SPITTING ON JERUSALEM CHRISTIANS A RECURRING SCANDAL

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By Ben Harris, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Jerusalem, 18 January 2010
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Typically the skirmishes begin when a young yeshiva student spits on or near a group of teenage seminarians, who occasionally respond by beating up their attacker. Several years ago, a young religious man pulled a gun when Sandrouni moved to intervene in a fight.
"Most of the incidents that happen, unfortunately, they happen in front of my store," said Sandrouni, who more than once has come to the aid of a yeshiva student bloodied after a run-in with a group of seminarians."Almost everybody, after the fight, they apologized," Sandrouni said. "They say, 'We are sorry. We didn't know that their reaction would be so strong.' "

Attacks on Christian clergyman in Jerusalem are not a new phenomenon, and may result from an extreme interpretation of the Bible's injunction to "abhor" idol worshipers.

But several people familiar with the issue say the attacks recently have reached epidemic proportions -- or at least enough that government officials and Orthodox rabbinic figures have begun to take notice.

A recent meeting between Foreign Ministry officials, the Jerusalem municipality and fervently Orthodox, or haredi, leaders resulted in a statement by Beth Din Tzedek, a haredi rabbinic tribunal, denouncing the phenomenon. In a sign of the ministry's concern over the issue, both the meeting and the statement were publicized on the Web site of Israel's diplomatic mission to the Vatican.

"Besides desecrating the Holy Name, which in itself represents a very grave sin, provoking gentiles is, according to our sages -- blessed be their holy and righteous memory -- forbidden and is liable to bring tragic consequences upon our own community, may God have mercy," said the statement.

The incident that appears to have gotten the ministry's attention occurred last September, when a pair of teenage Armenian seminarians reportedly fought with a young yeshiva student who spit on them. Police intervened, arrested the seminarians and referred the matter to the Interior Ministry.

According to George Hintlian, a spokesman for the Armenian community in Jerusalem, the seminarians are now facing deportation -- a decision the Armenians have officially protested. Carrying out the order would require the police to seize the boys from their seminary in the Old City, Hintlian said, which likely would result in a public relations disaster.

"It won't happen easily," Hintlian said. "They'll think twice."

Christian leaders stress that the problem is not one of Christian-Jewish relations in Israel. Most Israelis, they say, are peaceful and welcoming. In an interview with several Armenian Jerusalemites, they emphasized repeatedly that their relations with the largely religious community in the Old City's Jewish Quarter are normal.

The assaults, according to George Hintlian, a spokesman for the Armenian community in Jerusalem, are carried out by people from the outside -- visitors to Jerusalem from other towns, and even from abroad.

Though they may bear the brunt of the phenomenon, given the proximity of the Armenian and Jewish quarters, cases of spitting are confined neither to Armenian clergy nor the Old City.

Athanasius Macora, a Texas-born Franciscan friar who lives in western Jerusalem, frequently has been the target of spitting during his nearly two decades residing in the Israeli capital.

Macora, whose brown habit easily identifies him as a Christian clergyman, says that while he has not endured any spitting incidents recently, recollections of past incidents started flowing over the course of 30-minute interview.

In a sitting room at Terra Sancta College, where he is the superior, Macora recalled the blond-haired man who spit at him on Agron Street, not far from the U.S. Consulate. Another time, walking with an Armenian priest in the same area, a man in a car opened his window to let the spittle fly. Once it was a group of yeshiva students in the Old City, another time a young girl.

Five years ago, in what many say is the worst incident on record, a crucifix hanging from the neck of the Armenian archbishop, Nourhan Manougian, was broken in the course of an altercation with a yeshiva student who had spit on him.

Sometimes the assailants are clad in distinctive haredi garb; other times the attackers are wearing the knitted yarmulkes of the national religious camp. In almost all cases, though, they are young religious men.

A Franciscan church just outside the Old City walls was vandalized recently with anti-Christian graffiti, Macora said.

"I think it's just a small group of people who are hostile, and a very small group of people," Macora said. "If I go to offices or other places, a lot of people are very friendly."

Meanwhile, the Beth Din Tzedek statement, and an earlier one from Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger, have impressed the Christians and raised hopes that the spitting may soon end.

"We hope that this problem will be solved one day," Sandrouni said, "for the sake of mutual coexistence."