

Remarks by Avner Shalev,

The decision to invite all of you here today was a last moment one. Why was it so important to Yad Vashem to organize this kind of conference regarding Holocaust denial? This is not the first time that the Holocaust has been denied; it has happened in the past in Europe in North America in the Arab world. So what makes the Teheran Conference unique?

There are two issues that make this attempt at denying the Holocaust different from others. This conference was organized by an Islamic State, by the President of that State whose intentions, dreams and visions are to become one of the leaders, if not the leader of the Islamic world. What makes the conference in Teheran different is that someone who aspires to be the leader of the Islamic world convened such a meeting.

Over the years the Western world has built many mechanisms to combat Holocaust denial, including political, intellectual and educational programming. Holocaust denial in the Western world is, largely speaking, a marginal phenomenon. In the Islamic world those mechanisms have not been set into motion. We have not seen civilian efforts to combat Holocaust denial. On the contrary, the ideas of Holocaust denial have found fertile soil in the Islamic world. It has become a political issue, a part of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As part of a larger strategic agenda, the spread of Holocaust denial in Iran has become a very dangerous ideology.

Iranian President Ahmadinejad has made Holocaust denial part of a strategic agenda; not an academic or intellectual issue. Ahmadinejad wants to lead an Islamic Jihad and to orchestrate another genocide aimed at destroying the State of Israel. This endangers not only the Middle East and the Islamic world, but it has the potential to spread hatred and incite extreme actions worldwide.

We are here today not only to condemn and express our concerns in response to the conference in Teheran, concerns that leaders of countries around the world have already expressed, but to call to a more proactive set of actions. We must do more.

We must combat world awareness of Holocaust denial, through shaping public opinion and by intensifying our education and outreach efforts to the Islamic/Arab world. I know that this is complicated. We have plans to translate a good part of our Internet site into Arabic and Persian. We plan to enhance our activities and develop an Arabic guide for visitors to Yad Vashem. I would like to tell you about an initiative in cooperation with Amman, where we recently hosted a delegation of Jordanian teachers here at Yad Vashem.

We must make sure that the voices of the moderate world, that are ready to fight against fundamentalists, are heard. We must reach out to the Islamic population in Europe and America, who could potentially be a core of anti-Semitism, but instead view them as bridges between worlds. We are ready to host seminars for public opinion shapers and makers, to come and stay with us, in an effort to build these bridges.

I hope that the outcomes of this morning will not only be intellectual, but that there will also be practical outcomes that will serve to promote the issue worldwide.