



PERSPECTIVES

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Tunisian Jews Are in Immediate Danger

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The undisguised antisemitism of Tunisian president Kais Saied is encouraging Tunisian Muslims to express their own antisemitism more openly. Tunisia's Jewish population is now the target of hostility and provocation from their own countrymen, a state of affairs for which the new president bears much responsibility.

During his election campaign, Tunisian president Kais Saied accused Israel of being at war with the Muslim world, a message that struck a chord in the hearts of many Tunisians. He also said that any Muslim leader who normalizes relations with the Zionists should be prosecuted for treason. In other words, he deems anyone who maintains relations with Israel a traitor to the Arab *umma* (nation) and the Palestinian people.

Following his election to the presidency, Saied's campaign of hate toward Israel expanded to include Tunisian Jews, whom he has [called thieves](#). (He apologized afterward, claiming his words had been taken out of context.)

Thanks to Saied's influence, Tunisia has changed from an unusually tolerant Muslim country into a typically intolerant Muslim country that does not respect its minorities. A few weeks ago, a Tunisian church was [set on fire](#), and the danger to the country's Jews is escalating.

Jews lived in Tunisia for thousands of years in relative peace. Only 1,500 Jews remain in the country, most of them on the island of [Djerba](#). They represent one of the last remaining Jewish communities in the Middle East outside of Israel.

The president's attitude has opened the door to antisemitism among the Tunisian population, which is growing increasingly commonplace. A preexisting hostility toward faraway Israel has turned into open hatred and

acts of provocation against local Jews. In other words, anti-Zionism has revealed itself as antisemitism.

Lassaad Hajjem, the Muslim mayor of the Midoun Islands off Djerba, has altered the names of the area's Jewish neighborhoods by adding Muslim names. "Al-Riad" has been added to the name of the smaller Jewish neighborhood and "Al-Suani" to the name of the larger. Both are Islamic sites in Saudi Arabia. The changes were made following an order from the mayor and have already been integrated into official state documents and Wikipedia entries.

Lest the Tunisian Jews miss the point, Hajjem also placed a large sign near the entrance to the Jewish neighborhoods that reads as follows: "Al-Quds [Jerusalem] is the capital of Palestine". The sign states the distance to "Al-Quds" as 3,090 kilometers and displays the Palestinian flag.

Mayor Hajjem is a member of the [Ennahda faction](#) of the radical Muslim Brotherhood. He has been in office since August 2018, but waited until the end of the administration of former Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi to act against the Jews of the Midoun Islands. The Essebsi government included René Trabelsi, a Jewish cabinet member who served as Minister of Tourism. During Essebsi's term, the treatment of Tunisian Jews was much better than it is today.

After the election of Kais Saied, who is known for his nationalism and antisemitism, Lassaad Hajjem took advantage of the newly fertile ground to remind Tunisian Jews that they live on borrowed time in a Muslim country.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published in Israel Today on February 22, 2021.

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