

Jewish-Israelis Increase Protective Presence of Jerusalem Christian Clergy

JERUSALEM – Against the flow of Jewish worshippers heading to the Western Wall during the Shavuot holiday, three volunteers in yellow vests trudged from the direction of Mount Zion and the Dormition Abbey under the afternoon sun.

They had just finished a shift that began at 7 a.m., standing as a protective presence for Christian clergy near David's Tomb where the observant mingle on their way to their respective holy sites. They were headed to the Armenian Convent, another flashpoint of anti-Christian incidents.

The volunteers were among dozens of Israeli Jews who sacrificed their own holiday to stand with Christians in Jerusalem's Old City after a spate of incidents in recent weeks left the Christian population concerned for their safety.

"People were saying, 'It's nothing – it's just a few boys spitting,'" Alicia Nudelman told ALL ISRAEL NEWS about why she has chosen to volunteer. "But even if it were just two boys, I feel that my voice is that Jerusalem must be open for everyone and secure for everyone. All the streets must be open for everyone who loves Jerusalem."

Israel's treatment of Christians came under an international microscope after an attack on a nun, the barring of the highest Catholic official in the Holy Land from the church on Palm Sunday and the desecration of Christian statues in southern Lebanon by Israeli soldiers.

While the government condemned the attack on the nun, apologized to the Latin patriarch for the destruction of the

statues and took disciplinary actions against the soldiers, some Israelis allege that a general lack of enforcement for minor incidents has given rise to more frequent, violent, and brazen attacks.

“The trend is be very, very out there in the open – to be anti-Christian openly. It used to be spit and hide. Now, they do it without any hesitation,” said Yisca Harani, a Jewish-Israeli scholar on Christianity. “They have become emboldened to know they have the backing of the authorities who are going to turn a blind eye. It’s becoming more and more out there, more public, more hateful.”

Harani said the usual perpetrators – though still on the margins of Israeli society – are on the rise and “unstoppable.”

It’s this small number that concerns her.

“I’m not trying to hide the fact that we have radicals in Israel,” she said. “But the government is turning a blind eye and hence is actively encouraging this.”



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Three years ago, Harani established the Religious Data Freedom Center, a hotline for Christians to report general complaints ranging from disrespectful infractions such as spitting at a person or Christian property to defacing signs with crosses and actual assaults. Last year, 181 incidents were reported.

“If you don’t stop the 181 now, then tomorrow you will reveal there are 400,” Harani said.

A majority of the reports are minor infractions and do not involve violence. Still, many Christians do not file reports, Harani noted, indicating the number could be much higher.

Clergy members for the Catholic and Orthodox churches feel more conspicuous these days due to a lack of pilgrims in the land. Their robes, habits and crosses stand out, attracting unwanted attention in some cases.

The recent incidents went viral in the international media, prompting Israel to appoint a special envoy to the Christian world – a position tasked largely with defending Israel's position and noting that the Jewish state is a safe haven in the Middle East for worshippers of Jesus.

But Harani and Nudelman are among the concerned Israelis who have taken matters into their own hands, increasing the protective shifts, many of which also coincide with the Jewish holidays.

Harani has about 100 volunteers now. Wearing yellow vests and keeping watch during processions, they are intended to serve as a deterrent. They also document incidents that occur.

"Every afternoon we have volunteers escorting religious who feel unsafe. We suggested and we do it every day," Harani said, adding as she spoke, "I'm now texting the volunteer of this hour."

As fear among Christians has increased so has the need for volunteers. Harani has hosted several campaigns to raise awareness among the Israeli public and recruit more volunteers.

One Friday in May, around 80 Jewish Israelis – some from as far as the Tel Aviv area – attended a seminar at the Christian Information Center to learn about the tiny Christian presence and the challenges they face in the Holy Land. Christians comprise 2% of the population, numbering just under 200,000.

Harani shifted into this mission after years of teaching Christian history to Israelis.

“Let’s say I love animals and I study zoology and there’s a constant torturing of animals. Would I continue teaching and ignore it? If I see something is distorted, I have to fix it,” she explained describing Israelis’ general lack of understanding—and historical fear—of Christians.

She compared actions toward Christians in the Holy Land to Jews in the diaspora.

“We have suffered so bitterly,” she said of the Jewish people throughout history. “But now I have the opportunity to show that when we are a sovereign nation, this is how to do it right. I cannot continue to accuse the Christian world of treating Jews in a horrible way if, in the end, I am going to be like them.”

She is adamant that the Jewish state avoid the slippery road of history.

“The mistreatment of the Jewish people was wrong and now mistreatment of Christians is a sin to me,” she said.

She also understands these incidents are twisted by anti-Israel media to vilify the Jewish state.

“I’m not willing to be academically inaccurate. They want to talk about ‘persecution’ and attacks and put all of Israel into this category. I am not using the word,” she said. “‘Spitting’ is not an attack. Persecution of Christians in the world is about burning churches and beheadings. That is not happening in Israel.”

The matter was taken up in the Israeli parliament during a committee meeting that hosted local Christian leaders on May 13. Knesset Member Gilad Kariv recounted the recent events, asking, “This is the light unto the nations we purport to be?”

Harani was encouraged to see attention from the political echelon.

“It was the best show of democracy – because there is still democracy here. And here, a Knesset member was shouting his lungs out over what’s going on,” she said.

Nudelman, an Israeli tour guide, grew up in Argentina and knows what it is like to live as a minority. When she heard about an escalation in anti-Christian incidents, she said she had no choice but to step up.

“I want the world to also understand and say – this is, I think, the real face of Israel,” she said. “I know most people are not the one spitting and provoking, but there is also a face that says, ‘No no, we’re not just going to condemn at home and say, wow, it’s terrible.’ We are also going to do something; we are going to act.”

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