



'Unprecedented' Holocaust tribute by French imams

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In the first such event in France, some 30 French Imams visited the Holocaust Memorial at Drancy near Paris on Monday. The visit comes at a time of high tension between France's Muslim and Jewish communities.

Some 30 French Imams on February 4 visited the Holocaust Memorial at Drancy near Paris in an effort to improve Islam's image to a sceptical French public.

The visit was unprecedented and comes at a time of high tensions towards the country's large Muslim community following the killling in March 2012 of seven people, including three Jewish children, by French Islamist militant Mohamed Merah.

An IPSOS poll for respected daily Le Monde in January had 74% of respondents saying the Muslim faith was not compatible with the values of the French Republic.

"At a time of growing racism and fear of Islam in France, we are saying 'no, it is possible for us all to live together'," said Hassen Chalghoumi, who is imam for Drancy and France's first leading Muslim figure to call for reconciliation between religions.

"Today, we are demonstrating that Islam in France is not necessarily subject to foreign influence or interference," he added. "Most French Muslims aren't fanatics. We represent an Islam that values human life; that rejects fundamentalism, racism and barbarity."

'Imam for the Jews'

Chalghoumi, labelled France's "Imam for the Jews" by his detractors, is head of the Conference of Imams in France, an unofficial organisation that is not recognised by the state-created French Council of the Muslim Faith.

He caused controversy in 2010 in supporting then-president Nicolas Sarkozy's law banning Islamic veils that cover the entire face.

A vocal activist for greater dialogue between France's estimated five million Muslims and the country's much smaller Jewish population, Chalghoumi is a particular irritant to France's militant Salafist community, while many Muslims in Drancy accuse him of being a self-proclaimed leader with no real legitimacy.

Visit to Israel

Monday's event in Drancy follows a November 2012 trip of 16 French Imams led by

Chalghoumi to Israel, which included a visit to the Israeli Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem.

The visit attracted huge attention in Israel, but also generated widespread criticism in the Muslim world.

The controversy generated by the visit, interpreted by some Muslims as legitimising the State of Israel, has led to him being given round-the-clock police protection.

Monday's event at Drancy, the site of a wartime transit camp through which some 70,000 French Jews passed on their way to Nazi concentration camps, was praised by Interior Minister Manuel Valls.

"This is a powerful image that speaks much louder than words," he said as the Imams, accompanied by leaders of other faiths, laid wreaths in memory of the dead.

"The world is in need of peace and understanding. It needs people who are prepared to speak out, and people who are prepared to listen."

'Bravery' of the Imams

After the event, Jewish-French writer Marek Halter who jointly organised the visit with Chalghoumi praised the Imams' "bravery" for making the visit.

"It's a big deal for them, it isn't easy and they know they will be subjected to insults on the Internet for coming here today," he told reporters.

Memorial Director Jacques Fredj added: "I get the feeling that there is a growing number of French Muslims standing up to denounce, publicly and collectively, anti-Semitism in France.

"Today's visit is not only a message to their own community that hatred is not the Muslim way, it is also a message to the rest of the country that most French Muslims are not radicals."

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