

The terror attack on Ghriba synagogue in Tunisia

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Three Tunisian servicemen and two Jewish worshipers were killed and dozen others were wounded in an attack on May 9, 2023, when a Tunisian naval officer opened fire on the Ghriba synagogue in Djerba during Lag Ba'omer celebrations attended by hundreds.¹ The two Jewish victims were cousins, Benjamin Haddad, 42, who held both Tunisian and French nationalities and Aviel Haddad, 30, a dual citizen of Tunisia and Israel.² Aviel Haddad was laid to rest in the southern Israeli city of Netivot.

Tunisia's Minister of Interior Kamal Fekih said that the attack on Djerba's El Ghriba synagogue was deliberate and premeditated but authorities did not identify a motive for the attack.³

This is the first attack on the Tunisian Jewish community in over two decades. Al-Qaeda militants targeted the synagogue in 2002 with a truck bomb, killing 21 Western tourists. Tunisia's last significant security incident was an explosion targeting police outside the US embassy in 2020 that killed one officer.⁴

Tunisia is home to one of North Africa's largest Jewish communities. The annual pilgrimage to Africa's oldest synagogue regularly draws hundreds of Jews from Europe and Israel to Djerba, a holiday destination off the coast of southern Tunisia, 500 km from the capital Tunis. Tunisia has no diplomatic ties with Israel, but Israelis are allowed entry to the country as part of organized tours to the island for the pilgrimage.⁵

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was sorry to hear that two “members of our people” were killed in Djerba. “On behalf of myself and the government of Israel, I send condolences from the bottom of my heart to the families of the murdered,” he said in a statement.⁶

The US ambassador to Tunisia, Joey Hood, visited the synagogue alongside the United States envoy for monitoring and combating antisemitism on May 8, 2023, the day before the attack.⁷

The terror attack on the synagogue

Tunisia’s interior minister Kamel Fekih said the gunman first killed one of his colleagues and seized his weapon at a national guard base on the coast of Djerba, then took a National Guard motorcycle to a schoolyard about 200 meters from the Ghriba temple, where hundreds of worshipers were present. “When he left the school after monitoring the movement of a traffic police car that was parked in the vicinity, he shot the first victim at about 8:13 p.m. and then moved toward the security guards, who were protecting the area around the synagogue, opening fire indiscriminately in order to cause as many victims as possible. But he was immediately surrounded and shot,” Fekih told reporters in Tunis.⁸

Authorities did not identify a motive for the attack or said if anybody else was involved in the attack, even though Islamic extremists have previously targeted the pilgrimage in Djerba and staged terrorist attacks in the country.⁹

El Ghriba synagogue

The Djerba synagogue, also known as the El Ghriba Synagogue, is located on the island of Djerba in Tunisia and is considered to be one of the oldest and one of the most significant synagogues in the world. The synagogue is believed to have been built by Jews who fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the First Temple.¹⁰

Coming between Passover and Shavuot, the pilgrimage to Ghriba is at the heart of Jewish tradition in Tunisia, where only about 1,500 members of the faith still live mainly on Djerba. According to organizers, more than 5,000 Jewish faithful, mostly from overseas from Europe, the United States and Israel participated in this year's event. The annual pilgrimage only resumed in 2022 after two years of pandemic-related suspension.

The Djerba synagogue is also an important symbol of Tunisia's rich cultural heritage and its long history of religious tolerance and coexistence.¹¹

The bombing of the El Ghriba synagogue (2002)

On April 11, 2002, a Tunisian Al-Qaeda operative named Nizar Bin Muhammad Nasar Nawar (Sayf al-Din al-Tunisi) drove a truck filled with liquid propane into the wall of El-Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba killing 21 Western tourists and left 30 others injured. The attack was masterminded by senior al Qaeda commander Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), and it was Al-Qaeda's first successful operation following the 9/11 attacks.¹² The attack took place during the annual Jewish pilgrimage and since then the authorities have provided tight security to the pilgrimage.¹³

The Islamic terror threat in Tunisia

Tunisia suffered a sharp rise in Islamist militancy after the Arab Spring ousted president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. In last decade, Tunisians have contributed heavily to the ranks of the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and Islamist groups and Tunisia's porous borders with Algeria and Libya have allowed militants to leave and return.¹⁴

In 2015, ISIS-linked terrorists killed 60 people, most of them tourists, in two separate attacks: on Bardo Museum in the capital Tunis and an attack in Tunisia at the Mediterranean resort of Sousse.¹⁵

The Bardo National Museum

On March 18, 2015, militants opened fire on tourists unloading from buses in front of the Bardo National Museum. Many of the tourists were from two cruise ships, which were at port outside of Tunis. The attackers had originally planned to attack the Tunisian parliament, but opted to attack the museum because of its lighter security. The attackers followed fleeing tourists into the museum and took them hostage, precipitating a four-hour siege of the museum by security forces. In the end, 21 foreign tourists were killed along with a Tunisian policeman. Two of the attackers were killed, but one managed to escape. ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, threatening more in the future.

The attack at the resort of Sousse

The second major attack took place on June 26, 2015 when a gunman killed 38 tourists at the Hotel Rui Imperial Marhaba, located north of Sousse in Port El Kantaoui. The gunman reportedly fled the scene but was shot dead by local police within the hour. The attacker was later identified as Tunisian national Seifeddine Rezgui. ISIS later claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁶

The attack on US embassy in Tunis

Tunisia's last significant security incident was an explosion targeting police outside the US embassy in 2020.¹⁷ Two suicide bombers drove a motorcycle toward a police truck, which was parked near the embassy and blew themselves up, on March 6, 2020, killing one police officer and injuring four more and a civilian.¹⁸

In January 2022, Tunisian police thwarted an attack planned by a woman coming from Syria, where she received training "with terrorist groups," targeting tourist areas in the country. The woman was planning attacks with an explosive belt.¹⁹

Summary

The attack on the Ghriba synagogue was Tunisia's first deadly attack on foreigners since 2015, and the first to target the Ghriba pilgrimage since a suicide truck bombing killed 21 people in 2002.

The general attitude of Tunisians toward the Jewish community is one of tolerance. But historically there have been radicalized elements within Tunisia as it turns out in the disproportionate number of Tunisian fighters volunteering for the Islamic State in comparison to other countries.

The investigation of the attack has not yet been completed, but the attack appears to be the operation of a single individual ("a lone wolf") and authorities have not yet outlined the motivations behind the attack.

The terrorist attack in Djerba took place while Israel was conducting its operation Shield and Arrow in the Gaza Strip against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist organization, but apart from the fact that the two events took place at the same time, the attack in Djerba cannot be linked to the fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Tunisia is mired in political and economic crisis and the synagogue attack is a new blow to its tourism industry. Tourism is a major source of foreign currency and visitor numbers to Tunisia had just begun to recover last year after more than a decade of blows, including Tunisia's Arab Spring revolt at the end of 2010, the terrorist attacks and the coronavirus pandemic.

Tunisians have long been involved in Islamic international terrorism in the ranks of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. This threat is likely to continue, especially as many Tunisians who have gone to train in Libya, Iraq, and Syria over the past years returned home or to Europe.

Notes:

¹ Tunisia synagogue attack may bolster Saied's bid to maintain Western aid, The Jerusalem Post, May 11, 2023.

² Djerba synagogue attack was act of 'terror,' Tunisian Jews Insist, Haaretz, May 10, 2023.

³ Tunisia synagogue attack was 'premeditated', says Interior Minister, MENA, May 11, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Attack near Tunisia synagogue kills four, Arab news, May 10, 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Naval Guardsman Attacks Synagogue in Tunisia, Killing 5, The New York Times, May 10, 2023.

⁸ Deadly Tunisian synagogue attack was premeditated and targeted temple, interior minister says, AP, May 11, 2023.

⁹ Attack near Djerba synagogue kills six, mars annual Jewish pilgrimage, The Arab weekly, May 10, 2023.

¹⁰ Death toll rises to 5 in gun attack on Tunisian synagogue, Washington post, May 10, 2023.

¹¹ Tunisia launches investigation after several killed in shooting near synagogue, France 24, May 10, 2023.

¹² Naval Guardsman Attacks Synagogue in Tunisia, Killing 5, The New York Times, May 10, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, Fifteen Years after the Djerba Synagogue Bombing, CTC, April 2017, volume 10, issue 4.

¹⁵ Attack near Djerba synagogue kills six, mars annual Jewish pilgrimage, The Arab weekly, May 10, 2023.

¹⁶ Death toll rises to 5 in gun attack on Tunisian synagogue, Washington post, May 10, 2023.

¹⁷ Naval Guardsman Attacks Synagogue in Tunisia, Killing 5, The New York Times, May 10, 2023.

¹⁸ Suicide bombers kill policeman in attack near US embassy in Tunisia's capital, France 24, March 6, 2020.

¹⁹ Tunisia thwarts alleged terrorist attack targeting tourist areas, Reuters, January 29, 2022.