

Time to confront the past

By Warren L. Miller

Earlier this month in Cairo, with most of the Muslim world watching, President Barack Obama denounced Holocaust denial as "baseless, ignorant and hateful." In a city that has been a beacon of Islamic learning for centuries, the president condemned the perverse Holocaust revisionism that has become widespread in the Middle East.

The sad truth is that, with increasing frequency over the past decade, many of the Muslim world's leading politicians and religious figures have denied or questioned the Holocaust in an effort to delegitimize the Jewish state. Often these hurtful statements are accompanied by vile and outrageous anti-Semitic discourse in government-controlled media.

Most notorious, of course, is Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called the systematic murder of six million Jews a "myth," and whose government sponsored a conference of Holocaust deniers in 2006. Meanwhile, through Arabic translations of Holocaust revisionist literature, and with the indulgence of much of the state-sponsored Arab press, some Muslim and Arab leaders have sought to make Holocaust denial a tool against Israel and the West.

But not all Muslims leaders go along with this immoral attack on history. In a few places in the Islamic world, there is now a willingness to truthfully look at the past, and comprehend what befell European Jewry more than six decades ago. Last year, for example, the predominantly Muslim European nation of Albania commemorated its first Holocaust Remembrance Day.

But nowhere in the Arab world has the past been confronted as forcefully as in Morocco, where King Mohammed VI has shown real courage and leadership by publicly acknowledging the Holocaust. In a recent speech at the royal palace in Fez, which went largely unreported in the international media, the Moroccan king called the Holocaust "one of the blots, one of the most tragic chapters in modern history."

"Amnesia," the king declared, "has no bearing on my perception of the Holocaust, or on that of my people." His actions should be emulated as well as applauded.

At the U.S. government agency I head, we work to preserve the memory of the Holocaust - both the cultural legacy of the thousands of communities that were destroyed, and the truthful historical record of what happened to them. But beyond the preservation of evidence, we also try to preserve the lessons of that event, so modern societies will understand that allowing prejudice and hatred to flourish can

only lead to barbarity.

In both of these areas, King Mohammed's speech presents an important opportunity: It provides a starting point for Morocco and its neighbors to explore more fully the fate of Jews across North Africa during World War II. Some officials in these nations still maintain that the Holocaust did not affect their countries. Although Jews in North Africa largely avoided the genocidal fate their people suffered in Europe, they, too, faced painful persecution.

While King Mohammed's grandfather, King Mohammed V, managed to limit application of the Vichy government's racist laws toward Moroccan citizens of Jewish faith, thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe were placed in French-controlled detention and slave labor camps in Morocco, as they were in Algeria and Tunisia. Many of these Jews, as well as some Arabs and Berbers, were forced to work under cruel circumstances, with insufficient food and in unbearable climatic conditions.

The nations of North Africa must come to terms with this legacy. These nations were under French rule, and France has acknowledged the complicity of the Vichy regime in the Holocaust. For Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, the time for confronting the past is now.

Looking toward the future, the king's speech offers an opportunity to leaders of other Muslim nations, including those that were not directly affected by the Holocaust: They can choose historical truth over falsehood and the respect of civilized nations over ostracism.

King Mohammed stated, "The duty of remembrance induced by the Holocaust ... imposes ethical, moral and political standards." These standards are clear - and they are separate from the question of how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Muslim nations that have encouraged and engaged in Holocaust distortion and denial must reconsider their actions. They must recognize that such irresponsible conduct makes them look offensive and ignorant in the eyes of the world. They must acknowledge the Holocaust as a historical fact, and express sincere empathy for its victims.

Governments and people that deny the Holocaust condemn themselves to a path of perpetual mediocrity, a path on which no lessons are learned, no progress is made and no promising future is possible.

Wherever history is denied, the future is denied as well. That is a lesson Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and others like him would do well to learn.

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