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### **Beit Jimal monastery in Israel hit by suspected ultranationalist Jewish vandals**

Reuters (21.08.2013) - Vandals hurled a firebomb at the outer wall of a Roman Catholic monastery in Israel and daubed anti-Christian graffiti on it, a police spokeswoman said on Wednesday.

No damage was caused to the Beit Jimal monastery, near the town of Beit Shemesh, and no one was hurt, the spokeswoman, Luba Samri said.

She said the words "revenge" and "gentiles will perish" were painted in Hebrew on the wall, probably late on Tuesday.

"All lines of investigation are being looked at, including nationalistic motives," Samri said.

Jewish ultranationalists are widely believed to have been behind the vandalism of several churches and mosques in Israel and the occupied West Bank in recent years.

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### **Palestinian Muslims struggle to worship in Jerusalem for Ramadan's final friday prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque**

The Huffington Post (03.08.2013) - On the last Friday prayer of this year's Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, Palestinians struggled to reach Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The worshippers passed through multiple checkpoints and scaled walls with ladders in order to pray at one of Islam's most holy sites.

It is also Al Quds day, an annual anti-Zionist protest against the Israeli occupation of Palestine that has been commemorated with worldwide demonstrations. According to the Islamic Human Rights Commission, this year's theme is "the liberation of Palestine."

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### **Israeli cabinet approves ultra-Orthodox conscription law**

Reuters (07.07.2013) - Israel's cabinet approved a draft law on Sunday to abolish wholesale exemptions from military duty granted to Jewish seminary students, stoking ultra-Orthodox anger over the break with tradition.

Many Israelis have long bridled over state privileges handed to the conservative believers or "Haredim" - a Hebrew term meaning "those who tremble before God".

The debate heated up when elections in January saw strong performances for two parties who campaigned against the exemptions and created the first cabinet in a decade without ultra-Orthodox members.

Most Israeli men and women are called up for military service for up to three years when they turn 18, and often see active service in the occupied West Bank and other flashpoints.

But ultra-Orthodox men studying in seminaries, religious women and Arab citizens of Israel have been exempted since the Jewish state was formed in 1948.

Under the proposed law, only 1,800 of those students, designated "outstanding biblical scholars", would get an exemption, out of the estimated 8,000 who become eligible for the draft every year.

"The government's abuse of the haredi minority verges on persecution and cruelty," Meir Porush, an ultra-Orthodox legislator from the opposition United Torah Judaism party, said about the cabinet's decision.

Ultra-Orthodox rabbis say the study of the holy scriptures is a foundation of Jewish life and scholars have a right to devote themselves full time to the task.

"This is a stain on the State of Israel, which has become the only country in the world to determine that studying the Scriptures is not legitimate," another United Torah Judaism legislator, Moshe Gafni, told reporters.

### **Protests**

Changing the so-called secular-religious status quo in Israel has carried significant political risk in the past for its coalition governments, which have often relied on the support of ultra-Orthodox partners.

Two months ago, some 30,000 Haredim in traditional black garb rallied to rabbis's calls against conscription reform and protested outside a military recruitment centre in Jerusalem.

But while leaders of the Haredim community have pledged more mass demonstrations against the legislation, an ultra-Orthodox backlash currently poses little danger to the government's survival, given its composition.

Hoping to avoid any immediate confrontation, the government agreed to delay any sanctions against draft-dodgers by imposing a four-year interim period in which the military will encourage young Bible scholars to enlist.

"We will make this change gradually through consideration for the special needs of the ultra-Orthodox community," Netanyahu said in public remarks at the cabinet meeting, where ministers voted 14-0, with four abstentions, to approve the proposed law.

Some 3,500 Haredim already serve in the military, and a recent study by the Economy Ministry found that 70 percent of ultra-Orthodox soldiers entered the workforce after they completed their service. By contrast, only 45 percent of all Haredi men were employed, according to the central bank.

Haredim make up 10 percent of Israel's eight million population and they are expanding rapidly, with families of 10 children not uncommon.

The draft legislation, which will be brought to parliament for ratification, would be implemented fully in four years' time.

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## **Suspect arrested in Latrun Monastery arson**

***Nearly a year after the Latrun Monastery was torched and vandalized and following Undercover investigation, Israel police have arrested Moshe Orbach, a 22-year-old Ultra-Orthodox man from central Israel in connection with the case.***

ynet (01.07.2013) - Last September, vandals set fire to the entrance door of the Latrun Monastery and spray-painted slogans against the Christian religion on its walls, including names of West Bank outposts and "Jesus is a monkey".

The vandalism was widely condemned by Israel's leaders.

At the time, Jerusalem Police launched an investigation together with the Shin Bet. The case was later turned over to the Police's International Crime Investigations Unit which handles "price tag" crimes.

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon announced Monday that planning and perpetrating "price tag" acts are to be defined as "illegal organizing," a legal clause that was thus far preserved for Islamic terror operatives working for Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad and more.

Within the next few days, Minister Ya'alon is to implement the clause, thereby allowing Shin Bet to work against radical rightwing activists who are known to be behind "price tag" acts.

The practical aspects of the clause include a longer period of incarceration than so far given, arrest until legal proceedings are concluded, disallowing presence of attorney during investigation and confiscation of property.

The Defense Ministry stressed that not only perpetrators will be subject to the new proceedings, but also those who plan and fund "price tag" acts.

Ya'alon announced his decision in a meeting with defense officials, adding that "price tag" perpetrators will be legally deemed as terror groups, which are defined by law as organizations that include "ideological inspiration and covert activity, the main goal of which is to prevent the Israeli government from performing political moves or enforcing the law, and hinder State's leaders from making certain decisions. Some of the acts possess an aspect of revenge on Arabs, which is for all intents and purposes terror."

The defense minister added **"This is a terrible phenomenon, which includes violence toward Arabs, damage to property and risking human lives, in an attempt to stop the government from taking certain actions. It is our duty to deliver harsh punishments on these criminals, seeing as the results of their actions are disastrous."**

"We must fight them with zero tolerance and utilize all the means we have," Ya'alon noted. "They do not represent the values of the Jewish faith nor the values of the State

of Israel. Over the next few days I intend to instruct the Central Command Chief to announce this."

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## **Police shield Jewish women activists in confrontation at Western Wall**

Reuters (10.05.2013) - Israeli police held back thousands of ultra-conservative Jews who tried to drive liberal women worshippers from Judaism's sacred Western Wall on Friday, marking a shift in the authorities' handling of a long-running religious schism.

Ultra-Orthodox protesters dressed in traditional dark clothing threw chairs and water at the women, then later stoned their buses. Two policemen were hurt.

Previously police detained members of Women of the Wall, a group challenging the Orthodox monopoly over rites at Jerusalem's Western Wall, for wearing prayer shawls in violation of Orthodox tradition.

This time police arrested five religious protesters instead.

The police response followed a court ruling last month that found that the group was not in violation of the law.

The issue is at the heart of a long struggle between a secular majority and an ultra-Orthodox minority over lifestyle in a country where institutions such as marriage, divorce and burial are controlled by religious authorities.

Dozens of border policemen formed a cordon to keep the protesters at the site - revered as part of the Biblical Jewish Temple compound - from charging at the approximately 100 women and some male supporters as they prayed.

"They're desecrating the site of our holy temple," shouted one of the hundreds of Orthodox women who also came to protest against Women of the Wall.

Yocheved Malachi called it shocking that women would wear prayer shawls or other religious gear, which Orthodox tradition reserves solely for men.

Friday's prayers were the first in weeks in which police avoided any showdown with Women of the Wall, whose members have been detained in the past and charged with disruption for violating Orthodox traditions at a holysite. They are seeking a greater role in prayer ritual.

"I'm seeing signs of progress," one woman worshipper, Lisa Kainan, said about the police presence at the site.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asked former cabinet minister and Jewish leader Natan Sharansky to seek a compromise to permit the Women of the Wall to hold prayers without exacerbating tensions with the ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Sharansky has since proposed a formula to widen a separate zone at the Western Wall once designated for egalitarian prayer, a suggestion neither side nor the government has yet embraced.

Also spurring Israel's drive to resolve the dispute is the growing support for the Women of the Wall movement among Jews in the United States, Israel's main ally.

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