

Op-ed

Destruction of Jesus statue should serve as moral wake-up call for IDF, Israel

Israel boasts about being safe for Christians and other minorities, yet is unwilling to crack down on soldiers and civilians whose actions are taking a hammer to ties with Christians

By [Lazar Berman](#) 20 April 2026



An IDF soldier appears to destroy a statue of Jesus in southern Lebanon (seen in an undated photo on the left side prior to the incident), in an image uploaded to social media on April 19, 2026. (Social media, used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

On Sunday, an image of an Israeli soldier operating in Lebanon spread rapidly across social media.

It so perfectly encapsulated some of the worst tropes about Israel and Jews that many instinctively assumed it was an AI-generated product meant to slander the Jewish state.

Friends of Israel who thought the photograph might be real prayed it wasn't, so damaging was the picture.

Their prayers went unanswered. An IDF soldier had indeed taken a hammer to the face of a statue depicting Jesus in the Christian town of Debel in southern Lebanon. There was no AI,

no manipulation, no getting around an image that points to a deep moral morass in the IDF and in broader Israeli society.

It is hard to think of an image that could be more damaging to Israel on the world stage right now.

The emergent “woke right” in the US — led by figures like Tucker Carlson — contends that Jews are enemies of Christians, who are persecuted by Israelis in the Holy Land. Carlson has devoted multiple episodes of his popular podcast to speaking with local Christian figures about hardships imposed by Jerusalem.



Tucker Carlson attends a meeting with US President Donald Trump and oil executives in the East Room of the White House, January 9, 2026, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

The movement is working hard to convince Christian Zionists, the backbone of America’s support for Israel, that Israelis harbor a not-so-secret disdain for Christians, and that their natural allies are the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the political spectrum, Israel is cast as a uniquely cruel fighting force, going out of its way to destroy homes, lives and religious sites. All of this is done with a bizarre glee by IDF forces, say anti-Israel social media figures.

And, of course, there is the millennia-old charge of deicide, that Jews collectively bear eternal guilt for the death of Jesus on the cross. That accusation, which has led to the death of untold thousands of Jews, has been adapted in Palestinian liberation theology, which recasts Israeli soldiers as the Romans and Palestinians as their victim, Jesus.



14th century fresco depicting a Jew (as evidenced by his hat) nailing Christ to a cross. (DKrieger, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

What better evidence could all those camps ask for than a photo of a broken figure of Jesus, torn off the cross and hanging upside down as an emotionless Israeli soldier smashes him with a hammer?

The same army that killed tens of thousands in Gaza, and struck the only Catholic church in the territory, those critics can now say, is going out of its way to desecrate images of Jesus as it systematically destroys southern Lebanon as well.

As Jerusalem and Beirut wade into unprecedented peace talks, Israel has gone to great lengths to insist that its fight is with Hezbollah and its Shiite strongholds, not the Maronite communities in southern Lebanon that have worked with Israel since before its independence. But the image of the soldier destroying infrastructure in a Christian town, and a statue of Jesus at that, would seem to directly contradict the contention that Israel is not targeting Christians as well.



Troops of the 162nd Division operate in southern Lebanon, in a handout photo issued on April 19, 2026. (Israel Defense Forces)

Most Israelis are rightly horrified by the incident, and the IDF and Foreign Ministry have denounced it in unequivocal terms. “Yesterday, like the overwhelming majority of Israelis,” [said](#) Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “I was stunned and saddened to learn that an IDF soldier damaged a Catholic religious icon in southern Lebanon.”

Not an isolated incident

Although it is authentic, the image is not representative of the conduct of Israel’s soldiers, many Israelis have noted in the last few hours. Every large organization has a few bad apples, they point out.

But Israel and its leaders can’t be let off the hook by dismissing it as an isolated incident, involving a single soldier.



People drive past damaged homes as they return to the southern Lebanese village of Srifa on April 19, 2026. (Kawnat HAJU / AFP)

First of all, the soldier desecrating the statue is not the only guilty party. Another reservist took the picture, and soldiers don't wander around southern Lebanon in pairs or drive around in lone vehicles. There were likely over 10 soldiers — and very likely an officer — who witnessed some part of the act and did not stop it.

Moreover, the soldier with the hammer thought it was a good idea to put the evidence of his crime online, with no fear of the potential personal and national consequences for his act.

He is far from the first IDF soldier to upload damning images, and even evidence of war crimes. Since the war that began with the October 7, 2023, Hamas invasion of southern Israel, Israeli soldiers have been posting videos and photos to Instagram and TikTok that have gone viral both in anti-Israel circles and in mainstream media, with some being used

for evidence in international cases against Israelis.



An IDF soldier seen throwing a Quran into a fire in Gaza. (X screengrab)

Soldiers have put photos online showing them throwing Qurans into fires, burning books, abusing prisoners of war and more.

Even more damningly, Sunday's incident wasn't the first time Israeli troops shocked Christians around the world with behavior they put online.

In 2024, elite troops operating in Lebanon filmed a mock wedding ceremony inside an Orthodox church, entirely oblivious to the sanctity of the site. Naturally, they uploaded

footage to social media, essentially handing it to news organizations around the world.



The trend is indicative of a fundamental problem within the IDF. Despite incalculable damage to the legitimacy of Israel's military operations — a key factor that determines what Israel is able to accomplish on the battlefield — the IDF has not put an end to the phenomenon of soldiers taking phones onto the battlefield to document themselves defying IDF regulations and international law, and then uploading that content to the internet.

The army recognizes at least some aspects of the problems, but has only addressed the symptoms.



An Israeli reservist reads Talmud to Palestinian detainees in the West Bank, in a video posted online on October 6, 2024. (X screenshot: used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

Amid efforts by pro-Palestinian organizations to get Israeli soldiers traveling abroad arrested and prosecuted for war crimes, the army has issued guidelines requiring that the identities of all troops who participate in combat be concealed.

Interviews with officers under the rank of brigadier general are now aired with their faces blurred or from the back, and with their full names hidden.

Of course, that doesn't do much when soldiers put their own videos online, nor does it address the moral and disciplinary issues at play.

To the lions

The soldier didn't smash the Jesus statue accidentally, and his actions didn't take place in a vacuum.

Without knowing exactly what motivated his act, it's reasonable to think it was done with forethought and intention. Somewhere in his education or his social milieu, he likely learned that Christian shrines and icons are not to be respected, or even that they are to be destroyed.

Though the vast majority of Israel doesn't support persecuting religious minorities in general or Christians in particular, there are enough extremists and religious fanatics in the country who do support such actions that the soldier has plenty of potential sources of inspiration for his crime.

Christians in Israel say they are increasingly coming under assault, including a series of incidents in recent years in which mostly young Orthodox Jews made a habit of spitting on the ground in front of clergy and other Christians, mainly in Jerusalem's Old City, an act that may be prosecuted in Israel as a hate crime. There were also acts of vandalism against churches and cemeteries, and physical assaults, including actions that bear the hallmark of extremist Jewish settler violence familiar to the West Bank.

The publication of the picture comes as Israel finds itself in repeated and avoidable fiascos around its relationship with Christians.



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, holds a prayer service to mark Holy Thursday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, April 2, 2026. (Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem)

On Palm Sunday last month, Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Catholic official in the Holy Land, and other senior clergy [were prevented](#) by Israeli police from worshipping in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because of wartime safety guidelines. The incident became an international scandal that demanded Netanyahu's speedy intervention.

US Ambassador Mike Huckabee had to threaten Israel to get the Shas-run Interior Ministry to give visas to Christian clergy; the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party submitted a symbolic bill in 2023 that would make proselytization punishable by jail time; a tax fight between the Jerusalem Municipality and major churches in Jerusalem led to them closing the Holy Sepulchre in protest.

In all the cases, Netanyahu had to get involved after damage was done internationally in order to find a solution, evidence that Israel does not recognize the importance of its ties with Christians and does not prioritize the issue.

That was painfully evident in July of last year, when an Israeli tank shell [hit](#) Gaza's only Catholic church, killing three people. Father Gabriel Romanelli, the church's priest whom former pope Francis used to speak to daily, was injured in the attack.



Parish Priest of the Holy Family church in Gaza City Fr. Gabriel Romanelli receives care after he was injured by errant IDF tank fire on the church, at the city's Arab Ahli, also known as Baptist, hospital on July 17, 2025. (Omar al-Qattaa/AFP)

It is hard to imagine the Israeli army intentionally targeting the church.

Yet that does not mean Israeli leaders and commanders deserve a pass. If the military decides it must avoid hitting something at all costs, it has plenty of tools to ensure that troops do not fire in that direction. The IDF had been very careful about avoiding any strikes that had even a small chance of hitting areas where Israeli hostages might have been.

If it recognized the sensitivity of the church, the fact that hundreds of civilians shelter there, and the resonance of the site for Christians around the world, the IDF would have ordered troops to avoid firing anywhere near the site.

A new IDF standard?

“Israel is the only country in the region that the Christian population and standard of living is growing,” read an awkwardly phrased English-language statement from Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu on X Monday condemning the destruction of the statue of Jesus.
“Israel is the only place in the Middle East that adheres to freedom of worship for all.”

That may be. But it’s also a country that has not stopped Jewish teens from regularly attacking Palestinian civilians in the West Bank, nor has it taken meaningful action to stop IDF soldiers from violating laws in Gaza and Lebanon and filming them.

Israel is also a country in which soldiers and civilians, let’s face it, desecrate Christian sites. There are certainly no orders to do so, it violates Israeli law and IDF orders, and disciplinary action is taken. But that doesn’t change the fact that it happens in the IDF, as it does in ISIS, Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.



Members of the Khabour Guards (MNK) Assyrian Syrian militia, affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), walk in the ruins of the Assyrian Church of the Virgin Mary, which was previously destroyed by Islamic State (IS) group fighters, in the village of Tal Nasri south of the town of Tal Tamr in Syria's northeastern Hasakah province on November 15, 2019. (Delil Souleiman / AFP)

The militaries of Israel’s emphatically authoritarian neighbors Egypt and Jordan don’t attack statues of Jesus or disrespect churches.

And it’s not that the IDF and the security services don’t know how to drop the hammer on relatively minor violations of its orders.

Last week, four Border Police officers [were sentenced](#) to two weeks in military prison for “harming religion and Judaism” by barbecuing on base during Shabbat.

The same week, the IDF [court-martialed](#) three female soldiers and docked a third of their salaries for wearing purportedly revealing clothes to base as they were being discharged.



Female soldiers cut their military ID cards at an IDF base on the day of their discharge, when three of them were court-martialed and fined for wearing revealing clothing. (Screen capture: X, used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

The military said that incident “constitutes a departure from orders and was therefore handled by the deputy commander of the unit in accordance with the IDF’s disciplinary code of conduct.”

If Israel’s military is treating all violations of its regulations seriously, then we can expect to see a long jail sentence for the reservist who desecrated the statue, certainly more time than the Border Police officers received for grilling on Shabbat.

But if the reservist gets minimal jail time for destroying a cherished religious object while others are punished severely for violating Jewish religious sensibilities, then Sunday’s incident in Lebanon shouldn’t be seen as a crime by a soldier, but as further evidence that Israel is sliding away from tolerance and democratic values and toward religious and political extremism.