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Debating, Again, the Founding of Israel

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As the Obama administration deepens its outreach to the Muslim and Arab world, it faces the difficult task of countering Holocaust denial without reinforcing an increasingly popular anti-Zionist narrative that ties the legitimacy of the State of Israel to Jewish suffering in Europe.

And as discussion of the Holocaust becomes more widespread, so does the argument heard from Tehran to Gaza that while Europeans were responsible for atrocities against Jews, it is the Palestinians who are paying the price.

“Discussing the Holocaust and learning its lessons have become an integral part of global culture, and therefore, to a certain extent, the Arabs feel they are on the defensive,” said Esther Webman, research fellow of the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, at Tel Aviv University. “That’s why we see in recent years an increase in Arab rhetoric tying the Holocaust to the Palestinian hardship.”

It was into this minefield that President Obama stepped June 4, when he delivered his anticipated speech to the Muslim world from Cairo.

“America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable,” Obama said in his speech. “It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.”

Obama’s seemingly supportive statement was, in the eyes of some pro-Israel activists, insensitive at best, or even biased. “It sounds as if he is buying into the Arab narrative,” said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Foxman was quick to issue a statement in which he accused Obama of making an “egregious error which plays into the hands of the most extreme elements of the radical Muslim world.” The error, Foxman said, was in implicitly asserting that Israel’s legitimacy is based on the

suffering of the Jewish people's tragic history? and not on their historic ties to the Land of Israel. Obama's choice of words and his decision to mention only the Holocaust as a reason for the creation of the State of Israel gave fodder to the many in the Arab world who argue against the legitimacy of Israel," Foxman said.

Researchers believe that viewing the Holocaust as the sole reason for the creation of the State of Israel and the subsequent Nakba – what the Palestinians call their catastrophe – date back to the years after Israel's 1948 independence. As those views have become more prevalent, there also has been a shift in the Arab world, from "hard" Holocaust denial (totally denying the systematic murder of Jews, as done by Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) to a "soft" denial that questions facts about the Holocaust and argues that the Jews are cynically using its memory to justify the occupation of Palestinian land.

"Historically, this is not true," said Israeli historian and journalist Tom Segev, who has written extensively on the issue. "The State of Israel would have come to being even without the Holocaust. It was a result of 30 years of intensive work by the Zionist movement."

Still, Segev believes that Israel shares some blame for perpetuating the myth of a state that "rose from the ashes of the Holocaust."

Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum argues that the narrative of tying the creation of Israel to the Holocaust has "certain plausibility," since international support for the Jewish homeland increased after the end of World War II. But Berenbaum agrees with Segev that Israelis themselves bear some responsibility for helping this notion take root.

"How do they want Obama to deny this narrative when the Israelis have done it themselves?" Berenbaum asked. "The Israelis send warplanes from Jerusalem to fly over Auschwitz, and then they claim there is no relationship between the two?"

The assertion of a causal relationship between the murder of Europe's Jews and the creation of the Jewish state has sparked a renewed debate in Israel, as well.

"In the heat of debate with Holocaust deniers, sometimes this mistake is repeated," wrote Eli Eyal, editor of the World Zionist Organization's Kivunim Chadashim (Hebrew for "New Directions"), a magazine on Zionism and Judaism. He argued that David Ben-Gurion understood the problems that could rise from linking the Jewish national revival to the Holocaust and deliberately chose not to mention the link in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

Obama's speech alone did not spark this debate; there has been growing international awareness that the Arab world is the last enclave in which Holocaust denial is on the rise.

A recent poll conducted by Haifa University found that 40% of Israeli Arabs believe the Holocaust never happened. This is a dramatic increase compared with 28% two years ago, and especially notable, since those surveyed were educated in the Israeli system, which puts great emphasis on Shoah studies. "My explanation is that it is completely a political issue," said Webman, who is also a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. "What stands behind this approach is an attempt to undermine Israel's legitimacy."

Obama's remarks on Holocaust denial – he called it "baseless, ignorant, and hateful" – were widely criticized in Arab blogs. As'ad AbuKhalil, a visiting professor at University of California,

Berkley, wrote in his blog, Angry Arab: "What is his point here: That because of Nazi crimes, the Palestinians need to accommodate Zionist crimes on their land?"

The argument that Palestinians are "paying the price" for Jewish suffering during the Holocaust also has been echoed in statements by left-wing groups throughout Europe; some Germans have argued that their nation now carries a moral burden of taking care of the Palestinians, since their suffering has derived from the Nazi-era crimes against Jews.

Activists on the right also point frequently to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas as one of those responsible for spreading Holocaust denial in the Arab world. Abbas, in a 1984 research paper written at the Moscow Oriental College, questioned the existence of gas chambers and suggested that the number of Jews murdered was not more than 1 million. After Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization engaged in negotiations, however, Abbas said, "Today I would not have made such remarks." In a 2003 interview with the Israeli daily Haaretz, he added, "The Holocaust was a terrible thing and nobody can claim I denied it."

Another contentious issue is equating Jewish suffering during the Holocaust with current Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation. In his Cairo speech, Obama spoke emphatically about the need to recognize Nazi crimes against Jews and to fight anti-Jewish stereotypes used in the Arab world. "On the other hand," he added, "it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland." The term "on the other hand" drew criticism from supporters of Israel, who saw it as equating the Holocaust with the occupation. "How dare Obama compare Arab refugee suffering to the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust?" Israeli right-wing lawmaker Aryeh Eldad asked after the speech.

Berenbaum argues that while the debate over "who suffered more" is legitimate, it is not helpful. "What makes suffering suffering is that it is personal," he said. "Everyone feels his suffering is the worst."

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