

## Mahmoud Abbas Shifts on Holocaust

By Jodi Rudoren, *The New York Times*, 26 April 2014



*A statement by President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority grew out of a meeting with a rabbi. Credit Abbas Momani/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images*

JERUSALEM — President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority issued a formal statement on Sunday calling the Holocaust “the most heinous crime to have occurred against humanity in the modern era” and expressing sympathy with victims’ families.

The statement, which grew out of a meeting a week ago between Mr. Abbas and an American rabbi who promotes understanding between Muslims and Jews, is the first such offering of condolences by the Palestinian leader.

Mr. Abbas has been vilified as a Holocaust denier because in his doctoral dissertation, published as a book in 1983, he challenged the number of Jewish victims and argued that Zionists had collaborated with Nazis to propel more people to what would become Israel. A senior Israeli minister, incensed at quotations from Hitler highlighted on Facebook pages affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, denounced Mr. Abbas earlier this year as “the most anti-Semitic leader in the world” at a conference in Tel Aviv.

Mr. Abbas had already backtracked from the book, saying in a 2011 interview that he did “not deny the Holocaust” and that he had “heard from the Israelis that there were six million” victims, adding, “I can accept that.”

But the statement published in English and Arabic on Sunday morning by Wafa, the official Palestinian news agency, goes further, describing the Holocaust as “a reflection of the concept of ethnic discrimination and racism, which the Palestinians strongly reject and act against.”

“The Palestinian people, who suffer from injustice, oppression and denied freedom and peace, are the first to demand to lift the injustice and racism that befell other peoples subjected to such crimes,” Mr. Abbas said. “We call on the Israeli government to seize the current opportunity to conclude a just and comprehensive peace in the region, based on the two states vision.”

Yad Vashem, the center for Holocaust research in Jerusalem, said in an email on Sunday afternoon that Mr. Abbas’s statement “might signal a change” from a situation in which

“Holocaust denial and revisionism are sadly prevalent in the Arab world, including among Palestinians.” The email said “we expect” the new approach to “be reflected” in Palestinian websites, school curriculums “and discourse,” and encouraged the use of its Arabic-language websites and YouTube videos.

“Acknowledging the crimes of the Holocaust is fundamental to anyone who wants to confront history honestly,” the email said.

The timing — on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day and two days before the scheduled expiration of deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian peace talks — turned out to be terrible.

Last week, the Palestine Liberation Organization, of which Mr. Abbas is chairman, moved to repair its seven-year rift with the militant Islamist faction Hamas, prompting Israel to halt the talks that Secretary of State John Kerry started last summer.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel dismissed Mr. Abbas’s statement, telling his cabinet on Sunday morning that “Hamas denies the Holocaust even as it attempts to create an additional Holocaust by destroying the State of Israel.”

“Instead of issuing statements designed to placate global public opinion, Abu Mazen needs to choose between the alliance with Hamas, a terrorist organization that calls for the destruction of Israel and denies the Holocaust, and a true peace with Israel,” Mr. Netanyahu said, using Mr. Abbas’s nickname, according to a statement distributed by his press office. “We hope that he will disavow this alliance with Hamas and return to the path of true peace.”

In a speech on Saturday to the P.L.O.’s central council, Mr. Abbas said that the new government he would form under the reconciliation agreement with Hamas would adhere to prior P.L.O. agreements, recognize Israel and renounce violence. He said he remained willing to extend the negotiations with Israel if it released a promised group of long-serving Palestinian prisoners and if the next three months were devoted to drawing borders.

And he repeated his vow: “I’ll never recognize Israel as a Jewish state.”

The rabbi who prompted the Holocaust statement, Marc Schneier, is the founder of both the celebrity-studded modern Orthodox Hampton Synagogue and the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, a 25-year-old group that fosters relations between Jews and Muslims, blacks and Latinos. Rabbi Schneier said he met with Mr. Abbas at his West Bank headquarters for about 40 minutes last Sunday to enlist his support against European crackdowns on ritual animal slaughter and human circumcision, and for a program that would establish partnerships between Palestinian mosques and Israeli synagogues.

When he suggested that it would be “very significant, very meaningful” for Mr. Abbas to make a statement for Holocaust Remembrance Day, Rabbi Schneier recalled in an interview, the president agreed “before I could finish my statement.”

“It was very heartfelt, very genuine,” Rabbi Schneier said.

“Of course he expressed his frustration on the negotiations, on the peace process — I’ll leave that up to the political leaders,” he added. “I’m a great believer that Muslim-Jewish

reconciliation worldwide transcends the Israeli-Palestinian process. We're working on the spiritual peace process."