



State of Palestine
Palestine Liberation Organization
Negotiations Affairs Department



THE NAKBA 70 YEARS ON:
THE IMPACT OF ISRAELI POLICIES ON
EASTER CELEBRATIONS

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Introduction

Palestine is the birthplace of Christianity and home to its holiest sites, including in Jerusalem. Throughout the centuries, the celebration of Easter has become one of the most important events in Palestine and is considered to be a national celebration and not just a religious one. However, Easter celebrations have been dramatically effected since the Nakba of 1948. This media brief describes some of the policies and events that, over 70 years, have affected the celebrations of Easter.

Nakba Of 1948 – Exile

- In 1948, Jerusalem had a population of about 31,000 Christians. Most of them inhabited areas that were ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces during the months of March – May 1948, including Talbayah, Qatamon, Upper Baqaa and the historic Christian community of Ein Karem. All of them are located in areas that are considered part of Israel or Israeli-controlled West Jerusalem. Many of the Palestinian Christian refugees ended up in Jordan, Australia and the Americas, including various countries in South America and the United States. The Nakba changed the demography of Palestine and particularly the one of Jerusalem, severely affecting the Christian congregations of the city.

The Occupation Of 1967 – End Of Arab Pilgrimage.

- East Jerusalem, which represents the areas of Jerusalem that had not been occupied by Israel in 1948, was occupied by Israel in June 1967. One of the first effects that the occupation had in the celebrations was the end of pilgrimage from other Arab countries to celebrate Christian and Muslim religious holidays in Jerusalem. Every Easter, pilgrims from Arab countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt, would freely celebrate in the city. This has been drastically changed since 1967, as East Jerusalem has been cut off from the wider Arab world.

Israeli Settlements

- The expansion of Israel's illegal settlement enterprise, including the Annexation Wall, has had a dramatic impact on the churches of Jerusalem and their congregations. The construction of Israeli settlements has deprived Palestinian communities, including Christian communities in Jerusalem, of their land. Along with a number of restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation on Palestinian construction, has forced thousands of Jerusalemites out of the city. Many Christian Jerusalemites have moved either to Ramallah, Bethlehem or abroad, decreasing the number of indigenous parishioners of the city.
- Settler organizations, in coordination with the Government of Israel and the so-called "Jerusalem Municipality" have pursued a policy of colonization inside Palestinian neighborhoods, including the Christian Quarter of the Old City. This can be seen by walking the *Via Dolorosa* (from the Latin "way of suffering", marking the 14 stations that Christian tradition identify as the path which Jesus Christ took before his crucifixion). Israeli colonial-settlement activities are clearly visible from at least 8 out of 14 stations, including:
 1. **Station 1** is the exit of the tunnel opened in 1996 by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu which runs next to Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound.
 2. **Station 3** is where a Palestinian Christian family was evicted from their home by the former Israeli PM Ariel Sharon.
 3. **Station 5** has a heavily protected Israeli settlement on top, totally changing the landscape of the station, where it is believed Jesus fell for first time on his way to crucifixion.
 4. **Station 9** has another settlement (located over the Souq).
 5. **Stations 11, 12, 13 and 14** are located inside the Holy Sepulcher. Right across the church you can find what is known as the "Moristan" settlement, in what previously was called the Saint John area. Israeli settlers entered the building in April 1990, turning it into the largest Israeli settlement in the Old City outside of the Jewish Quarter. This settlement led to the forcible displacement of several Palestinian Christian families—according to church sources, about 44 families. As a response to this on April 27, 1990, the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem closed the Holy Sepulcher for first time in around 800 years.

Movement Restrictions – Annexation Wall

- The Israeli occupation has carried out a systematic plan to isolate Occupied East Jerusalem from the rest of Palestine. First, rings of illegal settlements built around the city that effectively cut off East Jerusalem from neighboring Palestinian areas. In addition, since the early 2000s, Israel has instituted extensive and disproportionate movement restrictions, which require all Palestinians to apply for a military permit and cross humiliating checkpoints in order to go to East Jerusalem.
- The ring of settlements and the Annexation Wall completely separate Bethlehem from Jerusalem, including notoriously in the Cremisan Valley. The construction of the Wall in Mount of Olives separates the communities in Al Ezzariya (Bethany) from their churches.
- The inability of many Palestinians to access Jerusalem, including some family members who have different legal statuses, has made many Palestinians conduct their celebrations outside Jerusalem. A major example of this is the Holy Fire Saturday Celebration, *Sabt Il nour*, with thousands of Jerusalemites now opting to celebrate in Ramallah or in the Bethlehem area rather than in their own hometown. This has been increased by the brutal Israeli repression against Palestinian families preventing them from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for Holy Fire Saturday.
- Even the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report has constantly described the hardships faced by Palestinians to pray in their own city. For example, the 2016 report stated:

“The Israeli government continued building the separation barrier, particularly south of Jerusalem in the West Bank. Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem stated the barrier impeded their work. Clergy members stated the barrier and additional checkpoints impeded their movements between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship.”¹

¹ Israel and the Occupied Territories International Religious Freedom Report – 2016 available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269140.pdf> Page 43. Last checked on March 25th, 2017.

- Church leaders have often complained that the permit regime imposed on Palestinians and impacting their congregations is unfair, mainly because the application process for a permit is arbitrary and ends up leaving family members without permits (forcing families to either divide the families for the celebrations or not to use the permits). In addition, Palestinians that are denied permits have no appeals process or way to challenge the denial of a permit.
- No Palestinian should be forced to ask for a permit in order to visit a part of his or her own country.

Israel's Illegal Annexation Of The City Has Been Encouraged By The US Administration

- The Trump's Administration recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the commitment to move the embassy not only contradicts UNSC Resolution 478, but also legitimizes and emboldens Israeli policies aimed at turning Jerusalem into an exclusive Jewish city.
- The fact that the Trump Administration emphasized that their recognition does not change the "Status Quo" of the Holy Sites, remains irrelevant in light of the policies that have been seen on the ground.
- President Trump's Jerusalem announcement was rejected by all Christian leaders in the Middle East region, prompting a boycott by Christian leaders and community members to the visit of VP Mike Pence to the region. He was not received at the Holy Sepulcher nor the Nativity Church due to the consequences that the US recognition would bring to the region. In a message to the Trump Administration the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem called upon President Trump and the United States
" to continue recognizing the present international status of Jerusalem. Any sudden changes would cause irreparable harm" ².
- Since the Trump Administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the Israeli occupation has intensified its policies and actions aimed at turning the occupied city into an exclusive place for Israeli Jews, including by:

2 "Heads of Local Churches send letter to President Donald Trump regarding Status of Jerusalem". Full text available at <https://www.lpj.org/heads-local-churches-send-letter-to-president-donald-trump-regarding-status-of-jerusalem/> Last checked on March 25th, 2017.

1. Passing a law that threatens to revoke the residency rights of Palestinian Jerusalemites unless they are “loyal” to Israel³.
2. Attempting to change the historical and legal status quo of church-owned property in Occupied East Jerusalem, including by requiring churches to pay property taxes, even though this violates longstanding protocol with regards to the status of church property⁴.

CONCLUSION:

As we mark 70 years since the Nakba, and over 50 years of Israeli occupation, the impact of Israeli actions and policies have been visible in the celebrations of Palestinian religious celebrations and particularly during Easter in and around the Old City. For peace to prevail, we must recognize basic facts about the current situation of the city:

- The Old City is an integral part of East Jerusalem, which is the capital of Palestine, and remains under Israeli military occupation.
- Israel’s annexation and any attempts to change the status of the city are null and void.
- There will be no solution that does not ensure the sovereign rights of the Palestinian people over the city, as well as the importance of the city for the three monotheistic religions.
- Ending the Israeli occupation is a requirement for freedom of worship in the city, as well as for overall peace.

The Trump Administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has only encouraged the very same policies that are preventing the achievement of a just and lasting peace between Israel, Palestine and the rest of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

3 For more information please access our Media Brief “The Occupied demands loyalty from the Occupied: Background and Implications of Israel’s ‘Breach of Loyalty’ Bill”, available at <https://www.nad.ps/en/media-room/media-brief/occupier-demands-loyalty-occupied-background-and-implications-israels-breach> Last checked on March 25th, 2017.

4 For More information please access our Fact Sheet “the Historic ‘Status Quo’ Agreement in Jerusalem and the Israeli Occupation – in light of Israel’s attempt to impose municipal taxes on Church Property” <https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/faqs/historic-%E2%80%9Cstatus-quo%E2%80%9D-agreement-jerusalem-and-israeli-occupation-light> Last checked on March 25th, 2017.