Middle East

Palestinian university students’ trip to Auschwitz causes uproar

Clarification: An earlier version of this story referred to Auschwitz only as a concentration camp in Poland. The story has been clarified to indicate that the camp was run by Nazis in what was then German-occupied Poland.

By William Booth  April 12, 2014

JERUSALEM — Professor Mohammed S. Dajani took 27 Palestinian college students to visit the former Auschwitz Nazi concentration camp in Poland a few weeks ago as part of a project designed to teach empathy and tolerance. Upon his return, his university disowned the trip, his fellow Palestinians branded him a traitor and friends advised a quick vacation abroad.

Dajani said he expected criticism. “I believe a trip like this, for an organized group of Palestinian youth going to visit Auschwitz, is not only rare, but a first,” he said. “I thought there would be some complaints, then it would be forgotten.”

But the trip was explosive news to some, perhaps more so because it took place as U.S.-brokered peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians were in danger of collapse, and emotion surrounding the decades-old conflict is high.

Controversy was also heightened by rumors — untrue — that the trip was paid for by Jewish organizations. It was paid for by the German government.

Dajani said that many Palestinians think the Holocaust is used by Jews and Israelis as propaganda to justify the seizure of lands that Palestinians say are theirs and to create sympathy for Israel. Others, he said, think the Holocaust is exaggerated or just one of many massacres that occurred during World War II.

“They said, ‘Why go to Poland? Why not teach our young people about the Nakba?’” Dajani said.

The Nakba, or catastrophe, refers to the events of 1948 when the Arabs and Israelis fought a war. The Arabs lost, the state of Israel was born, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes and became a people of a diaspora, living even today as refugees here and across the Middle East.
An online version of an article about the trip published in the major Palestinian newspaper al-Quds was taken down by the publishers, reportedly because of heated invective in the comments section.

One reader said that taking Palestinian students to Auschwitz, a former camp run by the Nazis when Germany occupied Poland, was not freedom of expression but treason.

Other critics of the trip included newspaper columnists, TV analysts and fellow researchers in the West Bank.

While the Palestinian students were visiting Auschwitz, a parallel group of Jewish Israeli students from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and Tel Aviv University ventured to Bethlehem to hear Palestinians from the Dheisheh refugee camp tell their story. The responses of both groups of students — Israelis and Palestinians — would then be analyzed.

‘You feel the humanity’

A professor who founded the American studies program at al-Quds University in East Jerusalem (and whose department then-Sen. Barack Obama visited in 2006), the bespectacled Dajani wears a tweed blazer with leather elbow patches and carries around a copy of the Amos Oz classic “How to Cure a Fanatic.”

A firebrand in the Fatah political movement when he was young, Dajani said he is now a proponent of moderate Islam and moderate politics. He founded a group dedicated to both, called Wasatia, in 2007. His writing and conversation are filled with references to tolerance, reconciliation and dialogue. He supports two states for two peoples and thinks Jerusalem should be shared by Israelis and Palestinians.

“He is a theologian and a pragmatist, and in that regard, he is unique here. He is also extremely brave,” said Matthew Kalman, a commentator at the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz who broke the story of the Auschwitz trip and who has followed Dijani’s career for years.

“He is also a proud Palestinian nationalist,” Kalman said, who regards the Israelis as occupiers. “But he thinks if you want to engage the Israelis, you have to understand where they’re coming from.”

The trip to Auschwitz was part of a trilateral research project called “Heart of Flesh — Not Stone,” named for a passage in the Book of Ezekiel and designed to not only increase empathy but also to study it. Organized by one of the oldest faculties of Protestant theology in Europe, at the Center for Reconciliation Studies at Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena, Germany, the trip was paid for by the German Research Foundation, a funding agency.

Some of Dajani’s detractors accused him of trying to brainwash Palestinian youth.
A university student who went on the trip but asked not to be named because of the charged atmosphere said the visit changed him. “You feel the humanity. You feel the sympathy of so many people killed in this place because of their race or religion.”

“Most people said we shouldn’t go,” the student said. “It is a strange thing for a Palestinian to go to a Nazi death camp. But I would recommend the trip.” He said it did not diminish his desire for a Palestinian state.

No regrets

Al-Quds University issued a statement saying that Dajani and the students were not representatives of the university. Palestinian universities cut off all ties with Israeli counterparts some years ago to protest Israeli actions.

Many Palestinians today oppose what they call “normalization,” which they say seeks to paper over the injustice of the Israeli military occupation by encouraging joint projects between Israelis and Palestinians as if they were both equal, the one not subject to the greater power of the other. Such joint efforts, they reason, will only prolong the occupation by providing Israelis with cover.

“I am against normalization with Israel as long as they are building settlements and walls,” said Hamdi Abu Diab, a leader of a popular committee that opposes the Israeli occupation. “But I do want Palestinians to know about the terrible things that happened to the Jews at Auschwitz. Because at the same time, I don’t want the Palestinians to be punished like the Jews were.”

Hani al-Masri, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies, said such a trip was not a bad idea. “It all depends who is running the show,” he said.

In a statement last week, Dajani wrote: “I will go to Ramallah, I will go to the university, I will put my photos of the visit on Facebook, and I do not regret for one second what I did. As a matter of fact, I will do it again if given the opportunity. I will not hide, I will not deny, I will not be silent. I will not remain a bystander even if the victims of suffering I show empathy for are my occupiers. And this is my final statement on this issue.”

Later, he added that in this debate, there may be no such thing as a last word.

Sufian Taha contributed to this report.

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