

**Urgent Appeal to UN Special Procedures on the Expulsion of Catholic Priest,
Fr. Louis Salman, from the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its
implications on Freedom of Religion, Minority Rights, and the Protection of
the Remaining Christian Presence in Palestine**



Submitted by:

The Balasan Initiative for Human Rights – Palestine (BIHR)

For the attention of:

- Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Mr. Nicolas Levrat;
- Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Nazila Ghanea;
- Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Ms. Francesca Albanese;
- Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression; Ms. Irene Khan
- Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel.

Date of Submission: 13 May 2026

Your Excellencies,

The Balasan Initiative for Human Rights – Palestine (BIHR) respectfully submits this urgent appeal regarding the Israeli authorities' decision to deny renewal of residency and subsequently expel Fr. Louis Salman, a Catholic priest serving as the parish priest of the town of Beit Sahour in the Bethlehem Governorate in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt), forcing him to leave for Jordan on 11 May 2026.

I. Background and Context

Fr. Louis Salman, born in 1989, is a Jordanian Catholic cleric of Palestinian descent who has most recently served as the Latin parish priest in Beit Sahour and as a spiritual guide for Palestinian Christian youth. He is widely recognized as a prominent religious and community figure, particularly among young Palestinians, for his pastoral work, civic engagement, and active presence in moments of collective grief and solidarity, in light of the urgent need arising from the serious escalation of Israeli settlement policies across the oPt, including in his parish town of Beit Sahour, where settler groups have begun extensive bulldozing works in the “Ush al-Ghurab area in preparation for the establishment of a [new settlement outpost known as “Yatziv.”](#) This comes as part of a broader settlement plan aimed at linking the Gush Etzion bloc with Jerusalem through a settlement corridor extending around Bethlehem, thereby progressively encircling and isolating Beit Sahour.

This renders the living environment in Beit Sahour increasingly fragile and threatens the continuity of its population's presence, particularly within its historic Christian community. Among his most notable public acts was his service in funeral prayers for the prominent Palestinian-American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed on duty by an Israeli sniper in Jenin in 2022, an event that later drew accusations from Israeli authorities of “political incitement,” illustrating the growing criminalization of religious and humanitarian expressions of solidarity within the oPt. According to church sources, the decision was justified by Israeli authorities based on his perceived political positions and his influence among Palestinian Christian youth. His public characterization of the situation in Palestine as one of military occupation appears to have been central to the decision not to renew his residency status.

These developments occur within a wider context of escalating pressures on Palestinian religious institutions, including churches and Christian organizations, through repeated attempts to tax church institutions in Jerusalem, [violating the Status Quo of the city](#), relentless settlement expansion and land confiscation, including of church properties, increased restrictions on religious celebrations, and repeated attacks by settlers on Christian villages, clergy, and church property.

This pattern has previously affected prominent ecclesiastical figures such as [Archbishop Hilarion Capucci](#) and Father Elias Khoury, and the [expulsion of Father Yusuf Asaad earlier this year from Gaza](#) in a manner that strikes at the structure of the Palestinian and Arab Christian presence and its historical, spiritual, and national role. It also indicates that the current targeting is not limited to individuals but extends to churches and Christian institutions themselves, which makes them increasingly vulnerable to mounting pressure and restrictive measures that undermine their ability to carry out their religious and humanitarian mission.

The expulsion of Father Louis Salman cannot be viewed solely as an “administrative” or “security” measure. Rather, it falls within a broader policy aimed at severing any organic link between the Christian identity and the Palestinian identity. Israeli policies systematically target Christian religious presence that is embedded in the Palestinian context as part of a people living under occupation, seeking to reframe Christianity as a detached or neutral religious identity, separated from the colonial reality on the ground. This approach weakens the historical role of Palestinian Christians within the national fabric, empties their presence of its political and social significance, and advances a colonial logic that fragments Palestinian society by isolating religious belonging from collective action and resistance.

These developments intersect with what is being witnessed in towns and villages with a Christian majority and among the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world as well, such as [Taybeh](#), [Beit Sahour](#), [Beit Jala](#), Aboud, and [Birzeit](#), where residents face Israel’s escalating settlement and land confiscation policies, prohibitive movement restrictions, and increasing acts

of violence and terror, notably by Israeli settlers, thereby creating a coercive and increasingly unlivable environment for the local population.

II. Legal Standards Violated

Israel constitutes an unlawful occupying power in the oPt. This legal characterization was authoritatively affirmed by the International Court of Justice in its 2004 Advisory Opinion [“Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”](#), which concluded that Israel’s presence in the oPt, and subsequently, its control over it, are unlawful under international law and its obligations under arising under customary international law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. Therefore, its control over entry, exit, residency, and movement within the territory is unlawful and strictly limited by international law.

Moreover, Israel’s exercise of effective control over the oPt does not confer sovereignty over the territory, but rather gives rise to strict and well-defined legal obligations under international law. Thus, its administrative powers must remain temporary and limited, and do not extend to altering the demographic composition of the territory or to adopting measures that arbitrarily interfere with the rights of the protected population or their civil, religious, and social life.

Accordingly, the regulation of entry or residency is strictly limited and must not be used to control demographic presence or to expel individuals from the oPt, except within the narrow limits permitted under international law and subject to strict conditions of imperative security necessity. This restriction is of particular importance with respect to clergy and religious institutions, which enjoy special protection under the rules of international humanitarian law.

In this regard, the measures described above, including the denial of residency renewal and the subsequent expulsion of a member of the clergy, Fr. Louis Salman, raise serious concerns under international human rights law and international humanitarian law applicable in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

These measures may also raise questions of individual criminal responsibility under the International Criminal Court. The Rome Statute establishes liability for serious international crimes, including expulsion or forcible transfer of protected persons, persecution on political, national, ethnic, or religious grounds, and other grave violations that may arise in situations of occupation.

A. Violation of the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief

The expulsion of a Catholic priest actively engaged in pastoral and religious duties constitutes a direct interference with the collective and individual manifestation of religion. This engages the protections guaranteed under international humanitarian law; notably the fourth Geneva Convention, which provides in its Article 58 for the obligation of the occupying power to permit ministers of religion to provide spiritual assistance to members of their religious communities. In addition, [Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) safeguards the freedom to manifest religion “in worship, observance, practice and teaching,” both individually and in community with others. The removal of clergy integral to the functioning of a religious community further undermines the institutional dimension of this right and negatively impacts the religious rights of the parish being served, part of a decreasing minority that is the Palestinian Christian.

B. Arbitrary Interference with Residence and Family Life

The denial of residency and enforced departure of Fr. Salman amounts to an interference with lawful presence and established residence in the oPt, where Israel should not have sovereign powers and control over entry, residence, and exit thereof. In addition, such measures engage protections under [Article 12 ICCPR](#), which prohibit arbitrary interference with residence. In situations of occupation, such restrictions must meet strict tests of legality, necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination, which appear not to have been satisfied.

C. Prohibition of Arbitrary Expulsion in Occupied Territory

Under international humanitarian law, including [Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention](#), the forcible transfer or expulsion of protected persons from occupied territory is strictly prohibited, regardless of individual conduct, except under narrowly defined exceptional circumstances related to imperative security reasons and lawful procedures. The pattern described, including reliance on vaguely defined “security” justifications and political expression, raises serious concerns of arbitrariness and incompatibility with this prohibition.

D. Discrimination on the grounds of Religion, Origin, and Political Opinion

The differential treatment of clergy, particularly those of Arab origin serving in Palestinian churches, raises concerns under the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in [Articles 2 and 26 of the ICCPR](#). The reported reliance on political views and perceived influence within Palestinian society suggests discriminatory targeting based on political opinion and national or ethnic origin.

E. Interference with Fundamental Freedoms

The cumulative impact of restrictions on the residency, movement, and presence of clergy may affect the ability of individuals to carry out their religious and [community-related functions](#). However, where such measures are justified on alleged security grounds or based on an individual’s political views or expression, they must be assessed under the strict requirements of necessity, proportionality, and non-arbitrariness under international human rights law.

This calls for the application of [Article 18\(1\) of the ICCPR](#), as interpreted by the Human Rights Committee, which affirms that the freedom of religion includes the institutional dimension necessary for the life of religious communities. In parallel, under Article 19 of the ICCPR, any restrictions on freedom of expression must be provided by law and be

strictly necessary for a legitimate aim, including national security. Mere reference to security considerations or political opinions is insufficient to justify measures that result in severe interference with protected civil presence in the territory.

III. Recommendations

- Demand that Israel cancel the decision to expel Fr. Louis Salman and allow him to re-enter the oPt and resume his service as the Parish Priest of Beit Sahour.
- Request that the Israeli authorities provide clarification on the legal basis for the refusal to renew Fr. Salman's residency.
- Take urgent measures to prevent the recurrence of such violations against members of the clergy and religious institutions that serve the remaining Palestinian Christian community in the oPt.