

Christian-Jewish Group Explores Way to Help French Jews Make Aliyah

In the wake of the recent Islamist terror attacks that resulted in the deaths of a combined 16 people at the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine and a kosher supermarket in Paris, the leader of a prominent Christian-Jewish aid group told that he is exploring ways to help French Jews immigrate to Israel.

Brothers Cherif Kouachi and Said Kouachi, the two Muslim terrorists suspected to have carried out the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, were killed Friday in a police raid on a printing shop in the Paris suburb of Dammartin-en-Goele, where the Kouachi brothers had taken one man hostage.

A separate but simultaneous raid killed Islamist terrorist Amedy Coulibaly, who took nearly 20 hostages at Hyper Cacher (the kosher supermarket) on Friday and had killed a female police officer last Thursday. According to French police, Coulibaly was a close associate of Cherif Kouachi and may have been involved in the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

“There’s no question in my mind that incidents like this [and] the many others recently are increasing the risk for the  Jewish community in France and their desire to leave,” , founder and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), told .

France, which has both the largest Muslim and Jewish populations in western Europe, saw a dramatic rise in anti-Semitism in 2014, especially in reaction Israel’s Operation Protective Edge against the Hamas terrorist group last summer. France’s Jewish community suffered several violent attacks, including a recent home invasion and rape in which the attackers referenced the victims’ Jewish faith.

According to Israeli government statistics, France was the leading country for aliyah to Israel in 2014 with new 7,000 arrivals, up from 3,400 in 2013.

While Eckstein said that it is not his organization's role to take over the responsibility of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for Israel in facilitating the aliyah of French Jews, he acknowledged that his organization is exploring ways that it can help.

"If we can make a difference in more Jews coming out of France, then yes, we will get involved," Eckstein said.

Founded in 1983, IFCJ promotes understanding between Jews and Christians. The group has raised more than a billion dollars, mostly from Christian donors, for Jewish immigration, social programs in Israel, and struggling Jewish communities around the world.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency on Sunday hosted an aliyah information fair in Paris that had been scheduled before last week's attacks.

"The Jewish Agency embraces the French Jewish community at this difficult time and is extending its full support by helping provide for the physical security of Jewish communities across France, increasing our assistance to any individual who wishes to immigrate to Israel, and working to ease immigrants' integration into the Israeli workforce and Israeli society," Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, said in a statement.

On Jan. 8, after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack but before the kosher supermarket attack, Sharansky cautioned against strategically promoting terrorism in France as a reason for aliyah.

"We're not building our aliyah strategy on tragic events," Sharansky told the *Times of Israel*. "We're building it on the

fact that there is this place in the world called Europe, where Jews are feeling increasingly uncomfortable.”

Eckstein told that his organization remains focused on helping facilitate the aliyah of Ukraine’s beleaguered Jewish community.

In October, IFCJ announced it would significantly step up efforts to increase immigration to Israel, especially from countries in the former Soviet Union. IFCJ hired the former head of the Jewish Agency’s aliyah department, Eli Cohen, to head the initiative.

IFCJ said it is providing a special grant of \$1,000 for each adult and \$500 for each child to Ukrainian Jews who come to Israel, and that it is sponsoring a flight each month for the rest of the year to facilitate their aliyah.

“One of the things that we can provide to French Jews that the Israeli government and Jewish agency can’t provide is funds,” Eckstein said.

Eckstein, however, admitted that the situation facing French Jews is different from the plight of Ukrainian Jews.

“I am not sure if that incentive program can work for French Jews; it is more complicated as their economic situation is different,” he said. “They want to know things like if their medical diploma is valid in Israel. We are exploring that, and if we can make a difference, then we will, God willing, get involved.”

Simone Rodan-Benazquen, director of the Paris branch of the American Jewish Committee, told that she understands the rationale of “members of our community when they are thinking of leaving France, because many of us are wondering whether we are responsible parents to stay.”

“As a Jew and as a mother, I do not want my children to live

in a climate where being Jewish means to be in danger for their physical safety, but also for their identity,” she said. “The question remains. We just hope that we have our [security] alert system sufficiently in place. It also helps that the [French] government is on our side and recognizes the immensity of the problem and is prepared to fight it. But more needs to be done. If the situation doesn’t change I fear that many more will want to leave.”

As the situation in France continues to unfold and Jews face new threats from Muslim extremists, Eckstein said that he is reminded of the stories of early Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky warning Jews to flee Europe before the Holocaust.

“I have these thoughts of Jabotinsky going around Europe before the Holocaust and telling Jews to flee to Israel while they could,” he said. “As long the governments of Europe can ensure and want to ensure the security of Jews, then they are okay. [But] unless the governments of Europe significantly step up and fight anti-Semitism, I’d certainly rather be identified as someone like Jabotinsky, who is warning Jews to get out and come to Israel.”

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