

Prominent Muslims make pilgrimage to Auschwitz

by [Jeff Diamant](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

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—and doing it 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—and online—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, New Jersey, 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 Muslims on the trip, which ended August 12, had worked with Jewish groups in interreligious dialogue. Only one of the eight, Shaykh Yasir Qadhi of New Haven, Connecticut, academic dean for the AlMaghrib Institute, had been quoted in 2001 as doubting the extent of the Holocaust, but he recanted long before the trip, saying his past views were based on misinformation.

On their return, the group of eight released a statement citing the 6 million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust, among 12 million Holocaust deaths overall. It concluded, "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 could not comprehend how such evil could be unleashed."

Like others in the group, Qadhi said the historical truth of the Holocaust should not be distorted by the 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 collections of victims' hair, suitcases and belongings. "Almost everybody was in tears," said Imam Muzammil Siddiqi, of the Islamic Society of Orange County in California. Siddiqi, a longtime participant in interfaith events, chairs the influential Fiqh Council of North America.

Also on the trip was Laila Muhammad, daughter of the late imam W. D. Muhammad of Chicago, and Sayyid M. Syeed, a top official with the Islamic Society of North America. The imams said they were moved also by meetings with Holocaust survivors and by seeing their tattooed numbers.

—Jeff Diamant, RNS