



Muslim World League's Historic Auschwitz Visit Draws Support From Saudi Arabia, Condemnation From Qatar

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Introduction

The January 23, 2020 visit to the Nazi Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp in Oświęcim, Poland by a delegation from the Mecca-based Muslim World League (MWL), comprising 25 senior Muslim clerics and headed by its secretary-general, Mohammad Al-'Issa, was unprecedented. Taking place in advance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, it was the first visit by a senior Muslim delegation to the camp, and was in conjunction with delegations and representatives from the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The visit, along with Al-'Issa's statements condemning the Holocaust during the visit, prompted a range of reactions in the Arab and Islamic world.

Saudi intellectuals and media figures expressed support for the visit on social media, emphasizing that the Holocaust was a mark of shame for humanity as well as history's most loathsome crime, that it should be acknowledged and condemned as such, and that it should be taught in schools. They added that the visit itself was an expression of tolerance and a positive move that would advance peace in the region. The Saudi press also published articles in support of the visit and of Al-'Issa, clarifying that it expressed condemnation of the crime against the Jews but was not an expression of support for Israel since Jews and Zionists are not the same.



Al-'Issa, the MWL delegation, and members of other groups in joint Auschwitz visit (Source: *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, London, January 23, 2020)

Aside from the delegation's Auschwitz visit, this year International Holocaust Remembrance Day received special mention in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. The Bahraini and UAE foreign ministers expressed solidarity with Holocaust victims and condemned racism on Twitter, with the Bahraini minister tweeting: "Together, we will remember those who were annihilated, [to ensure] that these crimes against humanity will not recur." [1] This was retweeted and expanded by his Emirati counterpart. Likewise, Saudi media published articles on International Holocaust Remembrance Day recognizing its importance. [2]

On the other hand, pro-Qatar elements leveraged the visit to protest against the MWL and its home base, Saudi Arabia. Condemnation of the visit appeared in the Qatari media, and the Qatar-backed International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) also condemned it, calling it an expression of unacceptable normalization with Israel. The position taken by the IUMS was in line with the antisemitic statements made over the years by its senior officials. IUMS founder Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi has for years promoted an extremist antisemitic and anti-Christian discourse, even saying in a sermon that Hitler was Allah's punishment for the Jews and calling for another Holocaust but this time at the hands of the Muslims. [3] This year, the organization's current leader, Dr. Ahmad Al-Raissouni wrote that it is a right and an obligation to question the Holocaust, and that details about it could not be confirmed because the narrative consists of claims that are "politically biased and questionable." [4]

This report will present details of the Auschwitz visit and sample reactions to it from the Saudi media as well as condemnations from Qatar and the Qatar-backed IUMS.'

Muhammad Al-Issa And Other Delegation Members: "The Atrocities Perpetrated Here Were Heinous Crimes"; "We Have Come Here To Draw A Lesson [From These Events] "

The Muslim delegation that visited Auschwitz together with an AJC delegation included MWL representatives and other clerics from across the Muslim world. The visit included a tour of the camp, and the clerics also held public prayers in front of the memorial for the victims of the Holocaust at the site. After leaving Poland, the Muslim delegation also visited Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were massacred in July 1995. [5]

Among the members of the Muslim delegation that visited the camp were Poland Mufti Ahmad Tomasz Miśkiewicz, the secretary-general of the Morocco-based League of Mohammedan Scholars, [6] Dr. Ahmed Abbadi, and the secretary-general of the Lebanese Shi'ite Arab Islamic Council, Dr. Sayyed Muhammad Ali Al-Husseini, a Lebanese Shi'ite living in Lebanon and, a known opponent of Hizbullah. Together with AJC representatives, they also visited the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the Tatarska Street Mosque, and the Nozyk Synagogue, and held a celebratory interfaith Shabbat dinner. [7]

The Auschwitz visit was an additional milestone for Dr. Al-Issa, who in recent years has conveyed, on behalf of Islam, messages of pluralism and of the need for interfaith dialogue, particularly in Europe and in the U.S. Two years ago, on January 22, 2018, in advance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, he sent a letter to Sara Bloomfield, director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, harshly and unprecedentedly

condemning the crimes of the Holocaust and calling it "an incident that shook humanity to the core." [8] Several months later, on May 2, 2018, he visited the museum. [9]

Prior to the Auschwitz visit, the MWL wrote on its Facebook page that the visit was aimed at "stressing condemnation of those foul crimes without exception, since the Muslims condemn all crime, no matter the source or the victim, because these are Islamic values." It added that the visit was also meant to emphasize that Islam "is a religion of forgiveness and justice, and opposes all evil deeds," adding that "this position applies not only to the Islamic world but includes everyone, because Islam's justice and compassion are comprehensive." [10]

During the visit, Al-'Issa said: "Here, in Poland, we emphasize that we see those barbaric horrors, whoever perpetrated them and whoever was their victim, as a grave crime, since Islam is a religion of justice, with solid principles that have no double standard." [11] He also said: "I came here and met with grandchildren of those who survived the slaughter at Auschwitz. At these sites, ugly crimes against all humanity were committed... Today we honor not only the memory of the dead, but honor the living as well. The terrifying stories we heard from the survivors are proof of our shared humanity. There were Muslims who made an effort to save Jews from the Holocaust, placing themselves at great risk. They represent the true values of Islam. Our visit is aimed at spreading brotherhood, peace, and friendship worldwide." [12]



Al-'Issa and delegation members pray near the memorial at Auschwitz (Source: Al-Quds Al-Arabi, London, January 23, 2020)



The delegation at Auschwitz (Source: themwl.org, January 23, 2020)

Lebanese Shi'ite sheikh Muhammad Ali Al-Husseini, secretary-general of the Arab Islamic Council and known for his anti-Hizbullah sentiment, tweeted after his visit: "We call for turning over a new leaf with the entire human race, with an open and moderate approach, in order to stress the brotherhood of humanity and our shared fate... [My] presence at Auschwitz is part of the humane stand to ponder the history of mankind, where the most terrible massacres and of all [types] of annihilation due to religious affiliation occurred. The visit provides an opportunity to remember what man has done to his fellow man... We are here to learn a lesson and to stress that the burning of human beings, particularly Jews, that happened on this piece of land is condemned by all the monotheistic religions, by the UN, and by the human race. There must be no murder because of religious affiliation..."[13]

Prior to the visit, Al-Husseini tweeted: "We have left for Poland as part of the Muslim World League delegation, and there we will meet with representatives of the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish religions, and with senior [Polish] state and EU officials. The visit will include a tour of the Auschwitz camp, as a clear Islamic expression of [the delegation's] condemnation of this crime of the Holocaust as a crime against humanity, and of our opposition to all forms of religious persecution."[14]

Dr. Ahmad Abbadi, secretary-general of the Moroccan League of Mohammedan Scholars, said in an interview with Al-Arabiya that no one in the family of man was immune [to contracting] the "virus of hatred" and that "this lesson must be learned so that we will not repeat this tragedy anywhere on the face of the Earth."

View Abbadi's statements on MEMRI TV [here](#).

Following the visit, leaders of Muslim organizations in Europe, among them the World Council of Muslim Societies director Muhammad Bishara, North Macedonia Cultural and Justice Association director Nasrat Ramadan, and Islamic Council of Germany secretary-general Abd Al-Samad Yazidi, also expressed their support.[15]

Saudi Support For The Visit On Social Media: This Is Tolerance; The Holocaust Is Humanity's Mark Of Shame; We Should Teach About The Holocaust In Schools

Prominent on social media were tweets by well-known Saudi intellectuals and media figures who supported the visit of the delegation to Auschwitz and emphasized condemning the Holocaust.

Saudi intellectual Turki Al-Hamad tweeted in response to the visit: "This is tolerance. Regardless of [our] feelings towards the Israelis and the Jews in general, and [our] relations with them, the Holocaust and what happened to the Jews and others at the hands of the Nazis is a mark of shame on the forehead of mankind. Fanaticism will not blind us or distance us from our humanity. If we want the world to identify with our problems, we must identify with its problems." [16]

Saudi intellectual 'Abd Al-Hamid Al-Hakim, former director of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Jeddah, who has visited Israel in the past and tends to express support for the country,[17] tweeted the following in advance of the delegation's visit to Auschwitz: "A wonderful trend, which is in keeping with [the objective] of achieving peace. The time has come for the Arabs to understand that the thinking which led them to avoid acknowledging and condemning of the most heinous crime in history, [the crime] of the burning of the Jews, is the same [thinking] which transformed their countries into arenas of civil war. I propose teaching about heinous crime in our educational curricula so as to produce mature people who believe in and support peace." Al-Hakim also shared the video testimony of a Holocaust survivor from Auschwitz published on the "Israel in Arabic" Twitter account, along with a message expressing similar sentiments.[18]

Saudi media figure 'Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ghabin, also known for his support for Israel, tweeted a link to an interview he gave on "Makan," an Israeli channel in Arabic, in advance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In the accompanying message he wrote: "The position of the Muslim world and of the Gulf on the massacre which the Nazis perpetrated against the Jews has changed, [and now considers it a] crime unlike any other in all of history. The participation of the Muslim World League in the Berlin Forum [the AJC Global Forum in Berlin in June 2020] is paving the way for a change in perception, not only of the Jews but [also] of Israel, a country with which we must coexist on the basis of peace and the denunciation of hatred." [19] It should be noted that in December 2019, Al-Ghabin confirmed that Saudi authorities had revoked his citizenship, for reasons unclear to him.[20]



Turki Al-Hamad's tweet

Loay Al-Shareef, another Saudi media figure who lives in Bahrain and is likewise known for his sympathetic stance toward Israel, and who was a member of the delegation to Auschwitz led by Sheikh Mohammed Al-'Issa, published the following tweet, in Hebrew, on the day of the visit: "Exclusive – historic visit of the Muslim World League in Poland with Sheikh Mohammed Al-'Issa. The true Islam condemns the Holocaust and every other crime against the Jewish people. May there be peace, with God's help." [21] In another tweet the same day, he attached a video of Al-'Issa and other members of the delegation praying inside Auschwitz, an act that had drawn criticism from various Twitter users, and wrote: "Important clarification with respect to this clip, from an eyewitness [who was present at the event]. During the visit of the Muslim World League at the Auschwitz camp, when the time came for the midday and afternoon prayers, those responsible for the camp, in a humane and civilized gesture, quickly prepared a place for the sheikh and others to pray, after which the program for the visit was completed." [22]

Support For The Visit In The Saudi Press: It "Shattered The Bonds Of Extremism" But "Was Not A Recognition Of The Occupation"

The Saudi press published several articles about the visit to Auschwitz. These articles praised the "necessary" visit to Auschwitz as well as Muhammad Al-Issa personally for having "shattered the bonds of extremism," while stressing that the visit did not indicate support for Israel or Zionism.

'Abdallah Al-Tayer, a columnist for the Saudi *Al-Jazirah* daily, wrote: "By visiting the Auschwitz [concentration] camp, Sheikh Mohammed Al-'Issa actively implemented the law of divine justice, as mentioned in the words [of Allah]: 'Oh you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just' [Quran 5:8]. He thereby emphasized that Islam does not recognize such acts of massacre, and that anyone who is killed by tyranny and aggression deserves that his fellow human should do him justice by remembering his suffering and taking every precaution to ensure that these humanitarian disasters do not recur..."

"[Muhammad Al-'Issa] shattered the bonds of extremism by means of proofs and evidence, and opened the doors which have been locked so long due to various political desires or fanatical interpretations of religion. Every objective scholar of shari'a texts, unfettered by the influence of social and political elements and by the demagoguery which has piled up [over the years], will reach the same conclusion as Al-'Issa, if he is courageous. The late Sheikh 'Abd Al-'Aziz bin Baz arrived at the same realization about three decades ago, when he ruled that it is permitted to have diplomatic relations with Israel for mutual economic gain and if this benefits the Islamic countries. This is because such relations in no way signify recognition of the occupation or consent to what Israel does to the Palestinians..."[23]

In an article on the Saudi website Elaph.com, former Jordanian information minister Saleh Al-Qallab, who frequently writes in the Saudi media, rejected the criticism that had been voiced against the visit, emphasizing that the it was meant to condemn the massacres against the Jews, but certainly not to express support for the Zionists. He wrote: "There is absolutely no need for the uproar that some people made over the visit of Muslim World League secretary-general Dr. Muhammad Al-'Issa to Auschwitz, Poland, at the head of a delegation of 25 Muslim clerics. [This was] the place where, during World War II, the Nazis, under the orders of Adolf Hitler, carried out immense massacres against Jews as Jews. [These victims] had nothing to do with the 'Zionist Movement,' founded by the Austrian Theodor Herzl in the late 19th century and early 20th century as a colonialist nationalist movement..."

"The Nazis carried out their crimes in Auschwitz and Srebrenica [*sic*] out of racist motives, against the Jews as Jews, not against the Zionists and the Zionist Movement. That is probably what prompted Dr. Muhammad Al-'Issa... to head the delegation and visit Auschwitz in Poland, and Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina. [His aim was] to stress to the entire world that the Muslims condemn these massacres perpetrated against the Jews just because of their religion, and that they distinguish between Judaism and Zionism, treating [only] Zionism as a nationalist, racist and colonialist movement..."

"The objective of this good and necessary visit was to emphasize to the whole world, and to the members of the Jewish faith, in Palestine and everywhere else in the world, that the Muslims treat the Jewish faith as a divine faith, like Islam and Christianity; that they distinguish between Judaism and Zionism; that they oppose the massacres perpetrated by the Nazis in Poland and Bosnia-Herzegovina [*sic*], and that they demand that the world condemn the massacres perpetrated against the Palestinians out of racist, Zionist motives..."[24]

Qatar-Backed International Union Of Muslim Scholars: We Oppose And Condemn The Visit

The Muslim delegation's visit to Auschwitz and the holding of a public prayer there sparked condemnation from Saudi Arabia's rivals, especially from Qatari and Qatar-supported elements, chief among them the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS). This organization, headed by Dr. Ahmad Al-Raissouni and supported by Qatar and Turkey, issued an official statement condemning the visit and the holding of the public prayer in front of the memorial at the camp, which it claimed were expressions of "normalization with

the Zionist occupier." This position is not surprising; since its inception, the IUMS, founded by Sheikh Yousuf Al-Qaradawi and headed by him until recently, has been promoting antisemitic and anti-Christian rhetoric and also encouraging jihad and martyrdom. In fact, last May, Dr. Al-Raissouni published an article claiming that doubting the Holocaust was not only a right but a duty.[25]

The IUMS statement condemning the visit to Auschwitz said:

"The Muslims followed [the events] with puzzlement and disapproval as a delegation of sheikhs, organized by the Muslim World League and headed by its secretary-general and former Saudi justice minister Muhammad bin 'Abd Al-Karim Al-'Issa, paid a bizarre visit to the Nazi camp Auschwitz in Poland, to take part in the Israeli events marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the prisoners incarcerated there. The visit included a public prayer in front of [one of] the monuments commemorating the Holocaust, and ceremonial meetings with figures from the global Zionist movement.

"In light of this visit and its content, the International Union of Muslim Scholars

1. Condemns every injustice that was perpetrated or will be perpetrated against any individual or nation, regardless of its religion;
2. [Declares that] this visit is actually a chapter in [the process of] normalization with the Zionist occupier and the various arms [of the occupation]. Calling for just coexistence and peace did not require making this biased visit, with all its symbolic ceremonies. On this basis, the union opposes this normalization visit and condemns it, while supporting every [kind of] peace and coexistence that grant every [side] its due rights.
3. The union warns against the implications of exploiting clerics [as part of] the Zionist plans and the efforts of some Arab regimes to promote these [plans] with the aid of clerics.
4. [The union] condemns the holding of public prayers in front of the cameras and amid the monuments that are symbols of Zionism, and [condemns] the exploitation of the Jewish tragedy in propaganda that serves the Zionist entity and justifies its crimes against Palestine, the Palestinian people and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. [Holding] this prayer was [an act of] deceiving the Muslims and distorting their faith." [26]

Qatari Media Figure: Muslim World League Wept In Submission At The Holocaust Memorial

Condemnation of the visit came also from the Qatari media. Media figure Jaber Al-Harmi, who tweeted: "The Muslim World League wept in submission at the Holocaust memorial and its secretary-general led worshippers facing [the monument to the] Holocaust, but we saw none of this weeping over the wounds of the Uyghur Muslims [in China], the Rohingya [in Myanmar], in India or in Kashmir; we saw no serious activity for Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa, or the wounds [sustained] by the peoples in Syria, Libya, and Yemen." [27]



Jaber Al-Harmi's tweet

Article In Qatari Daily: The Quran Teaches Us Not To Follow In The Footsteps Of The Jews – So Why Are We Thronging To Auschwitz To Lament Them?

Muhammad Saleh Al-Musafir, lecturer in political science at Qatar University and columnist for the *Al-Sharq* daily, likewise condemned the delegation's visit and the statements of its members, claiming that the Arab states had nothing to do with the Holocaust. He added that, instead of praying for the souls of the Jewish Holocaust victims, they should have prayed for the martyrs of Gaza, Iraq and Syria. He wrote:

"I understand the position of Europe with respect to this human tragedy of Holocaust and genocide, but I cannot understand the position of several Arab countries with respect to this tragedy, since they have nothing to do with it. They took no part in it, and, from a historical perspective, they are not required to relate to it publicly. Seventy years have passed, and the subject of the Holocaust has not been [part of] our culture or our educational curricula. Seventy years have passed, and we repeat in our educational curricula that the Jews, [or in other words] Israel, stole Palestine [as part of] a European-American plot, and it was planted in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world as an obstacle to its unity and territorial contiguity.

"I don't want to remind you of the words of Quran 5:82, for you are familiar with them ['You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah']. Moreover, Quran 2:120 teaches us, 'And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion. Say, 'Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the [only] guidance.' If you were to follow their desires after what has come to you of knowledge, you would have against Allah no protector or

helper.' If so, why flock to [visit] the graves of Jewish victims of the European Nazism, to pray for their souls and mourn for them?

"The imam of the Muslim World League, [Mohammed Al-'Issa], stood there with a group of Muslims behind him and they prayed for the souls of the Jewish victims of Nazism. Would it not be preferable to pray for the souls of the martyrs of Gaza, Iraq and Syria who were killed by European and Israeli gunfire, and for [the souls of] the martyrs of Egypt who were killed in defense of Palestine [?]...

"Oh our fortunate leaders, Israel will not be pleased with you, no matter what you do, and the U.S. won't be pleased with you until you bow down and your noses touch the ground. It's a vicious circle. Therefore, return to your people; they are your assurance, if you will attain justice and equality for them." [28]

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[1] [Twitter.com/ABZayed](https://twitter.com/ABZayed), [Twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa](https://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa), January 25, 2020.

[2] For example, Elaph.com, January 23, 2020.

[3] See MEMRI TV clip No. 2005, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi: Allah Imposed Hitler Upon The Jews To Punish Them – "Allah Willing, The Next Time Will Be At The Hand Of The Believers," January 28, 2009.

[4] See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 8083, Dr. Ahmed Al-Raissouni, Head Of The International Union Of Muslim Scholars Which Was Founded By Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi In Dublin: Questioning The Holocaust Is Not Just A Right But An Obligation, May 23, 2019; MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 8000, International Union of Muslim Scholars, Which For Years Has Encouraged Jihad, Calls On The West To Prohibit The Discourse Of Hate, April 15, 2019.

[5] The delegation's visit to Auschwitz was an outcome of cooperation between the MWL and the AJC, and was part of a memorandum of understandings signed by the sides on April 30, 2019. The MoU specifies additional activities planned for late this year: an AJC visit to Saudi Arabia in early 2020, and Dr. Al-'Issa's participation in an AJC conference in Berlin in June 2020 (Ajc.org, January 25, 2020), themwl.org, January 23, 2020.

[6] The League of Mohammedan Scholars is a public organization established by Muhammad VI in 2006.

[7] Ajc.org/news/american-jewish-committee-muslim-world-league-commit-to-combat-hate-deepen-ties, January 25, 2020.

[8] See MEMRI Special Dispatch No.7368, On Social Media, Criticism Of Muslim World League Secretary-General's Condemnation Of Holocaust – But In Saudi Press, Support For It, March 6, 2018.

[9] [Twitter.com/holocaustmuseum](https://twitter.com/holocaustmuseum), May 2, 2018.

[10] Facebook.com/mwlog, January 21, 2020.

[11] Themwl.org, January 23, 2020.

[12] Themwl.org, January 24, 2020.

[13] Twitter.com/sayidelhusseini, January 24, 2020.

[14] Twitter.com/sayidelhusseini, January 21, 2020.

[15] *Al-Yawm Al-Saba'* (Egypt), January 26, 2020.

[16] Twitter.com/TurkiHAlhamad1, January 25, 2020.

[17] For more on Al-Hakim's support for Israel, see MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1399: Shift In Saudi Media's Attitude To Israel – Part II: Saudi Writer Who Visited Israel: We Want An Israeli Embassy In Riyadh; We Should Make Peace With Israel, Uproot Culture Of Hatred For Jews, May 29, 2018.

[18] Twitter.com/hakeem970, January 21, 2020.

[19] Twitter.com/Abdullhameeds, January 22, 2020.

[20] Twitter.com/Abdullhameeds, December 16, 2019.

[21] Twitter.com/lalshareef, January 23, 2020.

[22] Twitter.com/lalshareef, January 23, 2020.

[23] It appears that Al-Tayer is referring to a group of rulings made by former Saudi mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz on the subject of reconciliation with the Jews, which was published in a collection of his rulings on January 21, 1995. In his rulings bin Baz wrote that every country is free to reconcile with the Jews if this serves its interests, and that the relationships between the Jews and the PLO do not obligate the other Arab countries. *Al-Jazirah* (Saudi Arabia), January 27, 2020.

[24] Elaph.com, January 27, 2020.

[25] See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 8083, Dr. Ahmed Al-Raissouni, Head Of The International Union Of Muslim Scholars Which Was Founded By Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi In Dublin: Questioning The Holocaust Is Not Just A Right But An Obligation, May 23, 2019.

[26] lumsonline.org, January 26, 2020.

[27] Twitter.com/jaberalharmi, January 24, 2020.

[28] *Al Sharq* (Qatar), January 28, 2020.

<https://www.memri.org/reports/muslim-world-leagues-historic-auschwitz-visit-draws-support-saudi-arabia-condemnation-qatar>