

Arab Holocaust centre reaches out

By Rob Winder

BBC News website

Khaled Mahameed admits his museum, in Nazareth in northern Israel, is small. But he believes it is unique.

According to Mr Mahameed, it is the first and only Arab run centre for promoting the study of the Holocaust.

The museum contains a collection of just 60 photographs depicting the genocide with Arabic captions explaining the scenes. The pictures were purchased from Yad Vashem - the Israeli national Holocaust memorial.

Mr Mahameed firmly believes that it is only by understanding the truth about how the state of Israel was created that Arabs can fully understand Jews and ultimately resolve the conflict between them.

Ahmadinejad doesn't know what he's talking about - but I hope that people try to find out more about the Holocaust as a result of his words

Khaled Mahameed

Many Arabs believe that Israel uses sympathy for Jewish suffering during the Holocaust to gain support from the West, Mr Mahameed says.

Arab leaders, he says, think that by giving credence to the Holocaust they are legitimising Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

"But when Palestinians learn about the Holocaust they will understand the Jewish people better and can begin to develop a shared history," says Mr Mahameed enthusiastically.

Controversial

Since the museum opened in March 2005, Mr Mahameed says, more than 2,000 people have visited.

The 43-year-old Israeli Arab lawyer's passion for his project is clear, he used \$5,000 of his own money to set up the centre.

On Friday 27 January - UN Holocaust Remembrance Day - he spent hours handing out leaflets promoting the centre to Palestinians filing through Qalandiya checkpoint outside the West Bank town of Ramallah.

But Mr Mahameed's desire to spread information about the Holocaust is also controversial amongst Palestinians and Israeli Arabs - even within his own family.

Many Palestinians feel that sympathising too much with Israelis could lead to justification for the occupation

Dr Sami Adwan, Bethlehem University.

No-one spoke to him at a recent wedding and his neighbours have cursed him in public, he says. Visitors to the museum's website have harangued him for speaking sympathetically about Jews and Israelis.

'Victim status'

Even though Palestinians are taught about the Holocaust in school, the continuing Israeli occupation means that many Palestinians find it difficult to sympathise with Jewish suffering, says Dr Sami Adwan, a professor of education at Bethlehem University.

"Many Palestinians feel that sympathising too much with Israelis could lead to justification for the occupation."

"And there is feeling that the Holocaust could undermine the Palestinians international status as victims - that the horror of the Holocaust is so big that it could overpower our own suffering."

But there may also be hope that the relative lull in violence between Israel and Palestinian militants will allow greater understanding of each other's histories.

Dr Haim Gertner, Director of Teacher Training at the International School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, says that whenever the political situation is calm Israeli Arabs show more interest in learning about the Holocaust.

"When there is less political tension, people are more open," he says.

And despite the difficulties of spreading his message against a background of continuing conflict in the region Mr Mahameed believes he is making progress.

He hopes to make contact with Palestinian militants Hamas and Islamic Jihad to offer them information about the Holocaust.

He also has support for his project from many Israelis, including backing from Yad Vashem itself.

A conference organised by the centre in November attracted 30 people and Mr Mahameed believes that slowly - sometimes very slowly - he is changing minds.

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