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Seeking to Advance Muslim-Jewish Relations: Selected Highlights

The American Jewish Committee has demonstrated a profound commitment to enhancing relations between Jews and Muslims, a vital part of its fundamental dedication to the promotion of interreligious understanding in the United States and around the world. Rejecting the inevitability of a "clash of civilizations," AJC has instead insisted on the possibility of a "community of civilizations" by encouraging dialogue on the highest levels with like-minded groups committed to fostering tolerance and cooperation. In so doing, we have achieved a number of breakthroughs in this vital arena.

Ongoing Activities

Political and diplomatic outreach to Arab and Muslim leaders worldwide

For well over a decade, AJC has dedicated itself to forging significant relationships with Arab and Muslim leaders around the world.

AJC has traveled extensively in the Muslim world - from Morocco to Mauritania, through the Middle East and the Gulf states, to Indonesia. We have met with scores of Muslim leaders, including top officials of Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia, Bosnia, Kuwait, Qatar, Malaysia, and Indonesia, to discuss topics ranging from relations with Israel and the United States to the promotion of international Muslim-Jewish dialogue.

Reaching out to Muslim communities in the United States

As part of a proud tradition of extensive intergroup and interreligious work, AJC's chapters have worked in cities around the country toward advancing Muslim-Jewish ties. Chapters have been at the forefront in responding to hate crimes and in pressing for local legislation to deter them. In addition, chapters have played an important role in preparing and following up on national conferences and meetings with Muslim leaders and academics.

Several chapters have also visited Muslim countries to learn about their traditions and cultures and to help represent American Jewish viewpoints. [Timeline](#)

1985-1986 Condemning scapegoating

AJC forcefully condemns the October 1985 murder of Alex Odeh, director of the Santa Ana branch of the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in a bomb attack.

In a public statement, AJC executive director David Gordis condemns the singling out and defamation of any group within America. "Violence has no place in the American body politic, no matter what the political cause. The rule of law must protect the Constitutional right of free expression for all Americans, whatever their beliefs or opinions."

AJC meets with FBI director William Webster, urging vigorous steps to identify and prosecute those responsible for the attacks and endorsing better protection of Arab-American organizations by law

enforcement officials in the face of threats. In tandem with a coalition of ethnic and religious organizations, AJC also publishes expressions of concern in an ad in *The New York Times*.

On July 16, 1986, AJC takes the issue to the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice of the U.S. House of Representatives, where it submits testimony on the subject of ethnically motivated attacks against Arab-Americans. AJC advocates for the importance of local legislation on hate crimes and the development of standardized local and national statistics.

1991 Condemning scapegoating

AJC issues a public warning about the potential breaching of civil liberties of Arab-Americans at the start of the Gulf War and speaks forcefully and unequivocally against attacks on Muslims within the U.S. "We are ever mindful of what happened to Japanese-Americans as a result of war hysteria shortly after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941," writes executive director David Harris in the statement. "Some 120,000 Japanese-Americans, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were evacuated and incarcerated in internment camps...without any evidence whatsoever that they were a threat to U.S. security. This must not happen again."

1992-1995 Urging action in Bosnia

In a series of letters and public statements from 1992 to 1995 and in numerous meetings with U.S. and foreign officials, AJC urges NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in order to prevent further mass killing of Bosnian Muslims and help bring an end to the continued violence in the region.

In an "Open Letter to World Leaders," AJC and two sister agencies lament the "the existence of Serbian death camps in which humans, forcibly incarcerated because of their ethnicity, are once again being systematically slaughtered" and urge the United States and the international community to act without delay.

AJC's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (JBI) plays a vital role in strengthening the human rights voice within the international community. In 1993, JBI director Felice Gaer leads a fact-finding mission to the region to document ethnic cleansing and related human rights abuses, including importantly sexual violence against women. In the following year, Gaer travels with the United Nations Association to assess official UN peacekeeping efforts in all parts of the area. JBI works extensively with the UN to ensure that those who perpetrated crimes in the former Yugoslavia be brought to justice and to help educate the public on the complex legal and ethical issues involved in this historic endeavor. Its involvement with the UN War Crimes Tribunal dealing with Bosnia and neighboring countries extends to this day.

AJC helps to build and set the agendas of a number of powerful coalitions around the issue of Bosnia. From 1993-1995, AJC and JBI issue numerous letters and statements with coalitions of diverse major religious and human rights organizations, laying out specific proposals for action.

1993 Condemning scapegoating

In the wake of the March 9 car bomb at the World Trade Center, AJC issues a statement warning against a potential backlash of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim violence in the United States. "Those who would implicate an entire people or religion because of the accusations against a few add grievous insult to murderous injury. Therefore, we call on all Americans of goodwill to denounce any form of ethnic, racial or religious scapegoating."

1993 Expressing solidarity with Muslim victims of hate in Germany

AJC executive director David Harris and director of community services Eugene DuBow travel to Germany for the sole purpose of attending the June 3 funeral at a mosque in Cologne of five Muslim victims of the hate-inspired firebombing of a house in Solingen a few days earlier.

"I am neither a Turk nor a German nor a Muslim, but an American Jew profoundly concerned with the evil of crimes inspired by hatred based on so-called 'differentness' or 'otherness' wherever they may occur," says Harris in his public comments. "I stand with you today on behalf of the American Jewish Committee.... As we are taught in Judaism, we are all - all of us - created in God's image."

1993 Promoting Muslim-Jewish understanding in the United States

AJC co-sponsors the first ever national conference on "Muslims and Jews in North America: Past, Present and Future" with the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies at the University of Denver in October. Academics and experts from major American universities, including Princeton, Howard, Syracuse, Colorado, and Syracuse, as well as from Tel Aviv University, join for groundbreaking discussions.

"It is time for Muslims and Jews alike to speak out boldly and honestly to each other, to come to know and understand each other as people and not as spiritual abstractions," says Rabbi A. James Rudin, AJC interreligious director, at the conference.

1994 Promoting Muslim-Jewish understanding in the United States

AJC sponsors a second national conference to foster understanding between Muslims and Jews entitled "Women, Families, and Children in Islamic and Judaic Traditions" at the University of Denver. The conference focuses on issues of commonality between the religions and cultures.

[A third national conference, however, is cancelled when irreconcilable differences emerge over a spate of deadly terrorist attacks against Israeli targets.]

1995 Condemning scapegoating

Following the April 19 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, AJC issues a statement warning against any prejudgments about responsibility for the attack and condemns incidents of violence toward Arab and Muslim Americans.

1995 Forging contacts with the Muslim world

AJC becomes the first Jewish group to be invited on a diplomatic visit to Kuwait to meet with the foreign minister and other officials. Contact with Kuwait dates back to the Gulf War, when AJC vigorously supported U.S. efforts to oppose Iraqi occupation. In 1994, AJC had hosted a meeting with visiting members of Kuwait's National Assembly to discuss concerns about Kuwaitis missing since the Gulf War and suspected of being held in Iraq.

In 1995, AJC also becomes the first American Jewish group to visit the moderate Arab states of Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain and encourage the growing dialogue with the West.

Jason Isaacson, director of AJC's Office of Government and International Affairs, maintains close, ongoing contact with high-level members of the government of these and other moderate Arab and Muslim states.

1995-present Engaging in dialogue with Muslim influentials

Starting in 1995, AJC becomes a frequent stop for visiting delegations of Muslim clergy and Arab intellectuals on U.S. State Department-sponsored visits to the United States to study American pluralism.

1996 Aiding Muslim refugees

AJC takes a special interest in the welfare of a former senior Muslim government official forced to flee with his family from Sudan, offering needed aid for resettlement.

1996-2000 Forging contacts with the Muslim world

AJC representatives are invited to address the Diplomatic Institute of the Egyptian foreign ministry on a number of occasions to discuss Arab-Israeli relations and the status of Muslim-Jewish dialogue worldwide.

1999 Promoting Muslim-Jewish understanding in the United States

AJC holds meetings to launch an important relationship with the Islamic Supreme Council of America, a moderate American Muslim organization headed by Sheikh Kabbani.

1999 Aiding Muslims in Kosovo

A high-level AJC delegation travels to Macedonia at the start of the Kosovar refugee crisis to bear witness and show solidarity and support for Muslims forced to flee their homes. AJC draws attention to the plight of the refugees through ads in *The New York Times* depicting the children of Kosovo. Over \$1.2 million is raised for humanitarian aid, which AJC directs in its entirety toward alleviating the plight of the refugees.

AJC publicly supports NATO's action against Serbian troops as a necessary last means of defending Albanian Muslims persecuted in Kosovo. In ads in *The New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *New Republic*, AJC states: "With determination and courage, NATO weighed the difficult choices and chose to act - because it was right, because the alternative would give tyrants a green light to terrorize civilian populations and destroy the fabric of international order."

1999 Forging contact between Israel and the Muslim world

Due to its high standing and legitimacy in the Muslim world, AJC is able to arrange the first-ever meetings between the Israeli and Malaysian and Israeli and Tunisian foreign ministers. (Israel does not have formal relations or contacts with either of these countries.) Not infrequently, AJC has served to help facilitate communication between Muslim nations and Israel or Jewish leaders.

1999 Providing Turkish earthquake relief

Following the devastating earthquake in Turkey in the summer of 1999, AJC raises \$800,000 for humanitarian relief. The money is used to rebuild a school and construct a clinic in the areas of Adapazari and Duzce - both devastated by the earthquake. AJC executive director David Harris joins Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the dedication of the school.

"We, the Jewish people, have chosen to stand with you, our friends, in your darkest hours, just as you have chosen to stand with us on more than one difficult occasion in our own history," says Harris. "We have chosen to be friends, not only on the nice days but on the rainy days as well."

2000 Forging contacts with the Muslim world

AJC and its partner organization, the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council, go on an historic joint visit to Indonesia to meet with President Abdurrahman Wahid and other top officials to discuss a possible opening of lines of communication with Israel and the advancement of interreligious dialogue, among other pressing subjects.

2001 Promoting Muslim-Jewish understanding

AJC's Robert and Harriet Heilbrunn Institute for Interreligious Understanding releases two pathbreaking volumes designed to advance understanding between Muslims and Jews worldwide. One of the books, entitled *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, by Professor Reuven Firestone, a scholar of Islam at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, presents Judaism to Muslim readers.

The second book, by Muslim scholar Khalid Duran, subtitled *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, seeks to enhance Jewish understanding of Islam.

The books are praised by many experts in the field, including the Crown Prince of Jordan, who calls it "a courageous initiative to promote understanding, wisdom and brotherhood between the Jewish and Muslim communities in the land, which is holy to both of them - and around the world."

2001 Advancing Muslim-Jewish Relations in Germany

AJC's Berlin Office hosts a pathbreaking meeting with Turkish politicians and leaders of major national Turkish social and religious organizations in Germany to discuss common challenges of the Turkish and Jewish communities.

2001 Condemning scapegoating

Following the attack on America by Osama bin Laden's terrorist forces, AJC issues a statement condemning stereotyping and racist action.

The statement reads: "The catastrophic terror inflicted on American soil must not become an occasion for stereotyping or scapegoating.

"Jewish history makes us painfully aware that, too often, times of crisis provide opportunities for expressions of bigotry.

"An entire people or religion should never be implicated because of the heinous crimes committed by some of its members. We call on all Americans of goodwill to denounce any form of ethnic, racial or religious intolerance and reaffirm the American spirit of pluralism and openness."