

Anti-Trump boycott of Hanukkah event will hurt Muslim-Jewish ties, leaders say

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By Rafael Medoff/JNS.org

WASHINGTON—The decision by eight Jewish organizations to boycott an event sponsored by the Muslim government of Azerbaijan could harm Muslim-Jewish relations, critics are warning.

The eight left-of-center groups, which are among the more than 50 members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, announced they will not

A protest against then-presidential candidate Donald Trump outside the Trump International Hotel in Washington, DC, Sept. 12, 2016.

Credit: Ted Eytan via Wikimedia Commons.

participate in a Dec. 14 pre-Hanukkah celebration in Washington, DC, co-sponsored by the Embassy of Azerbaijan and the Conference of Presidents, because the event will take place in the Trump International Hotel and because of Azerbaijan's human rights record.

The eight boycotters are Americans for Peace Now, Ameinu (formerly the Labor Zionist Alliance), the refugee advocacy group HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), the Union for Reform Judaism, the Workmen's Circle, Jewish Women International (formerly B'nai B'rith Women), the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), and the National Council of Jewish Women.

"I think the boycott is misconceived," popular author and commentator Rabbi David Wolpe, the leader of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, told JNS.org. "I've visited Azerbaijan. It is not a perfect place, granted, but they have wonderful relations with Israel and the Jewish community there feels secure and esteemed." Wolpe is a member of the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council, a group of clergy and scholars from both faiths that was recently established by the American Jewish Committee and the Islamic Society of North America.

"It sounds like Purim rather than Hanukkah," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, regarding the Jewish groups' boycott. "In the Purim story, everything is turned upside down—and here we have an important Muslim country reaching out with a friendly gesture to the Jewish people, and these Jewish organizations turn around and boycott them." Cooper told JNS.org that "these groups are always saying we have to find moderate Muslims, but then they find some political reason to snub them."

In response, Rabbi Steven Fox, president of the CCAR, told JNS.org that the organization "is committed to deepening Muslim-Jewish relations." He pointed to a resolution adopted by the CCAR in 2004 advocating "reaching out to our Arab and

Muslim neighbors."

Ameinu CEO Gideon Aronoff told JNS.org the "primary" reason his organization will boycott the event is that the choice of venue will "personally enrich President-elect [Donald] Trump" and "makes it appear that the Conference [of Presidents] is seeking to curry favor with the president-elect."

Workmen's Circle Executive Director Ann Toback said the choice of Trump Hotel is "problematic" because of positions that Trump took during his presidential campaign and because of what she said were "Nazi salutes at his rallies." Americans for Peace Now charged that the choice of Trump Hotel could be "interpreted" by the public as "a political statement."

But Farley Weiss, president of the National Council of Young Israel, disputed the claim that the choice of venue was politically motivated. Weiss, who will be attending the Hanukkah event, told JNS.org that "it was very kind of the Embassy of Azerbaijan to pick the Trump Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue for the convenience of the many Conference of Presidents participants who will be heading to the White House later that same day for President [Barack] Obama's annual Hanukkah party."

Weiss argued that "it is not often that opportunities arise to improve relations with a Muslim country and to boycott such an opportunity could be damaging to improving such relations."

The human rights aspect of the controversy has also become a matter of dispute. The Workmen's Circle charged that the government of Azerbaijan "sanctions violent suppression," and Americans for Peace Now said that Azerbaijan's human rights record "is dismal, as laid out in detail in the annual State Department Human Rights report."

Endowment for Middle East Truth President Sarah Stern, who will be attending the Hanukkah event, said the groups criticizing Azerbaijan are being inconsistent, since "these boycotting organizations have friendly relations with other Muslim regimes that violate human rights—such as Turkey, Jordan, and especially the Palestinian Authority (PA), which according

to the State Department 'restricts freedom of speech, press and assembly,' 'abuses detainees', and tolerates 'violence against women.' So will these groups now boycott the PA? Somehow I doubt it."

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