. "Belittling the suffering of any people contradicts Islamic teachings and the actions of the prophet Muhammad. It's a red line that no one should cross."

A Palestinian who grew up in Amman, Jordan, Awad acknowledged that Jews and Muslims have differences on contemporary issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But, he said Muslims are reflecting their faith when they sympathize with how Jews suffered in Europe, and cited a Koranic verse: "Let not the dispute with other people make you swerve you from

being just."

Halina Peabody, 74, was one of the Holocaust survivors attending last week's event. The Bethesda resident said she was "overwhelmed with happiness" at this gesture by Muslim leaders.

"This makes me believe there are moderate Muslims, but I keep wondering if they are living under a cloud and are in danger of being assassinated," she worried.

Peabody, her sister and mother had survived the war in their native Poland after buying papers from a priest certifying that they were Catholic.

Another survivor, Silver Spring's Johanna Neumann, and her parents were saved by Njazi and Liza Pilku, Albanian Muslims whose names are inscribed at the Holocaust museum and Yad Vashem among the "Righteous Among the Nations."

The Pilkus hid Neumann's father during the war while the teenage Johanna and her mother passed themselves off as members of the Pilku family.

When Magid lit a candle commemorating victims of the Holocaust, he mentioned the Pilkus. Neumann, 76, was impressed, saying, "I mentioned their name only once in a conversation with him before the candlelighting ceremony."

She and her parents had fled their home in Hamburg, Germany, in early 1939, shortly after Kristallnacht ("Night of the Broken Glass") in November 1938, the date often used to mark the onset of the Holocaust.

On the day after the museum ceremony, Magid led a delegation of 100 Muslims on the annual hajj to Mecca. He said that once he returned, he wanted to invite Neumann to address youth at the Sterling mosque. This would not be the first time that ADAMS reached out to the Jewish community. Last April, it hosted a Jewish-Muslim Passover seder for 30 people in the mosque.

Neumann said she would be pleased to speak there.

"Education is the best way to counteract negative propaganda. I can tell them about how my own experiences and how Albanian Muslims saved more than a thousand Jews from the Nazis," she said. "This is a historical fact that no one can dispute."
