

# Interfaith council condemns West Bank mosque burning

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Jerusalem, 6 October (ENI)--The Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land has expressed "grave concern" over the 3 October burning by militant Israeli settlers of a mosque in the West Bank village of Beit Fajar near Bethlehem.

"The CRIHL strongly condemns these and similar acts of vandalism and arson which have taken place in the past year," said the council in a 5 October statement.

It added, the council, "calls upon people from all faiths - Christians, Jews and Muslims - Palestinians and Israelis - to refrain from any assault on places of religious significance and not to resort to extremism and the exploitation of religion for a political and territorial gain."

The religious council represents the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Palestinian Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Palestinian [Islamic] Sharia Courts and the assembly of the Heads of [Christian] Churches of Jerusalem.

The fire set by the arsonists caused damage to the building as well as to carpets and dozens of Qurans, the Islamic holy book. News agency reports said the attackers also scrawled the word "revenge" on a wall in Hebrew.

"The council calls upon all who live in the land, which is holy to the three faiths, to extend their hands in peace and to respect the religious dignity and holiness of the holy sites for any of the three religions, avoiding any acts of desecration or aggression against them," the CRIHL said in its statement.

Israel's authorities have said they suspect nearby Israeli settlers of carrying out the attack in an attempt to pressure the government over the issue of construction by Israelis in West Bank settlements.

Israeli politicians, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak, condemned the attack.

"This was a disgraceful act and a stain on the state of Israel and its values," said Barak in a statement, accusing the attackers of trying to harm the peace process.

On 5 October a delegation of settler rabbis visited the village and condemned the attack, noting that it was not the way of the Torah, the Jewish holy book. Eretz Shalom, a grassroots settler peace movement, also organized a protest over the attacks near the village together with Palestinians. It presented new copies of the Quran for the mosque of Beit Fajar.