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Middle East

## Iran Hosts Large Meeting of Holocaust Deniers

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### All Things Considered: December 11, 2006

ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel.

MICHELE NORRIS, host:

And I'm Michele Norris.

There are two conferences on the Holocaust taking place today with two very different aims and in two very different places. One is in Berlin, and we'll get to that in just a few minutes.

The other is in Iran and it was convened to challenge the widely held history of the Holocaust. The two day meeting was organized by the Iranian Foreign Ministry. The country's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made speeches claiming that the Holocaust is a myth and that the murder of European Jews has been exaggerated.

NPR's Mike Shuster reports from Tehran.

MIKE SHUSTER: The Iranian government is calling this conference Review of the Holocaust Global Vision, and it does bring together people from all over the world, from Syria to Australia, Morocco to Malaysia. Most share a single passion: the desire to prove that the Holocaust never happened. Said one participant from France, there's no proof. Another from Australia, when asked what he thought about the Holocaust, said simply it's a lie.

The Iranians themselves were weighing their words a bit more carefully. Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki opened the conference declaring we are not seeking to deny or prove the Holocaust. But the conference's organizer, Manouchehr Mohammadi of the foreign ministry, made little effort to hide his bias.

Mr. MANOUCHEHR MOHAMMADI (Iranian Foreign Ministry): Right now, I am not judging at all. Some people said that there are a lot of facts - a lot of evidence that confirm that Holocaust, it was not happened like the way they are claiming.

SHUSTER: Iranian officials were quick to claim that simply holding this conference was an act of political courage. It is a display of Iran's commitment to freedom of political expression, said Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Razishigato(ph).

Mr. ALI RAZISHIGATO (Deputy Foreign Minister): You know, it has a braveness to regard this issue. The other countries don't dare this due to the pressures of Western countries that they form any type of discussion regarding Holocaust. Iran is the only country that could dare this.

SHUSTER: Denying the Holocaust is illegal in Germany, Austria and France, a circumstance that provoked much outrage here. Among those attending is David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan and the author of "Jewish Supremacism: My Awakening on the Jewish Question." Duke has spent much time in recent years in Russia and Ukraine and his book has become popular in anti-Semitic circles there.

Mr. DAVID DUKE: In Europe, you can ridicule and criticize and deny Jesus Christ. You can criticize and deny the

prophet Mohammad. You can put out the rankest kinds of pornography degrading women, but if you simply have an intellectual view and you contest certain aspects of the official Holocaust story or historiography, then you can go to prison.

SHUSTER: Iran's government kept the list of participants secret until the last minute, so it was something of a surprise to see several ultra orthodox Hasidic Jews taking part. This small Hasidic group from New York follows the teachings of the Satmar Rabbi, who preached it was against God's will to establish a nation on earth for the Jews.

These anti-Zionist Jews condemn what they call the Holocaust religion, and they talked of the so-called Holocaust, although one from Britain acknowledged that there is sufficient evidence to prove that the Nazis killed millions. But these orthodox Jews argue that Palestine does not belong to the Jews and should be returned to the Palestinians.

Rabbi Dovid Weiss tried to explain why some Jews of his community might want to deny the Holocaust.

Rabbi DOVID WEISS: People who question, many that come from embitteredness because of the Zionists using the Holocaust to brazenly and offensively oppress a people. So people start questioning. Just like they said Palestine was a land without a people and they were liars, maybe they're liars about here.

SHUSTER: For Iran, though, this conference seems to have a political goal, to raise questions about the Holocaust in order to challenge the historical reasons for establishing the state of Israel. Many participants were eager to take the same view, among them David Duke.

Mr. DUKE: The Holocaust has been used politically. It has been the bludgeon. I think the Holocaust is one of the reasons why America's had this pro-Israel Mid East policy. I think the Holocaust has caused many people to turn a blind eye to the crimes against the Palestinians.

SHUSTER: Since President Ahmadinejad's election last year, Iran's government has sought to portray itself as the Muslim world's preeminent supporter of the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

Mike Shuster, NPR News. Tehran.

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