

“RESURRECTION AND ISRAELI RESTRICTIONS” EASTER IN JERUSALEM



INTRODUCTION

Occupied East Jerusalem is the center of Palestinian celebrations, whether Easter or Ramadan. For Christians, Jesus Christ preached in Jerusalem and was later judged, crucified and resurrected there. For Muslims, Jerusalem is where the prophet Muhammad ascended to the heavens and the first place towards which Muslims prayed, before Mecca.

Freedom of religion and freedom of movement are basic human rights enshrined in international law. They are protected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The rights of an occupied people are also protected under the fourth Geneva Convention and the Hague Regulations.

Since 1967, successive Israeli governments have developed a number of policies aimed at directly and indirectly forcing people from their land. These policies are particularly concentrated in East Jerusalem, which the Israeli government claimed to annex to Israel while continuing to occupy it. No country in the world recognizes Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem as valid. And yet, ID revocations, evictions, home demolitions, land confiscation, deportations, the construction of the annexation wall and settlement construction are all part and parcel of Israel's ongoing violations against Palestinians Christians and Muslims.

KEY FIGURES

In 1944, there were 29,350 Christians living in the old city of Jerusalem. **TODAY**, Jerusalem's Christian population do not exceed 11,000

[Faith Under Occupation, Dr. Bernard SABELLA, 2012]

During the NAKBA of 1948 around 60,000 Palestinian Christians became refugees. They made almost 50% of all Christians who lived in Palestine prior to May 1948.

[From the Earthly to Heavenly , Dr. Bernard SABELLA, 2000]

TODAY, there are roughly 200,000 Palestinian Christians in Palestine and Israel. Around 52,000 Christians live in the occupied State of Palestine; mainly in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah.

[DIYAR, 2008]

TODAY, 22 Christian families in Jerusalem are facing threats of demolition or eviction. In five years, the number of Palestinian Christians living in Jerusalem is expected to drop down to 5,500.

[Faith Under Occupation, Youssef DAHER 2012]

JERUSALEM: CENTER OF EASTER CELEBRATIONS

For billions of Christians worldwide, the holy week of Easter is an opportunity to celebrate, pray and remember Jerusalem. Easter is supposed to be a time of hope and joy. But for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Christians, the first Christian community, the reality today is one of oppression and discrimination. Of these Christians, who are the centuries-old inhabitants of this land, only a tiny minority are able to celebrate in Jerusalem. The vast majority of Palestinian Christians are either exiled or are denied permits to enter their capital city, which, since 1967, has been occupied by Israel.

KEY FACTS ABOUT PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS

Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people and an invaluable element of the historical, cultural, social and national fabric of the Holy Land. They have played prominent roles in the national liberation movement. There are 13 main Christian denominations, including the Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic (Latin), Greek Catholic (Melkites), Armenians, Syrians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Copts, Maronites and most recently some Evangelical communities.

IN THE DIASPORA

The majority today lives in exile. The biggest wave of forced displacement followed Israel's creation in 1948, with around 60% of the Palestinian Christian population becoming refugees. Several predominantly Christian towns and villages were ethnically cleansed by Zionist militias in 1948. Today, the majority of Palestinian Christians are located in Jordan, the US, Chile, Australia, Canada, Lebanon (including Al Dbayeh and Mar Elias refugee camps) and Sweden.

IN THE STATE OF PALESTINE

The main Christian population centers are the Bethlehem – Jerusalem – Ramallah areas, with other ancient communities in Gaza, Nablus, Jenin (including Zababdeh and Burqin) and Jericho.

IN JERUSALEM

Only around 11,000 Palestinian Christians still remain in the Holy City, down from 33,000 in 1948. Their exile from what is now West Jerusalem (notably the neighborhoods of Talbiya and Qatamon), and continued Israeli policies since that time are primarily responsible for the decline in number.

IN ISRAEL

Palestinian Christians are mainly located in the Nazareth area as well as in Haifa, Jaffa, Ramleh and villages of the upper Galilee such as Shafa Amr', Fassouta, Mi'iliya, Jish and Rameh.

ISRAELI RESTRICTIONS ON EASTER CELEBRATIONS IN JERUSALEM

Palestinian Christian families, together with visiting pilgrims, have held Easter celebrations in the Holy Land for centuries. These celebrations have been dramatically affected by Israeli restrictions on Palestinian social, political, cultural or religious life in occupied East Jerusalem. Israeli restrictions include:

ISRAELI RESTRICTIONS ON EASTER CELEBRATIONS IN JERUSALEM

PERMIT REGIME	<p>Palestinian Christians from the rest of Palestine, including Bethlehem (less than 10km from Jerusalem) are now being compelled by the Israeli forces, who occupied East Jerusalem in 1967, to apply for permits in order to access the Holy City. The situation is particularly difficult for the Palestinian Christian population in Gaza, where anyone over the age of 16 is not allowed to apply for a permit at all. For those who are permitted to apply- and are fortunate enough to receive a permit to visit their own capital city- the humiliation of having to cross foreign military checkpoints within their own country discourages participation in festivities. Moreover, the Israeli authorities, in the vast majority of the cases, do not grant permits to all members of a family.</p>
DENIED RIGHT OF RETURN	<p>Many thousands of Palestinian Christians who make up most of Jordan's Christian population as well as significant numbers in Lebanon, Syria and the rest of the Arab World, are not allowed to return to their homeland and are denied their right to worship in occupied East Jerusalem.</p>
DENIED ENTRY FOR ARAB CHRISTIANS FOR ALL AROUND THE ARAB WORLD	<p>A clear difference in Easter celebrations since 1967 is the absence of pilgrims coming from Arab countries. Millions of Christians from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, the Arab Gulf and Egypt are either deprived of their right to come to occupied Palestine or find it increasingly difficult, due to discrimination by Israeli immigration authorities, who are imposing control over Palestinian borders.</p>
ROAD BLOCKS WITHIN THE CITY	<p>Over the past few years, Israeli forces have put further restrictions on Palestinian freedom of religion that affect even those who live in Jerusalem. Several roadblocks during the Good Friday procession along the Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross), within the Old City, have led to beatings and arrests of Palestinian Christians in their attempt to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Holy Fire Saturday celebrations provide another example, where shocking images of families and priests being beaten by Israeli military give a clear indication of Israeli policies in Jerusalem: To diminish Jerusalem's Palestinian Christian and Muslim identity.</p>
DISCRIMINATION	<p>While Palestinian Christians and Muslims have to apply for permits to participate in their celebrations, Israeli Jews (and effectively, any Jew regardless of their nationality) participate in their religious celebrations in occupied East Jerusalem without any restriction.</p>

Israel has succeeded in disrupting traditions that have been celebrated by Palestinians in Jerusalem for centuries. This has led to thousands of Palestinian Christians from Jerusalem now feeling they have to celebrate Easter elsewhere, such as Ramallah and Beit Jala, due to the harassment and aggression they face from Israeli forces in Jerusalem.

The coalition of Palestinian Christian organizations in occupied East Jerusalem has denounced such policies:

“The restrictive measures constitute grave violation on the freedom of worship, and amount to discrimination against Christians because the occupation authorities want to negate Christian presence and create the impression of a Jewish-only city.”

SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN JERUSALEM

A key element of Israel’s efforts to make Jerusalem a Jewish-only city can be seen in the Via Dolorosa itself, with Israeli settlement activity taking place in at least 8 out of 14 stations. Some notable examples are: Station 3, where a Palestinian Christian family (The Tams family) was evicted by late Israeli PM Ariel Sharon, who took over the home for himself; and the last station at the Holy Sepulcher, across from the Moristan Area where, in Easter 1990, Israeli settlers took over a building that used to be home to 44 Palestinian Christian families.

THE STATE OF PALESTINE: COMMITTED TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION

The State of Palestine, with its long history of Christian, Muslim and Jewish presence, remains fully committed to freedom of religion in Palestine. In 2013, the signing of the Holy See- Palestine Agreement reconfirmed that all Palestinians are equal before the law, regardless of their religion, and that Palestine respects the historic status of the Catholic Church in Palestine, including the Status Quo over the religious sites. Most recently, the State of Palestine, as a responsible international actor, has acceded to, among others: the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: A KEY ROLE TO PLAY

In order to put an end to violations of human rights, caused by Israel’s prolonged occupation of Palestine, the international community must ensure that Israel ends its occupation which began in 1967. In the meantime, Israel, as the Occupying Power, must be required to abide by its obligations under international law. This includes freedom of religion and movement in and around the State of Palestine, including its capital East Jerusalem, as well as a whole host of other rights which are being deliberately breached on a daily basis. By holding accountable those who violate international law, members of the international community can be assured that they are upholding their own obligations, as well as the universal principles and values that are shared worldwide.