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Jews, Muslims make pilgrimage to Auschwitz

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American Muslim leaders and others enter the Auschwitz concentration camp as part of a tour of Holocaust sites.

CARLSTADT, N.J. - The scenario might have seemed unlikely: prominent Muslims and Jews from the United States, trekking across the Atlantic in mournful, spiritual solidarity to visit two Nazi concentration camps. Together. The trip to Dachau and Auschwitz was meant to combat the rise in Holocaust denial that has popped up in various Muslim and non-Muslim circles around the world in recent years.

"The best way to convince someone about the truth of something is to let them see it for themselves and experience it for themselves," said Rabbi Jack Bemporad of the Center for Interreligious Understanding in Carlstadt, who organized the trip. "I feel that it was important to take Muslim leaders who have a really significant following in the American-Muslim community." Some of the eight imams on the weeklong trip, which ended Aug. 12, had previously worked with Jewish groups in interreligious dialogue.

Only one of the eight, Shaikh Yasir Qadhi of New Haven, Conn., academic dean for the AlMaghrib Institute, had been quoted doubting the extent of the Holocaust in 2001, but he recanted long before the trip, saying his past views were based on misinformation.

On their return, the eight imams released a statement citing the 6 million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust, among 12 million Holocaust deaths overall. It added, "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."

In interviews, the imams said the trip affected them deeply.

"The experience was overwhelming," Qadhi said. "It was a very moving experience for all of us imams, in particular myself. I had never seen anything like this. I was just overwhelmed throughout the entire trip. I was just overwhelmed at the sheer inhumanity of it. I could not comprehend how such evil could be unleashed."

Like other imams, he said the historical truth of the Holocaust should not be distorted by the past 60 years of tensions in the Middle East.

"Politics should not play a role in historical facts," Qadhi said. "Whatever happened post-Holocaust should not diminish the evil that was the Holocaust. ... The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very complicated. Let's leave anti-Semitism out of it."

Some said the trip's most emotional part was seeing gathered collections of victims' hair, suitcases and belongings.

"Almost everybody was in tears," said Imam Muzammil Siddiqi, of the Islamic Society of Orange County, Calif. "I laid a wreath of flowers there at the wall and recited the words from the Quran, which says killing one person is like killing all of humanity and saving one life is like saving all of humanity. I said, 'Here it feels part of us were killed. It's part of our human brothers and sisters.'"

The imams said they also were moved by meetings with Holocaust survivors and from seeing their tattooed numbers.

Also during the trip, which was sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Center for Interreligious Understanding, the imams met with the Roman Catholic cardinal of Krakow and the chief rabbi of Poland, who hosted them for dinner on the first night of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Some participants, including Hannah Rosenthal, the U.S. State Department's special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, said they thought the trip itself was of historical importance.

"I know of no other time that a group of imams experienced the camps, and prayed at the camps, and came out with a strong statement that condemns Holocaust denial, Holocaust justification, Holocaust comparison and anti-Semitism," Rosenthal said. "I know of no other time that's happened in history."

The sight of Muslims praying at Dachau stopped other passers-by in their tracks, she said.

History aside, the trip — like all pilgrimages to concentration camps — was emotionally devastating, said Bemporad, the rabbi.

"It was painful," he said. "One of the most painful things was to see these imams, all pretty intelligent and sophisticated, absolutely bawling like children. They couldn't get over it, especially when they saw these children's clothes and shoes by the tonful. It was really poignant."