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# New York Muslim Leader Backs Iranian In Saying Holocaust Is 'Exaggerated'

By **RUSSELL BERMAN**, Staff Reporter of the Sun | January 13, 2006

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**THE LEADER OF A LARGE SHIITE MOSQUE IN QUEENS HAS JOINED** the new Iranian president in disputing the Holocaust, saying the Nazi massacre of an estimated 6 million Jews during World War II "has been exaggerated."

"The numbers which have been mentioned are too much," the spiritual leader of the Imam Al Khoei Islamic Center in Jamaica, Sheik Fadhel al Sahlani, told The New York Sun. Sheik al Sahlani, who said his mosque has a membership of about 3,000, said that the killing of innocent Jews during the war was "an injustice" but that the extent of Nazi persecution needed further examination. "The numbers, the reasons, we have to study more," he said.

In that light, Sheik al Sahlani voiced his support for Iran's proposal to hold a conference on the Holocaust in Tehran, saying there is "nothing wrong with studying more." The conference is likely to include scholars who deny that the Holocaust took place.

The sheik's skepticism about the Holocaust follows President Ahmadinejad's recent statements that the genocide of the Jews is a "myth" and that Israel should be "wiped off the map." Sheik al Sahlani said that the Iranian leader's call for an end to Israel was not practical, but added, "It is a kind of dream, but we have to be realistic. Even we have to accept a fact that we don't like."

Many Muslim leaders in New York are rejecting such fiery rhetoric about Israel and the Holocaust, saying the comments will not help defuse tension in the Middle East.

In a survey by the Sun of more than a dozen Muslim leaders across the city, only Sheik al Sahlani voiced agreement with Mr. Ahmadinejad's statement about the Holocaust. Most imams, mosque administrators, and officials at Islamic organizations strongly denounced the Iranian leader's comments. Some called the remarks "irresponsible" or "offensive," and others said they should not be taken seriously.

"For him to make stupid comments like that, I don't even think the Iranian people think like that," the president of Masjid Ar-Rahman at 80 Madison Avenue, Firoz Shaikh, said. He added that there is little doubt about the Holocaust in the Muslim community. "Of course it happened. It was atrocious."

The director of the Muslim Center of New York, Mohammad Sherwani, called the Holocaust the "greatest injustice" and suggested Mr. Ahmadinejad was "going bananas."

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"How can he say that?" Mr. Sherwani said. "Nobody can deny who knows history that the Holocaust happened."

Other imams interviewed by the Sun professed to have little knowledge about the details of the Holocaust but did express skepticism that 6 million was an accurate figure for the number of Jews killed.

"This is now common knowledge that the Holocaust did indeed take place," the imam of the Islamic Cultural Center on the Upper East Side, Sheik Omar Abu Namous, said. "But about the exact numbers, this needs some scholars to investigate. Only God knows the real number of people who perished at the hands of Hitler. Only God knows."

The Anti-Defamation League has repeatedly condemned Mr. Ahmadinejad's position. The director of its New York branch, Joel Levy, expressed dismay that a Muslim leader in the city would question established facts about the Holocaust.

"It's extremely disturbing that any religious leader would buy into the lie that the Holocaust did not take place or question the well-documented statistics about the number of Jews murdered," Mr. Levy said. "There is no need to go to Iran and meet with a Holocaust denier and somebody who has said that Israel has no right to exist and has even called for its destruction."

The director of the Middle East Forum, Daniel Pipes, said skepticism about the Holocaust from Muslim leaders is "all too common."

"Most mosques, Sunni or Shiite, are in the hands of Islamists," Mr. Pipes said. "Most Islamists are one way or another denying the Holocaust."

Mr. Ahmadinejad has launched repeated verbal attacks on Israel since he took power last August. In October, he was quoted as calling the Jewish state a "disgraceful blot" that must be "wiped off the map." "Anyone who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury," he said, according to the state-run Iranian news agency.

He followed up the remarks in December by saying that because Europeans "insist" on claiming that Hitler murdered millions of innocent Jews, Israel should be moved to Europe.

"If the Europeans are honest," Mr. Ahmadinejad said, "they should give up some of their provinces in Europe - like in Germany, Austria, or other countries - to the Zionists, and the Zionists can establish their state in Europe. You offer part of Europe, and we will support it."

An Iranian studies scholar at New York University, Farhad Kazemi, said Mr. Ahmadinejad's comments were far more forceful than rhetoric from past Iranian regimes that were hostile toward Israel.

"For a president of a country that was popularly elected to make these statements, and repeatedly, is a terrible sign," Mr. Kazemi said, adding that Iran's Revolutionary Guard now has a spokesman in the presidency. Iran also has the second-largest Jewish population in the Middle East after Israel, Mr. Kazemi noted.

Mr. Kazemi, who was born in Iran, called the Iranian president's statements "absolutely outrageous." He said that while it was clear that Mr. Ahmadinejad was appealing to a hard-line constituency in Iran, he saw little practical purpose in his rhetoric, especially with regard to a rejection of the Holocaust.

Like a Road Trip

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"All they have to do is go to Auschwitz," Mr. Kazemi said. "What is there to deny, for Pete's sake?"

Though extreme, Mr. Ahmadinejad's tirade amounts to a "p.r. effort" likely to backfire, an Iran historian and associate professor of international affairs at Columbia University, Lawrence Potter, said. "These kinds of comments are just going to set them back," Mr. Potter said, adding that Mr. Ahmadinejad, in picking a fight over Israel and the Holocaust, may simply be seeking to distract attention from domestic problems in Iran.

Whatever Mr. Ahmadinejad's intent, his comments have drawn sharp rebukes from around the world, especially in America, Israel, and Europe.

In New York, though some Muslim leaders remain skeptical about details of the Holocaust, most distanced themselves from Mr. Ahmadinejad's call to wipe out Israel.

"That's not our concept. That's not our opinion," the imam of Masjid Al-Hamdu-Li-Llah in Jamaica, Sheik Aziz Bilal, said. "He does not speak for the Muslim community."

Of Israelis, Sheik Bilal said: "They're there, and they deserve to be there and have a place where they can live in peace."

At the Jamaica Islamic Center, the mosque's president, Khwaja Hassan, said Israel's right to exist is no longer at issue. The anti-Israel rhetoric out of Iran should stop, he said. "Israel is an independent state," Mr. Hassan said. "It is a sovereign state." He also dismissed the suggestion that Israel be moved to Europe. "Israel belongs where it is," he said.

The assistant secretary-general of the Queens-based Islamic Circle of North America, Azeem Khan, said the Iranian president's comments would only harm efforts for a Palestinian state in the Middle East. "That type of rhetoric is not constructive," Mr. Khan said. "It doesn't help anyone anywhere."

The executive director of the New York branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Wissam Nasr, said the attack on Israel "boils down to a step backwards. ... For 2005, that's a pretty ill though-out remark."

The secretary of Madina Masjid on 11th Street in Greenwich Village, Mohammed Uddin, also said he disagrees with Mr. Ahmadinejad's sentiments, saying his comments were "not good."

"We have a good relationship with all types of religions," Mr. Uddin said.

Other Muslim leaders characterized Israel's existence as an accepted reality, even if Palestinian Arabs claim ownership of the land both Jews and Muslims consider holy.

"Israel is there, and it is going to be there whether we like it or not," a coordinator for the Arab-American Federation, Linda Sarsour, said. "We have to learn to deal with that."

While many imams denounced the harshness of Mr. Ahmadinejad's statements, some emphasized that it did not mean that Israel does not deserve the bulk of the blame for its ongoing conflict with the Palestinian Arabs.

Imam Talib Abdur Rashid of the Mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood in Harlem called the Holocaust "one of the great tragedies of humanity, along with slavery, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Bosnia, and Rwanda."

But he said Mr. Ahmadinejad's call for Israel's destruction reflects a "sentiment born of the legitimate anger, frustration, and bitterness that is felt in many parts of the Muslim world." Mr. Abdur Rashid said hostility toward Israel in the Muslim world is due in part to Israel's "ongoing injustice toward the Palestinian people."



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