Melbourne synagogue sustains severe damage in predawn attack by masked arsonists

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The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/melbourne-synagogue-sustains-severe-damage-in-predawn-attack-by-masked-arsonists/>

Arsonists extensively damaged a Melbourne synagogue on Friday in what Australia’s prime minister condemned as an antisemitic attack.

Victoria Police Detective Inspector Chris Murray said a witness who had come to Adass Israel Synagogue to pray saw two masked people spreading an accelerant inside the building at 4:10 a.m.

The synagogue was ‘engulfed in flames,’ Murray added. ‘We believe it was deliberate. We believe it has been targeted. What we don’t know is why.’

About 60 firefighters and 17 fire trucks responded to the blaze, which Murray said caused extensive damage.

Investigators have yet to identify a motive, but Prime Minister Anthony Albanese blamed antisemitism.

‘This is an outrage. The violence and intimidation and destruction at a place of worship is something that we should never see in Australia,’ Albanese told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

‘I think an attack on a synagogue is an act of antisemitism by definition,’ Albanese added.

The prime minister said he had ‘zero tolerance’ for antisemitism, adding, ‘It has absolutely no place in Australia.’

No serious injuries were reported in the blaze, in the southeast Melbourne suburb of Ripponlea.

Police said Friday there is not enough evidence yet to suggest terrorism, but that they haven’t ruled it out as a possibility. They are working with counter-terrorism experts to track down the suspects, who have not yet been identified, 7NEWS Australia noted.

Police will increase patrols and do their utmost to catch the arsonists, who were wearing dark clothing, Murray said, adding that detectives would be looking at CCTV footage and interviewing any witnesses.

Melbourne police are also ramping up their presence around synagogues and Jewish schools, 7NEWS reported.

Bakery on ‘lockdown’

Hours after the synagogue attack, Victorian police removed a man wielding a hammer and abusing community members from a nearby Jewish bakery in Melbourne.

The incident took place at the Balaclava branch of Glick’s bakery, an iconic Jewish institution founded by Holocaust survivor Mendel Glick in 1960.

Posts on social media say the bakery was put on ‘lockdown.’

A Jewish community security organization said its personnel ‘assisted Glick’s staff and remained on site until police arrived.’

An hour later, hundreds would have been inside

Television images from the synagogue attack showed firefighters hosing down the embers through the blackened door of the single-story building, which has a grey concrete facade.

A board member of the synagogue, Benjamin Klein, said a few congregants were sitting and praying inside when the fire started, and ‘they heard loud banging.’

Liquid was poured inside the synagogue and it was set alight, he said, adding, ‘If this had happened an hour later, there would have been hundreds of people inside.’

The congregants ‘ran out the back of the synagogue. One man who ran out — his hand got burnt,’ Klein said, adding the fire was ‘extensive’ and that the synagogue’s ‘inside is completely gutted,’ and that holy books and furniture were destroyed.

He vowed, however, that the community would ‘rebuild.’

Klein said the synagogue had increased security over the past 12 months amid safety concerns, without giving further details.

In 1995, the synagogue was damaged by a deliberately lit fire, with walls and Torah scrolls burned. Klein, who was a child at the time, said he remembered standing inside the damaged synagogue with his grandfather, a Holocaust survivor.

Quadrupled attacks since October 7

Opposition Leader Petter Dutton, meanwhile, said the attack was predictable, amid a rise in antisemitism that he said Albanese had failed to stand up against since the Hamas terror group’s October 7, 2023 attack on Israel started the ongoing war in Gaza.

Antisemitic incidents in Australia have [quadrupled since the Hamas attack,](https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-jewish-attacks-in-australia-quadrupled-after-october-7-report-finds/) amid a global surge. Physical assaults on Jews in Australia spiked from 11 the previous year to 65.

‘Why have we allowed, since October 7 of last year, months and months of violent protests to take place, the vilification of people of Jewish faith, the defacing of cars, and now the bombing of a synagogue?’ Dutton said.

‘It’s unacceptable, totally unacceptable in our country, and the prime minister needs to step up for our values, and he needs to do that not just here at home, but also in the United Nations and elsewhere around the world,’ he said, appealing to Albanese to be a more straightforward ally of Israel in international forums.

Israel’s Ambassador to Australia Amir Maimon on Friday noted that dozens of anti-Israel activists had staged a three-hour protest outside The Great Synagogue in downtown Sydney on Wednesday, demanding sanctions against Israel. Worshippers were prevented from leaving the synagogue during the demonstration.

‘We are talking about the values you expect Australians to follow, not my own values. And for me it’s clear that everyone should have the right to worship his own religion, own beliefs, as long as they also respect others,’ Maimon said.

Shul built by Holocaust survivors

Jillian Segal, a Sydney lawyer and business executive who serves as the Australian government’s special envoy to combat antisemitism, said the Jewish community in Australia was ‘feeling evermore rattled by what is going on.’

‘I’m very concerned. Here is one major escalation in terms of burning synagogues which has resonance to what happened during the Holocaust,’ Segal said.

Victoria State Premier Jacinta Allan noted in a statement that the synagogue was ‘built by Holocaust survivors.’

Many of the synagogue’s original worshippers were post-World War II immigrants from Hungary.

Allan offered 100,000 Australian dollars ($64,300) to help repair the synagogue and said there would be an increased police presence in the area.

‘Every available resource will be deployed to find these criminals who tried to tear a community apart,’ Allan said.

‘We stand against antisemitism now and forever,’ she added.

Religious leader Rabbi Gabi Kaltmann described the arsonists as ‘thugs.’

‘Tonight is the Sabbath. We must all go and find a sense of calmness, camaraderie and community by gathering for the sabbath tonight and praying together as one community,’ Klatmann told reporters outside the synagogue.

Similar condemnation of the environment created by anti-Israel demonstrations came from the Zionist Federation of Australia, whose president Jeremy Leibler said in a statement Friday that the synagogue attack ‘appears to be another shocking escalation of the hate that we have seen brazenly displayed on the streets of Melbourne every week for over a year.

‘No one should be surprised; this violent attack is a direct consequence of words turning into actions. Jew-hatred, left unchecked, endangers all Australians,’ Leibler said.

‘Enough is enough, this is a stain on our nation. It’s time for all levels of government to turn their words into actions to stamp out this Jew-hatred.’

Executive Council of Australian Jewry president Daniel Aghion said the community had been living in fear of such an incident since the Hamas onslaught last year.

‘This for us is just evidence of that fear,’ he told reporters.

Aghion also said the broader Australian community needed to condemn the arson attack.

‘I’ve been getting phone calls this morning from the Hindu community, from other people, from good people who are prepared to stand up, and that’s my message this morning to Australia, to the good people of Australia,’ Aghion said. ‘Don’t leave the Jewish people behind.’