

Jewish Journal

An insider's account of International Farhud Day

By Edwin Black
June 26, 2015



From left, Shahar Azani of StandWithUs, Israeli Ambassador David Roet, Malcolm Hoenlein of the President's Conference holding the proclamation, historian author Edwin Black, Avi Posnick of StandWithUs, Rabbi Elie Abadie of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries and Alyza Lewin of the American Association of Jewish lawyers and Jurists, at the United Nations on International Farhud Day.

While I was speaking to the packed room, a woman I did not know, sitting in the front row, slowly shook her tear-stained head in disbelief and muttered softly ... barely audible ... "I never thought I would hear these words in this building."

The woman, it turns out, was of Iraqi Jewish ancestry. The building was the iconic United Nations Headquarters in Manhattan, astride the East River. The event was in a hall routinely used by the UN Security Council. The day was June 1, 2015. The occasion was the proclamation of "International Farhud Day" at the UN as a live global event broadcast by UN TV.

Farhud in an Arabic dialect means violent dispossession. The words I spoke that gripped the woman listening described in detail how the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, leader of the Arab community in Mandate Palestine, organized a blood-curdling massacre by Nazi-allied Arabs against Baghdad's peaceful Jewish community on June 1-2, 1941. The ensuing mass rape, beheading, murder, burning, and looting spree was the first step in a process that throughout the Arab world effectively ended 2,600 years of Jewish existence in those lands. Ultimately, some 850,000 to 900,000 Jews were systemically pauperized and made stateless in a coordinated forced exodus from the Arab world.

Many Sephardic Jews consider the 1941 Farhud, which murdered and maimed hundreds, to be their Kristallnacht.

However, for the past 74 years, neither the facts about the brutal, two-day pogrom, nor the culpability of the Nazified Iraqi and Palestinian Arab perpetrators, nor the expulsion of 850,000 Jewish refugees from the Arab world that followed were topics the UN wanted to hear of. Nor for the past 74 years was this blood-letting and its aftermath commemorated in the vast chronicles of organized Holocaust remembrances. Nor for the past 74 years was this constellation of tragedies commonly known and/or spoken of within the Jewish community. In fact, it took years of highly acrimonious, sometimes public, debate with and pressure on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum only recently successful to even induce the USHMM to recognize either the atrocity that occurred or the Mufti's role in the killing as a Holocaust-era persecution.

Indeed, the Farhud is most often referred to as the "forgotten pogrom." I first wrote about this massacre, in fleeting passage, in my 2004 book, "Banking on Baghdad." My articles on the subject in the media, drawn from the book, such as those syndicated by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, were typically headlined "The Forgotten Pogrom." That spawned the 2005 Farhud Recognition Project, which endeavored to bring this brutal Holocaust chapter into history's sightlines.

Half a decade later, in 2010, I went further and published an entire book devoted to the topic, "The Farhud: Roots of the Arab-Nazi Alliance in the Holocaust." Yet, 10 years after being "rediscovered" and right through the week before the UN event, Jewish media articles were still referring to the Farhud as the "forgotten pogrom." Conference of Presidents vice chairman, Malcolm Hoenlein, in his introductory remarks at the June 1, 2015 UN event, poignantly asked

this question: "I must wonder why it took 74 years for the world to recognize the tragedy of the Farhud."

Certainly, that was the question of the day. Three main reasons explain how mass carnage as barbaric as the Farhud remained out of earshot and over the horizon of Holocaust awareness.

First, persecution of Jewish victims in Arab countries did not conform to the established line of study that followed the classic Holocaust definition, as archetypically expressed by the USHMM's mission statement: "The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945." Note the pivotal word "European." This geographic qualifier left out the Jews of Iraq as well as their persecuted coreligionists in North Africa, where some 17 concentration camps were established by Vichy-allied and Nazi influenced Arab regimes.

Second, because the persecution of Jews in Arab lands during WWII and their forced exodus was considered beyond the thematic horizon, the type of well-financed and skilled scholarship that has riveted world attention on the Holocaust in Europe, generally by-passed the Sephardic experience. Certainly, the overwhelming blood and eternal sorrow of the Holocaust genocide was experienced by European Jewry. But their deeply tragic suffering, including that endured by my Polish parents, who survived, does not exclude the examination of other groups. Years of focus on the plight of Gypsies, Jews in Japan, and other persecuted groups proves that. Undeniably, a solid nexus clasps the events of the Middle East, roiling in oil, colonialism, and League of Nations Mandates, to a European theatre brimming with war crimes and military campaigns.

After the 1941 Farhud and during the subsequent years Husseini was on Hitler's payroll, the Mufti of Jerusalem toured European concentration camps and intervened at the highest levels to send European children to death camps in occupied Poland rather than see them rescued them into Mandate Palestine. In his diary, Husseini called Adolf Eichmann "a rare diamond." What's more, the tens of thousands of Nazified Arabs who fought in three Waffen SS Divisions in the Balkans and across all of Europe, were fighting for a Palestine and a greater Middle East Arab cause that hinged on Jewish extermination and colonial upheaval. When I wrote "The Farhud" in 2010, the focus was on excavating the details of a forgotten pogrom and a forgotten Nazi alliance. Only in recent years has a renewed trickle of excellent scholarship yielded gripping new research into the Arab role in the Holocaust. For example, there is *Islam and Nazi Germany's War*, which *The Wall Street Journal* reviewed as "impeccably researched." A second book, "Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East," by meticulous Arab and Turkish culture researcher Wolfgang Schwanitz, was published by Yale University Press. There are several excellent others.

Third, critics say, that many of the leading Jewish newspapers and wire services, now vastly more politicized than they were in the prior decade, did not devote sufficient space and informed knowledge to the topic. Moreover, some these critics suggest that in recent years, the Jewish press seemed to have marginalized the atrocity and its aftermath as a political discussion. "When former Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon was doing his 2012 campaign for Jewish refugees from Arab lands," asserts Lyn Julius of the British organization HARIF — Association

of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, "hardly a day went by when certain Jewish or Israeli newspapers did not politicize the matter, or suggest Israel was exploiting the issue for political gain."

In that vein, the day before the June 1, 2015 UN event, one prominent Jewish newspaper published an article on the Farhud, which included this observation: "Now, Jewish organizations and the Israeli government deploy it [memory of the Farhud] frequently to support their claims for refugee recognition on behalf of Middle Eastern Jews." Before the UN ceremony, three different irate members of the audience showed me this article on their tablets, and the consensus of disdain was expressed by one Sephardic gentleman who objected, first quoting the newspaper with derision: "Deploy it frequently to support their claims for refugee recognition on behalf of Middle Eastern Jews?" and then adding, "They would never say such a thing about the European Kristallnacht!" The complainers were equally astonished that this prominent article made no mention of the Mufti of Jerusalem. They felt the complete omission of Husseini's involvement and the marginalization of their nightmare was typical of the roadblocks they had encountered during their decades-long struggle for recognition of their anguish.

But on June 1, 2015, yes, 74 inexcusably years late and, yes, not an hour too soon, after waiting for thirty minutes beneath a gaggle of umbrellas in the torrential rain at a narrow admittance gate on First Avenue, and then into a packed hall at the UN, attended by diplomats from several countries, human rights activists of various causes and key Jewish leaders from a communal spectrum, in an event broadcast worldwide live by the UN itself, the stalwarts of Farhud memory gathered to finally make the proclamation of International Farhud Day — and made it loud and clear. In doing so, they made history by simply recognizing history.

All they wanted was to be remembered — to change the headline on their suffering from "the forgotten pogrom" to "the not forgotten pogrom." All they wanted was to draw back the curtain of their sorrow without an asterisk, without a parenthetical, without a "but also" or a "however" or a political catchphrase to qualify or filter their disconsolation. In short, they wanted to take their place in the annals of misery for the same reason all other Jews gather into that space: so they can help whisper endlessly the words "never again" as a beacon to humanity.

That happened on June 1, 2015, 74 years too late but not a minute too soon. The official proclamation was read aloud that day to the world: "On behalf of Iraqi Jews everywhere who yearn to commemorate the Farhud, the Holocaust-era massacre by Arab nationalists in coordination with the Nazis, which occurred June 1-2, 1941 in Baghdad, killing hundreds of innocent Jews and brutalizing thousands more, and pillaging their property and on behalf of those who recognize that Palestinian Arab leaders, including the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, were central instigators of the violence in Baghdad, along with Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Gailani and the Golden Square coup plotters ... and on behalf of those who yearn to recognize that the Farhud was the first step in the process which resulted in the forced exodus of 850,000 to 900,000 Jewish refugees from centuries of peaceful existence in Arab countries ... The organizations and individuals assembled and represented here, this June 1, 2015, in New York City at the United Nations, do hereby proclaim June 1st as International Farhud Day, to recognize and commemorate the Nazi-allied massacre by Arabs, the mass forced

exodus that followed, and the 850,000 to 900,000 Jewish refugees from Arab Lands. We recognize this date as a lamented day of history that should not be forgotten."

Seven parchment copies were signed by the five key organizers: Rabbi Elie Abadie of Jews for Justice in Arab Lands, Alyza D. Lewin for both the American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists and the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, Maurice Shoheit of the World Organization of Jews in Iraq, Avi Posnick for StandWithUs, and myself as historian. Signing as witness for the proceedings was Malcolm Hoenlein of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Numerous Jewish and non-Jewish organizations both here and abroad added their voices as co-sponsors, such as Philadelphia-based Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, HARIF — Association of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East in London, the Zionist Federation of Great Britain, and the Babylonian Heritage Society of Israel.

On behalf of Congressional Israel-Allies Caucus in the House of Representatives, co-chair Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ), issued a public statement expressing "deepest solidarity with Iraqi and the Arab world's Jews. Franks declared, "Today we will change the first of June from a day of a near-forgotten tragedy into International Farhud Day — a day of commemoration — when we call on the entire world to remember the disaster that befell the Arab world's Jews, and to do justice by them and their descendants."

Those who know the complex inter-relations and brimming calendar of the Jewish communal scene would understandably guess that such an international and multi-organizational undertaking at the UN as a live global event no less would necessitate many months of tedious planning, and probably a grant or two from the donor community. In fact, the entire enterprise took just six weeks from the first light bulb email on April 9 to the culminating applause of Farhud Day on June 1, 2015. As a testament to the long overdue recognition and the deep-seated and visceral understanding of the tragedy, uncharacteristically, the prime movers came together immediately, cohesively, and with humanitarian synchrony. There was no real funding, except for the shoestring contributions of the participants. A team of volunteers were found to man the event.

Key among the responsible parties was Alyza Lewin who had successfully coordinated a UN event on UNRWA some months earlier. The two organizations she represented, the American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists and the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, combined the heft of their juridical grasp of international law and human rights abuses to inject the needed gravitas and perspective. Rabbi Elie Abadie, born in Beirut, heads up Justice for Jews from Arab Countries and has long been a warrior for recognition of both the Farhud and the unrecognized and forgotten nightmare of 850,000 to 900,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries. When he agreed to be program moderator, Rabbi Abadie imbued the effort with the long overlooked activist fire needed to fuel the effort. Maurice Shoheit, as head of the World Organization of Jews from Iraq added the indispensable historical sinew to the survivor and descendant community. His dignity and intrinsic epicentral voice was listened to at all times as the program was developed. StandWithUs, as America's pre-eminent Jewish and Israel defense organization, was not new to the topic. For years, its president Roz Rothstein had elevated the Farhud and the related forced expulsion of Jews from Arab Lands to a prominent place in the constellation of StandWithUs causes.

My end was simply the history. History, when connected to the present, can be a spark plug for the future.

Unlisted in the list of proclamation signers, was Israel's Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Its mighty efforts bored through tunnels of UN bureaucracy and secured the space, time, and broadcast slot at the UN. Israel's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador David Roet came forward to provide introductory remarks for the UN program and, in so doing, revealed his family's personal connection to the historical injustice of the Holocaust — a credential all too often known among Israeli diplomats. Two Long Island Jewish high schools, Mesivta and Shalhevet, organized a bus of students who came to witness the making of history.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry devoted a page International Farhud Day. The Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles opened a page as well. So did the Israeli Consulate in Boston. Google added the day to their online calendar cites. Within 48 hours of the event, a simple Google search yielded more than 5,000 entries for "International Farhud Day." Hashtags such as for #FarhudDay appeared.

From that very rainy moment June 1, 2015 at the UN and going forward, memories of the day Baghdad burned in 1941, will no longer be invisible, muffled, or parenthesized. The long, painful threnody of the Holocaust that never lacks for cadenzas now includes a refrain for the Jews of Baghdad and 850,000 of their co-religionists across the Arab world for whom the persecution never stopped when the Third Reich was toppled in May 1945. For them, forever more, we have imbued an added dimension, in a macabre cubist process that never lacks for additional dimensions, when we look out, look back, and look within, to intone the haunting always-wafting injunction: Never Again.

Edwin Black is the author of IBM and the Holocaust, and The Farhud — Roots of the Arab-Nazi Alliance in the Holocaust. He began the initiative to proclaim International Farhud Day at the United Nations.