



Sorrowful Palestinian Easter over Israel's War on Gaza and Amid Worsening Israeli Restrictions

This year marks the convergence of the Easter and Ramadan, as Palestinians observe their religious holidays with great anguish and sorrow for Israel's ongoing war on Gaza, mounting up to an unfolding genocide¹. Palestinians mourn over 32,600 Palestinians killed in Gaza, 75,000 injured, 1.7 million displaced and the total destruction of the Strip, as well as the collapse of all of its vital sectors, and a looming famine.²

In this specific context, Palestinian Christians and Muslims in the West Bank celebrate Easter and Ramadan, marked with a severe escalation of the situation in the West Bank³. As Palestinian Christians and Muslims try to access their holy sites in their occupied capital city of Jerusalem, they are faced with total and partial shutdown of checkpoints, revoked 'permits', and a lethal escalation of Israeli violence, eventually preventing millions of Palestinians from entering occupied Jerusalem to practice their faith.

For decades, Israel has strived to sever Jerusalem from the rest of Palestinian cities, altering its geography and demography to achieve an Israeli-Jewish majority, and effectively *de-facto* annexing the city, violating international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law in effectively all of the measures undertaken to alter the character of the city and its illegal annexation.

With that, the norm that Israel imposed on Palestinians has turned the journey to these central, holy sites in occupied Jerusalem, a reflection of deep spiritual yearning, to one fraught with barriers. For Palestinians, Israeli settlement expansion, checkpoints, and the segmentation of their own land have made it extremely hard to be able to move freely to practice religious festivals. Consider a Palestinian who lives in Bethlehem, which lies adjacent to Jerusalem, desiring to visit the Church of the Sepulchre for Easter—a journey of mere minutes transformed into an impossibility without a special 'permit' from Israel's military, an open checkpoint, and an indomitable spirit to withstand the underlying humiliation and danger just to reach Jerusalem and pray there.

¹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the occupied Palestinian Territory A/HRC/55/73, 25 March, 2024

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-73-auv.pdf?fbclid=PAAabhMBtg0Fe6gnsKWQHCnmLRvcoDOaxa2eR2UjsdwtOFzlycWdVBSI5tufg_aem_ATT4jd7qlwV2rf88Xakb9-DT-GCtVnDw0SD_XWzPyNS7D7WBoYdl5jVmYb4hNJbN8cM

² UN OCHA Report, day 175:

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-175>

³ For instance, see: The Balasan Initiative for Human Rights: "The Impacts of the War on Gaza on the Bethlehem Governorate"

<https://balasan.org/further-fragmented-reality-the-effects-of-the-war-on-gaza-on-the-bethlehem-governorate/>

However, the recent years have witnessed increased restrictions on practicing Palestinian Christians striving to celebrate in their holy sites. As documented in last year's report, Israel enacted several restrictions and harassments against Palestinian Christians as they sought to access their holy sites in Jerusalem during the holy Christian week and enforced repressive measures on access and worship, such as significantly limiting the numbers of Christian celebrants⁴. Yet, this year witnesses a worsening situation, with even further severe violations.

Ever since the events of October 7th and the ensuing Israeli war on Gaza, only Palestinian Christians over the age of 40 years can apply for permits, and if issued, they hold a maximum duration of 7 days⁵. These permits were not issued through the church, as had been the usual case, but only through 'Al-Monassik', an Israeli application designed for coordinating the permit procedure. It is worth noting that all 'permits' issued before that date were completely suspended. Moreover, since October 7th, the number of checkpoints in all its shapes has been increasing, separating Palestinian cities in the West Bank from one another and hindering movement. Israel has lately prevented thousands of Christians from across the West Bank from accessing Jerusalem to celebrate the Palm Sunday and imposed even harsher measures at checkpoints surrounding the city of Jerusalem and around the Old City⁶. It is imperative to also highlight that this kind of oppression is unfolding while the Gazan Christian community faces a complete extinction as a result of the genocide unfolding in Gaza.

Not only does Israel practice religious violations against Palestinians wishing to practice their faith in their holy sites, on their land, but it also extends to Christian pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. Israel, exercises absolute authority over who can cross into Palestine. This control is far-reaching, encompassing all entry points, rejecting/accepting visas and the power to vet every visitor. Tourists suspected of having affiliations deemed undesirable by Israel can either be summarily denied entry or expelled at the airport even before they step foot into Palestine. Foreign pilgrims also face increased aggression by extremist Jewish settlers, with increasing incidents of degrading treatment, such as the incident when Jewish settlers spat on Christian clergy⁷.

It sounds plausible to say that practicing freedom of worship in Palestine is curtailed given that the Israeli occupation strategically utilizes religious tourism as a means to further its political and territorial ambitions. Israel has complete sovereignty over the tourism sector, including all crossing points in and out of the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian religious and touristic hubs became captives of Israel's decision of when, where and who is allowed to practice their right to access religious sites, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Holy Sepulchre Church and Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

⁴ Balasan Initiative for Human Rights: "Israel's Fragmentation of Christian Presence & Centuries-Old Religious Traditions in Palestine: Increased Restrictions on Easter Celebrations"

<https://balasan.org/israels-fragmentation-of-centuries-old-christian-presence-traditions-in-palestine/>

⁵ An Interview with the Greek Orthodox Church in Beit Sahour, 30/03/2024.

⁶ PNN: "Israeli Occupation Bars West Bank Christians from Jerusalem on Palm Sunday"

<https://english.pnn.ps/news/46834>

⁷ The Guardian: "Outrage over Jerusalem Video"

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/03/video-of-ultra-orthodox-jews-spitting-by-christians-in-jerusalem-sparks-outrage>

Simultaneously, from a mere economic perspective, Israel undermines the potential for Palestinian economic and cultural development by the restrictions it imposes on the Palestinian tourism sector⁸. At the heart of these challenges is Israel's monopolistic control over the tourism industry, a control that extends across every facet from access and mobility to even the narrative it conveys to international visitors.

It is important to also highlight in statistics the economic losses such restrictions by Israel cause to the Palestinian economy. Official figures reveal that the Palestinian territories have suffered a staggering loss of approximately \$200 million in tourism income due to the 2023-24 war on Gaza⁹. The Palestinian Ministry of Economy reports a total collapse in tourism, especially in Bethlehem, dropping to zero following continuous lockdowns and assaults, exacerbating since the beginning of the war and resulting in financial damages amounting to millions of shekels. Experts indicate that the economic fallout has severely impacted the local industry, with 78 hotels, 90 antique shops, and 450 craft businesses in the city experiencing significant losses, leading to a complete cessation of their operations (ibid). In this context of constant oppression and damaged economy, and notably after October 7th, many Palestinian Christian families have emigrated from Palestine, decreasing further the frail number of the remaining Palestinian Christians in Palestine¹⁰.

According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, the right to freedom of religion is a fundamental right that should be respected and protected¹¹. As Israel being the occupying power over Palestinians, it has the obligation under international law, and international humanitarian law to ensure and respect Palestinians' right of religion¹². However, not only does Israel fail at ensuring this right, but it uses it as a collective punishment method against Palestinians, which is another violation in and by itself, and a breach of international humanitarian law according to The Fourth Geneva Convention art. 27-34 and 47-78 (ibid). As stipulated in rule 104 of the Geneva Conventions, the convictions and religious practices of civilians and persons hors de combat must be respected¹³. This rule would be breached by any act of persecution, harassment, or discrimination based on an individual's beliefs, whether they are religious or non-religious.

Also, this rule explains that respecting personal beliefs and religious practices entails ensuring access to places of worship and religious authorities. The Commission on Human Rights resolution 2005/40

⁸ International Journal of Business and Management: "Factors Impact on Religious Tourism Market"
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266213735_Factors_Impact_on_Religious_Tourism_Market_The_Case_of_the_Palestinian_Territories

⁹ The New Arab: "Tourism in Palestine Suffers"
<https://www.newarab.com/news/palestine-tourism-suffers-200m-loss-amid-gaza-war>

¹⁰ See: "The Balasan Initiative Submits an Urgent Appeal to UN Special Procedures on the Imminent Threats on the Palestinian Christian Presence on Both Sides of the Green Line due to Israel's Ongoing Breaches of International Humanitarian & Human Rights Law"

<https://balasan.org/the-balasan-initiative-submits-an-urgent-appeal-to-un-special-procedures/>

¹¹ OCHR, International Standards. "Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief"
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#1>

¹² ICRC, "Occupation and international humanitarian law: questions and answers".
<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/634kfc.htm>

¹³ ICRC, "Respect for Convictions and Religious Practices".
<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule104>

paragraphs 4 (c) and 4 (e) prompt States, "To review, whenever relevant, existing registration practices in order to ensure the right of all persons to manifest their religion or belief, alone or in community with others and in public or in private;"¹⁴. Israel's discriminatory policies from limiting/banning Palestinians from accessing their religious sights—especially during the holidays, is a clear violation of international human rights and international law.

¹⁴OCHR, International Standards. “ Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief”
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards#1>