

Jewish extremists suspected of torching mosque near Bethlehem

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JERUSALEM (RNS) A West Bank mosque sustained damage Wednesday (February 25) in what Palestinians say was an arson attack carried out by Jewish nationalists.

Spray-painted Hebrew-language graffiti scrawled on the mosque's exterior stone walls read "We want the redemption of Zion" and "Revenge" next to a Jewish Star of David.

The mosque, in the village of Jabaa near Bethlehem, was on fire when worshippers arrived at 4:30 a.m. for early-morning prayers. The mosque's interior walls, furniture, and carpets were damaged.

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the attack "an official declaration of religious war," according to the official Palestinian WAFA news agency. "The new attack is a sign of the mounting violent extremism within Israeli society," the ministry said.

The Israel police said the attack is being investigated.

Jewish extremists known as "price tag" activists have attacked mosques, churches, Arab-owned property, Israeli military bases, and even a liberal synagogue in an effort to exact a price for any action against the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Wednesday's attack occurred on the 21st anniversary of the shooting spree by Baruch Goldstein that left 29 Muslim worshippers dead. Goldstein, a Jewish settler, entered a room in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs that was serving as a mosque and opened fire. Survivors of the massacre later beat him to death.