

Imams join U.S. officials at Nazi sites

By: [Laura Rozen](#)

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U.S. officials participated in a trip of eight Muslim-American clerics to the sites of the former Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps last week in what one official called a transformative experience.

“These Muslim leaders were experiencing something they knew nothing about,” President Barack Obama’s envoy to combat anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal, told POLITICO Tuesday. Rosenthal lost many family members at Auschwitz, including her grandparents. “I can’t believe anyone walks into Auschwitz and leaves the same person. I watched them break down. I broke down in front of suitcases. ... It is the cemetery of my whole family.”

The participating imams “were totally aware that they were visiting

my family cemetery, and they were very loving about it,” Rosenthal said.

At the end, the imams — from a broad range of backgrounds — issued a far-reaching statement, condemning anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial and religious bigotry.

“We bear witness to the absolute horror and tragedy of the Holocaust, where over 12 million human souls perished, including 6 million Jews,” the group said [in a joint statement](#) issued after the trip. “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.”

Beyond Rosenthal, among those from the Obama, Reagan and George W. Bush administrations who accompanied the imams on the Aug. 7-11 trip to Germany and Poland were Rashad Hussain, Obama’s envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference; Nasreen Badat, a State Department official working on religious freedom issues; Marshall Breger, former special assistant to Reagan for public liaison and his liaison with the Jewish community; and Suhail Khan, an official in Bush's public liaison office. Also participating was Rabbi Jack Bemporad from New Jersey.

The trip was co-sponsored by Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Center for Interreligious Understanding, of which Bemporad is executive director.

The letter was signed by Imam Abdullah T. Antepi, the Muslim chaplain of Duke University; Imam Syed Naqvi, director of the Islamic Interfaith Center in Washington; Shaikh Yasir Qadhi, dean of academics for the AlMaghrib Institute in New Haven, Conn.; Laila Muhammad, daughter of late Imam W.D. Muhammad of Chicago; Imam Suhaib Webb of the Muslim Community Association of Santa Clara, Calif.; Sayyid Syeed, national director of the Islamic Society of North America’s Office of Interfaith & Community Services; Imam Muhamad Maged of the All-Dulles-Area Muslim Society in Virginia and vice president of the Islamic Society of North America; and Imam Muzammil Siddiqi of the Islamic Center of Orange County, Calif.

Organizers of the trip say they were dismayed that the Anti-Defamation League's Abe Foxman lobbied U.S. officials against participating. They also say the Investigative Project's Steve Emerson, author of "American Jihad," lobbied against the trip, arguing that one of the imams planning to participate had made Holocaust denial statements a decade ago.

Emerson was unavailable for comment and Foxman did not respond to repeated queries from POLITICO.

Organizers say they tried to pick imams from a wide range of American constituencies.

"The Muslim faith and community leaders represented the broad diversity of the Muslim-American community including Arab, South Asian, African-American, Caucasian, Sunni, Shiite, men, women, young and older established leaders," Khan told POLITICO. "Most knew very little about the Holocaust, and all were eager to learn and personally witness the reality of this historical tragedy."

"There is a view among some people in the Jewish community that you should not meet with certain Muslims because they are in some way not worthy or they don't meet the right criteria," former Reagan special assistant Breger, now a professor of law at Catholic University, told POLITICO. But, he said, it was the trip organizers' belief that "it is important to reach out to Muslims prepared to talk to us, people who are ready to open themselves to experiences which might be transformative for them — as occurred on this trip to Dachau and Auschwitz."

At the sight of the imams praying in Dachau, Rosenthal said, "All of the tourists stopped in their tracks. I don't think anyone has ever seen anything like it."

In Poland, the group met with the chief rabbi of Poland as well as with the cardinal of Krakow. On the last night of the trip, Rosenthal said, the group went to an Iftar dinner at a Turkish mosque in Munich.

“It was truly an interfaith experience,” Rosenthal said. “There were representatives from the Catholic community, from the Jewish community and members of the mosque. It was wonderful. They were very curious about what we had just done. I am sure a number of them had no idea what we were talking about. How can you?”

“I can’t really put into words what we saw there,” Imam Suhaib Webb of Muslim Community Association in California, told POLITICO Wednesday. Webb, 38, originally from Oklahoma City, said he converted from Christianity to Islam. “I would have to say the sheer inhumanity of what we saw I was not able to comprehend — the systematic killing of people. ... The whole time we were asking the rabbis, ‘why did they do this?’ ”

Webb said he and Rabbi Bemporad and Imam Muhamad Maged have discussed organizing future trips for Jewish and Muslim youth groups to Poland, Germany and Bosnia.