How we honor Muslims who stand up to terror

By Robert Satloff
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Nice, on France's Mediterranean coast, now joins a long list of cities, on four continents, where Islamist terrorists have perpetrated gruesome attacks, mercilessly killing hundreds of innocents.

And those are just where some of the highest-profile outrages have occurred, the ones that attract headlines. The fact that millions of people, mostly other Muslims, survive under the daily brutality of violent Islamists in large parts of Syria, Iraq, Libya, Gaza, Nigeria, and elsewhere is so routine as to barely be newsworthy.

Most people recognize that Islamist terrorists who kill and maim in the name of God do not represent the other billion-plus Muslims in the world today. But still, there is a widespread, if not always articulated, view that huge percentages of Muslims are enablers, cheerleaders, or at least passive shoulder-shruggers at what the terrorists do. No doubt a certain number are—probably fewer than feared but more than one would hope.

This is why what took place last Friday, just across the Mediterranean, on the grounds of the Italian Embassy in Tunis, is so important. That is where people of various faiths, nationalities, and ethnicities came together to consecrate a "Garden of the Righteous" to honor the memory of Muslims who risked—and in some cases, gave—their lives to save others from the horror of terror.

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The concept of a Garden of the Righteous draws from the example of the sacred space at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to victims and heroes of the Holocaust, dedicated to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during humanity's darkest hour.

More than 26,000 people—men and women of all faiths (and none at all)—have so far been recognized. Given that this constitutes but a tiny percentage of non-Jews who had the opportunity to protect Jews during their hour of need, the honorees showed a particularly unique brand of courage displayed by ordinary people doing extraordinary deeds.

Taking this idea and applying it to Muslims who risked or gave their lives in the face of terror is the brainchild of the Italian historian Gabriele Nissim, founder of the Milan-based organization Gariwo, which stands for Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide.

For years, Nissim and his colleagues have worked to tell the stories of "righteous"—not just those who saved Jews but those who, more generally, put themselves in harm's way on behalf of "the other"—as a way to open new channels of understanding among peoples chained by conflict.

Several years ago, I was privileged to speak in front of 500 enthusiastic Italian high school students at a Gariwo conference highlighting brave women and men who crossed ethnic lines to save "the other" at atrocious times throughout the last century, from the Armenian genocide to the Balkan Wars. My own contribution was to talk about Arabs who saved Jews during the Holocaust.

To his great credit, Nissim has taken this idea out of Europe and brought it to Tunis, deep in the heart of an Arab Muslim society that is on the front lines of the great civilizational battle raging between enlightenment and fanaticism.

In 2011, Tunisia was the first Arab country to throw off its ossified, autocratic leadership in the much-too-optimistically named Arab Spring. Ever since, it has labored to protect its nascent democracy from both the allure of Islamist politicians promising simplistic answers to complex problems and the brutal violence of Islamist terrorists keen to bring the whole country to its knees.

Working with the brave Tunisian human rights activist Abdessattar Ben Moussa, winner of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, and the forward-thinking diplomats in the Italian foreign ministry, Nissim and his colleagues have created a sacred space on Arab soil where people of goodwill, from around the world, can honor Muslims whose courage transcends faith, nationality, and ethnicity.

Who are these remarkable Muslims?

Of the honorees, the earliest story is from the Nazi occupation of Tunisia in 1943, when Khaled Abdul Wahab, a wealthy nobleman, protected nearly two dozen Jews on his farm outside the seaside town of Mahdia and risked his life to prevent a German officer from raping a young Jewish woman.

The most recent story is from Bangladesh, where Faraaz Hussein, a young Muslim man, could have saved himself during the recent ISIS attack in Dhaka by reciting Qur'anic verses but instead demanded the release of his non-Muslim friends and heroically died alongside them.

These stories are moving and inspiring; in a world in which Islamist terror is a fact of numbing frequency, they also remind us of the extraordinary heroism of many ordinary Muslims.

Eventually, when a peaceful Tunisia emerges from its current travails, it will be a welcome step to move the garden from the secure, fenced-in grounds of the embassy to public space, on sovereign Tunisian soil. And when it does, the organizers should make sure there is room for many more honorees than the inaugural five.

That is because stories of Muslims facing down hate and terror, especially perpetrated by violent Islamists who claim to speak in their name, are both important to tell and more common than we realize.