

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Christian schools shut in Israel to protest budget cuts***
  - ***Catholic bishop condemns arson attack on Israel church by 'Jewish zealots'***
  - ***Israel questions, sets free 16 young Jewish settlers after Christian church burned down***
  - ***Protest against Jehovah's Witnesses seminar in central Israel turns violent***
  - ***Israeli city asks court to ok ban on Jehovah's Witnesses event***
  - ***PA holds Israel responsible for torching of mosque and church***
  - ***Statement condemning attacks on religious sites in West Bank and Jerusalem***
  - ***Arson attack against Greek Orthodox seminary in Jerusalem***
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## **Christian schools shut in Israel to protest budget cuts**

RT (01.09.2015) - <http://www.rt.com/news/314033-israel-christian-children-school/> - The beginning of a new academic year has been put off for nearly 50 Christian schools in Israel. Almost 33,000 pupils, mostly Palestinians, have had to stay at home due to a funding dispute with Jewish authorities.

47 schools, run by the Roman Catholic Church stayed closed on the first official day of the school year, Tuesday, in Israel and East Jerusalem, in protest against the Jewish state's new education funding policy, AFP reported.

While the state covers all of the school costs of secular Jewish and religious ultra-Orthodox Judaic schools, "unofficial but recognized" Christian schools have seen a budget cut to a mere 29 percent "of the overall cost of a primary school." It follows a reduction from 65 percent of the funding, with the rest paid by parents, to 34 percent two years ago.

"All the schools are closed after a call for an open-ended strike," a spokesman for the Office of Christian schools in Israel, Botrus Mansour, told Middle East Online web portal. "We've tried everything and have no option left but to go on strike."

"For a year and a half, we have been holding talks with the Israeli authorities and several figures have intervened, even the Vatican. A week ago, President Reuven Rivlin and Education Minister Naftali Bennett made very positive comments... but we still haven't seen any serious proposal," Mansour added.

About 50 Christian schools in Israel are attended by some 33,000 pupils, roughly 60 percent Christian and 40 percent Muslim, with approximately 3,000 teachers employed.

Many of the local Christian schools, governed by the Roman Catholic Church, have history going farther back than Israel's foundation in 1948. Some of them rank among the country's most academically successful.

"It is a matter of equality," Father Abdelmassih Fahim, director of schools for the Catholic Church's Custody of the Holy Land said. "A Jewish Israeli child has the right to 100

percent [of school costs covered by the state] and our schools don't, while our teaching is among the best in Israel."

He said that the schools still wait for the education ministry to reply to their demands, as they had been calling for a return of the 65 percent funding figure. Last week, President Reuven Rivlin and Education Minister Naftali Bennett had a meeting with church officials, and the president's office said that he "welcomed the important work of these schools," according to The Times of Israel newspaper.

According to a Monday statement by the Office of Christian schools in Israel, the meeting "failed because the proposed increase did not comply with the minimum demands of the schools and we found that their purpose was just to win time and stop all our protests."

About 160,000 Christians currently live in Israel, and their population in East Jerusalem is 14,000, according to official Israeli figures.

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## **Catholic bishop condemns arson attack on Israel church by 'Jewish zealots'**

***Declan Lang, bishop of Clifton, demands arrest of those who attacked Church of the Multiplication, where a fire last week caused extensive damage***

A Catholic bishop in Britain has issued an unusually strong condemnation of last week's arson attack on the biblically symbolic Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Israel, referring to "Jewish zealots" and demanding the Israeli authorities act against religious bigotry.

Declan Lang, bishop of Clifton, said he had learned of the attack on the church in Tabgha with "great sadness and deep regret", adding that "the common consensus seems to be that Jewish zealots were responsible". He demanded the arrest of the perpetrators, adding that Israel must ensure that "such attacks that take religious bigotry to a new level ... do not continue unchecked".

Lang's comments follow a report from the official Vatican news service describing the attack on the church as "yet another episode in the long series of desecrations and acts of intimidation committed by groups of extremist Jewish settlers to the detriment of monasteries, churches and Christian cemeteries since February 2012". The report also referred to attacks on mosques by "militant extremist groups close to the settler movement".

A fire was started in the church in the early hours of Thursday morning, causing extensive damage to the roof, a souvenir shop, offices and meeting rooms, and destroying Bibles and prayer books. The bill for repairs is expected to run to millions of dollars. Graffiti in Hebrew was sprayed on the walls of the church, reading: "False idols will be cast out."

Father Gregory Collins, head of the Order of Saint Benedict in Israel, which maintains the site, described the attack as "absolutely deplorable" and "an attack on freedom of speech, democracy and the right to live here". Thousands of people gathered at the church on Sunday to take part in a protest over the attack.

The church, which receives 5,000 visitors a day, was built in the 1980s on the site believed to be where Jesus performed the miracle of feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, on the north-western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It

incorporates an ancient mosaic floor, part of a fifth-century church, which survived the attack.

In a statement, Richard Verber of the Board of Deputies of British Jews condemned "the heinous arson attack". He said: "Such hatred and disrespect of faith should have no place in Israel, the holy land to the three Abrahamic faiths. The board welcomes the Israeli government's pledge to apprehend the perpetrators and they should meet the full force of the law."

Following the attack, 16 people from Jewish settlements who were staying in the area were questioned for six hours before being released. "There is an ongoing investigation. We're still searching for suspects," said Israel police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld.

There have been dozens of attacks on Christian sites in the Holy Land in recent years. Targets have included Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem's Old City, a Trappist monastery in Latroun, and the Convent of St Francis on Mount Zion. A surge of anti-Christian graffiti – such as "Death to Christians", "We will crucify you" and "Jesus is a monkey" – preceded Pope Francis's visit to the Holy Land last year.

The Church of the Multiplication was also attacked in April, when perpetrators destroyed crosses in an outdoor prayer area and threw stones at worshippers.

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## **Israel questions, sets free 16 young Jewish settlers after Christian church burned down**

RT (19.06.2015) - <http://www.rt.com/news/268255-church-arson-israel-settler/> - group of young Jewish settlers suspected of torching the Catholic Church of the Multiplication, on the spot where Jesus is believed to have performed a Biblical miracle, have been released without charge. Israel has vowed to find the arsonists.

The church, located on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, was set ablaze early Thursday morning. Graffiti saying, "The false gods will be eliminated," in Hebrew – a quote from a Jewish prayer – was also daubed on a wall. The church was marking the Biblical story of the Feeding of the 5,000, in which Jesus fed a crowd with five loaves and two fish, and has been rebuilt several times since the fifth century.

The building suffered extensive damage, with the roof partly collapsed and stone walls charred. Several members of the clergy suffered smoke inhalation, and one 80-year-old monk was reportedly hospitalized. The altar of the Catholic church is said to have been left intact, despite the damage to its other rooms. A church shop with Bibles and prayer books was completely destroyed in the fire.

Sixteen Jewish youths visiting the area from the West Bank were detained for questioning following the arson. The group, which included several seminary students and legal minors, were set free with no conditions after their testimonies were taken.

"In an area near the church, 16 youths were detained for investigation in order to check their involvement in the incident before dawn," Israeli police spokeswoman Luba Samri said in a statement. "All 16 were released, with no conditions attached, after being interviewed and giving statements."

"The shocking arson of the church is an attack on all of us," Netanyahu said in a statement. "Israel's freedom of religion is a cornerstone of our values and it is anchored in the law. We will mete out justice to those responsible for this atrocious act. We have no room for hatred and intolerance in our society."

Father Jamal Khader, rector of the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jalla in the West Bank, linked the attack with a stone-throwing assault on the same church perpetrated by radical Jewish youths last year, and accused the authorities of "not doing enough" to stop similar incidents.

Known as "price tag" attacks, these acts of vandalism of mainly Muslim and Palestinian, but also Christian and Jewish sites, are supposedly a form of retribution for anti-settler steps and activity, as well as for terrorist attacks against Jews.

Earlier this year, a mosque was set on fire in a village near Bethlehem, with the Star of David and the word "Revenge" painted on one of the walls. Last year, attackers defaced a Catholic church in Jerusalem, daubing the words, "Jesus is garbage."

Tag Meir, an Israeli anti-racism group, says that no prosecutions have been brought in connection with dozens of such incidents that have taken place over the last three years.

"Punishing these crimes is not a priority for the authorities," said Yossi Saidov, a Tag Meir activist. "The message that comes down from the prime minister to the individual policeman is that it's all right that this happens, it's not so terrible. If 43 synagogues were attacked in Poland and the authorities didn't stop it, we would scream that it was anti-Semitism and rightly so."

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## **Protest against Jehovah's Witnesses seminar in central Israel turns violent**

***Hundreds show up to protest event, which is being held after a district court overturned the municipality's decision to block it.***

Haaretz (02.05.2015) -

A demonstration against a Jehovah's Witnesses seminar being held in a municipal building turned violent in Ra'anana on Saturday.

Hundreds of protesters showed up to protest the event after a prolonged court struggle in which the municipality unsuccessfully attempted to cancel the event.

Two days earlier, a district court ruled that the objection to the event infringed on the right to freedom of religion and ritual and overturned the municipality's decision to cancel the event so as not to "hurt the feelings of the public."

Police kept the demonstrators away from the building with barriers. As the seminar participants entered, they both prayed and sang loudly in groups, with some of the crowd imploring them not to go in or jeering at them as they did. Others were more restrained, praying quietly at the fringes of the crowd.

"Any Jew who leaves Judaism becomes a Jew-killer!" one man shouted.

The crowds who came to protest were responding to posters that had been put up across town on Thursday and Friday by the city's chief rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, calling for an "outcry and protest" against the event, saying it was "incumbent on all residents" to show up for morning prayers outside the sports hall where the seminar was taking place.

After the prayer session, a crowd began to attempt to approach the building through a side entrance. They were warned away by police, but a small group persisted, and two men who refused to move and attacked the security detail trying to stop them were

pushed to the ground, punched in the face and sprayed with pepper spray until they were handcuffed and led away.

The crowd grew larger and angrier, demanding that the two men be released, and a police vehicle was brought in to block the entrance to the building.

The situation was defused when Rabbi Peretz entered the building and secured the release of the two men, who raised their hands triumphantly as they exited.

### **Overtuned**

After the Ra'anana municipality cited "real fear" that the Jehovah's Witnesses sought to convince children and teenagers to convert from Judaism, the Lod District Court ruled Wednesday that the objection to the event infringed on the right to freedom of religion and ritual.

"A read between the lines shows that the change in the municipality's position stems from a protest by biased groups," Judge Varda Meroz wrote. "The municipality lets these groups sway its judgment while infringing on rights and exceeding the boundaries of reason."

Meroz ruled that the municipality had "violated the petitioner's constitutional right to freedom of religion and assembly, as well as the right to dignity, liberty and equality. These rights supersede the alleged offense to certain Ra'anana residents."

The municipality, she said, "hadn't proved the existence of extreme and unusual circumstances that could justify the infringement on the petitioner's constitutional rights."

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.654581>

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## **Israeli city asks court to ok ban on Jehovah's Witnesses event**

Jewish Telegraphic Agency (01.05.2015) -

<http://www.jta.org/2015/05/01/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/israeli-city-asks-court-to-ok-ban-on-jehovahs-witnesses-event> -The city of Ra'anana in Israel's center petitioned the country's high court to allow it to prevent two gatherings by some 1,000 followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses Christian sect.

The petition, filed Thursday, follows a district court's ruling against the municipality's ban on the events, one of which was scheduled to take place two weeks ago. The second event is slated for Saturday at a municipal event hall that the city rented out to the organizers of both events, the ynet.co.il news site [reported](#).

Activities in Israel by Jehovah's Witnesses, whose members engage in door-to-door preaching, have raised vocal opposition by Jewish groups and communities opposed to proselytizing.

The city of Ra'anana, a relatively-affluent suburb of Tel Aviv where one in every five residents is religious, cited the prospect of "serious disruption of the public's sensibilities and offense to their beliefs" in its petition to the high court to allow it to ban the events.

In the petition, the city also claimed that the Jehovah's Witnesses concealed the exact nature of the events before striking the contractual agreement with the city for the use of its event hall. The city received \$4,800 after the contract was signed in January.

The sect's attorney petitioned to the district court to order the city to honor the contract, saying a ban was an attack on freedom of worship and a violation of the contract.

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## **PA holds Israel responsible for torching of mosque and church**

Middle East Monitor (27.02.2015) <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/17222-pa-holds-israel-responsible-for-torching-of-mosque-and-church> - The Palestinian presidency held the Israeli government responsible for settler attacks against Islamic and Christian places of worship in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

Palestinian state-run news agency Wafa reported a statement issued by the Palestinian presidency as saying: "The Palestinian presidency condemns in the strongest terms the burning of the Al-Huda Mosque in the Jab'a village, southwest of Bethlehem, and Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem."

Jewish extremists wrote racist slogans against Muslims and Christians after [burning the mosque](#) and [the church](#).

Member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council and Secretary-General of the National Christian Assembly in the Holy Land, Dimitri Diliiani said the attack is the latest in an ongoing cycle of violations targeting Islamic and Christian holy sites in occupied Palestine.

"Netanyahu and his government are liable for every attack carried out against Islamic and Christian holy sites," Diliiani said, adding "those terrorist attacks are carried out by fanatics who receive political, financial and security support from the colonialist, extremist, Israeli government."

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## **Statement condemning attacks on religious sites in West Bank and Jerusalem**

World Council of Churches (27.02.2015)  
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/statements/statement-condemning-attacks-on-religious-sites-in-west-bank-and-jerusalem/> - Recent attacks against a mosque in the West Bank (on 25 February) and a Christian centre in Jerusalem (on 26 February) appear to be part of the series of so-called "price-tag" attacks by extremist elements.

It is reported that a group of Jewish settlers stormed Al-Jaba'a village, near Bethlehem, and set fire to the Al-Huda Mosque, leaving anti-Arab slogans on its walls.

The following day, in another apparent arson attack, a building belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem was set on fire and vandalized with anti-Christian graffiti.

The World Council of Churches is grateful for the clear and unequivocal response by the President of Israel Reuven Rivlin in a phone call to Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III, in which he denounced the Jerusalem attack, calling it "a heinous crime" and affirming that "those responsible must be brought to justice." President Rivlin acknowledged that the protection and conservation of holy sites was an obligation for Israel, as both a state and a society.

The Mayor of Jerusalem Nir Barkat said in a statement that the fire was set deliberately, and that "there is no room for such deplorable activity" in the city, which is deemed holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Israel's Foreign Ministry has also condemned the attack and "any action of religious intolerance of any kind."

As the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Robert Serry has observed, such "religiously-motivated attacks and provocations by any party" risk further inflaming "an already volatile environment". Moreover, they further diminish hopes for peace with justice in the region.

The World Council of Churches therefore calls for swift and concrete measures to ensure those responsible for these and other similar attacks are in fact brought to justice, and further such attacks prevented.

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## **Arson attack against Greek Orthodox seminary in Jerusalem**

Asia News (27.02.2015) - Israeli police is investigating Jewish extremists to find the culprits of an arson attack against a Greek Orthodox seminary in Jerusalem.

According to police and fire department sources, arsonists poured flammable liquid into a bathroom through a window, lit it, and fled. No one was injured.

The Greek Orthodox seminary for the study of Christianity is next to Jaffa Gate, near Dormition Abbey.

Messages disparaging Jesus were found on the seminary's walls, including the phrase "the Redemption of Zion," which was also scrawled on the walls of a [Palestinian mosque in Jab'a](#) near Bethlehem in the West Bank torched overnight on Wednesday

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin expressed his sadness at the attack. Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat condemned the attack as "deplorable".

Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem responded by reiterating that "Our mission is to act to bring an end to such acts, in all areas of the Land of Israel."

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat described the perpetrators of both incidents as "terrorists", blaming Israel's government for inciting the attacks by continuing its "illegal occupation and colonisation based on distorted religious claims."

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