



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on October 4, 2011

Exiled Libyan Jew Barred From Restoring Tripoli Synagogue

A Libyan Jewish man who fled the nation with his parents decades ago has become a celebrity in recent days for his quest to restore Tripoli's main synagogue. But shortly after 56-year-old David Gerbi took a sledgehammer to the wall blocking the entrance (photo at left), armed men threatened his life and forced him to abandon the project — for now.



Gerbi said he had obtained permission from members of the ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) and a local leader to start fixing up the Dar al-Bishi synagogue, which was shut down and sealed off under the Gadhafi regime following a wave of anti-Semitic persecution in the late 60s. Most of the other synagogues in Libya were destroyed or turned in to mosques as Jewish property was confiscated and Jews were expelled.

But Gerbi was hoping the rebellion would be a new start — that the exiled Jews could return to Libya if they chose to. He called the reconstruction effort a “test” of the new regime's tolerance.

After knocking down the wall erected in the building's entrance, Gerbi went inside, prayed, cried, and began to clean up the trash. Soon afterwards, however, an angry crowd gathered outside and told him to leave or become a target.

“They told me that if I am not leaving now, they are going to come and they are going to kill me because they don't want Jews here,” Gerbi [told](#) NPR after the hostile locals chased him away. “This is the old persecution. This is thousands of years that they always needed to kick out the Jew. And now they throw me out again.”

When asked about the situation, Libya's new rulers said they had not made any decisions about Jews yet. And it is too soon to start thinking about restoring a synagogue anyway, the National Transitional Council (NTC) claimed, citing ongoing battles with forces loyal to Gadhafi.

“This matter is premature and we have not decided anything in this regard,” rebel boss Mustafa Abdul-Jalil explained during a press conference, contradicting Gerbi's claim that he had official permission to begin. “Everyone who holds Libyan nationality has the right to enjoy all rights, provided that he has no other nationality but Libyan.”

A spokesman for the new regime, Jalal el-Galal, echoed the NTC chief's remarks in interviews with various reporters. And he, too, claimed Gerbi was never authorized to restore the building in the first place.



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“It’s an illegal act because he has not [received] permission from anybody,” the spokesman [told](#) NPR. “I think it’s a very sensitive issue at a very critical time. You are inciting something by not going through the proper channels.”

More recently, el-Galal [told](#) Bloomberg that he could not predict whether Gerbi would *ever* be allowed to come back. “The NTC is a temporary body and isn’t prepared to deal with this sensitive issue right now,” he explained.

While Gerbi had indeed been welcomed to Libya a decade ago, anti-Semitism related to the existence of Israel as a Jewish state still runs deep in the North African nation — as in much of the Arab world. Numerous reports say there was not a single Jew left in all of Libya.

So, relatively speaking, some analysts say tepid progress is being made. El-Galal cited the fact that Gerbi was even allowed to move around in Libya at all as an indication of how the nation was changing.

Still, Gerbi was disappointed that the new regime was not more helpful — especially after he earned the nickname “[revolutionary Jew](#)” by offering his services as a psychoanalyst to rebel forces during the rebellion. He even rode into Tripoli with NTC fighters when Gadhafi fled the capital in August.

But there is much work to be done. “If they want to prove that it’s different from Gadhafi ... they need to do the opposite,” Gerbi told reporters tearfully after being kicked out of the area, criticizing rebel authorities for distancing themselves from his efforts and claiming he did not have authorization to restore the 200-year-old synagogue.

Despite the setbacks and intimidation, however, Gerbi has vowed to persevere with his mission. “I am scared only of God. If I have to die in this moment, I die,” he said. “I don’t want to be a hero, I don’t want to play martyr. I just want to be here to support the new Libya and the democracy and to build this.”

In addition to restoring the Jewish place of worship, Gerbi has other big plans for what he hopes will be his future in a new and improved Libya. Among other things, he intends to work on resolving issues related to property confiscated from Jews under the Gadhafi regime.

And there are glimmers of hope, according to some optimistic analysts. The new regime’s interim “Justice Minister,” for example, recently [said](#) that Libyan courts would be open to Gerbi’s claims “if” he was discriminated against in the past.

But tens of thousands of Jews lost everything when they were forced to flee the country as Islamic outrage against Israel’s success in the 1967 war was boiling. And not everyone is convinced the long train of abuses will be easy to rectify.

“I really do not believe that the Libyan people are ready to reconcile with the past and their history and the wrongs that they have done to the Jewish community,” Gina Publil-Waldman, president of a group called Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA), told the Associated Press.

She thought it was too early to even attempt returning to Libya at this point. But nonetheless, the Libyan-born Jew called Gerbi’s activism sincere and honorable.

While many view Gerbi as an adventurous hero, however, some of Libya’s prominent exiled Jews have expressed mixed feelings about his efforts so far. Several leaders of the Libyan Jewish community in Europe blasted his approach in [interviews with](#) the *Jerusalem Post*.

Much of the public criticism stems from a perception that Gerbi is waging his own one-man battle



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without cooperating enough with fellow members of the Libyan Jewish Diaspora — mostly residing in Israel, but also in Europe and America. Gerbi does have heavy-hitting defenders, too, however.

World Organization of Libyan Jewry chief Meir Kahlon, for example, praised Gerbi and his efforts, [telling](#) the *Post* that Gerbi had his blessing to undertake the mission. “We speak for all the Libyan Jews in Israel and many outside the country. I don’t need permission from the Libyan Jews in Italy or the UK,” Kahlon explained. “The problem is that everybody thinks they can do better.”

Many Jews remain hopeful that the new regime will be better than Gadhafi’s dictatorship even though it has already [announced](#) that Sharia law will govern the nation. Not everyone agrees though.

The rebels and their leaders — [many of whom are known](#) to be “former” terrorists and senior al Qaeda leaders — have attracted a barrage of criticism for [widespread war crimes](#), [vicious persecution of blacks](#), and [more](#). And many experts [fear](#) that the new regime, [if it succeeds](#), could be even worse than the last one.

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Photo: David Gerbi as he knocks down a wall blocking the door to the main synagogue in Tripoli, Libya, Sunday, Oct. 2, 2011: AP Images



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