Tunisia terror attack threatens to deal ‘mortal blow’ to rare Jewish pilgrimage

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The Jewish pilgrimage to the island of Djerba in Tunisia moved Rudy Saada so thoroughly that he vowed repeat it with some of the people closest to him.

So Saada, a French-Jewish journalist who lives in Paris and visited Djerba for the first time last year, returned this week to the island and its El Ghriba synagogue with his Tunis-born parents, Frank and Josefine, both in their 70s.

His return took a tragic twist: On Tuesday night, minutes after Saada left the synagogue, a gunman killed two worshipers and two police officers and wounded several others in the worst terrorist attack on the Tunisian-Jewish landmark in over 20 years.

The attack, whose details are not all entirely known but which happened despite extraordinarily robust security arrangements, has sent a shockwave of hurt and consternation among the members of the growing community of pilgrims to El Ghriba, Africa’s oldest still-running synagogue, and the larger circle of Tunisian Jews. It is also a major setback for the organizers and supporters of the pilgrimage, which is a rare example of the survival of Jewish-Arab kinship in an Arab country.

“The shots rang out minutes after I and most of the foreign Jews had left the synagogue for their hotels,” Saada told The Times of Israel on Wednesday. Making sure his parents, who had already returned to their hotel, were safe, Saada headed back in the direction of the synagogue to report on the situation for RCJ Radio, a French-Jewish radio station based in Paris.

Most tourists had already left the synagogue, which receives about 8,000 pilgrims annually on Lag B’Omer, when at least one assailant shot and killed Aviel and Benjamin Haddad, cousins living in Israel and France, respectively, as well as at least one security officer, Saada said. Another security forces officer died Wednesday from wounds sustained in the shootout with the perpetrator, Reuters reported.

The worshipers who remained around the synagogue when the attack happened, Saada said, were almost exclusively from the local Jewish community of several hundred people, who are among only a handful of extant Jewish communities in the Arab world.

“A colorful, folkloristic custom full off hope and joy has turned into tragedy,” said Saada, 41, who heads the news department of RCJ Radio. “It’s a major setback for the pilgrimage, which is a source of pride for authorities and an important and rare link connecting Tunisian Jews and their descendants from across the world to their country of origin.”

Jews, mostly with Tunisian origins, travel to Djerba yearround but especially on Lag B’Omer, which this year fell on May 9; thousands of pilgrims gather in the southern island, which used to have thousands of Jews and maintains a dwindling Jewish population of about 1,000 people to this day.

Unusually, Israelis are also issued entry visas on Lag B’Omer even though Tunisia and Israel do not maintain diplomatic relations; these collapsed during the Second Intifada less than a decade after their establishment following the 1994 Oslo Accords.

The authorities of the predominantly Muslim country — where terrorists in 2002 already targeted the El Ghriba synagogue, killing 19 people — maintain a solid presence of security forces in Djerba, especially during the pilgrimage.

“The amount and deployment of security forces even before the attack was remarkable,” Saada said. “It reflected the level of importance that authorities attribute to the pilgrimage, which means a huge source of revenue for an island with little to no sources of income beyond tourism.” In practical terms, “we’re talking a police officer around each street corner,” he added.

But even that left authorities and pilgrims exposed to Tuesday’s attack, which appeared, at least in part, to have been an inside job: A man that the Tunisian interior ministry in a statement described as an assistant in the Naval Center of the National Guard in Djerba shot and killed a police officer, took the officer’s ammunition and shot the worshipers before being shot to death himself by other security officers. At least six police officers were wounded in the exchange.

The fact that the attack happened despite the security arrangements “suggests the impression of inevitability,” said Avi Chana, a French-Israeli Jew who was born in Tunisia, and last visited Ghriba during the pilgrimage several years ago. “I think it’s a death blow, at least for the foreseeable future, to a beautiful tradition and pilgrimage, and it is causing palpable pain. This is dealing the pilgrimage a mortal blow.”

Dr. Miryam Gez-Avigal, the chairwoman of the World Federation of Tunisian Jewry in Israel, described her feelings as “intense pain.” But Gez-Avital, who was born in Israel and has visited Djerba at least 17 times, wasn’t entirely surprised by the attack.

“Recently, I’ve been sensing tension, which made me decide not to organize an official delegation by the Federation last year and this one,” she said. “Personally I’m not afraid to go to Tunisia, where the population is largely welcoming, supportive of Jews and even Israel. But a delegation and the pilgrimage are bigger targets for a small but growing radical fringe.” Her group stopped organizing delegations to Ghriba following the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown.

Gez-Avigal described the tension as subtle. “It’s friends and contacts not returning messages, not sharing on social networks, as they used to. It’s not something they tell you directly but you feel with multiple people a straining presence on the relationship, which is fear.”

In recent years — amid internal political upheavals following the 2011 revolution that ignited the Arab Spring and led to the rise and subsequent [fall](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/tunisia-and-future-political-islam-0) from power of an Islamist party — normalization with Israel, which many see reflected in the presence of Israelis in Djerba, has become a lightning rod for criticism by hardliners.

Authorities under President Kais Saied have sought to separate the pilgrimage, which Tunisian officials have described as pertaining to an element of local heritage, from discussions about Israel and Tunisia’s position on the Palestinian-Israel conflict.

Saada also reported sensing jitters before the attack. “Police were tense. The atmosphere was tense, and for a good reason: Apparently a chink in the armor was found,” he said.

Martine Cohen, a 70-year-old Tunisia-born French Jew living in Paris, reacted with anger to the news of the attack – not only vis-à-vis Tunisian society, which she said is “hopelessly infected with antisemitism,” but also with Jews who go there en masse.

“I don’t understand this insanity of the pilgrimage in Tunisia,” said Cohen, who left as a child with her family after the Six Day War of 1967, amid what many Jewish emigrants described as an atmosphere of anti-Jewish sentiment that led to [multiple](https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2016-06-05/ty-article/tunisia1967-tunisians-riot-against-the-jews/0000017f-e6a3-d62c-a1ff-fefb27b40000) antisemitic riots. “This nostalgia for good old Tunisia can only be shared by those who either don’t know the place, or forgot,” she said. “If the tragedy, which saddens me immensely, has a silver lining it’s that it will maybe stop the pilgrimage that endangers so many people needlessly.”

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, who visited Djerba with his organization’s leadership in 2018, said that, amid grief for the victims of the attack, “We express our gratitude and admiration to the security services without whose action this tragedy would have been even greater.”

Goldschmidt added: “The world must unite and loudly condemn yet another cowardly attack on Jews at worship.”