

Jerusalem Churches in Crosshairs of Escalating Extremist Attacks: Churches Council

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Churches in East Jerusalem are constantly concerned about the rise in Israeli extremist attacks on Christian property in the city.

Current and former church officials told Anadolu Agency that the frequent attacks on Christian property ended in most cases without punishing the perpetrators.

On Sunday, Israeli extremists destroyed and toppled 30 graves with crosses at a Christian cemetery belonging to the Evangelical Episcopal Church in East Jerusalem.

"The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemns the act of vandalism at the Protestant Mount Zion Cemetery in Jerusalem," the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a tweet on Wednesday.

History of assault

On 27 December, 2022, dozens of settlers stormed the 5,000-square-meter (53,820-square-foot) plot of land in Silwan, south of Jerusalem's Old City, under Israeli police protection.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate decried the settler raid as a "clear encroachment" on its properties in Jerusalem.

"This radical group has no right or judicial backing in their favour to allow them to enter or occupy the land," it said in a statement.

The Patriarchate referred to the fact that, two years ago, a settlement association tried seizing the Imperial and Little Petra hotels located in Omar Ibn Al Khattab Square in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Conviction awaiting punishment

The former Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Holy Land, Munib Younan, said: "The attack on a cemetery that tells the history of Lutherans since the 19th century is evidence of the hatred of the attackers."

During his interview with *Anadolu Agency*, Younan said the attack on the cemetery "is unacceptable and should not only be condemned but the perpetrators must also be punished."

He stressed that the aggressors "aimed to seize the Hebron Gate by seizing the Imperial and Petra Hotels, which would lead to control of the local and international Christian pilgrimage to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City."

Intentional narrowing

The recent attacks were not limited to the property of the Lutheran Church, but also included the property of other Christian denominations, including those owned by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate's spokesman, Father Issa Musleh, said, "Extremists attack churches and monasteries, just as they attack the holy Al-Aqsa Mosque."

"Our Muslim brothers are exposed to the same attacks we are exposed to, our cause is the same," he added.

He attributed the increasing decline in the numbers of Christians in the Holy Land in part to Christians feeling targeted by extremists.

Father Musleh called on Christians to return to their lands to confront the "targeting of settlers", noting that "they are harassing us to displace us, but we will remain until the Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital is established."

Musleh said "the presence of an extremist right-wing government in Israel does not scare only us but the whole world."

Against unknown

Over the years, Wadih Abu Nassar, spokesman for the Council of Heads of Catholic Churches in Jerusalem, along with Israeli authorities, followed up on many attacks.

"We are not talking about singular attacks but rather dozens of attacks over the past few years, most of which were recorded against unknown persons," he noted.

"This matter cannot be accepted," Abu Nassar added. "Advanced security services must be used to stop hate crimes and bring perpetrators to justice."

He warned against the development of attacks in the future and their transgression of cemeteries.

"The continuation of the attacks will lead their perpetrators to believe that they are untouchable, their attacks will not end with graveyards," Abu Nassar noted.

He also pointed out that “hate crimes stem from an educational problem,” adding: “A radical solution is needed.”

Aggravating attacks

Abu Nassar narrated examples of how the Israeli authorities deal lightly with hate crimes.

“In the case of the attack on the Church of the Grotto of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, the assailant was arrested, then declared abnormal,” he stressed, explaining: “The Israeli authorities behave strangely with such mentally abnormal crimes. If the assault is documented through cameras, authorities say the faces are blurred, and when aggressors are arrested, they are always mentally ill.”

“I do not rule out that the Christian presence is targeted, according to some Jewish fundamentalists, the Christian is an enemy. There are ideological dimensions, not just political ones, just as I do not rule out hatred among some,” he added.

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