

Afghanistan's last Jew leaves after Taliban takeover

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Zebulon Simentov, the last known Jew living in Afghanistan, closes a window in the Kabul synagogue he lived in and cared for, on August 29, 2009. (AP Photo / David Goldman)

The last member of Afghanistan's Jewish community has left the country.

Zebulon Simentov—who lived in a dilapidated synagogue in Kabul, kept kosher, and prayed in Hebrew—endured decades of war as the country's

centuries-old Jewish community rapidly dwindled. But the Taliban takeover in August seems to have been the last straw.

Moti Kahana, an Israeli-American businessman who runs a private security group that organized the evacuation, said in an interview that the 62-year-old Simentov and 29 of his neighbors, nearly all of them women and children, have been taken to a “neighboring country.”

Kahana said Simentov, who had lived under Taliban rule before, was not worried about them. But Kahana warned him that he was at risk of being kidnapped or killed by the far more radical Islamic State group. He said Simentov’s neighbors also pressed him to leave, so that their children could join him on the bus out.

Israel’s Kan public broadcaster aired footage of the evacuation, showing a bus full of people traveling across what appeared to be Afghanistan, with all the faces blurred except for Simentov’s.

They joined an exodus of tens of thousands of Afghans who have fled since the Taliban swept across the country in August. The United States and its allies organized a massive airlift in the closing days of the 20-year war, but officials acknowledged that up to 200 American citizens, as well as thousands of Afghans who had aided the war effort, were left behind.

Kahana said his group is reaching out to US and Israeli authorities to find a permanent home for Simentov, whose estranged wife and children live in Israel.

Hebrew manuscripts found in caves in northern Afghanistan indicate a thriving Jewish community existed there at least 1,000 years ago. In the late 19th century, Afghanistan was home to some 40,000 Jews, many of them Persian Jews who had fled forced conversion in neighboring Iran. The community’s decline began with an exodus to Israel after its creation in 1948.

In a 2009 interview, Simentov said the last Jewish families left after the 1979 Soviet invasion. Born in the western city of Herat in 1959, he always insisted Afghanistan was home.

The Taliban, like other Islamic militant groups, are hostile to Israel but tolerated the country’s minuscule Jewish community during their previous reign. One of the few times they came knocking was when they noticed that Muslim women could often be seen visiting Isaak Levi, another Jewish Afghani who lived at the synagogue with Simentov until his death in 2005.

When they briefly arrested Levi, he explained that he had a business selling amulets to women who wanted to become pregnant with sons or who were opposed to their husbands taking other wives, as allowed under Islamic law. The Taliban released him. —Associated Press