

Jewish cemetery vandalized in Philadelphia, bomb threats target community centers and schools

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In a continuing surge of anti-Semitic acts and threats across the US, several hundred gravestones were toppled or damaged at a Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, late Saturday night.

The attack came amid a wave of bomb threats against Jewish community centers and schools and less than a week after vandals overturned some 200 headstones at Jewish cemetery in University City, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri.

While police initially reported that upward of 100 headstones were vandalized at the Mount Carmel Cemetery in Philadelphia, volunteers helping clean up on Sunday stated that more than 500 grave sites had been damaged. Destruction at the cemetery was extensive, with row after row of headstones knocked over; some stones, more than a century old, were split in half.

A group of activists calling themselves Muslims Unite to Repair Jewish Cemetery, who had raised \$133,000 to assist in cleaning up the Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery near St. Louis, announced Sunday that they will also donate some of the money to help clean up the Mount Carmel Cemetery.

As of this writing, no suspects have been identified in either the cemetery desecrations or the bomb threats, and there is no evidence that the incidents are directly connected.

Aaron Mallin, who discovered the turned-over gravestones while visiting his father's gravesite Sunday morning, expressed deep concerns. "I'm hoping it was maybe just some drunk kids. But the fact that there's so many, it leads one to think it could have been targeted," Mallin told local news station WPVI.

Other residents of Philadelphia voiced shock and

dismay over the anti-Semitic incident in their city. "I'm a child of a Holocaust survivor so I grew up with stories of destruction of Jewish cemeteries," Rebecka Hess told WPVI. "I always thought we were done with that."

The Mizel Family Foundation, in conjunction with the Anti-Defamation League, is offering a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any suspects.

This weekend's cemetery attack was followed by the latest in a wave of anti-Semitic bomb threats against Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and Jewish schools across the country. The JCC Association reported that there were 21 separate bomb threats on Monday against 13 community centers and eight Jewish day schools across the US.

Three locations in the Philadelphia suburbs were evacuated on Monday: the Kaiserman JCC and Perelman Jewish Day School in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, and the Katz JCC in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

The targeted organizations in Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Virginia were all evacuated by local police, searched and found to be clear of any explosive devices. The evacuations across the country affected hundreds of staff members, senior citizens attending aerobics classes, and children in school or day care.

"Has there been anything like this in our lifetime? It's just devastating," Jennifer Weiss, the executive director of the Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "It's unbelievable."

Monday's incidents brings the total number of bomb threats against JCCs and day schools since the beginning of January to 90, affecting 73 institutions in 30 states and Canada in five separate waves.

David Posner, director of strategic performance at JCC Association of North America, released a statement on Monday appealing to the federal government to act swiftly to find those responsible for the continuing anti-Semitic threats.

"Actions speak louder than words. Members of our community must see swift and concerted action from federal officials to identify and capture the perpetrator or perpetrators who are trying to instill anxiety and fear in our communities," Posner demanded.

President Donald Trump made a halfhearted and belated denunciation of anti-Semitism last week after coming under pressure from Jewish organizations. Vice President Mike Pence made a trip to the Missouri cemetery on Wednesday, where he made a show of helping the cleanup effort.

Reacting to the latest acts of vandalism in Philadelphia, White House press secretary Sean Spicer told a press conference Monday that Trump was "deeply disappointed and concerned."

Despite the hollow condemnations of anti-Semitism coming from Trump and his surrogates, it is clear that anti-Semitic elements in the US have been emboldened by his election and the nationalist and anti-immigrant policies being pursued by his administration. Trump has filled his White House with virulent nationalists and outright fascists. Steven Bannon, the former editor of Breitbart News—an online bastion of the alt-right neo-Nazis and anti-Semites—is Trump's chief strategist.

The latest survey of active "hate groups" by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that the number grew for the second year in a row in 2016 from 892 to 917, the highest number since 2011. At least 407 of these were Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazi, white nationalist or racist skinhead organizations.



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