Why Palestinians Should Learn About the Holocaust

31.05.2011 | Mohammed Dajani Daoudi and Robert Satloff *

Should Palestinian and other Arab schools teach their students about the Holocaust?

This is not an academic question. Many Palestinian and Arab political organizations recently pounced on reports that a new human rights curriculum being prepared for use in Gaza schools operated by Unrwa, the United Nations aid agency for Palestinian refugees, might include historical references to the Holocaust. Their reaction underscores the urgency of answering this fundamental question: Should Palestinians (and other Arabs) learn about the Holocaust? Should this historical tragedy be included in the Arab curriculum?

We — a Muslim-Palestinian social scientist, and a Jewish-American historian — believe the answer is yes. Indeed, there are many reasons why it's important, even essential, that Arabs learn about the Holocaust. And much of this has nothing to do with Jews at all.

One of the sad realities of many modern Arab societies is that Arab students have been denied history, their own and the world's. For decades, millions of Arabs have lived under autocrats resentful of the legacy of the leader they replaced and fearful of the leader-to-come. Although Arabs revere the study, writing and teaching of history, and have produced many famous historians, their rulers often tend to view history as a threat. The result is that many historians in Arab countries are more like the court chroniclers of long-dead dynasties, and entire chapters of history have been expunged from the curricula that Arab Gouvernements teach their students.

This is particularly true of the Holocaust. A world that has known terrible atrocities has seen none greater than the effort by Nazi Germany and its allies to exterminate the Jewish people. So methodical, so vicious and so exhaustive was the Nazi effort that a new word was coined to describe it — "genocide." All genocides before and since are judged against the Holocaust. To the extent that we can prevent genocide in the future — an uphill task, given the record of the last few decades — understanding what gives rise to it is essential. Without discussing the Holocaust, discussing genocide is meaningless.

But Palestinians, and Arabs more generally, know little about the Holocaust and what they do know is often skewed by the perverted prism of Arab popular culture, from the ranting of religious extremists to the distortions of certain satellite television channels to the many ill-informed authors. What happened to the Jews during World War II is not taught in Arab schools or universities, either as part of world history or as a lesson in genocide awareness or as an atrocity that ought not to be repeated. Arabs have nothing to fear from opening their eyes to this chapter of human history. As the Koran says: "And say: My Lord, advance me in knowledge." If Arabs knew more about the Holocaust in particular and genocide in general, perhaps Arab voices would be more forceful in trying to stop similar atrocities.

Palestinians have more specific reasons to learn about the Holocaust. We do not urge Holocaust education just so Palestinians can understand more sympathetically the legacy of Jewish suffering and its impact on the psyche of the Jewish people. While it is important for both Palestinians and Israelis to appreciate the historical legacies that have shaped their strategic outlook and national identities, teaching Palestinians about the Holocaust for this reason alone runs the risk the feeding the facile equation that "the Jews have the Holocaust and the Palestinians have the Nakba." We

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urge Palestinians to learn about the Holocaust so they can be armed with knowledge to reject the comparison because, if it were broadly avoided, peace would be even more attainable than it is today.

With all the suffering Palestinians have endured, their struggle with Israel is still, at its core, a political conflict, one that can end through diplomacy and agreements. Today diplomacy is deadlocked, yet the nature of politics is that tomorrow that reality may change. The Holocaust was not a political conflict: the very idea of a “Nazi-Jewish peace process” is absurd. Teaching the Holocaust to Palestinians is a way to ensure they do not go down the blind alley of believing their peace process with Israel is as hopeless as one would have been between Nazis and Jews. Discussion of the Holocaust would underscore the idea that peace is attainable.

Almost two years ago millions of Muslim Arabs listened carefully when President Barack Obama, speaking in Cairo, respectfully recited sentences from the Koran and proclaimed America’s endorsement of a two-state solution to achieve a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace. Few, however, remember that he also condemned Holocaust denial. Now that the Arab masses are applying the universal lessons of democracy, human rights and the rule of law in taking down their authoritarian governments, it is time they take back the learning of history, too. That includes teaching their children the universal lessons of the Holocaust.

*This article was first published in *The New York Times with the International Herald Tribune*, March 29, 2011. Used with kind permission by the authors.

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