

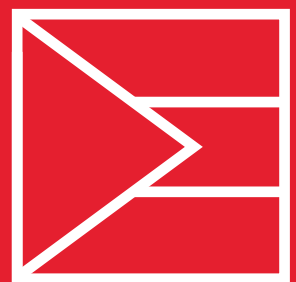
# Targeting of Christians and Christian Places of Worship in Palestine

November 2023



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London | Washington



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# Introduction and Brief Background on the Palestinian Christian Community



## 01

# Introduction and Brief Background on the Palestinian Christian Community

- Jerusalem, the cradle of Christianity, has been home to a Christian community since the advent of Christianity and continues to hold great significance to Christians across the world. It is home to some of Christianity’s most holy places, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and it is the place where Christians believe Jesus Christ died and rose again. Every year, millions of Christians make pilgrimage to the Holy Land.
- Most Palestinian Christians currently live abroad as refugees and are denied the right to return to Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Christians who haven’t been uprooted from their lands are mostly concentrated in urban centres like East Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah.<sup>2</sup>
- The rights of the remaining Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land are under threat. Except for Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, they all have Palestinian identity documents and are deprived of the freedom to move freely between the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many Palestinian Christians have been stripped of the right to their own lands and farms and are thus unable to build, expand, and develop.<sup>4</sup> As a result of Israel’s policies and persecution of Palestinian Christians, their numbers have steadily declined since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Christian population in 1922 stood at approximately 11 percent of the regional total. Today it is as low as 1 percent.<sup>5</sup>
- Today, only 10,000 Palestinian Christians live in East Jerusalem. Israeli policies and practices, such as revocation of identity documents and rejecting family reunification,<sup>6</sup> as well as attacks on Christian sites, threaten their presence.<sup>7</sup>
- In Bethlehem, the number of Palestinian Christians has fallen to 12 percent of the population (as opposed to 86 percent in 1950)<sup>8</sup> due to being forced out by Israel and the construction of illegal settlements on their seized lands.<sup>9</sup> They are also cut off from adjacent Christian communities by Israel’s Barrier Wall.<sup>10</sup>
- Similarly, the Christian population of the city of Jericho, which holds great significance for Christians and has several Christian landmarks and pilgrimage sites, has dwindled significantly over the years largely due to Israel’s policies impacting Palestinian farmers, including its expropriation or destruction of natural resources – particularly water.<sup>11</sup>

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# Discriminatory Policies and Limitations on the Freedom of Worship of Palestinians





## 02

# Discriminatory Policies and Limitations on the Freedom of Worship of Palestinians

- Israeli policies restrict Palestinian Christians access to areas of religious significance and places of worship.
  - In order to gain access to areas of religious significance or places of worship, Palestinian Christians are forced to apply for permits that are usually rejected.<sup>12</sup> Permits are particularly difficult to obtain during the annual procession in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the Holy Saturday observance in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>
  - Israel further prevents access to Christian places of worship and religious sites by imposing other checkpoints around the Old City, and in some instances, violence against individuals.<sup>14</sup>
    - In 2022 and again in 2023, Israel strictly limited all Christians, including Palestinian Christians, from attending the Holy Light Ceremony in the Church of Holy Sepulchre, one of the most important Orthodox Christian ceremonies.<sup>15</sup>



Israeli police keeping Christian worshippers away from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

- In 2023, during the Orthodox Christian Holy Week, Israeli police violently enforced access restrictions to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As reported by Israeli media, the Israeli police beat, choked, threw on the ground and handcuffed an 85-year-old Coptic priest heading a delegation of worshippers during the Coptic Orthodox observance of Easter in the Old City.<sup>17</sup>

03

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# Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites



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## 03

# Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites

- Over the last 56 years, Israel has attacked Christian communities and Christian sites on countless occasions. A UN fact-finding mission reported in 2013 that, “since 2008, mosques and Christian churches have been targeted ... including at least nine ... arson attacks against Palestinian mosques and 21 incidents where graffiti was used to desecrate mosques, churches and burial grounds with provocative slogans of a racist or a sacrilegious nature, intended to inflame the situation.”<sup>18</sup>

## Timeline

### 1960

In **1967**, Israelis broke down the doors of St. John the Baptist Church in Ein Karem (in the outskirts of Jerusalem), broke its windows, and stole its contents. They also replaced the icon of the Virgin Mary, which bears the image of Christ, with an insulting image.<sup>19</sup>

In **1967**, the Israeli army transformed the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George in Al-Shamaa neighbourhood of Jerusalem into a residential building.<sup>20</sup>

In **1967**, Israeli settlers stormed the Bir Yacoub Greek Orthodox Church in Nablus and killed the head of the church, Archimandrite Philomenos. His mummified body is still located in the Greek Orthodox ‘Zion Church’ in Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

In **1967**, Israeli soldiers also climbed the roof of the Church of Holy Sepulchre (which has since been the site of numerous other attacks) and assaulted the clergymen. They also tried to steal a cross and an icon from the car of the Greek Archbishop of Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>

- In **1968**, Israelis robbed the church at night, and were able to steal the jewellery placed on the statue of the Virgin Mary.<sup>23</sup>
- In **1969**, Israelis robbed the Church, including the crown encrusted with precious stones placed on the head of the statue of the Virgin Mary, which was later seen being offered for sale in Tel Aviv markets.<sup>24</sup>
- In **1971**, Israeli police attempted to burn down the Church by destroying the ancient lamps in the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>25</sup>



## Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites

### Timeline continued...

**1970**

In **1970**, the Israeli forces confiscated the Coptic Orthodox Al Sultan Convent after beating the priests and their Bishop and stole valuable items from their properties.<sup>26</sup>

In **1973**, Israelis burned the Mount of Olives International Bible Centre.<sup>27</sup>

In **1978**, Zionist gangs stole copper crosses, icons, and holy vessels from the Russian Cathedral in central Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup>

**1980**

In **1982**, a Jewish gang burned the Baptist church in Jerusalem, including its library. They burned it again in 2007.<sup>29</sup>

**1990**

In **1990**, a group of Jewish settlers took over the Saint John Monastery in the south of Jerusalem by force, with the encouragement and funding of the Israeli Ministry of Housing. During subsequent Palestinian Christian protests, Israeli soldiers assaulted Patriarch Theodore. Settlers continue to occupy the monastery.<sup>30</sup>

In **1992**, the Jerusalem Municipality demolished the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Ascension on the Mount of Olives, on the pretext that it did not have a proper permit.<sup>31</sup>

In **1995**, Israeli settlers tried to set fire to the Church of Gethsemane in East Jerusalem. In 1998, Israeli soldiers entered the same church and opened fire on those praying there. The same year, Israeli soldiers entered the Latin Church in Jaffa and opened fire on worshippers inside.<sup>32</sup>

**2000**

In **2000**, the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem demolished the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives under the pretext that it did not have a proper permit.<sup>33</sup>

In **2001**, the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas in Beit Jala in the West Bank was bombed by the Israeli settlers from Gilo settlement. The same year, the Israeli army occupied the Lutheran Church also in Beit Jala and Israeli tanks entered the courtyard. Israeli forces also surrounded the school for orphans in the church's courtyard, home to forty disabled orphans. After efforts by the leaders of the Lutheran Church in Jerusalem, Jordan and Palestine, the Israeli army and tanks withdrew.<sup>34</sup>

In **2002**, Israel shelled Jabal Abu Ghneim which is to the southeast of Jerusalem, destroying the YMCA church, many homes, and other places of worship. At the same time, Israel repeatedly also bombed Al-Khader Greek Orthodox Church near Bethlehem.<sup>35</sup>

In **2002**, the Israeli army also stormed the Syriac Orthodox Church of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem.<sup>36</sup>

## Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites

### Timeline continued...

#### 2000

In **2002**, the Israeli army opened fire on the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which led to a fire breaking out at its entrance, destroying parts of it, and damaging other parts. Following a 39-day siege of the church, Israel deported dozens, of what it said were suspected militants who had taken refuge in the church, to Gaza and 13 European countries.<sup>37</sup>

#### 2010

In **2010**, Israeli forces stormed the Church of Amwas in Al-Qabiba village in the West Bank with military vehicles.<sup>38</sup>

In **2010**, extremist settlers burned a church on Al-Anbiya Street in Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup>

In **2012**, Israeli settlers and extremist groups wrote insulting graffiti on the walls of the Baptist Church in Jerusalem and on vehicles belonging to the Monastery of the Crucifixion of the Orthodox Church. They also set fire to the entrance to the Latrun Monastery on the outskirts of Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup>

In **2014**, Jewish extremists wrote graffiti insulting to Christ on the wall of the Romanian Church in Jerusalem, as well as on a church building in the old city of Beersheba.<sup>41</sup>

In **2015**, the Israeli ‘Price Tag’ gang burned the Mount Zion Church in occupied Jerusalem and wrote offensive graffiti against Christianity on its walls.<sup>42</sup>

In **2018**, Israeli forces attacked participants in the Palm Sunday procession by beating them with sticks near Lions Gate, one of the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem.<sup>43</sup>

In **2018**, Jewish settlers attacked Beit Jamal, the monastery of the Salesian monks in Jerusalem, where they also desecrated cemeteries.<sup>44</sup>

#### 2020

In **2020**, a settler threw a firebomb inside the Basilica of All Nations at Gethsemane Church on the Mount of Olives.<sup>45</sup> As a result, “some of the benches and part of a Byzantine mosaic were damaged by the fire”.<sup>46</sup>

In **2021**, an Israeli settler smashed one of the locks on the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Musrara neighborhood of occupied Jerusalem and one of its surveillance cameras.<sup>47</sup> His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem condemned the assault, calling upon the international community to intervene to put a stop to these “terrorist attacks”.<sup>48</sup>

In **2021**, three Israeli settlers attacked two clerics from the Armenian Orthodox Church near the church of Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The attack resulted in multiple injuries to the clerics.<sup>49</sup>

In **2022**, Israeli settlers trespassed into the Greek Garden on Mt Zion, property of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, tampering with exhumed graves and throwing trash in the courtyard.<sup>50</sup> The trespassers “entered the chapel and defiled its interior and threatened the guard at the premises, saying: “we know you live here and will kill you”.<sup>51</sup> The Jerusalem Patriarchate strongly condemned this attack.<sup>52</sup>

## Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites

### Timeline continued...

2020

The Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre, which coordinates among different Christian denominations, explained earlier this year that “2023 is shaping up to be the worst year for Christians in a decade”.<sup>53</sup> Jerusalem’s “2,000-year-old Christian community has come under increasing attack, with the most right-wing government in Israel’s history emboldening extremists who have harassed clergy and vandalised religious property at a quickening pace”.<sup>54</sup> The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem explained that “[t]he frequency of these attacks, the aggressions, has become something new ... These people feel they are protected ... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians”.<sup>55</sup>

### Present Day

In **January 2023**, a Maronite Christian Centre was vandalised. Graffiti was scrawled across the Armenian Quarter reading “death to Christians,” “death to Arabs and gentiles” and “death to Armenians”.<sup>56</sup>

In **January 2023**, “religious Jews knocked over and vandalised 30 graves marked with stone crosses at a historic Christian cemetery in the city”.<sup>57</sup>

In **February 2023**, “a religious American Jew yanked a 10-foot rendering of Christ from its pedestal and smashed it onto the floor, striking its face with a hammer a dozen times at the Church of the Flagellation on the Via Dolorosa, where it is believed Jesus hauled his cross toward his crucifixion. ‘No idols in the holy city of Jerusalem!’ he yelled”.<sup>59</sup>



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Christian graves desecrated in the historic Jerusalem Protestant Cemetery on Jerusalem’s Mount Zion.<sup>58</sup>



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The broken statue of Christ in the Church of the Flagellation on the Via Dolorosa.<sup>60</sup>

## Hate Crimes and Attacks Against Members of the Christian Community and Holy Sites

### Timeline continued...

#### Present Day

In **March 2023**, “two radical Israeli men reportedly entered the Church of Gethsemane in East Jerusalem, where the Tomb of the Virgin Mary lies, and physically attacked a bishop and two priests who were taking part in a religious service, while attempting to deface items in the church”.<sup>61</sup>

In **April 2023**, when “a masked Jewish Israeli tried to scale a wall to take down the Armenian patriarchate flag, which bears a cross”, the Armenian residents who stopped him were “pepper sprayed [and] called terrorists” by the Israeli police.<sup>62</sup>

In **April 2023**, a report found that: “Priests of all denominations say they’ve been stalked, spat on and beaten during their walks to church”.<sup>63</sup> This was confirmed in June 2023 when “an Israeli journalist was derided and spat at, including by a child and a soldier, as he spent a day dressed as a priest in Jerusalem to investigate spiralling hate crimes against Christians in the city”.<sup>64</sup>

On **7 October 2023**, a group of extremist Jews spat on the entrance of the Armenian Convent of Jerusalem. Two Armenians confronted them and were pepper sprayed.<sup>65</sup>

On **20 October 2023**, Israel bombed St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza—one of the oldest in the world—killing at least 18 people.<sup>66</sup>



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