



Ramadan and Easter in the Occupied West Bank Under Regional War: Between Spatial Fragmentation and the Restriction of Religious and Collective Rights

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This year, the month of Ramadan coincides with Lent, marking a rare overlap between two sacred religious periods for Palestinians Muslims and Christians alike. Rather than facilitating the exercise of religious freedoms during this exceptional moment, including access to Holy sites, Israeli authorities have intensified measures of closure, movement restriction, and spatial isolation across the West Bank, invoking the pretext of regional security escalation amid the ongoing war between Israel and Iran.

The war has been instrumentalized to justify comprehensive restrictions that extend far beyond any concrete “security” measure. Under the guise of preventing spillover or escalation, Israeli authorities have imposed sweeping closures around Jerusalem and key religious sites, transforming the holy month into a period of arbitrary control rather than protected religious observance. The result is a direct infringement on the collective right of Palestinians Muslims and Christians alike to practice their faith during one of the most sacred periods of the year.

I. Instrumentalizing Regional War to Intensify Multi-layered Violations

1. Restricting Freedom of Movement and Religious Life in the West Bank

The escalation of the regional war has provided Israeli authorities with a legal and political pretext to intensify an already entrenched system of restrictions on Palestinian movement and religious life across the West Bank, particularly in and around Jerusalem. Under the broad and undefined justification of “regional security concerns,” Israeli occupation authorities have

expanded closures, imposed heightened military presence, and declared entire areas, especially surrounding the Old City, closed military zones, effectively emptying Jerusalem of Palestinian worshippers during Ramadan and Easter alike.

These measures operate within a longstanding, integrated system of movement restrictions that includes military checkpoints, the permit regime, bypass roads, and permanent and partial closures. Rather than being limited to temporary security measures, this system structurally reconfigures Palestinian geography, disrupts natural connectivity between cities and villages, and systematically restricts access to mosques, churches, family homes, and spaces of communal life. During religious seasons, the impact of this system is significantly intensified, as fasting, communal iftar, and religious worship inherently depend on the ability to move and gather.

In practice, Palestinians are routinely prevented from reaching places of worship, with waiting times at checkpoints extending for hours, forcing some families to break their fast while waiting or preventing access to Taraweeh prayers and communal iftar gatherings. These restrictions directly infringe upon the right to freedom of religion and belief and undermine the heightened protection afforded to religious practice under international law during holy periods.

This pattern is most evident in the restrictions imposed on access to Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan. Israeli authorities have implemented closures, intensified searches, expulsion policies, and age-based and security restrictions on worshippers. Under the Israeli government's Ramadan 2026 plan, only 10,000 worshippers from the West Bank were permitted to enter Jerusalem for Friday prayers throughout the month, subject to obtaining a special permit for each Friday. Access was restricted to men aged 55 and above, women aged 50 and above, and children aged 12 and under, accompanied by a first-degree relative. Al-Aqsa Mosque stands empty of worshippers on the last Friday of Ramadan. Worshippers were also subjected to digital and biometric documentation procedures at crossings to ensure their return to the West Bank at the end of the prayer day. In parallel, Israeli authorities banned Ramadan decorations in the Old City and prohibited the firing of the Iftar Cannon, a tradition practiced for more than 120 years.

During Lent, Israel has closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre until further notice, marking an unprecedented measure in the history of Christianity. The decision entails a comprehensive ban

in holy week and Easter services, including the cancellation of scheduled masses and prayers, particularly Sunday Mass.

This enforced closure effectively suspends religious life at one of Christianity's holiest sites, which is expected to receive hundreds of thousands of worshippers in the coming weeks, amounting to a deliberate silencing of the site by force.

In response, representatives of the Vatican, alongside Eastern Church leaders, have submitted a formal petition to the Israeli authorities demanding the reopening of the church. Israel has justified the closure on the grounds of "security concerns," a rationale rejected by the Vatican as a pretext for suppressing Christian worship, especially while Israeli Jews are permitted to hold large-scale religious gatherings without comparable restrictions.

Priests have been forcibly removed and prevented from conducting daily services. According to Vatican News, the large double-leaf gate that has guarded the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for centuries has never before remained closed for such a prolonged and continuous period.

Historically, wars, periods of heightened tension, and even pandemics have restricted access to the shrine, but they have never resulted in the indefinite suspension of liturgical celebrations at this central site of the Christian faith, rendering the current measure a dangerous precedent that undermines freedom of worship and the Status Quo governing holy sites.

Rather than being treated as a guaranteed right under the historical status quo and the binding international legal obligations incumbent upon the occupying power, access to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been transformed into a matter of unilateral administrative discretion. This reshapes the relationship between the protected population and their holy sites into one of surveillance and control, rather than one grounded in enforceable legal rights.

These restrictions extend beyond Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem's Old City. In East Jerusalem, Israeli police fined Al-Rahman Mosque in the town of Beit Safafa under the pretext of the "loudness of the call to prayer." In Anata, northeast of Jerusalem, dozens of vehicles were confiscated, while in Turmusayya, north of Ramallah, Israeli forces closed the town's main

entrance with an iron gate, severely restricting the movement of residents and vehicles. Taken together, these incidents reflect a broader pattern of spatial control extending from the religious center of Jerusalem to its surrounding towns, reinforced through the rhetoric of regional war and security.

The invocation of regional instability to justify these measures does not represent a temporary or proportionate response. Instead, it normalizes exceptional restrictions and collective punishment, reinforcing an existing regime of control over Palestinian movement and religious life under the guise of regional security.

2. “Pre-emptive” Military Operations as a Tool to Restrict Worship

Before the onset of Ramadan and Easter, Israeli authorities announced the launch of a wide-scale military operation across the West Bank, under the pretext of pursuing Palestinians suspected of “incitement or support for terrorism via social media.” According to official statements, these operations were presented as “pre-emptive” measures in preparation for Ramadan and were set to continue throughout the month.

This timing reflects a recurring pattern of linking Palestinian religious occasions to comprehensive security escalation, leading in practice to closures, increased checkpoints, and expanded search and arrest powers. These measures directly affect freedom of movement, the right to worship, and family life during a period of distinct collective and communal significance.

3. Demolitions, Seizures, Settler Crimes, and Forcible Displacement During Significant Religious Periods

In 2025, the month of Ramadan witnessed a marked escalation in policies of demolishing Palestinian homes and structures in the West Bank, particularly in East Jerusalem and in areas classified as Area C, which remain under full Israeli control and constitute approximately 61% of the West Bank. During the first ten days of Ramadan 2025, 71 Palestinian structures were demolished under the pretext of lacking building permits, exceeding the total number of demolitions recorded during the entirety of Ramadan 2024 (69 structures). By the 25th day of

Ramadan, the number had risen to 115 structures, including 21 inhabited homes, resulting in the displacement of 80 people and affecting 2,420 others.

These figures do not include the large-scale and ongoing destruction in refugee camps in the northern West Bank since January 2025, which has led to the displacement of more than 41,000 Palestinians, including announced plans to demolish 66 homes in Jenin Refugee Camp.

This quantitative and qualitative escalation reflects a temporal pattern of intensifying demolition measures during a period of particular religious and social significance, indicating the use of planning and demolition tools as means of reshaping the demographic space. In the same context, Ramadan 2026 witnessed an expansion in settler seizure practices, including the takeover of five homes within two days and housing settler families in them, alongside organized attacks involving property arson, grazing restrictions, and the imposition of new settlement outposts. In January 2026 alone, Israeli occupation authorities and settlers carried out a total of 1,872 attacks, including 1,404 attacks by Israeli occupation forces and 468 attacks by settlers. These attacks were concentrated in the governorates of Hebron (415 attacks), Ramallah and Al-Bireh (374), Nablus (328), and Jerusalem (201). These figures do not reflect a temporary escalation but rather a systematic pattern that constitutes the broader framework within which Ramadan unfolds this year.

During Ramadan, 11 families in the Al-Khalayel community south of the town of Al-Mughayyir were forced to dismantle their homes and relocate to other areas due to sustained pressure and attacks by settlers and occupation forces, after having previously been displaced from the Ein Samia community. The recurrence of land access restrictions, grazing prohibitions, confiscations, and arrests demonstrates that forcible transfer does not always occur through a single formal decision, but also through a coercive environment generated by cumulative practices.

4. Settlement Acceleration Before Ramadan & Easter

In the period preceding Ramadan and Easter, 21 settlement master plans were approved, including 12 in the West Bank and nine within the boundaries of the Israeli-controlled Jerusalem municipality. Approval was granted for 820 settlement units in the West Bank, with an additional 643 units deposited for approval. In Jerusalem, three plans were approved, and six additional

plans were deposited, encompassing 1,266 units over an area of 120 dunums. A new industrial zone covering 788 dunums was also approved in Tulkarm under the name “Bustani Hefts,” reinforcing settlement expansion toward the 1967 borders.

This planning acceleration before the holy celebrations carries particular significance, as it coincides with a period that is expected to be marked by family stability, social solidarity, and strengthened communal ties. Instead, the intensification of approvals and plan deposits during this period heightens anxiety and uncertainty among hundreds of Palestinian families facing risks of confiscation, demolition, or loss of access to their land.

From a structural perspective, these plans are not merely future administrative measures but produce immediate effects by creating a coercive and pressurized environment. Ramadan, with its religious and social specificity, thus becomes a temporal framework in which planning threats intersect with the fragility of lived reality. In this sense, the temporal dimension amplifies the impact of settlement planning, as it affects not only physical space but also the social and religious rhythm of Palestinian life.

II. Impact on Palestinians: Ramadan & Easter as a Temporal Framework of Coercive Pressure

Palestinians are entering this holy and blessed time of the year in an increasingly coercive environment marked by intensified attacks by both the military and settlers. These violations are particularly evident in restrictions on access to places of worship, as fasting, communal iftar, and Taraweeh prayers magnify the burden of movement restrictions. This underscores how the temporal dimension of Ramadan is instrumentalized to intensify spatial and social control.

Demolitions and seizures during the holy month have entrenched direct impacts on Palestinian society. In 2025 and 2026, Ramadan and Easter witnessed the demolition of dozens of structures, the displacement of families, land confiscation, and settlement expansion. This pattern generates a collective perception among Palestinians that Ramadan is not a period of stability or the normal exercise of rights, particularly religious rights, but rather a temporal framework associated with escalating violations. This deepens feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty and transforms daily religious and social practices into persistent challenges.

Furthermore, the approval of settlement master plans in hand before contributes to reinforcing this coercive pressure by imposing plans of annexation and expansion at the expense of Palestinian land and property. Consequently, the holy month becomes a period in which planning and demolition threats intersect with direct field restrictions. In this way, Ramadan is transformed from a religious occasion into part of a cumulative mechanism of coercive pressure, whereby the temporal dimension of the month is exploited to intensify its impact on daily and communal life and to undermine the ability to exercise fundamental rights in the normal course of events.

III. Legal Analytical Framework

The policies and practices documented in this report constitute clear, multidimensional violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. They cannot be justified as temporary or exceptional security measures linked to the coincidence of Ramadan and Easter, nor based on alleged regional escalation or the ongoing regional war. Rather, these policies fall within a systematic pattern of exploiting religious temporalities and regional political conditions as pretexts to intensify control, deepen closures, and re-engineer the geographic and demographic space of the occupied Palestinian territory, as part of an ongoing colonial practice that fails to meet the requirements of necessity and proportionality.

1. Restrictions on Freedom of Movement and Access to Places of Worship in the Context of Religious Coincidence and Regional Escalation

The restrictions imposed on Palestinian freedom of movement and access to places of worship, particularly Al-Aqsa Mosque and churches in Jerusalem, constitute direct violations of binding legal norms, including Articles 18 and 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. These violations are aggravated by the coincidence of Ramadan and Easter, a period during which religious observance should enjoy heightened protection rather than exceptional restriction.

Age-based limitations, individual permit regimes, and numerical caps on worshippers, justified under broad and vague claims of “security” and “regional escalation”, do not satisfy the requirements of military necessity or proportionality. In practice, these measures transform

religious worship from a protected right into an administrative privilege subject to unilateral discretion, amounting to prohibited discrimination on national and religious grounds, in violation of Article 2 of the ICCPR and undermining the core of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

When imposed as part of a systematic and institutionalized policy targeting a protected civilian population, such discriminatory restrictions may also engage individual criminal responsibility under international criminal law. In particular, the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights, including freedom of religion, on national or religious grounds may constitute the crime against humanity of persecution under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute, when committed in connection with a broader attack directed against a civilian population.

2. Spatial Fragmentation as a Policy Reinforced under the Pretext of Emergency

Policies of spatial fragmentation, including the construction of bypass roads, land confiscation, and the integration of settlements with territory within the 1948 boundaries, constitute direct violations of Articles 49(6) and 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as the customary international law principle prohibiting the acquisition of territory by force. These measures cannot be justified as security responses to regional war or escalation, as they primarily serve permanent settler interests rather than temporary military necessity.

The invocation of regional instability has been used to expedite settlement-related infrastructure projects and impose new geographic realities, amounting to de facto annexation and structural discrimination, even in the absence of a formal annexation declaration.

3. Demolition, Confiscation, and Forcible Transfer during Protected Religious Periods

The escalation of demolition and confiscation measures constitutes grave breaches of Articles 53 and 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Article 17 of the ICCPR. Planning-related justifications cannot provide lawful grounds within the context of a discriminatory planning regime that renders permits virtually unattainable for Palestinians. Such acts result in forcible displacement, which may amount to war crimes under Article 8(2)(a)(iv) and Article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The intensification of demolitions during periods of particular religious and social significance demonstrates the deliberate use of planning and enforcement tools as punitive and political instruments aimed at reshaping the demographic space, producing effects that amount to forcible transfer.

4. “Pre-emptive” Military Operations and the Instrumentalization of Regional Escalation as Collective Punishment

The announcement and implementation of widespread “pre-emptive” military operations during Ramadan, coinciding with Easter, and the accompanying comprehensive closures and expanded enforcement powers constitute collective punishment prohibited under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The linkage of these operations to religious occasions or alleged regional threats reflects a recurring pattern in which religious timeframes and regional escalation are instrumentalized to normalize exceptional and sweeping measures.

These operations do not constitute legitimate security responses but rather systematic uses of religious and political temporality as tools to recalibrate collective control and suppress religious and social life.

5. Ramadan and Easter as Temporal Frameworks of Systematic Coercive Pressure

The intensification of violations during the coinciding periods of Ramadan and Easter constitutes an infringement of collective cultural and religious rights, contrary to Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. This pattern demonstrates how religious time, which should benefit from heightened legal protection, is instead transformed into a mechanism of indirect coercion that intensifies restrictions and closures and amplifies their cumulative effects.

Accordingly, the exploitation of religious coincidence and regional escalation does not result in temporary or incidental limitations. Still, it produces legal effects equivalent to collective punishment and forcible transfer, confirming that these measures are not exceptional security responses but rather components of a systematic policy of colonial domination.

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