



STATE OF PALESTINE
PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION
NEGOTIATIONS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

Media Brief

CELEBRATING EASTER IN OCCUPIED
JERUSALEM: THE RESURRECTION OF
HOPE TO FREEDOM

Introduction

Jerusalem, the holiest city for the three monotheistic religions, has been the heart of Palestine for centuries. Its significance for the people of Palestine is incomparable to any other part of the country. It is also the heart of the Arab world and a city that unifies all Arabs, and many others across our world.

In November 1947, the United Nations decided to designate the city as a *corpus separatum*, but Zionist troops (the precursor to the Israeli Occupying Forces) attacked the civilian Palestinian population during the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948. They committed several massacres and terror attacks, such as the Deir Yassin massacre and bombing the Semiramis Hotel, subsequently occupying what was referred to since as "West Jerusalem," to ethnically cleanse that part of the city from Palestinians.

In June 1967 Israel conducted an offensive attack that culminated with the occupation of the remaining 22% of historic Palestine that remained in Arab hands after the Nakba (the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip). Later, Israel illegally declared the annexation of East Jerusalem in violation of international humanitarian law which prohibits the acquisition of territory by force. United Nations Security Council resolutions 242, 476, 478 and 2334, among others, have reaffirmed this principle.

While Israel insists on promoting itself as a protector of Christians, the reality in occupied Jerusalem indicates the opposite. The massive confiscation of Palestinian land and property that took place in the aftermath of the Nakba, including in traditional Christian neighborhoods such as Talbiyeh and Qatamon, was followed by further expropriations and laws aimed at changing the Arab identity of the city since Israel's occupation in 1967. Such Israeli policy has had a significant impact on Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem. From 1948 to today, the population of Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem has shrunk at least 60%, from 30,000 to a mere 12,000.

Religious celebrations, including Christian religious ceremonies in Jerusalem, have been severely affected by the policies imposed by the Israeli occupying authorities. The Israeli annexation of occupied East Jerusalem has isolated the occupied Palestinian capital from the rest of Palestine by building up rings of Israeli colonial-settlements, the ever-expanding Annexation Wall, and countless military checkpoints and other movement restrictions. The closure of occupied East Jerusalem has severely affected Palestinian access to the city with Israel imposing a discriminatory permit regime that prevents the freedom of worship to Palestinians and the rest of the region, including Christian communities from Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, that once upon a time joined the religious celebrations in Jerusalem before the Israeli occupation.

Jerusalem is central for Palestinian life and its Palestinian Christian and Muslim identity is indisputable. Regardless, the Israeli occupation, supported by the current U.S. Administration, insists on marginalizing Palestinians as part of its overall campaign of colonization and annexation while dehumanizing the people of Palestine.

Easter is a holy occasion that represents a cultural and social symbol of the ties of the Palestinian people, particularly of its diverse and active Christian community – the descendants of the first followers of Jesus Christ, that today struggle to be able to celebrate their traditions in freedom and dignity.

Key Facts:

How the Israeli Occupation Affects the Easter Celebrations in Jerusalem

- Israel's Annexation Wall in and around Jerusalem is 240 km long (one third of the wall's length throughout the occupied West Bank). It is built inside occupied Palestinian territory and thus separates over 300,000 Palestinians living in illegally annexed East Jerusalem from other Palestinians in occupied Palestine. The Wall was declared illegal by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2004.
- The Annexation Wall is part and parcel of Israel's colonial settlement enterprise and restrictions regime. To access East Jerusalem, Palestinians are forced to apply for special military permits, which are very normally difficult to obtain.
- For Palestinians, the issue is not about how many permits the occupying Power will grant, it is about freedom of movement and worship within one's own country. Palestinians are not requesting a visa to travel abroad, but to be able to access Jerusalem, that is internationally recognized as Palestinian territory, where their ancestors have lived for generations.
- There are over 40 Israeli settlements in and around occupied Jerusalem with a population of over 300,000 Israeli settlers. This has in effect led to the confiscation of vast areas of Palestinian land and to the disconnection of Palestinian communities from one another.
- In 2018, Palestinian Christian youth and priests, participating in the Palm Sunday Procession in occupied East Jerusalem, were assaulted and arrested by the Israeli Occupying Forces for raising the Palestinian flag among dozens of flags raised by pilgrims coming from many countries around the world.
- Over the past years, the Israeli Occupying Forces have even imposed movement restrictions on Palestinians within Jerusalem itself by installing checkpoints leading to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and other historical parts of the Old City. This includes the roof of the Holy Sepulcher where Palestinian families have for centuries gathered to celebrate Holy Fire Saturday.
- Due to the violence and restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation, many Palestinians, including Jerusalemites have stopped celebrating Holy Fire Saturday in Jerusalem, and instead travel to Ramallah or Bethlehem, where the Palestinian Government provides for the celebrations in coordination with local churches and civil society.
- Israel's systematic violations of Palestinian rights, including freedom of worship, have been documented by numerous international organizations and bodies, including the United Nations and the European Union. This is not something new, but a fundamental aspect of the overall Israeli colonial approach to change the identity of occupied East Jerusalem. Additionally, such illegal Israeli policies and practices have been encouraged by the irresponsible actions of certain governments in support of the extremist Israeli government, including the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, Czech Republic, and Hungary.

In Focus - Palestinian Stories¹:



Jerusalem
0 km away

Nadine in Jerusalem

“No doubt, despite the challenges, I’m going to keep on celebrating Easter in Jerusalem’s Old City”

For Palestinians living in occupied East Jerusalem, the Israeli occupation has meant dramatic changes for their city and lives. Being under several oppressive laws that aim at changing the identity of the city, including residency revocations, home demolitions, and forced evictions, religious celebrations have also been affected.

Twenty-nine-year-old Nadine was born, raised and now works in the Old City of Jerusalem. She’s active within the Palestinian Christian community in the city. She emphasizes the importance of the city as a Palestinian and as a Christian:

“Easter celebrations, including Palm Sunday, is a celebration of Jerusalem. It’s a religious celebration but it also highlights our presence as Palestinian Christians. It is a reminder that we are an integral part of Palestinian society.”

Nadine recognizes that over the past years less Palestinian Christians are joining the celebrations:

“Because of the movement restrictions, those who have children, as well as others, have stopped coming to Jerusalem and are joining the religious celebrations elsewhere. I work with youth, and we try to insist that Easter is one of the most important celebrations.”

One of the main problems for Nadine is the fact that it is now more difficult to reach the Holy Sites during the celebrations, “even for those of us living in the Old City of Jerusalem.”

Having studied abroad, Nadine thinks that even though social media has created some awareness on the realities of the Israeli occupation among Christians worldwide, there is no full awareness of its impact on Palestinian lives.

¹ Not all surnames are shown, upon the request of the individuals, out of respect for their privacy.

**Jerusalem
12 km away**

Henry in Ramallah

**A view of Easter before and after the Israeli occupation:
“Easter was something else”**

For those who lived Easter before the Israeli occupation, the experience was different than today. Henry was born in Al Lydd, the birthplace of Saint George, and had become a refugee at the age of 3. Later, his family moved between Jerusalem and Ramallah while keeping a strong connection with the church:

“If you ask me about one of the most important changes...until 1967, we used to celebrate Easter mass at midnight [in Ramallah]. After that year, we began having curfews, violence, and people would be afraid. Since then the mass is held around 8:00 PM.”

Henry knows how well tourism was doing before the occupation. His grandfather was a tour guide and he used to take care of families of pilgrims coming mainly from Syria and Lebanon. He worked in an airline with many employees in the Jerusalem Airport (located near Qalandia village) that closed after the occupation.

“Most tourists would come from Arab countries [.] I remember very clearly how for Easter we used to receive buses from Syria, many from Halab (Aleppo). We used to call them *al-halabiyeh*, and they had banners in the buses announcing the Resurrection. We used to receive many people coming from Egypt as well, but the Syrians were very well known. The same was replicated during Muslim celebrations. I remember for Eid Al-Adha that we had buses with pilgrims from Pakistan. This is not something that you can see today.”

The Israeli occupation has conditioned Henry's life. First as a refugee, then Israel revoked his Jerusalem residency, and now he cannot move outside Ramallah:

“Israel has taken my civil and human rights. I sit in a prison. I have documents showing how much taxes I paid to Israel since 1967 and still, they took my rights.”

About how the occupation has affected his life as a Palestinian Christian, Henry says:

“I'm someone who would always pray the Rosary in the Holy Sepulcher. Now I cannot, though I live only a few kilometers away.”

He also had some words to what Israel is doing with the tourism industry, “Once I heard an Israeli tour guide talking about ‘Mr. Jesus’ inside the Holy Sepulcher. What’s this? They are doing everything they can to change the identity of the city.”

**Jerusalem
47 km away from Aboud
21 km away from Ein Ari**

Fr. Emanuelle Awwad in Aboud Village

**“Our roots and commitment to this land are
stronger than the occupation”**

Palestine, the Holy Land, is known as the first pilgrimage destination. Jesus was born, lived, and was crucified in this land. In this context, and in addition to a large number of prominent religious Christian shrines located across the country, both Jerusalem and

its twin city Bethlehem and their surroundings have been the epicenter of the most important Christian celebrations. Throughout history, several Christian communities were established in and around Jerusalem, and while a number of them were ethnically-cleansed during the Nakba of 1948, notably the case of Ein Karem, others survived but today suffer from the policies of colonization that have imposed the disconnection of Jerusalem from the rest of occupied Palestine.

It's not only about how Bethlehem was disconnected from Jerusalem, but also many other historic villages and towns such as Al Izzariya (Bethany), Aboud, Taybeh (Ephraim) and Ein Arik.

Fr. Emanuelle Awwad belongs to the Orthodox Church. He was born and raised in Ein Arik, a village outside Ramallah, and is currently the Parish priest of Aboud village. He considers the connection between Ein Arik and Jerusalem very strong:

"We would always go there, and were encouraged by our elders to go to the Holy places. More so during Easter with many people from Ein Arik going to Jerusalem starting from Palm Sunday."

Fr. Awwad explains how Israeli imposed movement restrictions have challenged this connection:

"It's difficult to obtain permits and to go through Israeli military checkpoints. The Israeli occupation does not differentiate between Christians or Muslims; they want to cut our relationship and our ties as Palestinians with the Holy City. We encourage those who can go to Jerusalem to go, but people are concerned about the humiliation they suffer at Qalandia checkpoint and at other checkpoints leading to the city."

Fr. Awwad is concerned about the future: "I see what is happening on the ground, and how more Israelis are moving to the right. There is indeed fear about what is going to happen in Jerusalem and with Jerusalemites."

But he emphasizes that "no matter what the occupation has done to attack our Arab Christian identity, they could not change it."

**Jerusalem
around 80 km
away**

Youssef in Gaza

"We are Arabs. We are Palestinians. We are Christians. Our identity begins in Jerusalem, the place of Resurrection is in Jerusalem. If we lose it, if we can't access it, there is no future for us."

Gaza has one of the oldest Christian communities in Palestine and their presence has always been historically linked to the rest of the Holy Land.

Youssef is 30 years old, an active member of the Christian community, and one of the leaders of the local scouts' troops. He is currently seeking a degree in Christian theology in Bethlehem, which is around 80 kilometers away from the coastal port in Gaza. Such a path for Palestinian students has been forbidden by the Israeli occupation that denies Gazan students from studying in the West Bank. Youssef has therefore been forced to pursue his degree through a long-distance course.

On his relationship with Jerusalem Youssef says:

“I was lucky to get a permit to visit Jerusalem for a few days, and was able to see the churches in Jerusalem with my family. But it was only once that we could go as a family.”

Youssef has relatives in Jerusalem but they cannot celebrate the holidays together since family members rarely receive permits to exit Gaza. One of the most difficult situations they encountered was when his brother visited from Australia:

“My brother married a woman from the Bethlehem area and they now live in Australia. When they returned in Christmas 2017 to baptize their daughter in the Nativity Church, only myself, my mom, and one of my sisters received permits to go to the West Bank. My father and my other sister could not see him.”

As a scout leader, he wishes that the Gazan scouts will be able to participate in the parades that take place in Jerusalem and Bethlehem during Easter and Christmas “as they used to do before.” He said that since 2000 no scout troops from Gaza have been able to join the celebrations in the occupied West Bank.

Jerusalem
164 km away

Suhail in Jordan
“Still waiting to celebrate in Jerusalem”

The Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948 is the most traumatic moment in modern Palestinian history. For Palestinian Christians, it was a defining moment: from being almost 20% of Palestine’s population, numbers went down to nearly 5% within a matter of a few years. Several villages and neighborhoods were erased and ended up forcibly displaced. Consequently, many Palestinian Christian refugees were pushed into exile. Several churches in Jordan were expanded to host Palestinian refugees in addition to the establishment of many refugee camps (in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon), including Al-Dbayeh and Al-Bassa in Lebanon. A notable percentage of those Palestinian Christian refugees ended up in the Arab Gulf, the Americas, Europe, and Australia.

One of those refugees is 66-year-old Suhail. His family is originally from Al-Baqaa neighborhood in Jerusalem, which was ethnically-cleansed of its Arab Palestinian population in 1948. They first moved to Bethlehem, then to Kuwait just one week before the occupation in 1967. They were in Kuwait on a visit but could never return, not even to Bethlehem. They later settled in Jordan.

“It feels really sad that we cannot go to Palestine. It goes for both Christians and Muslims. It is unbelievable that people from all over the world can visit the holy places in Jerusalem, but we are not allowed to do so. After the Oslo Agreements, we tried to return to Bethlehem, or at least to get a visit permit. Sometimes we go to the Jordan Valley, to Salt, to look at Palestine. We can see Jerusalem sometimes, but we cannot reach it. There are many Palestinian Christians here in the same situation who get their requests for a visit permit denied. I have a brother and a sister who stayed in Bethlehem, but we cannot visit them.”

A Final Word



“We celebrate the Resurrection in the Holy City. We hope that all those around the world who celebrate the Day of Resurrection are aware of the ongoing struggle in the Holy City of the Resurrection. Jerusalem must be saved from ongoing death, hatred, and injustice imposed on its people. May new hope shine upon us, and a new life begin in Jerusalem for all those who love Jerusalem.”

Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah, April 2019.