



CIS EVENT

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The Wasatia Movement: Moderation & Tolerance in Islam

Dr Mohammed Dajani



Dr Mohammed Dajani, founder of the Wasatia Movement, discussed the formation of Al Wasatia, the first Islamic Palestinian organisation to call for a negotiated peace with Israel and to suggest the adoption of liberal values such as tolerance, freedom of speech, rule of law, pluralism, and a strong respect for civil and human rights.

Dr Mohammed Dajani is from one of Jerusalem's most distinguished Palestinian families and holds doctorates from the University of Texas and University of South Carolina. He was founding director of the Jerusalem Studies and Research Institute, chair of the board of directors of the House of Water and Environment in Ramallah, and a member

of the board of directors of the YMCA, Jerusalem. He has written extensively on Arab culture and politics, including an International Herald Tribune op-ed which he co-authored with Robert Satloff entitled 'Why Palestinians should learn about the Holocaust.'

He is currently the Weston Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and formerly Head of the American Studies Program at al-Quds University in Jerusalem, where he controversially led a group of Palestinian students on a historic visit to Auschwitz, ultimately leading to protests by faculty and his resignation from the school.

There is an urgent need to start teaching about the Holocaust in Palestine, to help alleviate rising tensions in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Most Arabs and Palestinians are ignorant of this most tragic event in human history... Thus teaching the Holocaust in Palestine is an urgent matter. However, it faces serious challenges due to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Here, I do not want to use the Arab translation of the term Holocaust -- Al-Mahraka -- since it is misleading and does not reflect reality.

The West believes that Holocaust studies are not limited only to Jews, while Arabs, and especially Palestinians, see the issue differently, as a purely Jewish concern. The challenges in teaching the Holocaust in Palestine lie on four levels:

The educational level: Generally speaking, the events of the Holocaust and the facts about it are not mentioned in Arab and Palestinian curricula, and are not studied in Arab or Palestinian schools or universities... due to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, most Arabs and Palestinians are ignorant of this tragic event in human history.

The political level: The Palestinians are the only nation in the modern age that is still under military occupation... They are denied their right to self-determination and to establish a civilian, democratic and independent Palestinian state. As a result, most Palestinians believe the Holocaust was the reason for the Nakba of 1948, which Israelis celebrate as their independence day. The conflict drives some Palestinians to see [the Holocaust] as Zionist propaganda meant to garner sympathy for the Jewish problem, while others see it as Zionist propaganda or an overinflated account meant to garner international sympathy for the Jewish state.

The religious level: The radical trend among some Palestinians in teaching Islam stresses the clash of values and faith between Islam on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other. Therefore, some Koranic verses are interpreted in a way that supports this claim. For example, Allah said: 'And thus have We willed you to be a nation of the middle way [Koran 2:143].' Instead of interpreting the verse as a call for justice, tolerance and moderation, it is explained thus: 'Muslims are the nation of the middle way between the Jews, who murdered the prophets, and the Christians, who made their prophet God'...

One of the most common hadiths that is attributed -- or more accurately, falsely attributed -- to the Prophet [Muhammad] reads: 'The day will come when the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them, until the Jews hide behind the rocks and the trees. Then the rocks and the trees, except for the Gharqad Tree, which is the tree of the Jews, will speak out and say: "Oh Muslim, oh worshipper of Allah, there is a Jew hiding behind me. Come and Kill him."'

The religious lesson taught in schools is this: 'In this hadith the Prophet tells us about one kind of battle between the Muslims and the Jews.' It should be noted that this hadith contradicts Koranic verses that revere the sanctity of life,

such as: 'And do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden, except by right' [Koran 17:33]; 'And we have not sent you [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the world' [Koran 21:107]. This mercy applies to all people, including Jews, Christians, and non-believers.

The abovementioned hadith [also] clearly contradicts the following verses: ... 'There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion' [Koran 2:256]; 'Whoever wills -- let him believe; and whoever wills -- let him disbelieve' [Koran 18:29]; 'Indeed, your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection' [Koran 32:25]; 'Allah will judge between [all of] you on the Day of Resurrection' [Koran 4:141].

Furthermore, this version [of the hadith] contradicts what Bukhari relates: 'When the funeral passed in front of the Prophet, he honored the dead by rising. They told Him: O Prophet, this is a Jew's funeral. He responded: Does he not have a soul?'

Indeed, the Holy Koran honors the Torah and New Testament and calls them 'Holy Books.' It also calls Jews and Christians 'People of the Book' or 'those who received the Book,' and there are some 60 Koranic verses that directly address the Jews. For example, in the words of Allah Almighty: 'O Children of Israel, remember My favor that I have bestowed upon you and that I preferred you over the people of the world' [Koran 2:47].

The psychological level: Palestinian society suffers from a deep wound that has yet to heal. While the events of the Holocaust happened in the past, the Palestinian suffering still continues, and therefore it is very difficult to ask these victims -- who suffer the occupation of their homeland, the continuous usurpation of their land and property, the suffering of their loved ones in prisons, and a denial of their humanitarian rights - to study about the suffering of others.

There is no doubt that Holocaust denial is a historic mistake and is morally unacceptable.

Strategy For teaching The Holocaust

Palestinians raise the question of why they should study the Holocaust. My answer was that the value of learning about the Holocaust lies in the following:

Learning about the Holocaust is a sign of honoring truth, while ignoring it destroys the values that man takes pride in.

It is the right thing to do. Incurring criticism for something does not mean we should avoid or ignore it.

Holocaust denial is a historic mistake and is morally unacceptable.

Knowing about past tragedies is vital to preventing their recurrence.

The Koran urges [us] to know and learn: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge' [Koran 20:114]. 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know? Only the wise shall remember' [Koran 39:9].

The Prophet urged to learn and study. It is said that the Prophet [advised]: 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave' and also, 'Seek knowledge even in China.'

The wise men say: If you do not know evil you cannot understand the meaning of good.

Displaying solidarity and compassion towards the suffering of others, even if you do not have bonds of friendship or affection with them, will make the world a better place to live in.

Curricula are vitally important when teaching sensitive subjects, so I advocate active learning through the adoption of the following steps for teaching such controversial subjects: Teaching the value of critical and creative thought, teaching the importance of adopting the middle road and

moderation, and teaching about the Holocaust and [other cases of] mass-extirmination in modern history, like in Rwanda, while explaining the connections and interplay [between various events].

It is useful to incorporate documentaries as a teaching aide. I had a hard time finding study material on this topic in Arabic, so I wrote a book together with Zeina Barakat and Martin Rau titled Human Suffering -- Is there a Way Out?

In conclusion, when a Holocaust documentary was screened at Al-Quds University, one student raised his hand and asked: 'Why should we study the Holocaust while Israelis have made the use of the word Nakba illegal and have forbidden its mention in their curricula?' My response was short and accurate: Don't be concerned with what others do but act according to what you think is right.