

Is Scientology Making Inroads in Israel?

The Church of Scientology has apparently found one place where its presence doesn't set off alarms, protests and demonstrations, and that place is one of the world's most religiously fraught countries—**Israel**.

In August, **Scientology** opened a gleaming new headquarters in the ancient port city of Jaffa, part of Tel Aviv. Since then, visitors and the curious have streamed through with no incidents.

And this in a country where **Jews and Muslims** harbor clashing claims over the same holy sites, sometimes sparking violence, and competing Jewish streams disparage each other openly and often.

Scientology has confronted charges in many countries that it is a dangerous cult that brainwashes its followers and confiscates their assets. Its leaders deny that.

“Like any new religion, people have misconceptions and much doubt, but we simply use logic to think life out for ourselves and are taught to question and debate everything,” said Sefi Fischler, the church's spokesman in Tel Aviv.

According to its website, Scientology believes man is an immortal spiritual being with unlimited capabilities. Its practices include spiritual counseling.

Created by American science fiction writer **L. Ron Hubbard** in 1954, the Los Angeles-based movement claims millions of members worldwide, including celebrities like actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta. It has been blamed as the catalyst behind the well-documented breakup of Cruise and his ex-wife Katie Holmes.

Germany, France and Russia are among the governments that keep a close eye on Scientology, and court cases have been filed against the church in some places.

In contrast, there hasn't been much public opposition in **Israel**.

While a 1987 Israeli parliamentary commission declared it a **cult**, the practice of Scientology in Israel is legal. The new headquarters has some 200 staff and claims to serve thousands.

Eytan Schwartz, a spokesman for Tel Aviv's mayor, said the new center is a testament to Israel's spirit of religious tolerance.

"Within just a few blocks of the center, you'll find numerous synagogues, several mosques and churches, 4,000 years of Abrahamic monotheistic religions expressing themselves," he said. "The Scientology center is simply showing that Tel Aviv is one of the most pluralistic cities in the Middle East."

"When it comes to all we strive for, for freedom, to be included and embraced by one's fellow man, there is no group that better bears these marks than Scientology," Mohammed Kaabia, the prime minister's adviser on Bedouin Arab affairs said in a statement issued by the Scientology center.

Kaabia and another representative attended the August opening, but the prime minister's office has since distanced itself from the event, saying the two officials were not there in an official capacity, attending as individuals invited by an anti-drug organization.

Despite the lack of public protests at its new center, the church has no shortage of detractors. A group of Israeli Scientology defectors, claiming corruption within the church, started a breakaway center in the northern city of Haifa.

Yad L'Achim, an **Israeli anti-missionary group**, criticized the government for what it said was too warm a welcome.

"Politicians have diplomatically welcomed the center, because politics is all about being nice," says Daniel Asor, a spokesman for the group. "**Scientology is a cult**, and this is a dangerous development."

Israeli movie director Erez Meshulam said the presence of the new center is disastrous. "Scientology ruined my marriage by convincing my wife, in return for thousands and thousands of dollars, that her soul could be cleansed," he said. "I fear this means more people will be fooled."

Church officials dismiss such criticism as baseless.

Fischler said the center hopes to bridge gaps among religions in the country. He noted its anti-drug and literacy efforts and outreach programs to prison inmates.

"Now with the building open, we can invite everybody in and show them who we are," he said.

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