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U.S. Holocaust Museum Comes Under Fire For Failing to Address Arab Anti-Semitism

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January 19, 2006

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/26139>

WASHINGTON - Amid pledges from Iran to "wipe Israel off the map" and to hold a conference examining whether the Nazi murder of 6 million Jews is a "myth," America's Holocaust Museum is under fire for its silence about Arab assistance to the Nazis during World War II, and about the intensifying hatred of Jews in the Arab Middle East today.

Leading the charge is Holocaust Museum Watch, a national organization formed 18 months ago to spur the museum toward meaningful acknowledgment of Arab anti-Semitism. A forum at the National Synagogue here last night - headlined by Rep. Eliot Engel, a Democrat of New York; the author of "IBM and the Holocaust," Edwin Black; the president of the Amcha Coalition for Jewish Concerns, Rabbi Avi Weiss, and other Jewish leaders - marked Holocaust Museum Watch's inaugural public event.

In particular, Holocaust Museum Watch charges that the federally chartered and federally funded United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is failing to meet the obligations set forth in its government-approved founding documents. The congressional legislation that approved the museum in 1980 was based on a 1979 report issued by the President's Commission on the Holocaust, established by President Carter and chaired by Elie Wiesel. Among other responsibilities, the commission tasked the museum with maintaining a Committee on Conscience, charged with monitoring potential genocidal situations and issuing an "'institutional scream' to alert the conscience of the world and spark public outcry" at the earliest signs of genocidal intent.

But while calls for destroying the Jewish state have been the mainstay of the Arab Middle East for decades, critics say, the Holocaust Museum has not issued any "institutional scream," or even included exhibits or materials about Arab anti-Semitism in the museum's facilities. It has also declined repeated requests to hold conferences or events addressing the issue.

"There is anti-Semitism emanating from parts of the Muslim world, and this is not a problem which should escape the concern of the Holocaust Museum," Mr. Engel said in a statement to The New York Sun. "I think it is time that the museum consider intensifying its focus on this continuing concern."

"It's unbelievable," the rabbi of the National Synagogue, Shmuel Herzfeld, told the Sun yesterday. "They won't talk about Egypt, about Syria, about Saudi Arabia - it's like the big elephant in the room."

Arab anti-Semitism, the rabbi added, is a widely recognized phenomenon; earlier this week, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld likened remarks by President Ahmadinejad of Iran to the early writings of Hitler. The museum's leaders, Rabbi Herzfeld said, "are the last ones in the world to admit that there's such a thing as Arab anti-Semitism."

Rabbi Herzfeld and other critics argued that the museum's silence on Arab anti-Semitism was likely the result of its political burdens. Two-thirds of the museum's operating budget is taxpayer-funded, and its leaders are

presidential appointees. This has, in the past, placed museum officials in tricky spots regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Rabbi Weiss cited as an example the Clinton administration's insistence that the former head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat, be given a guided personal tour of the museum. The then-director of the museum, Walter Reich, refused and promptly was fired.

"They are not talking about the major issues because they upset certain political niceties in Washington," Rabbi Herzfeld said. "That's fine if you're the State Department, but if you're tasked with preserving the memory of the Shoah, and you deal with it in a callous political fashion, that's deeply offensive."

According to Rabbi Weiss, the museum, which has had more than 22.8 million visitors since it opened in 1993, is also failing in its instructional capacity.

"Everyone looks to the museum for direction relative to Shoah memory," the rabbi said. Their silence on Arab anti-Semitism, he said, "has contributed to it now moving to a next step, and that is the step of Arab leadership denying the Shoah openly."

A spokesman for the museum, Arthur Berger, declined to comment on specific criticisms from Holocaust Museum Watch, and stressed: "We are principally a historical and educational institution on the history of the Holocaust. Our mandate is 1933 to 1945."

Moreover, Mr. Berger said, the museum's Web site highlights a statement denouncing Mr. Ahmadinejad's remarks, and links to organizations, including the Middle East Media Research Institute, that monitor Arab anti-Semitism. Mr. Berger said he was not aware of any exhibits or conferences addressing Arab anti-Semitism as an independent issue.

"We are not able to do everything that is even in our mandate," Mr. Berger said. "We don't have the staff, and we don't have the money for it."

The museum's operating budget for fiscal year 2006 is \$66.6 million, \$42.6 million of which is provided through federal appropriations.

To the founder and one of the board members of Holocaust Museum Watch, Carol Greenwald, the museum's failure to comply with its mandate represents an unacceptable lack of accountability for taxpayer dollars.

Ms. Greenwald, a financial-investment analyst who sits on the boards of several pro-Israel organizations, was also critical of the museum's contents.

One example of misplaced focus, Ms. Greenwald said, is a video documentary about Christianity's role in the Holocaust, addressing historic episodes such as anti-Semitic violence after medieval passion plays and the writings of Martin Luther. "Given that they don't have any hesitation about having a movie like that," Ms. Greenwald said, "they should have a movie or an exhibit that talks about the role extremist Islam is playing in spreading religious and racial hatred."

The museum's unresponsiveness to such criticism, Ms. Greenwald, drove her to establish Holocaust Museum Watch. Her inability to get the museum to include some mention of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Husseini, who conspired with Hitler to liquidate the Jewish population of British Palestine, was particularly irksome, Ms. Greenwald said.

Last night's forum, she added, is just a first step toward bringing accountability and a renewed sense of focus to the museum.

"I'm not going away," she pledged. "We're not going away."

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