

Should Arab MP be in Auschwitz?

Holocaust Day invite raises storm in Israel

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An Arab member of the Israeli parliament has sparked controversy among Jews and Arabs in Israel over his decision to join an official Israeli delegation commemorating International Holocaust Day today at a Nazi death camp in Poland.

Mohammed Barakeh will be the only Arab in a contingent of Israeli parliamentarians and government ministers, including Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, at Auschwitz to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the camp's liberation.

Mr Barakeh has reported receiving a spate of hate mail, including a death threat, since he was invited to the remembrance service by the speaker of the parliament, or Knesset, over the opposition of many right-wing politicians.

Among Israel's Arab population, meanwhile, commentators and public figures have argued that his involvement in a delegation dominated by rightwing politicians sends the wrong message, especially after Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip a year ago, in which hundreds of Palestinian women and children were killed.

"I have every sympathy with the Jewish people for their horrific suffering in the Holocaust," said Awad Abdel Fattah, the secretary general of the National Democratic Assembly party.

"But Mohammed Barakeh is participating in a delegation that wants to use the Holocaust as a way to win sympathy not for the Jewish victims but for an Israeli occupation and Zionist settler project that come at the expense of the Palestinian people."

Mr Barakeh, the leader of the Communist Party, the only joint Jewish-Arab faction in the Knesset, has defended his decision, even while admitting that his involvement can be exploited by Israeli officials.

This month he walked out of a lecture at Yad Vashem, the main Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, after accusing the speaker of blaming modern anti-Semitism on Arabs and left-wingers who opposed Israeli policies.

On Monday Mr Netanyahu struck a similar note in an address at Yad Vashem: "There is an evil that can spread and threaten the security of Jews. We know that this just begins with Jews, and then continues on to the rest of the world. There are today new people who hate Jews, with new reasons for [wanting] the destruction of the Jewish state."

Over the past few weeks a group of right-wing legislators, led by Danny Danon, a member of

Mr Netanyahu's Likud Party, have lobbied unsuccessfully to have Mr Barakeh barred from the commemoration. Mr Danon told a Knesset committee: "Do we want this man representing us at such an important and sensitive ceremony?"

Mr Barakeh, one of 10 Arabs in non-Zionist parties in the 120-member parliament, is reviled by many Israeli Jews because of his opposition to what he calls "racist" government policies, both towards Palestinians under occupation and towards the fifth of Israel's citizens who are Arab.

A death threat sent to his office this month referred to Arabs as "trash" and contained his photograph with a swastika drawn on his forehead.

A senior member of the Communist Party said in an interview that several of Mr Barakeh's colleagues questioned him in private over his decision, accusing him of attending with "war criminals".

Abir Koptiy, a Nazareth city councillor in Mr Barakeh's party, admitted she had doubts. "But after seeing how his participation has shaken up the right wing, I can see there is a positive side ... It is important that his attendance at the ceremony challenges the preconceptions and racist attitudes of many Israeli Jews."

She added that his visit would have a special effect given his image among Israeli Jews as an "extremist". In December he was charged with using threats and violence against police at four demonstrations since 2005, an indictment he has called "political persecution".

Mr Barakeh said: "It is my duty to be anywhere I can to demonstrate my very clear position against all forms of racism and genocide. The lesson of the Holocaust, a great tragedy for humanity and the Jews especially, must be that there can be no room for such crimes."

He added that, although he would join a candlelight march through Auschwitz, he would not take part in symposiums to avoid any danger of colluding with Israeli attempts to manipulate the occasion.

Mr Barakeh's attendance was backed last week by Ahmed Tibi, an Arab legislator with a rival party.

Other Arab public figures in Israel have been critical. In a commentary, Zuheir Androus, editor of a newspaper in Galilee, reminded Mr Barakeh that his family came from Saffuriya, a Palestinian village close to Nazareth that was ethnically cleansed during the Nakba, the Palestinian name for the 1948 war that founded Israel.

He wrote: "We should be asking Barakeh why he needs to take part in an official Israeli Knesset delegation to the death camp, while other [legislators] in the delegation prevent us, Arab Palestinians, from mentioning the 1948 Nakba."

Israeli legislators have been seeking to outlaw commemorations of the Nakba.

Mr Abdel Fattah said that, while it was compulsory for Arab children to learn about the Holocaust, the Nakba was excluded from the curriculum in both Arab and Jewish schools.

"The demand from Israel that we recognise Jewish suffering in the Holocaust while we are

required to deny our own people's suffering in the Nakba is just another form of loyalty test," he said. Far-right parties in the government have proposed that Arab citizens be required to take a loyalty oath or perform national service.

"Barakeh should remember that Israel wants to reshape our political and national identity and is using the Holocaust to do that."

But Nazir Majali, a journalist who helped to organise a trip of 260 Arabs and Jews to Auschwitz in 2003, at the height of the second intifada, called Mr Barakeh "courageous". He said the barriers of mutual suspicion between Arabs and Jews needed to be breached.

A poll conducted by Haifa University in the wake of Israel's attack on Gaza showed that 40 per cent of Israel's Arab citizens believed that the Holocaust had not happened, up from 28 per cent three years earlier.

Mr Majali said of his own visit to Auschwitz: "I did it for myself, my people and my children, not for the Jews. I don't expect something back from them because I participated. If it helps them to look at me a bit differently afterwards, that's great too but it's now why it was important I went."

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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