

# Djerba pilgrimage an annual test for Tunisia's authorities

Jewish News correspondent Beatrice Sayers, who visited Ghriba synagogue the day before last week's shooting, says the country is still safe for tourists

In the centre of Tunisia's capital stands an impressive 1930s building whose name, the Grand Synagogue, is wholly appropriate. But it a tiny house of prayer 300 miles away on Djerba, the island off Tunisia's south-eastern coast, that attracts Jews from around the world to its annual pilgrimage festival. I visited the synagogue, known as La Ghriba, last week and took part in the celebrations. The story goes that the Ghriba was founded with a stone brought from the First Temple in Jerusalem. During the five-day festival at Lag B'Omer, a door is opened on to the area below floor level where the stone can be seen. Along with the other pilgrims I placed an egg inscribed with my hopes and wishes next to it; a bit like placing a prayer in the Kotel in Jerusalem.

What happened the following day was a shock, not least for Tunisia's 1,300 or so Jews, most of whom live on Djerba, and the 5,000 visitors to La Ghriba. What all are grateful for is

that last week's shooting claimed far fewer lives than the attack in 2002, which also took place during the pilgrimage.

The hundreds of people in the synagogue on the afternoon of 9 May were put into lockdown. "We were there for three hours during the shooting. It was very trying," one of them, Sonia, told Jewish News. "We prayed and it helped... but it was traumatising all the same. I tell myself it was a miracle there was no carnage."

Sonia was visiting with her mother, Lydie, and daughter, Tania. Every year Lydie and her husband, who was born on Djerba, would make the pilgrimage together from Paris, where they lived. Having been recently widowed, this year Lydie was bringing her female relatives. Praising the Tunisian authorities, Sonia says they have "perfectly mastered the situation to defend the pilgrims who were their target".

When I met the three Frenchwomen at the synagogue the previous day, I could see from the extremely tight security how the pilgrimage



The sanctuary of La Ghriba the day before the attack and (top) the Grand Synagogue in Tunis

has become an annual test for the authorities, mindful of two incidents in the past, particularly the one in 2002, when an al-Qaeda suicide bomber killed 19 people. Reports from last week say the gunman, a naval guard in the eastern port town of Aghir, 12 miles away, killed a colleague before making his way to the synagogue, where he shot dead two visitors and three more guards before being killed. The civilian victims were cousins: Aviel Haddad, 30, who held dual Tunisian and Israeli citizenship, and Benjamin Haddad, 42, who was French.

"These attacks are particularly tragic," Oscar Scafidi, who lived in Tunisia for three years while writing a travel guide to the country, tells Jewish News. "Djerba hosts one of the most tolerant, multicultural societies in Tunisia, where Jewish Tunisians have lived alongside their Muslim and Christian compatriots for thousands of years."

Scafidi, who takes a keen interest in Tunisia's Jewish heritage, still sees the country as safe for tourists. The vast majority of terrorist incidents target the security forces and occur in areas well off the tourist track, he says. However, he also points out that the Republic of Tunisia is "strongly anti-Israeli," and that there are no official diplomatic relations between the states, adding: "A small minority of Tunisians conflate this anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist position with a broader anti-Jewish sentiment."

Despite the shooting, it is likely to be business as usual for Jews on Djerba. Jewish shops

in the island's main town, Houmt Souk, had posted signs with the Hebrew welcome *bruchim haba'im*, aware that Jewish visitors were coming to the island – accessible via a causeway – not only from north Africa but from Europe, Israel and north America. The signs stayed in place following the attack, says Avishai, who works at one of the Jewish jewellers at Houmt Souk and can trace his family back seven generations from the records of his synagogue. "We Jews have more care and love between each other than any other people," he adds.

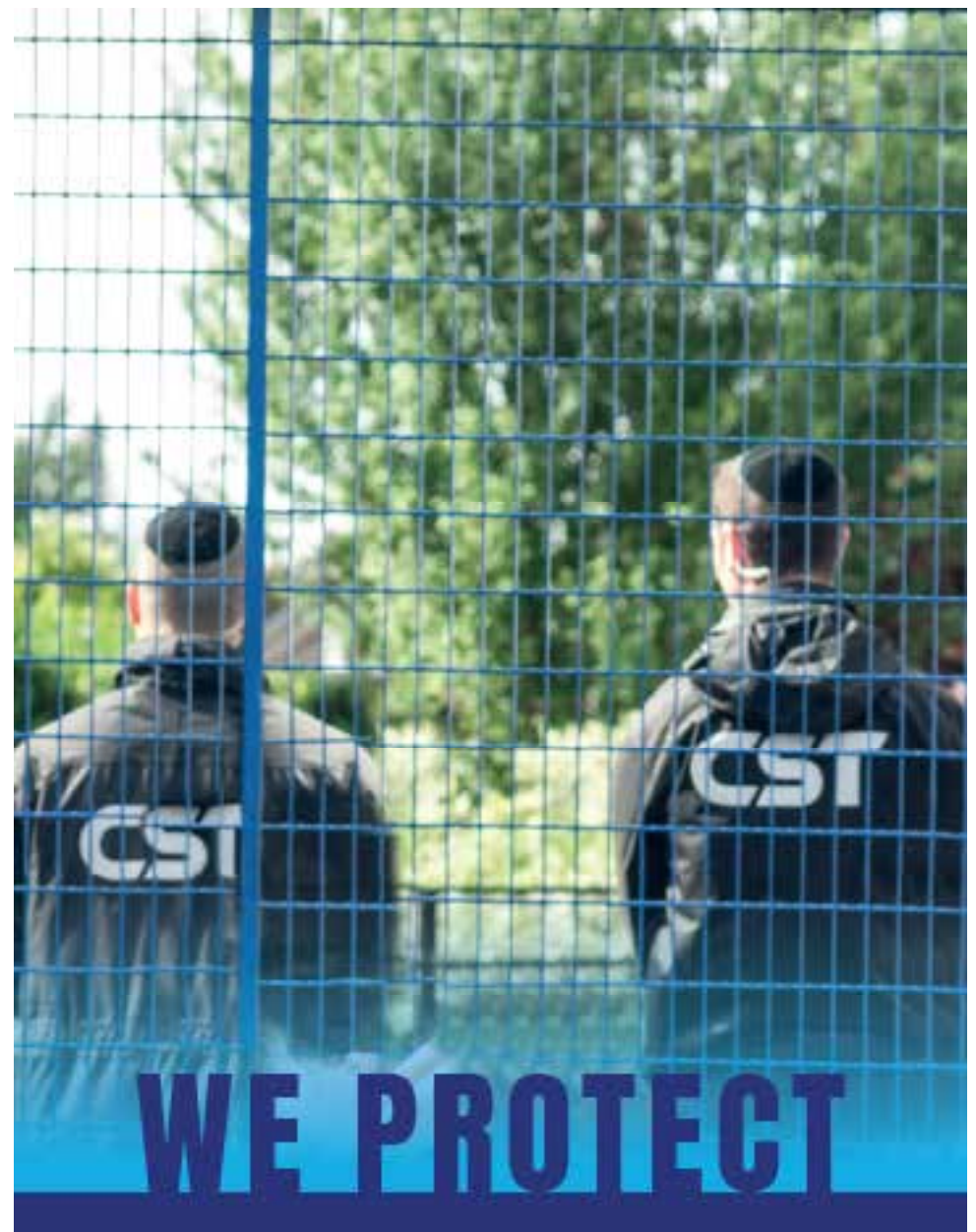
Jerusalem Post recently reported an Israeli government official as saying Israel was trying "to bring these Jews [from Djerba] following threats. The major migrations of Djerbian Jews took place in the 1950s and in 1967, to France and to Israel, following Israeli independence and the Six Day War. In 2011, there



Benjamin and Aviel Haddad were killed



Clockwise from above: festivities the day before the attack, a restaurant in Djerbahood, our reporter, and lighting candles at La Ghriba



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Tunisia by Oscar Scafidi is published by Bradt Guides on 12 June, RRP £18.99

Photos by Beatrice Sayers