

State of Palestine
Palestine Liberation Organization
Negotiations Affairs Department



**CELEBRATING
EASTER
APRIL 2017**

50 Years of Israel's
Colonization of Occupied
East Jerusalem

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INTRODUCTION

In the 50 years since Israel has occupied East Jerusalem (an integral part of the Occupied State Palestine along with the rest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) and the almost 70 years since the expulsion of two thirds of the Palestinian Muslim and Christian population from the rest of historical Palestine (including West Jerusalem), successive Israeli governments have introduced numerous measures to promote an exclusively Jewish historical narrative in the Holy Land. This can be seen no more clearly than in the heart of occupied East Jerusalem.

Through decades of Israeli policies aimed at transforming Jerusalem into “the undivided capital of the Jewish people”, Israel is actively negating and eradicating Jerusalem’s Palestinian, Christian and Muslim heritage and culture, irrevocably damaging not only the lives and social fabric of the indigenous Palestinian population, but the very spirit of the city itself.

Part one of this brief highlights some of the ways in which Israel has been altering the character of Jerusalem over the years, as well as explaining the political status of the city. Part two focuses on the changing nature of Easter celebrations in occupied East Jerusalem, through the personal stories of the indigenous Christians- Palestinians whose families have lived in and around the city for centuries.

FROM THE NAKBA TO ANNEXATION: THE CASE OF JERUSALEM

TIMELINE: ALTERING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF JERUSALEM

The following is a timeline highlighting several Israeli laws, policies and practices designed to promote a dominant Jewish historical and religious narrative at the expense of other faiths in Occupied East Jerusalem, in many cases restricting or damaging Christian and Muslim sites and celebrations. Key elements of international law and consensus are highlighted in **Red**.

1947

UNGA Resolution 181 divides Palestine in two states. Considers Jerusalem (including the city of Bethlehem) a "Corpus Separatum" under international jurisdiction. This was never implemented in part due to the Zionist offensives against the city and its periphery, including the massacre of Deir Yassin and many other crimes and terror attacks that aimed at ethnically cleansing vast areas of the city.

1948

Several religious institutions lose their property during the 1948 Nakbeh (Catastrophe), when Zionist militias take control of West Jerusalem. Among them the Churches and the Islamic Waqf (trusts). This includes, among hundreds of properties, the ancient Mamilla Islamic Cemetery and the Churches of Ein Karem. Most of the Christian population of Jerusalem is forced to leave the city by Zionist gangs.

1967

Israel Occupies East Jerusalem and demolishes the Moroccan Quarter in the Old City. Shortly afterwards, the Israeli government would begin a systematic policy of colonization outside of the Jewish Quarter, including Muslim and Christian properties.

1969

Destruction of the ancient Minbar (prayer platform) of Salah ad-Deen al Ayyubi and interior al Al-Qibli Mosque in Al Aqsa Mosque / Haram Al Sharif Compound.

1970

Ethiopian monks occupy Deir El Saultan (roof of the Holy Sepulcher) from the Coptic community, changing the status quo of the place. For political reasons, the Israeli government decides to support the Ethiopian Monks over the Coptic Church.

1970

The Catholic Church established the "Justice and Peace Commission" in Jerusalem in order to defend human rights in the occupied city.

1973

Israeli inter-ministerial Committee to Examine the Rate of Development for Jerusalem recommends that the "demographic balance of Jews and Arabs must be maintained as it was at the end of 1972." (73.5% Jews, 26.5% (non-Jewish) Palestinians)

1980

Israel officially annexes Occupied East Jerusalem, including the Old City.

1980

The UN Security Council approves Resolution 476, declaring all measures taken by Israel to annex Jerusalem "null and void".

1988

The PLO declares the State of Palestine on the 1967 border, with East Jerusalem, including the Old City, as its capital. The Declaration of Independence affirms commitment to Freedom of Worship.

1990

A week after Easter celebrations, a group of 150 settlers took over the Saint John's Hospice, with Israeli government funding, establishing the first Israeli settlement in the Christian Quarter since 1967, outside the Holy Sepulcher. Heads of Churches respond by closing the Holy Sepulcher for one day.

1991

Israel implements a permit regime for Palestinians from the rest of the West Bank and Gaza in order to enter East Jerusalem.

1994

As part of the Middle East Peace Process, Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres sends a written commitment to the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Johan Jorgen Holst, confirming that all Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, including the holy Christian and Muslim places, will not be hampered in their activity.

2000

The PLO signs its first agreement with the Holy See, reaffirming commitment to Freedom of Worship and to support the work of the Church in Palestine, including East Jerusalem.

2000

September 28, Ariel Sharon, a known Israeli politician known for a long list of War Crimes, stormed the Aqsa Mosque Compound with hundreds of Israeli Occupation Forces, leading to the Second Intifada.

2001

Israel closes several Palestinian institutions in Occupied East Jerusalem, including the Orient House, known as the PLO Headquarter in occupied East Jerusalem

2003

Israel builds its Annexation Wall between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, separating both cities for first time in history. The Wall also divides the Mount of Olives as well as the city from Ramallah.

2004

Plans are revealed for the construction of a Museum over the Muslim Cemetery of Mamillah, located in West Jerusalem and property of the Islamic waqf. The cemetery contains remains of figures from the early Islamic period. Since the fifties Israel has damaged hundreds of tombs from this Holy Place.

2007

Israeli Occupation Authorities request that Palestinian Jerusalemites wishing to participate in the Holy Fire Saturday Celebration in the Old City have to apply for a special permit. The request is rejected by all communities.

2015

The Holy See formally recognizes the State of Palestine on the 1967 border, including East Jerusalem.

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THE POLITICAL STATUS OF JERUSALEM/ PALESTINIAN POSITION

The political fate of Jerusalem is one of the key issues to be decided through permanent status negotiations between Palestine and Israel, in conformity with international law. With specific regard to East Jerusalem, no country in the world recognizes Israel's occupation or later annexation of that part of the city, because it remains part of the territory occupied since 1967.

Religious sites, as with any other cultural sites, fall under the sovereignty of the state in which they are found. In the specific context of Palestine and Israel and within the framework of a two-state solution, this means that all Jewish, Christian and Muslim sites that fall within Israel's territory on the 1967 border are under Israeli sovereignty and should be protected by Israel, while all Jewish, Christian and Muslim sites that lie within Palestine's territory are under Palestinian sovereignty and protection.

The PLO considers the Old City to be a single unit enjoying a unique character that will be preserved together with the promotion and development of the area and its inhabitants in accordance to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List regulations, in which the Old City is a registered site since 1981.

The open city concept, however, is an essential element to ensure the prosperity and centrality of the city. Consequently, in the spirit of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, a joint development council, composed of an equal number of representatives from both sides will be established by the parties to oversee cooperation between Israel and Palestine in both parts of Jerusalem, including with respect to planning and zoning, water, waste water and the environment, roads and industrial zones.

In summary, the Palestinian vision for Jerusalem is for a shared city housing the capital of two states and the three great monotheistic religions. It is pivotal to establish East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Without this, there can be no viable Palestinian state, and without a viable Palestinian state, there will be no lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of the two-state solution.

CASE STUDIES:

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EASTER IN JERUSALEM PERSONAL STORIES FROM PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS

CASE STUDY 1:

THE PALESTINIAN PILGRIMS OF BURQIN

The Palestinian village of Burqin, largely unknown to most Christian pilgrims, is home to the fifth-oldest holy place and third-oldest church in the world. Burqin lies approximately 5km west of the city of Jenin, in the northern part of the occupied West Bank. Archaeological surveys have found layers of evidence from the early Bronze age all the way through to the early Ottoman period. St. George's Church, which dates back to the Byzantine period and has been restored several times since that period, stands on the site where Jesus is said to have healed the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19).

Today, the village is home to a community of 80 Christians who wish to travel to Jerusalem for the Easter celebrations. Although the Old City of Jerusalem is also situated in the Occupied West Bank, around 80km south of Burqin, the community must apply for Israeli-issued permits in order to join the Easter festivities. According to the head of the Church, Father Vissarion, the number of permits issued varies year on year. "The community applies for permits through us," Father Vissarion explains, "but not all applications are successful. Usually parents are given permits but not all of their children, and there are four individuals who are not even able to apply through us for so-called 'security reasons'". He adds that it is never certain that permits will arrive in time or how long they will be granted for, meaning that families have to make plans and simply hope that they will receive permits in time.

The Deputy Governor of Jenin, Mr. Mansour Al-Saa'di, tells a similar story. He explains that permits have to be obtained through the Church, otherwise they will be rejected. Anyone between the ages of 18 and 40 tend to have more difficulties.

Those who do receive permits in time have to cross two main Israeli checkpoints- Zaatara (near Nablus) and Qalandia (between Ramallah and Jerusalem), both of which are in Occupied Palestinian territory. "This is a journey which should take around 1hr and 45 minutes under normal circumstances", the Deputy Governor explains. "With the checkpoints, journey time is more commonly 3-4 hours."

Assuming that these native Christian pilgrims make it to Jerusalem, it is still not guaranteed that they will be allowed to enter the Old City.

Mr. Al-Saa'di elaborates on this point: "Technically, children who don't yet have an ID [issued by Israeli authorities at the age of 16] are allowed to enter on a parent's permit as long as they show their birth certificate. In reality, there have been many cases where Israeli soldiers simply deny entry to the children under the pretext of having no permit. This means the whole family is forced to turn around and go back."

CASE STUDY 2:

EASTER CELEBRATIONS BEFORE 1967

Abu Maher was born in Jaffa in 1942. When he was 6 years old, he, along with most of the inhabitants of Jaffa, was forced to flee his home and walk towards Ramallah, where his family would eventually settle. He remembers how easy it was to go to the Holy Sites and celebrate Christmas and Easter. "We live in the Holy Land. We grew up celebrating our holy occasions in the same places that they originally took place. I remember very vividly the crowds that would go to Jerusalem to participate in the Good Friday procession", he says.

A member of the Roman Catholic (Latin) community, Abu Maher says there is almost no comparison between the Easter celebrations which took place before Israel's Occupation of 1967 and the situation that Palestine faces today: "I remember how the Old City would be a meeting point for people coming from all over Palestine, and even from the Arab World. It was common to see Arab Christians from the whole region coming to celebrate Easter in Palestine. Rather than staying in hotels, many of them would stay in Palestinian homes. I remember personally guiding an Egyptian family that was staying at the home of a friend of mine in the Old City of Jerusalem."

But things changed after 1967: "The first change was that people from other Arab countries would stop coming. Then, progressively, we saw other things. Settlements, checkpoints, roadblocks, having to apply for a permit to enter Jerusalem..."

Nowadays, even if Palestinians are able to get a permit- which, in itself, takes hours of queuing just in order to apply- passing through an Israeli Military Checkpoint is not a pleasant experience.

“Checkpoints are a big problem. As a Palestinian I find many hardships there. It’s a difficult and humiliating experience. And yet we still do it because these are our Holy Sites, it is our homeland, part of our lives, it is in our blood. One year we were at Qalandia checkpoint [between Ramallah and East Jerusalem], my wife and I, waiting to cross. My wife crossed ahead of me but then tripped and fell to the floor. I was behind her, trapped in the metal turnstile they make you pass through, one by one. The soldiers saw that she was hurt, but wouldn’t open it for me to assist her, so she stayed on the floor for several minutes before I was allowed to help her. It made me so feel so powerless and angry.”

“I still want to be able to take part in the religious festivities where they originally took place,” Abu Maher says. “There are people coming from all over the world to see the Holy places in Jerusalem, and we, living 16 kilometres away, cannot go ourselves. Even if we receive a permit, the whole celebration is tarnished by the difficulties- the delays and the harassment and the humiliation associated with getting there- especially when entrance to the Holy Sepulcher [for Holy Fire Saturday], even with a permit, is not guaranteed. I just don’t understand why I need a permit to visit Holy sites in my own homeland.”

CASE STUDY 3:

CELEBRATING EASTER IN JERUSALEM TODAY

Fifty-one year old father of five, Yousef, insists that he will continue celebrating Easter in Jerusalem, his hometown, just as he has done his whole life. “I was born here, I was raised here, I studied here, and I’ll continue celebrating here.” But joining the Easter festivities in Jerusalem has become increasingly difficult for the native Palestinian inhabitants of the city. “My wife and daughter were beaten by Israeli forces on their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher a couple of years ago,” Yousef explains, his voice tinged with anger and sadness.

Despite the Occupation’s brutality, Yousef and his family are determined to continue going to their holy sites at Easter because it is their right. “We are going to pray, and the Israeli occupation turns it into a battle. We are willing to peacefully resist this, but our goal is simply to pray and carry on with a tradition that we Christians have celebrated in Jerusalem for centuries before the Israeli occupation began.”

Others have stopped attending the celebrations. Yousef’s sister, Randa, a mother of two who is married to another Jerusalemite, has celebrated Easter with her family for the past ten years in Ramallah. “For her, it is about safety,” Yousef tells us. “In Ramallah celebrations are different. They are better organized, the police open the roads for the procession, and my sister’s family can watch the Scout troops marching and celebrating in a safe and secure environment.”

Yousef's case is not an isolated incident. An increasing number of Jerusalemites have opted to celebrate Easter elsewhere, rather than in their own city, due to the policies of the Israeli occupation. "When it comes to Jewish celebrations, the Israeli authorities make sure that every single Jewish person can reach the Old City. But when it comes to Christian or Muslim celebrations, it is totally the opposite: They treat us like strangers in our own city, to the extent of disrupting a religious celebration that we have held for centuries".



CONCLUSION:

Jerusalem has a rich history as the cradle of the three monotheistic faiths. It is a city which, one day, could be the model of co-existence as the capital of two states. Such a vision can never be realised as long as one faith is promoted and privileged at the expense of the others.

Israel, the occupying power, through its illegitimate municipality, has pushed for several projects in order to consolidate the illegal annexation of the city, including a light train, that passes through the New Gate of the Old City (Christian Quarter), as well as a Cable Car, that once ready, will go through areas of Occupied East Jerusalem. Other initiatives, including a Marathon and festivals, have been developed by the foreign occupier in order to consolidate the illegal annexation. At the same time, Israel, the occupying power, prevents Palestinian development in the city, whether residential, economic, social, cultural or religious.

Israel's overarching goal, to make Jerusalem the "undivided and eternal capital of the Jewish people" is carried out through an institutionalised regime aimed at maintaining a Jewish majority in Jerusalem. As seen from part one of this brief, Israel has taken –and continues to take– endless measures which are physically and irreversibly changing the landscape of the city, in order to promote a predominantly Jewish historical and religious narrative, in complete violation of international law.

Meanwhile, those of other faiths- in this case Christians wishing to celebrate Easter- are experiencing increasing difficulties which, at best hamper their experience of what should be a joyful and special occasion, and at worst, prevent them from celebrating the occasion at all. While pilgrims and tourists from all over the world are welcomed to the city, those Christians closest by are denied their rights. The very fact that Palestinian Christians and Muslims, people whose families have lived in and around Jerusalem for centuries, have to apply for a permit to visit their holy sites in their own capital city, is unacceptable.

Any just and lasting solution will first require an environment of freedom, equality and dignity for all.

Israeli Settlements in and Around Old City of Jerusalem

