



ROSSING CENTER
FOR EDUCATION AND DIALOGUE

מרכז רוסינג
לחינוך ולדיאלוג
מركز روسينج
للتربية وللحوار

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL AND EAST JERUSALEM

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About the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue

The *Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue* is a Jerusalem-based interreligious, peacebuilding organization, and our mission is to build the desire and capacity of Israelis and Palestinians to create truly shared societies for all groups. We believe that understanding, justice and equality will enable Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace, and we envision societies which embrace religious, ethnic and national diversity as an asset rather than a threat.

We launched our *Advocacy and Education Initiative* to address the escalating harassment Christian communities have faced for many years in Jerusalem and other areas of the country. The *Initiative* is part of our program called the "Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations" (JCJCR), which aims to increase understanding and knowledge

of the unique and complex status of Christianity and Christian communities in the Holy Land, among local and overseas Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. The *Advocacy and Education Initiative* is designed to provide local and international stakeholders with reliable information about the abuses suffered by Christians. It comprises a data-gathering process¹ to document attacks, and bi-annual reports intended for use as advocacy tools, which analyze the data in light of the socio-political context. For now, the active monitoring of our *Initiative* is mainly focusing on attacks within Jerusalem, but we aim to extend our coverage to a wider territory in the coming years. Finally, data from our monitoring processes will be integrated into our educational curricula and resources to ensure that our programs accurately reflect the current situation.

¹ The data-gathering process has been conducted in coordination with the Religious Freedom Data Center created by Yisca Harani.

Executive Summary

This report analyzes the disturbing rise in hostilities towards Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem in 2023. The desecration of Anglican cemetery tombs on January 1st, 2023, exemplifies a concerning trend of increased attacks, including spitting, physical and verbal harassment, property damage and disruptions of liturgies. The context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, coupled with overlapping religious and national identities, complicates the understanding of incidents solely as attacks on Christian identity. Additionally, a lack of consistent data collection methods hinders comparative analysis. But despite these limitations, a surge in various forms of hostility is noted. Spitting, although pervasive, is challenging to track and prosecute, with victims often unaware of legal remedies and a prevalent tendency to accept such behavior out of humility. Notably, this has evolved from a covert act to open and brazen actions against clergy, holy places, and even pilgrims.

The year 2023 also witnessed a worrying increase in severe property and physical assaults, especially affecting communities such as the Armenians in the Old City and the Polish monastery near Mea Shearim. When police intervention took place, it was helpful, emphasizing the critical need for swift condemnation by Israeli authorities and proactive measures to deter or halt harassment.

The targeting of Christianity is not, on the whole, explicitly encouraged by the political leadership or the Israeli authorities. However, the rise in attacks

correlates with a broader socio-political climate marked by a shift towards the far-right, growing nationalism, and an emphasis on Israel as a state for the Jewish population which has impacted the unique majority/minority dynamics of Jewish-Christian relations in the Holy Land.

In terms of the identity of the attackers, data shows that the majority of perpetrators are Jewish individuals, primarily young men identifying with the Religious Zionist camp and ultra-nationalist stances. It is crucial to emphasize that harassing behaviors are not normative, and the majority of individuals, irrespective of their views on Christianity or other religious minorities, do not partake in such actions.

Media reports, both local and international, have played a crucial role in highlighting the challenges faced by local Christians. Local and state authorities have openly condemned the attacks - even though with some regrettable delays - and some prominent rabbis have also spoken against these actions.

In conclusion, this analysis underscores the urgent need for collaborative efforts to address escalating hostilities against Christians in Jerusalem and advocates for a comprehensive approach involving condemnation by state and religious authorities, law enforcement, education, community involvement, media engagement and international awareness.

***"If there is no justice,
there is no safety. If
there is no safety, there
is no freedom of worship.
If there is no freedom
of worship, what is our
future as a community?"²***

In particular, we recommend:

- Enhancing police intervention, boosting the presence of police officers in critical areas, and promoting awareness of attacks on Christians
- Offering training regarding Christianity to members of local police, the municipality and other relevant authorities in order to build literacy and improve their ability to communicate appropriately with Christian leadership and members of the communities
- Establishment of two official positions - one within the municipality and one within the national government – as liaisons to the Churches' leadership
- Improving curricula about Christianity in the public education system
- Ensuring appropriate coverage in mainstream media and social media messaging
- Stronger condemnations from the authorities and religious Jewish leadership, in order to communicate support and solidarity to Christian leaders and the communities at large
- Encouraging Christian communities to report and be aware of the importance of not dismissing attacks
- Increasing awareness and understanding among diplomatic representatives regarding Jewish-Christian relations in Jerusalem

This Report Aims to be a Basis for:

- Building data-based, contextualized knowledge about the challenges faced by Christians in the Holy Land, and in Jerusalem in particular.
- Supporting policy advocacy efforts to foster the physical and perceived security of Christian communities.
- Creating and promoting new educational resources to expand the literacy about lived Christianity in the Holy Land among the Israeli Jewish population and relevant stakeholders (local authorities, media, local educational institutions, etc).
- Promoting justice in Christian-Jewish relations. We will strive to do so by increasing awareness about intolerance towards Christians among the wide majority of Israelis who unaware of the phenomena and would find it unacceptable.

² The Christian Science Monitor, "Israel, failing to stop attacks on Christians, Jerusalem Churches say", April 14, 2023. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2023/0414/Israel-failing-to-stop-attacks-on-Christians-Jerusalem-churches-say>

Terminology and Key Findings

We adopted the concept of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)³ and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), two documents which Israel is a signatory to and therefore bound by. The two key principles of FoRB are: freedom to have or not to have (including the right to change) a religion or belief; and the freedom to manifest it individually or in community, in public or private, “in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Our monitoring efforts will gather and analyze incidents of harassment towards Christian communities, including violations of FoRB based on this understanding of freedom of religion. This may comprise abuses committed by state or non-state actors limiting individual and collective exercise of this freedom.

3 Art. 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>

Overview:

numbers per categories of attacks*

Harassment:

Examples include verbal harassment, attacks and protests during Christian gathering, anti-Christian propaganda

7

known cases of verbal harassment

4

disturbances during liturgy or Christian gatherings

Physical attacks:

Examples include spitting, pepper spraying, hitting

7

cases of violent attacks, almost all of which involved multiple victims

30

Approx. formally reported cases of spitting⁴

Attacks on Church properties:

Examples include graffiti, trespassing, damaging statues, throwing of stones and garbage within Church properties, arson

1

cemetery desecration

32

documented cases of attacks on Church properties, including recurring disturbances, attempted trespassing, stone-throwing, and other forms of targeting aimed at specific properties

Attacks on Christian private properties:

Examples include attacks on restaurants, stores, houses, cars

2

attacks - One attack on an Armenian restaurant at New Gate, and a case of graffiti on a private home reading "Ben Gvir is here"

Public signs defaced

or anti-Christian incitement on public property (electricity poles).

6

known cases



The Statue of Christ of the Flagellation Church in Jerusalem, which was vandalized on February 2nd, 2023. | Photo: Adi Marer

Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB):

Examples include requests to remove religious symbols, limitations of access to religious sites, limitations in freedom of movement to attend religious services etc.

- The Abbot of the Benedictine Dormition Abbey was asked to remove his cross while in a public space
- Some Coptic nuns were asked to remove their crosses while waiting to be attended to at the Emergency Room of a major hospital in Jerusalem
- One known case of limitation of access to a Jewish religious site
- Two cases of limitations in attending/performing Christian liturgy (Mount of Beatitudes and Holy Fire Ceremony)

Representation of Christian communities in mainstream Israeli media and online harassment:

It is our intention to include in our reports an assessment regarding harassment and incitement taking place on social media platforms and through traditional media. As mentioned in the section dedicated to Methodology, in 2023 we tracked the narrative regarding harassment of Christians and attitudes towards Christian presence in Jerusalem as portrayed in mainstream Israeli media, while cases of online incitement were monitored periodically and to the best of our knowledge. In 2024 our monitoring activities will be conducted systematically.

**In almost all instances, verbal harassment and spitting occur concurrently, but in order not to inflate the overall number of incidents, we have categorized each incident according to the dominant nature of the attack.*

4 Every clergy member the Rosching Center spoke with in 2023 admitted to being spat at regularly, multiple times a week.

A photograph showing the interior of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The image captures the lower portion of the large dome, featuring a series of arched windows and a balcony with a decorative balustrade. The architecture is made of light-colored stone. The lighting is somewhat dim, with a bright light source visible on the right side, creating a dramatic effect. The overall color palette is dominated by the warm tones of the stone and the deep blue of the sky visible through the upper arches.

The Dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. | Photo: Adi Marer

Who are the Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem?

The ancestral Church in the territory covered by this report is mainly composed of Arab Christians the majority of whom identify as Palestinian. This creates a very special and complex dynamic between the Jewish majority population and an ethnic minority which is also a religious minority within the predominantly Muslim Arab society. Among the Christians living in Israel and East Jerusalem, there are also tens of thousands of non-Arab citizens and residents, such as clergy of different denominations who serve the communities connected with their Churches, migrant workers and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa, who live

and work among Jewish society and have created sizable communities across Israel.

Largely for historical reasons, Israel officially recognizes 13 Christian churches, but does not recognize some Protestant denomination even though they have a significant presence in the country. Among the 13 recognized Churches, the Greek Orthodox, the Latin Roman Catholic, and the Greek Catholic Melkite comprise the largest number of believers. Among the other, non-official Churches present in the Land, are the Baptist Church and numerous Evangelical communities, including Messianic Jews. For further information on each Church, see Annex II.

Socio-Political Context

Statistics

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, on December 31, 2023, Israel's population⁵ was estimated at 9,841,000 citizens, of which Jews represent 73% (the ultra-Orthodox population standing at about 13% of the total population) and Arabs representing 21.1% percent.⁶ Christians comprise about 1.9% of the State's population, and among them 75.3% are Arab Christians (6.9% of the total Arab population in Israel).⁷

Legal Framework

Israel has no formal constitution, but the *Declaration of Independence* is the fundamental document defining the character of the State. According to it, Israel "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations".⁸ Due to the lack of a Constitution, legal principles are enshrined in a series of Basic Laws. For example, the 1992 "Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty" addresses the protection of human rights⁹ and describes the state as Jewish and democratic.

However, the "Basic Law: Israel The Nation State of the Jewish People" approved in 2018 declares that "the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People."¹⁰ The law was criticized by legal experts and civil society organizations dedicated to safeguarding the rights of minorities, including the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries, which called the attention to the "tension that exists in the wording of the declaration about the State being both 'Jewish' and 'democratic'"¹¹ and to the fact that although the 2018 Basic Law "changes very little in practice, it does provide a constitutional and legal basis for discrimination between Israel's citizens, clearly laying out the principles according to which Jewish citizens are to be privileged over and above other citizens."¹²

Israeli state institutions are generally secular; however, a distinct separation between Religion and State is lacking, impacting personal status in significant life domains such as marriage, divorce, and death. The administration of these matters is entrusted to leaders of the Jewish, Christian, and

5 This includes Jewish citizens resident in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, but does not include Palestinians in East Jerusalem or the West Bank who are not citizens.

6 Population of Israel on the eve of 2024 - Data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics in December 2023 https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/mediarelease/DocLib/2023/424/11_23_424b.pdf

7 Christians in Israel - Data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics in December 2023 <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/pages/2023/christmas-2023-christians-in-israel.aspx>

8 Declaration of Independence, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx>

9 Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty <https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawLiberty.pdf>

10 Basic Law: Israel - The Nation State of the Jewish People <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawNationState.pdf>

11 Statement of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land on the Nation State Law <https://www.medialpj.org/posts/assembly-of-catholic-ordinaries-calls-on-israel-to-rescind-its-nation-state-law-5e470fbf59a6f.html>

12 Ibid.

Muslim faiths, who preside over religious courts operating in accordance with the respective religious laws—*halakhah*, *sharia*, and *canon law*.

Lastly, in regard to missionary activity, it is often wrongly believed that the practice is outlawed in Israel, while the only restrictions declare that it is illegal to proselytize to a person younger than 18 without the consent of both parents, and to offer material benefit to potential converts while proselytizing.¹³

Context

In 2023, local Christian communities experienced a significant increase in both the frequency and intensity of harassment directed at them. While hostility towards the Christian presence has been a longstanding occurrence in some local communities, it has now escalated to a broader and more severe phenomenon. According to Christian leaders and experts on Christianity in the Holy Land, there is a connection between the growing sense of insecurity among local Christians and the wider socio-political context. As the Cardinal of Jerusalem, Pier Battista Pizzaballa said, regarding the spike in attacks, “these people [the attackers] feel they are protected... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians.”¹⁴ The purpose of this report is to contribute to an analysis of the current situation, examining the challenges faced by Christians living in Israel and East Jerusalem within the context of the trends characterizing Israeli society.

Broadly, 2023 was an *annus horribilis* for Israel/Palestine. It exposed the deep divisions running through Israeli society concerning the legal system and it saw a spike in violent attacks against Palestinians living in the West Bank.¹⁵ The October 7th attack committed by Hamas – which saw the killing of around 1,200 Israelis and the abduction of over 240 hostages into Gaza – triggered a devastating war, still ongoing at the time of writing this report. The Israeli military response has resulted in the mass displacement of Gazans and the killing of around 34,000 Palestinians to date. After years of political instability, in December 2022 the most right-wing government in Israeli history was sworn in, a coalition composed by an almost homogeneous bloc of ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious leaders led by Benjamin Netanyahu, a Prime Minister deeply weakened by corruption trials. The values guiding this extremist government comprise hardline stances vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of Judaism in shaping the character of the state. The judicial overhaul announced on January 4th, 2023, aimed to alter the system of checks and balances of the government through a series of measures, and it was immediately perceived by large segments of the Israeli public as dangerous to the very democratic essence of the country. The response was an unprecedented mass protest movement launched on January 7, which saw millions of Israelis¹⁶ take to the street week after week for nine months. The protest movement

13 Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium, United State Commission on International Religious Freedom <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/2023%20%20Anti-Conversion%20Laws%20Compendium.pdf>

14 Associated Press, “Holy Land Christians say attacks rising in far-right Israel”, April 13, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/christians-easter-attacks-netanyahu-jerusalem-e287dd6bad32573d1656eaea07223782>

15 UNRWA, Situation Report #51 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-51-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem>

16 Haaretz, “Seven million Israelis have participated in protests against Netanyahu’s Judicial Coup, Police chief says”, article accessed, September 4 2023 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-09-04/ty-article/.premium/police-chief-around-7-million-israelis-participated-in-anti-judicial-coup-protests/0000018a-5f41-d845-adfe-ff61a2940000>

The frequency of these attacks, the aggressions, has become something new. These people feel they are protected ... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians.

***Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa,
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem***

pledged loyalty to the values expressed by the Declaration of Independence, a quasi-Constitutional chart which ensures "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex."¹⁷ But in order to reach the widest consensus across the political spectrum, the leaders of the protests intentionally avoided any reference to the Occupation or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, alienating Palestinian citizens of Israel and at the same time reinforcing the misbelief that the current reality in the West Bank and Gaza was sustainable.¹⁸

On the contrary, very soon after the right-wing, ultra-nationalist coalition came to power, violence against Palestinians in the West Bank spiked. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) counted 1,225 cases of settler violence in 2023,¹⁹ and some attacks have reached pogrom-like dimensions, as in the case of Hawara, the Palestinian village attacked by 400 settlers on February 26, 2023. Days after the attack, Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's Finance Minister, called for the village to be wiped out, stressing that the operation should be carried out by the State itself, not by private individuals.²⁰ Many other members of the government or the broader coalition regularly express racist and ultra-nationalist views wrapped in populist language,²¹ contributing to the polarization

that has adversely impacted Israeli politics for years.

Finally, as a result of the devastating events of the last three months of 2023, fear has been the most pervasive reaction among Israelis and Palestinians and interactions in mixed Jewish-Palestinian settings were spontaneously halted. But despite this, polls carried out in November and then again in December by the Israeli Democracy Institute show a growing sense of belonging to the State among Palestinian citizens, with 70% of the respondents declaring that they feel part of the state and expressing the desire to be part of society.²²

17 Haaretz, "2023 was Israel's worst year ever. It ends with a few traces of hope", December 31, 2023 "<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-31/ty-article/.premium/2023-was-israels-worst-year-ever-it-ends-with-a-few-traces-of-hope/0000018c-c043-d4e1-ad8f-fcf349300000>

18 Ibid. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-31/ty-article/.premium/2023-was-israels-worst-year-ever-it-ends-with-a-few-traces-of-hope/0000018c-c043-d4e1-ad8f-fcf349300000>

19 Times of Israel, "2023 'most violent' year for West Bank settlers attacks, watchdog says", January 1st, 2024 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/2023-most-violent-year-for-west-bank-settler-attacks-watchdog-says/>

20 Axios, "US says Israeli minister call to wipe out Palestinian town is 'disgusting'", March 1st, 2023 <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/01/hawara-israeli-smotrich-wipe-out-west-bank-settlers>

21 BBC, "US condemns Israeli minister Ben Gvir's 'inflammatory' Palestinian comments", August 25, 2023 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66614459>

22 The Israeli Democracy Institute, "Public Opinion Survey of Arab Society in Israel on the War in Gaza" November–December 2023 <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/52016>



Police preventing pilgrims from attending the Eastern Good Friday ceremony in the Old City, April 2022. | Photo: Adi Marer.

Analysis

The desecration of about thirty tombs in the Anglican cemetery which took place in broad daylight on January 1st, 2023, epitomizes the atmosphere that would distinguish the year ahead: an unapologetic escalation in hostilities towards Christians, which included attacks on properties, spitting, disruptions of liturgies, graffiti and other forms of harassment. A lack of shared methodology among institutions collecting data on attacks in previous years prevents a comparative analysis. However, taking as a reference the situation reported in the “2022 International Religious Freedom Report” by the Office for Religious Freedom of the US State Department, or the attacks tracked by the “Protecting Holy Land Christians” ecumenical campaign between 2016 and 2022, there has been a significant surge in both the number and types of attacks.

A notable increase in spitting incidents, property attacks, trespassing, and a new trend targeting Christian pilgrims visiting the city has been identified. While spitting is by far the most pervasive type of attack experienced by Christians, it is also the most difficult act to track, report and prosecute. According to article 378 of the Israeli penal law, spitting is included in the felony of assault. In addition, article 144F states that “if a person commits an offense out of a racist motive [...] or out of enmity toward a public because of their religion, religious group, community of origin [...] then he shall be liable to double the penalty set for that offense or ten years of imprisonment, whichever is the lesser penalty.”²³ But victims are generally not aware of this legal aspect, and the wide majority choose not to report the incidents, also because of a prevalent tendency among the police to dismiss such cases as nonviolent or irrelevant. Consequently, a common attitude among religious individuals,

particularly those from Eastern traditions, is a form of acceptance of this insulting behavior, mostly out of humility. From conversations with victims of these cases, a smile and a silent blessing are typically the response to unknown passersby who engage in spitting. Spitting has been a known occurrence in religious life in Jerusalem for decades, but it has transformed from a covert act to perpetrators openly spitting at clergy, holy places, and even pilgrims, in broad daylight, before crowds and in the presence of security cameras. Similarly, **the series of spitting incidents and verbal harassment directed at pilgrims from abroad in 2023 marked a new development in the context of hostilities against Christians.** Historically, foreign visitors had typically been exempted from such offenses. However, it has now become an expectation among Israeli tour guides that groups may face harassment, particularly at locations deemed “hotspots,” such as the area of Mount Zion or the path of the Via Dolorosa. Additionally, there have been consistent informal reports from tour guides about instances where Christian pilgrims were denied access to Jewish religious sites, such as the “Tomb of David”.

Based on compiled records of known attacks in previous years, 2023 also witnessed a **notable increase in both severe property and physical assaults.** Some communities situated near Jewish neighborhoods, such as the Armenians in the Old City of Jerusalem and the Polish monastery located on the border of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, endured repeated attacks throughout the year. The Armenian Patriarchate, situated in the heart of the Armenian Quarter in the Old City, is positioned along a route commonly taken by Jewish residents and visitors heading to the Western Wall.

²³ Israeli Penal Code, accessed through the OECD website <https://www.oecd.org/investment/anti-bribery/anti-briberyconvention/43289694.pdf>

Both clergy and secular families reside within the compound, with additional families living in properties nearby. Due to its location, the Patriarchate, clergy, and individual neighbors have been regularly subjected to harassment by religious Jews, particularly young men and teenagers. These incidents encompass physical assaults involving pepper-spraying, hitting, verbal harassment and attempts to trespass.

Similarly, the Polish monastery bordering Mea Shearim experienced various forms of harassment over several months. The abuses ceased only after the community began reporting to the *Religious Freedom Data Center* hotline established by Ms. Yisca Harani, who drew the attention of the Police to the situation faced by the nuns and their guests. The heightened police presence successfully deterred assailants, leading to a halt in the most severe assaults. Nevertheless, instances of spitting, verbal harassment, and the throwing of objects and garbage into the compound from a nearby building persisted. Police intervention also proved effective in addressing attacks on the Catholic monastery of Stella Maris in Haifa, where a continuous two-month police presence ultimately discouraged attempts by Jewish followers of Rabbi Berland to pray at the monastery. **This emphasizes the critical need for swift and unequivocal condemnation by Israeli authorities, coupled with proactive police measures in the field, as the most urgent steps to deter or halt harassment.**

In August, after a meeting between the Command of the Jerusalem District police and city church leaders, a press release from the police underscored their commitment to ensuring the security of Christians. The document detailed 16 investigations initiated since the beginning of 2023, accompanied by 21 arrests and detentions related to attacks on Christians. Deputy Commissioner Doron

Turgeman, the Commander of the Jerusalem District, acknowledged in the release that spitting incidents often go unreported and deemed this as “the ugliest and most prevalent occurrence” faced by Christians. Despite these condemnations and an established communication channel between the Israeli police and the Heads of the Churches, Christians who reported attacks often encountered dismissal and a lack of action. The prevailing sentiment among community members is that substantive change has yet to transpire. Effecting meaningful change requires consistent intervention against attacks, with zero tolerance even in the case of non-criminal incidents. On the contrary, communities have experienced discrimination and abusive behaviors from the authorities, as in the case of the police intervention when the Armenian community faced repeated threats and physical attacks specifically linked to a dispute over the property in the area known as “Cows’ Gardens.” Amidst repeated confrontations with groups sent to intimidate the community, the Police arrested a few Armenian youth but not the assailants. This action conveyed a distinct message of mistrust and vulnerability that reverberated throughout the entire Armenian community.

Additionally, there is a need for increased awareness among police officers regarding the cultural and religious sensitivities of Christian communities. Indeed, tensions between the authorities and Christians can often be attributed to a lack of understanding by the police and public employees of the symbolic importance of spaces, rituals, or practices deeply meaningful and sacred to Christians. A pertinent example is the limitations imposed on access to the Holy Sepulcher during the Greek Orthodox ceremony of the Holy Fire. Another concern is the requests made to members of the clergy to remove or conceal the crosses they

"You cannot say that people fear for their personal safety, but the increased harassment makes us feel even more humiliated."

Resident of the Christian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem

wear as part of their religious attire. It is important to note that Jerusalem Christians fear that under the pretext of safeguarding public security or the sensibilities of the Jewish population, Israeli

authorities may be actively working to alter the character of the Old City by limiting the presence and visibility of Christians.

Media reports have been crucial in keeping the attention high on the challenges and fears that local Christians have been dealing with, and Israeli news media, both in Hebrew and English, consistently covered the issue along with international news outlets. A notable example of impactful media coverage illustrating the severity of the situation was a report by Israeli TV Channel 13. In this instance, a journalist assumed the role of a Franciscan monk to document attacks in the Old City, only to find himself spat at by a soldier. This type of media attention led local and state authorities to openly criticize the harassment of Christians, and condemnations came from President Isaac Herzog, the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the mayor of Haifa, and, after a highly publicized series of spitting attacks on pilgrims in October, also from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A number of prominent rabbis also spoke out against the assaults at different moments during the year. Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef referred to the attacks as "a desecration of the name of heaven" and emphasized that such actions have no place in Judaism, characterizing them as misguided nationalism. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau stressed that attacks on individuals of any faith "cannot be attributed to Jewish law," countering

the justifications of some offenders who claim spitting as an old custom supported by Jewish law. Alongside these critiques, other local leaders such as the Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem Aryeh King and influential rabbis with right-

wing positions organized events against what they perceived as "missionary activity". Despite these official antagonistic voices, it should be noted that there is no mainstream messaging from the political sphere encouraging attacks on Christian presence, but harassment of Christianity falls within a broader atmosphere of intolerance towards minorities, especially if not Jewish.

It is challenging to definitively categorize the age and gender of the victims. When groups of pilgrims or local Christians were targeted, the gender makeup of the group often is unknown, as is the case with disturbances during liturgies or services. In instances of individual attacks, it's noted that the majority of victims were male, including priests or young male residents of the Armenian Quarter. However, it's important to emphasize that communities predominantly composed of nuns, such as the Polish and Romanian delegations, have faced repeated attacks, and the sisters have been subjected to harassment within their community premises and during their movements to and from their monasteries. In terms of age distribution, the majority of victims are primarily adults or young adults, with no documented cases of attacks targeting children.

Information about the attackers was gathered through testimonies from the victims, footage from security cameras, photographs taken by witnesses, police cameras, or initiatives such as the *Religious*

Freedom Data Center established by Ms. Yisca Harani, whose volunteers were stationed at sensitive locations during special occasions and filmed attackers. In all instances, the perpetrators have been identified as Jewish individuals. The majority are teenagers or young adults, including uniformed soldiers, while a minority consists of older men and even children. The attackers are overwhelmingly male, with minimal involvement by women, who mostly serve as witnesses or encouragers and rarely participate actively. These assailants can be classified in two main groups: those who engaged in spitting on or near clergy and churches, curses and verbal harassment, and those involved in more severe actions such as graffiti, vandalism, and physical attacks. The first group typically consists of ultra-Orthodox ultra-nationalist individuals, referred to in Hebrew as *Hardal*, the most religiously and socially conservative end of the Religious Zionist block, together with the most nationalist part of the ultra-orthodox world. This group may include students from prominent yeshivas in Jerusalem, as well as young men who have been defined by authorities and the media as *Hilltop Youth*.²⁴ Presently, these groups play a more dominant role in the phenomenon of spitting. On the other hand, more serious attacks typically emanate from marginalized individuals on the social periphery, those who have not found their place within existing frameworks, including members of communities on the very fringes of Haredi society. The rise of the phenomenon among *Hardal* groups is linked, on the one hand, to their increased presence at intersections between Christians and Jews, showcasing sovereignty in the city, especially in areas like the Muslim Quarter and Mount Zion.

Additionally, within the current political landscape of the Israeli government, the influence of *the Hardal* sector and extreme religious Zionists can be seen having significant impact on government decisions. Representatives of extremist national religious and *Hardal* groups in the Knesset provide support and legitimacy for harassment and attacks. Attackers come from a variety of locations: some live in settlements - either within Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem or in the Occupied Territories - while many reside in West Jerusalem or other parts of Israel. And although they may support settlements, in Israeli terminology they cannot all be labeled as settlers. Lastly, it is crucial to note that this report does not seek to generalize the entire Jewish Orthodox society. This behavior is not normative, and **the majority of people, regardless of their views on Christianity or other religious minorities, do not engage in these actions.**

As mentioned, the targeting of Christianity is not explicitly on the political leadership's agenda, but it is intricately linked to the broader socio-political climate. The ongoing shift towards the far-right, a growing sense of nationalism, and the emphasis on Israel primarily as a state for the Jewish population have collectively undermined both the legal and perceived sense of equality for any minority within the country. The attacks outlined in this report are in fact connected to a set of broader issues that the Churches have been grappling with. These challenges encompass escalating difficulties in securing visas for foreign clergy, ongoing debates concerning the state's proposed changes to the fiscal status of Church properties, and initiatives aiming to convert Church land surrounding the

²⁴ Hilltop Youth is a definition applied to extremist, right-wing young men, who are usually driven by nationalist positions but often consider themselves also anarchists, who establish or live in illegal outposts in the West Bank and carry out violent attacks against Palestinians.

²⁵ Ynet, "Christian monk says is under daily attacks from extremist Jews", January 6, 2023 <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/sjkkmas82>

***"There have always been forces that hate us but now they sit in the government. I get spat on almost every day. 20 years ago, it was maybe every six months."*²⁵**

Fr. Nikodemus Schnabel, Abbot of the Church of the Dormition in Jerusalem

Old City into a national park. We believe that the surge in overt animosity towards Christianity can be attributed to the unique and intricate dynamics characterizing Jewish-Christian relations in the Holy Land. This region stands as the only space where the historical majority/minority relationship has undergone a reversal, with Jews now constituting the majority tasked with safeguarding the rights of Christians in their midst. While Jewish identity was historically molded by centuries of perceived inferiority vis-à-vis the Christian world, the contemporary scenario, where Christianity no longer poses a threat and a robust, independent Jewish state is established, has fostered a new and unapologetic attitude among Orthodox Judaism and its authorities. As argued by Hebrew University senior lecturer Karma Ben Johanan in her book "Jacob's Younger Brother," "Orthodox Jews are not "raising the fences" out of fear of Christianity and "gentile" culture; on the contrary, they part ways from previous, more lenient positions toward Christians precisely because they no longer fear them. The new freedoms brought by the post-

World War II liberal ethos gave rise to initiatives of rapprochement and friendships that were previously unimaginable, at the same time that they surfaced old resentments that were repressed under a thick barrier of cultural and political inferiority".²⁶ This sense of reaffirmed Jewish identity reaches its most extreme expression in the context of right-wing ultra-nationalism, a phenomenon that has become an important factor in Israeli society, particularly as articulated by members of the current government.

Lastly, we want to mention the repercussions of the ongoing war in Gaza, where the ancient Christian community counts less than a thousand individuals and is at risk of disappearing. Christians in Gaza have endured both loss of life and the damage to very ancient religious sites and vital infrastructures. Since the conflict's inception, the leadership of the various Churches in Jerusalem has consistently appealed for an immediate cessation of hostility. Furthermore, after the attacks suffered by churches and convents, where the Christian population has been sheltering for months, Church leaders have also urged Israeli authorities to recognize the compounds and hospitals as protected locations. The leadership has endeavored to walk a fine line, keeping the diplomatic dialogue open with Israel while protecting the rights and wellbeing of their communities in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. While this territory is beyond the scope of this report, we deemed it necessary to include it here as the Church leaders and laity have communicated to us during the gathering of data, the key importance of this issue for them.²⁷

26 Karma Ben-Johanan, *Yacob's Younger Brother - Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022, 193.

27 Messages and Statements from the Patriarchs and Church Leaders, accessed on the Protecting Holy Land Christians website <https://protectingholylandchristians.org/messages-statements/>



Methodology

The *JCJCR Advocacy and Education Initiative* seeks to monitor criminal and non-criminal incidents of harassment and violence towards Christian communities and individuals. This includes cases of harassment in its different manifestations, physical assaults, attacks against property and violations of freedom of religion. Our initiative aims to cover territories within Israel and East Jerusalem, but at this stage our proactive monitoring effort is focused on Jerusalem.

Via Dolorosa, Christian Quarter. Photo: Hana Bendcowsky



Abuna Fadi Salofi, the Abbot of the St. Gabriel Church in Migdal HaEmek, showing the stones thrown at the monastery on August 21, 2023. | Photo: Yossi Zamir, Tag Meir.

In 2023, we collected incident data from several sources:

- directly from the victims, a category which comprises the religious leadership of local Churches, religious and lay members of local communities, pilgrims, and Christian tourists
- from media reports
- from partners working in the field
- from the Police

Our monitoring effort started spontaneously in the first days of January, after witnessing a string of egregious attacks against Christian properties and individuals. We soon decided to launch our *Advocacy and Education Initiative*, and since the very beginning we have been sharing and exchanging information with other actors who follow with concern the increasing trends of hostility towards Christians in Jerusalem.

Therefore, the data-gathering process has been a joint effort together with other civil society organizations, tour guides and activists working in the field, such as the *Religious Freedom Data Center* established by Ms. Yisca Harani, the *Jerusalem Intercultural Center*, *Tag Meir*, and *Ir Amim*. An immediate goal in terms of data collection has been the establishment of a unified list of attacks, in order to avoid duplication or dispersion of information, and to assemble a reliable body of data regarding the attacks. For this reason, in the second half of the year we decided to channel all incident reports to the *Religious Freedom Data Center*, which offers a platform for incident reporting accessible in multiple languages.

In accordance with the information requested by the authorities, we made every effort to document



The Armenian property known as Cows' Garden (Goverou Bardez) in the Old City, at the center of a land dispute. | Photo: Adi Marer

all pertinent details to ensure thoroughness. This documentation may prove crucial should the victims choose to pursue a legal claim, whether independently or with our assistance. Therefore, upon receiving a direct incident report, the staff at the *Rossing Center* engaged in conversations with the victim or the representative of the targeted institution. The purpose was to gather more details about the attack and extend support. If news of an attack reached us through our partners or media reports, and identification of the victim was possible, we promptly reached out to them to obtain a first-hand report and specific information. We followed up on the outcomes of the claims, particularly in criminal incidents, to the best of our capacity. All recorded information was securely stored on a digital platform and organized based on a predefined set of categories.

Finally, we closely monitored media coverage addressing attacks and the challenges faced by Christians in the Holy Land. Our objective was to collect a comprehensive array of reports to conduct an assessment of the overall discourse within the Israeli media concerning the harassment of Christian communities.

We want to stress that due to the very nature of the incidents, our report offers only a partial view into a structural, pervasive issue. Many attacks go unreported daily, either because victims deem it useless to report to the authorities, or because it would be very difficult to apprehend the perpetrators of incidents such as verbal harassment or spitting. Therefore, one of the goals of our *Advocacy and Education Initiative* is to increase the awareness among Christian communities about the legal standing of incidents and the need to report them.

Recommendations

Enhancing police intervention, boosting the presence of police officers in critical areas, and promoting awareness of attacks on Christians.

This involves leveraging collaboration between field police officers and technological tools, such as body cameras and street cameras, to identify perpetrators of harassment incidents against Christians. This proactive approach aims to enhance surveillance capabilities and facilitate the investigation process. Furthermore, it entails thorough investigation of all incidents, including seemingly minor ones like spitting, to establish a strong deterrent effect. Officers should be instructed to handle spitting cases in strict adherence to legal standards, emphasizing the significance of taking all reports seriously and avoiding dismissal of any incidents.

Offering training regarding Christianity to members of local police, municipality and other relevant authorities in order to build literacy and improve their ability to communicate properly with Christian leadership and members of the communities.

This will limit frictions and avoid incidents which may fall under the scope of Freedom of Religion or Belief, such as the escalating tensions surrounding the celebration of the Holy Fire ceremony at the Holy Sepulchre during the Greek Orthodox Easter. These programs may encompass brief reviews, lectures, or a series of lectures, meetings, and tours. They aim to provide a communication channel for consultation, fostering shared dialogue to enhance understanding and relationships with Christian denominations.

Establishment of two official positions - one within the municipality and one within the national government – as liaisons to the Churches' leadership.

Both local and national authorities currently lack a designated liaison to address any questions or issues concerning the Christian communities. While there are specific officials responsible for certain matters, there is a gap in addressing broader issues. Many problems either go unresolved or fail to reach the appropriate person who can provide assistance. Therefore, we strongly advocate the appointment of a coordination person in the municipalities of mixed cities and government offices. These individuals will need knowledge of the special status and unique challenges faced by churches and Christians, facilitating assistance, referrals, and communication with relevant parties. The *Rossing Center* is happy to offer training and ongoing consultation services, as needed. It is noteworthy that in the past, such a liaison position existed within the Municipality of Jerusalem but was discontinued over 10 years ago. However, the Christian communities department at the Ministry of Interior is currently overwhelmed with existing obligations.

Improve curricula about Christianity in the public education system.

We acknowledge that the rise in attacks against Christians can be attributed, on one hand, to an implicit message that non-Jewish minority groups do not merit respect or recognition, allowing extremists to exploit the atmosphere to target not only Christians but also other vulnerable groups. On the other hand, a lack of awareness about the issue, unfamiliarity with Christianity and Christians in Israel, and a failure to comprehend the sensitivities contribute to these attacks going unnoticed by most Israelis. Whether

due to indifference or insufficient knowledge, many Israelis do not respond or condemn these incidents. To foster delegitimization of these attacks and encourage widespread condemnation, it is crucial to address the issue through educational initiatives. This involves promoting exposure, providing education, facilitating access to knowledge, and incorporating information about Christianity and Christian communities in Israel into the school curriculum. These efforts collectively contribute to increased awareness and a proactive approach to tackling the problem.

Ensuring appropriate coverage in mainstream media and social media messaging.

Communication tools and social media play a pivotal role in raising awareness, shedding light on a subject, and fostering discourse around it. Presently, most information is disseminated to the public through official and social media channels rather than traditional educational methods. Media platforms serve to acquaint the general public with instances of assault and harm against Christians, as well as the responses from state authorities, the police and various government agencies. Leveraging both traditional and social media enables the dissemination of reliable and well-organized knowledge about Christians in Israel to the broader public. Social media in particular serves as a tool for cultivating a reciprocal dialogue between content creators and their audience. It encourages engagement and activism among the public, fostering a dynamic conversation that motivates participants to take action contributing to the eradication of the identified issues.

Stronger condemnations from the authorities and religious Jewish leadership in order to communicate support and solidarity to the Christian leaders and the communities at large.

Taking a strong stance and disseminating it

through influential figures, elected officials, and representatives is instrumental in conveying a message that delegitimizes attacks and harm against minority communities. Specifically for Christian communities, expressions of support and concern coming from Jewish Israeli authorities demonstrate recognition of their belonging to the Holy Land, their societal role, and the value and esteem that the majority society places on their presence in the region.

Encouraging Christian communities to report and be aware of the importance of not dismissing attacks.

We are unable to accurately assess the extent and severity of the phenomenon without the collaboration of church leaders, members of religious communities, employees at Christian sites, tour guides, and tourists. As previously mentioned, there exists a reluctance to report, either due to fear or because clergy may not find it worthwhile, as outlined earlier. The essential key to combating and eliminating the phenomenon lies in the cooperation of these communities, facilitated by the encouragement and support of church leaders.

Increasing awareness and understanding among diplomatic representatives regarding Jewish-Christian relations in Jerusalem.

We acknowledge the necessity for broader engagement from the international community to have a more substantial impact on Israeli authorities. To elevate the priority of this issue, we propose encouraging churches worldwide, Christian communities, diplomats, and aid organizations, among others, to actively address this matter. This involves raising awareness among their peers in their respective countries, fostering media exposure, and exerting pressure on Israeli authorities to address the phenomena seriously. It is imperative to treat incidents of attacks with the utmost seriousness, issue official condemnations, and ensure that attackers are brought to justice.

Anglican Cemetery on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, in the aftermath of the attack on January 1st, 2023, which damaged dozens of tombs. | Photo: Federica Sasso



ANNEX I: Detailed List of Known Attacks

Physical attacks:

Examples include spitting, pepper-spraying, hitting.

- On the evening of January 28, 2023, two Jewish young men attacked a car containing two Armenian young men near the Armenian compound. According to an account provided by the Armenian Patriarchate through its Facebook official page, the Armenians inquired about the motive behind the attack, only to be met with pepper spray to their eyes. Subsequently, the Armenians had to go to hospital for treatment, after which they reported the incident at the police Station. The police apprehended one of the attackers. Approximately an hour later, a large group of Jewish young men attempted to climb the Patriarchate's building with the intention of removing the Patriarchate's flag (bearing a cross with the Armenian letters of St. James), and the Armenian flag. Armenian young men prevented them from doing so, causing the Jewish group to flee. However, some members returned and started provoking the Armenian youth, and the Jewish young men ran towards the police station, falsely claiming a terrorist attack was taking place. In response, the police attacked the Armenian youths and detained one of them. Following the intervention by His Beatitude Archbishop Nourhan Manougian, and with court approval, the detained Armenian was released, and after medical examination and treatment for his injuries, placed under house arrest for 20 days awaiting trial. He was eventually released, but it is not clear if the case is still pending.
- In March, a Christian man from the United States, who was volunteering at a shop in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, faced repeated harassment. On one occasion, a group of Jewish Orthodox men forcibly entered the shop, pepper-sprayed him, and punched him in the face. Subsequently, a group of Jewish children barricaded the door to the shop. He was spat at from the synagogue located above the store on multiple occasions, and liquids were poured on him from above while he was opening the shop door. Additionally, Jewish Orthodox men would display knives in his presence, while others verbally harassed him during work hours, labeling him as a "missionary." This accusation tarnished his relationships with potential Jewish customers. Eventually, due to these intimidations, the volunteer was compelled to leave his position.
- In April, participants in an Armenian procession suffered repeated spitting while passing in front of the Armenian St. James cathedral.
- In April, the guardian of the Church of the Flagellation (2nd Station of the Via Dolorosa) filmed numerous incidents of spitting. The videos show orthodox Jewish men, walking by the entrance to the compound of the church - alone or in groups - and spitting either at the entrance to the compound or at the cross carried by pilgrims walking the Via Crucis procession.
- The same month, two religious men wearing black skull caps spat right next to two Greek Orthodox priests. The incident happened in the area of Jaffa Gate and policemen stationed there witnessed the incident, but they insisted they could not arrest the perpetrators because the spitting did not hit the priests. This is inaccurate, because according to Israeli law, spitting is a crime of assault derived from the penal code.

- On May 1st, around 6 or 7pm two sisters from the community of the "Little Sisters of Jesus" were standing near the parking entrance to the Karta parking lot near Jaffa Gate, when they were confronted by 3 religious boys with shirts, tassels and skull caps. The boys stood at a distance of 1.5 meters in a threatening manner, meaning that they did not move to the sides and spat directly towards the sisters. Then they started speaking sentences in Hebrew that the sisters could not understand, except the word "Yeshu" repeated many times.
- Repeated spitting in front of the Armenian Cathedral of St. James during the "Flag Parade" on Jerusalem Day.
- On May 28, a young woman spat twice in the direction of two Benedictine sisters walking in the area of Zion Gate.
- The same day, four religious boys screamed and then repeatedly spat at a group of tourists on their way to the Romanian Church, which is located on Shivtei Israel Street, near the neighborhood of Mea Shearim.
- On June 6, a boy spat on the ground near a Catholic priest who was standing in front of the Polish Monastery located on Hahoma HaShlishit Street, near Mea Shearim.
- In mid-June, an entire family of religious Jews walked by the Church of the Flagellation and a member of the family spat at the entrance of the church. An Israeli tour guide who witnessed the incident engaged with the family, but they stood by their actions justifying the spitting through the teachings of the Jewish medieval rabbi and philosopher Maimonides.
- On June 16, right after the conference organized by Ms. Yisca Harani on the issue of spitting, Ms. Harani was walking behind the Catholic Monsignor William Shomali and another priest from the Latin Patriarchate. While they were standing right in front of the Armenian Cathedral, a Jewish orthodox boy walked by and spat on the floor behind the two clergymen who did not notice the gesture.
- On July 11, a visitor opened the door of the Polish monastery on Rechov Hachoma HaShlishit in order to walk inside the property and three children spat in her direction. After this, the children ran to the yard of the Breslov school located near the convent.
- On July 26 (the eve of the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'Av), two Jewish girls passed by the Armenian monastery and spat at the gate. Asked why by an Armenian by-stander, one of them replied that "Jerusalem is Jewish and it should be ours'. The same evening, three men passed by the monastery and spat at the gate. A police officer who was present and saw the men spitting, told them that this is not nice behavior and let them go.
- On July 27, a group of religious Jews walking towards Lions Gate passed by the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the via Dolorosa), where a group of pilgrims was standing. Some of the men spat at the entrance to the church, and one of them spat twice in a very explicit way.
- On August 2nd, a nun was spat on while walking on Rechov HaNeviim, near the St. Joseph Monastery.
- On August 8, an Orthodox Archbishop was spat at while walking in the Old City. He was on his way to a meeting convened by the Jerusalem District Police Command and the heads of the Churches. The same day, walking back from the same meeting, the Lutheran Propst, Joachim Kenz was spat at by a young boy.
- On August 26, a Jewish man passed by the Church of the Flagellation and spat towards the gate of the compound.



Ethiopian pilgrims walking the Way of the Cross in the Old City, April 2023. | Photo: Adi Marer

- On August 28, one of the Polish sisters living in the monastery on Rechov Hachoma HaShlshit was attacked by someone in a building adjacent to the monastery. The suspects threw rotten pears at the sister, hitting her in the leg. The incident went on for a while and the sister had to hide in the house because the throwing was getting more intense.
- On September 1, a Jewish man spat at the entrance to the compound of the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the via Dolorosa).
- On September 2, a Jewish man spat in the direction of the entrance to the compound of the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the via Dolorosa).
- On September 8, a Jewish man spat at the entrance to the compound of the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the via Dolorosa).
- On September 12, a group of Jewish men were walking on the Via Dolorosa and one of them spat in the direction of the Church of the Flagellation, very close to the guard and to the tour guide who reported the incident.
- On October 1st, a group of Orthodox Jews spat at a group of pilgrims walking out of the Church of the Flagellation and carrying a cross for the Via Crucis.
- On October 2nd, two boys who appeared to be Jewish settlers walked into the Armenian monastery and spat at the door.
- On October 3rd, a group of children, boys and adults passed by the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the Via Dolorosa) and spat at the church and pilgrims.

Graffiti on the walls of the Armenian monastery in the Armenian Quarter reading "Death to the Christians". | Photo: Tag Meir



- On October 7, a physical confrontation took place in front of the Armenian Patriarchate between two Jewish men and an Armenian, after the two men spat at the Armenian monastery. The video of the security camera shows the two men fighting with the Armenian and pepper-spraying him.
- On October 12, two Jewish men threatened the guard of the Church of the Flagellation (Second Station of the Via Dolorosa); they called on him to come out and confront them. He hid, refusing to come out, and when they eventually left one of them spat on the floor.
- On October 31st, an Armenian father and his son were spat at by a group of four Jewish teenagers in front of the Armenian Patriarchate. One of the youngsters then also pepper-sprayed the father. Another two religious Jewish teenagers were on bikes looking at the scene.
- On November 5, a group of about 15 Jewish young men arrived at the parking lot located in the Armenian quarter which has been at the center of a land property dispute between the Armenian Patriarchate and Xana Capital, a development company. The group of Jewish men arrived with weapons and guard dogs at the parking lot known as Cows' Gardens and demanded the expulsion of the Armenians who were standing on the land to prevent demolitions of parts of the disputed property. According to a communique released by the Armenian group called 'Save the Armenian Quarter', some of the Jewish men also said offensive things like Armenians are all "Goys and when the Messiah comes [they] will all die." In response to the aggressive presence, the Armenian Patriarch, His Beatitude Archbishop Nourhan Manougian arrived at the scene along with other bishops and priests.
- On November 15, a motorcade of 4x4 vehicles and motorbikes arrived at the Armenian parking lot's premises. According to the members of the Armenian community, the group was sent by Xana Capital. The community alerted the police, which arrived at the scene. When the police officers arrived, some of the trespassers scattered but others stayed and according to witnesses from within the Armenian community, the officers did allow some of the people to stay on the Armenian property. Eventually, the Police ended up arresting three Armenians, including a 17-year-old minor.
- On December 28, thirty masked individuals arrived at the Armenian parking lot known as Cows' Gardens and attacked members of the Armenian community stationed there to guard the property. The assailants were accompanied by attack dogs and assaulted clergy and secular members of the community with batons, stones and pepper spray. According to accounts published by the 'Save the Armenian Quarter' activist group, when the Israeli police arrived at the scene, two members of the Armenian community were unjustly arrested.

Attacks on Church Properties:

Examples include graffiti, trespassing, damaging statues, throwing of stones and garbage within Church properties, arson.

- In the early afternoon of January 1st, two religious Jewish teenagers were caught on camera vandalizing 28 graves of the Anglican Protestant cemetery on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The camera footage shows the two young men (one was a minor), dressed in skullcaps and the knotted ritual fringes worn by observant Jews, knocking over crosses, damaging tombstones, and throwing debris over the graves. The perpetrators were arrested and then put under house arrest.
- On January 11, members of the Maronite Church in the northern city of Ma'alot-Tarshiha discovered that their community center had been attacked during the Christmas holiday. The community center, which also serves as a place of worship for a Maronite community of 250 people, had Christian images defaced and equipment broken. The community notified the municipality and the police, who came and took photos and began an investigation.
- On the night of January 12, someone left threats on the walls of the Armenian monastery in the Old City. The different graffiti in Hebrew read: "Death to Arabs, death to Christians, death to the Armenians."
- On February 2nd, an American Jewish tourist in his 40s was arrested after vandalizing a statue of Jesus at the Church of the Flagellation. After walking into the church, which is located at the 2nd Station of the Via Dolorosa, the man knocked down and damaged the statue. The guardians of the compound managed to stop the perpetrator and called the police. The suspect was arrested and interrogated, and later the case was closed after the police declared that the man suffers from a mental illness.
- On February 16, graffiti was found on the walls surrounding the Armenian Patriarchate, reading "Death to Christians".
- On March 19, two Israeli men entered the Greek Orthodox Church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in East Jerusalem, and physically attacked with a metal rod a bishop and two priests who were taking part in a religious service, while attempting to deface items in the church. According to eyewitnesses quoted by the press, the attackers were wearing a skullcap and the ritual fringes worn by observant Jews. Police reports only mentioned one assailant, a 27 year old citizen of Israel of Moldovan descent who was arrested. The case was closed after the man was declared mentally ill.
- The community of Catholic sisters living at the Polish monastery bordering the ultra-orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea-Shearim (Rechov Hahoma Hashlishit) suffered repeated attacks and harassment over the course of 2023. According to the sisters, the community experienced almost daily verbal harassment and spitting, and objects such as eggs, glass bottles, rolls of toilet paper, rotten fruit, plastic bags filled with water, metal sticks, stones and objects on fire, have been thrown into their property. Pilgrims staying at the house have been harassed and spat at as well. In the month of April graffiti with a red star of David and the number 318 was sprayed on the doors of the monastery. In June, while

“There are things that make us worry about our very existence, but without hope, more and more of us will leave.”²⁸

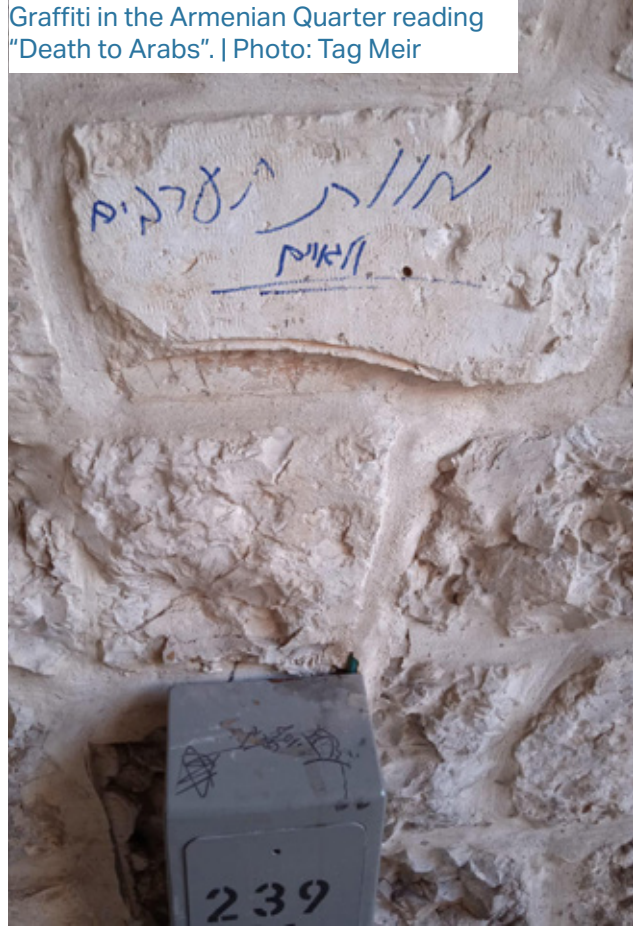
Bishop Sani Azar, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

standing in front of the house, the sisters saw that objects were being thrown in their direction, most likely from the roof of the house next to the monastery. Some of the objects included a girl's shoe, plywood, and a can of chips. The following evening, some boys threw several very large stones on the roof of the monastery's garage and in front of the sisters' house. A couple of days later, on June 16, between 3:40 and 3:50 at night, a young man threw a large stone against the front door of the house which was consequently damaged. The security camera footage shows the man entering the area, looking through the windows of the monastery and eventually throwing the stone. The noise woke some of the pilgrim guests of the monastery, who made the suspect run away, but the footage shows that he returned after a few minutes and hit the door with a rock once more. On June 24, a small group of two or three men again threw stones towards the monastery. On July 7, at 5:30pm someone threw garbage into the garden of the monastery, and when the sisters came out to see who it was, the perpetrators also started

to throw stones. On July 8, the stone-throwing continued. In the afternoon, from the house next door, large stones were thrown at the monastery building and they damaged the wall of the chapel. After this, more stones and bottles were thrown into the monastery's garden. A few days later, on July 12, about 3 kilos of rotten apples were thrown into the garden of the monastery. Then the property was also attacked during the night. Footage from the security camera at the monastery shows a young man trespassing around 3:30am, collecting a pot from the garden and smashing it against the door leading into the main building. At 4am someone trespassed once again (apparently the same suspect), acting in the same way: the man picked up a pot from a corner of the garden and launched it against the main building (this time the pot did not reach the door and smashed on the floor). The following night, on July 15 a few individuals trespassed again. At 2:25am two young men walked in from the gate, picked up two pots from the garden and smashed them against the door of the building. Later, at 3:50am, a man who seemed to be speaking on the phone, walked through the gate straight to the entrance door and checked if it was open. Then he called in a second man, who also walked through the open gate and checked the entrance. Then the suspects walked around the garden, checked the entrance door once again, and were joined by a third man who also seemed to be verifying if it was possible to open the door. After this, two of the men walked out of the property, while the third man walked around

28 Associated Press, "Holy Land Christians say attacks rising in far-right Israel", April 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/christians-easter-attacks-netanyahu-jerusalem-e287dd6bad32573d1656eaea07223782>

Graffiti in the Armenian Quarter reading "Death to Arabs". | Photo: Tag Meir



the garden and eventually also left. On August 26, at 10:00pm a guest staying at the monastery brought to the sisters a stone that had been thrown through the window. On September 11, someone threw rotten tomatoes into the garden of the monastery.

- In May, the walls and windows of the Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion were sprayed with graffiti, including a Star of David.
- In May, followers of convicted sex offender and fraudster, Rabbi Eliezer Berland (Shuvu Achim Yeshiva), started to visit the Catholic Stella Maris Monastery for Discalced Carmelite Monks located on Mount Carmel, in Haifa. For months, single individuals or groups of men, traveled from Jerusalem and prayed in loud voices near the gate of the monastery. In one incident, one individual also walked inside the church to pray in the cave that the group claims to be the tomb of the biblical prophet Elisha. There is no historical proof to consolidate this claim, and both local and state authorities condemned the provocative visits. On June 19, about 300 Christians demonstrated in front of the monastery against the actions of the Hasidim, with MKs Ayman Odeh and Aida Touma-Suleiman attending the demonstration. Mayor of Haifa, Einat Kalish Rotem, paid a visit to the leadership of the community condemning the disturbances. She also conveyed a meeting with church leaders and the police in order to address the issue and find solutions to prevent attrition and make sure the site does not become a space for religious disturbances. On July 23, about 30 Hasidim (many of them minors) arrived by bus to the monastery and disrupted the Sunday mass, raising the ire of Catholic worshippers,

who pushed the group out engaging in physical confrontation. Responding to the seriousness of the attacks, on August 9, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited the monastery and participated in a meeting with the leaders of the Churches, including Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilus III and Anglican Archbishop Hosam Naoum, and Israel's Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai. According to the Superior of the community, following the intervention of the authorities, the police guarded the monastery day and night for about two months. The police intervention, combined with the erection of a fence around the entrance to the monastery, discouraged the attacks, and since September the situation at the monastery has been calm.

- On May 26, a window of the Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion was shattered with a stone.
- On June 15, a stained-glass window of the

Cenacle, the room said to be the site of the Last Supper, was shattered by a Jewish man who threw stones against the building until he was detained by a security guard. The suspect was arrested and stood in front of a Magistrate's Court but released under restriction of staying away from the Old City for 30 days. He is known to the police as a person with mental health issues.

- On August 1st, a religious Jewish man made obscene gestures and threw garbage into the area of the Armenian Genocide Memorial.
- On August 21, father Fadi Shufila, the abbot of the monastery of St. Gabriel in Migdal HaEmek woke up at 1:30am hearing noises. Someone was throwing rocks at the monastery, but when the abbot came out, he had to hide for fear of being hit by the stones. He also heard the attackers shouting words against Arabs and Christians. The whole incident lasted about 15 minutes.
- On August 22, stones were thrown again at the monastery. According to media reports the police caught the attackers at the end of September. They were two 14-year-old boys and due to their age the incident was closed and labeled as "childish things".
- On August 26, a young boy threw a wooden block at the gate of the Armenian Patriarchate in the Old City. Then he approached the security camera and made an obscene gesture towards it.
- On the night of December 27, an anti-Christian graffiti was painted on the wall of the Greek Orthodox cemetery located in the area of Mount Zion, just in front of the Dormition Abbey. The Hebrew writing reads: "The Christian mission is worse than Hamas. Death to missionaries.

A missionary is a Nazi." The abbot Nikodemus Schnabel wrote on social media channels that a cleaner from the municipality had already removed the text in the early hours of the following morning.

Harassment:

Examples include verbal harassment, attacks and protests during Christian gathering, anti-Christian propaganda.

- On April 1st, a group of religious Jewish children and teenagers cursed and harassed pilgrims in the area of the Last Supper on Mount Zion.
- At the end of May, on the occasion of the Catholic Pentecost, Franciscan friars were celebrating a short service at the Cenacle (also known as the Upper Room) on Mount Zion, while a group of ultra-Orthodox men and boys were disturbing the liturgy from outside. In videos shared among groups monitoring the sensitive area of Mount Zion, the men can be seen blowing shofars and screaming in order to disrupt the celebration, and in one video we can see two policemen standing at the site without intervening. The disturbances to freedom of worship were even more severe in this case, if considered that according to the Status Quo, Catholics are allowed to pray in the Cenacle only a few times a year due to a controversy with the State of Israel around property rights.
- Similarly, at the end of May, dozens of right-wing activists violently disrupted a prayer gathering organized by the Evangelical movement linked to the International House Prayer of Kansas City. The event took place near the Davidson Center, at the archeological park located near the southern steps at the southern Wall of the Temple Mount.

"It's getting worse. There is an attack on the Christian identity" of Jerusalem.²⁹

The several hundred participants had to be ushered in by the police, while

protesters chanted "Missionaries go home!" spat at them and tried to block them. Eventually, one of the Davidson Center's glass doors was also smashed. Among the demonstrators were Deputy Mayor Aryeh King (from the far-right "Meuhadim" group within the City Council), Rabbi Zvi Tau, the spiritual leader of the extreme right-wing Noam party, and Matiyahu Dan, the chairman of "Ateret Cohanim", an organization which promotes Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem. Aryeh King was among the promoters of the demonstration, and according to media reports he criticized the decision to allow the prayer gathering to take place at Davidson Center, which is managed by the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City. This was not the first time that the Davidson Center hosted foreign Christian communities, and Churches of different denominations have been renting the space for many years. According to quotes reported by the media, Mr. King wrote that the protest was a "dignified and just protest against a government company that allowed this, and against the missionaries. As far as I'm concerned, let every missionary know they are not welcome in the Land of Israel."³⁰ He also

*Yousef Daher, Executive Director of
the Jerusalem Interchurch Center*

declared that "it is the duty of every Jew to save all Jews from descending

into the Christian cult. The provocation by 110 missionary groups will not pass quietly and we came here to protest in front of them" and that "they should understand that this is not the way to show their love for us."³¹ The protest was met with strong condemnation from within Israeli society, starting with fellow members of the Jerusalem City Council and Israel's Foreign Ministry, as well as from independent organizations such as the Israeli branch of the Anti-Defamation League.

- On June 22, dozens of activists (many of them teens and boys), disrupted a worship concert of Messianic Jewish leaders organized by the "Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries" in the Clal Center, a building located in central Jerusalem. According to media reports, most of the activists belonged to the far-right Jewish supremacist organization "Lehava" and from "Or L'Achim", an organization countering Christian proselytizing in Israel. Videos of the attack shared on social media show protesters screaming against the congregants, pushing them, and preventing them from entering the hall of the concert. One person was arrested for scuffling with the police. Outside of the Clal Center, Deputy Mayor Arie King accused the organizers of the music event

29 Columbia News Service, "Amid Rising Attacks on Christian Sites in Jerusalem, Urgency Grows Among Clergy", May 26, 2023 <https://columbianewsservice.com/2023/05/26/amid-rising-attacks-on-christian-sites-in-jerusalem-urgency-grows-among-clergy-and-advocates/>

30 Times of Israel, "Near the Western Wall Jewish radicals shout at Christian Evangelicals to go home", May 28, 2023 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/near-the-western-wall-jewish-radicals-shout-at-christian-evangelicals-to-go-home/>

31 Haaretz, "Dozens of Right-wing Jewish activists protest Evangelical event near Western Wall", May 28, 2023 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-05-28/ty-article/.premium/dozens-of-right-wing-activists-protest-christian-event-near-western-wall/00000188-61d3-df79-a19d-f3df35f60000>

***"If the perpetrators are not held accountable, they will continue their attacks, but if one person is punished, this will be a deterrent."*³²**

Munib Younan, Bishop Emeritus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

of missionary activities and once again decried the fact that such Christian worship ceremonies are preparation for missionary efforts directed at Israelis.³³

- On July 2nd, a Christian was initially refused care in a health clinic, where they were trying to get a blood test. The woman who was supposed to perform the service started shouting at the patient and then another colleague came in to administer the test.
- On July 3rd, a Maronite nun wished to enter the women's section of King David's Tomb, but the Jewish women present at the site firmly told her that she was not allowed in.
- On July 7, a religious Jewish man verbally harassed a small group of 3 Chinese tourists. The tour guide accompanying the group was giving an explanation near the mezuzah of the Jaffa Gate when they started hearing frightening shouts and then saw the religious man approaching and screaming at them "Don't touch! Don't touch you goyim [gentiles]!" Then he passed in between the group and left.
- On July 16, a young man passed by the Armenian quarter and verbally harassed two Armenian priests standing on the sidewalk on the other side of the street. He threw a phone towards them, spat at them and yelled "This is our country".
- On July 25, a Jewish young man disrupted the visit of a group of pilgrims standing in the area of Mount Zion. The group was accompanied by a pastor and a tour guide. The young man silenced the pastor, shouting that the group was not allowed to be there and could not talk while standing in that area. The man cursed the group and yelled at pilgrims saying that they should leave the Jewish state. His demeanor was intimidating, and he did not stop until the group eventually left the area.
- On August 23, three young men disrupted the explanation of a guide accompanying a group of pilgrims near King David's Tomb on Mount Zion. The three men sang and shouted while the tour guide was speaking to the group, and when asked to leave the group alone, one of the men came very close to the tour guide with a provocative smile and made obscene gestures. The guide called the police, but the whole incident was dismissed because no physical violence had taken place.
- On August 29, two young religious Jewish men shouted and aggressively pushed a group of Indian pilgrims who were visiting the Tomb of King David.
- On September 11, in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, two Christian women were surrounded and harassed by a group of Jewish religious

32 Memo, Middle East Monitor, "Israel assaults against Christians climb: Palestinian Bishop", February 5, 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240205-israel-assaults-against-christians-climb-palestinian-bishop/>

33 Times of Israel, "Christians worry growing protests against 'missionaries' will soon turn bloody", July 7, 2023 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/christians-worry-growing-protests-against-missionaries-will-soon-turn-bloody/>

children and youth. The women were wearing a headset with a microphone, but from a video posted on X (formerly known as Twitter) it is not clear if they were preaching or distributing any material. The Jewish kids and teenagers are seen harassing the women in many ways: pulling their backpacks, yelling at them, insulting them, throwing things at them, and hitting them with pieces of paper. The harassment came to an end when adults from the community approached the women urging them to leave the place.

- On October 3rd, several dozens of protesters demonstrated outside the "Pais Arena" stadium, where hundreds of members of the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem were holding a music and prayer gathering as part of the Embassy's annual Feast of the Tabernacles festival, which coincides with the Jewish festival of Sukkot. Demonstrators were mostly young religious men, protesting against what they considered a missionary event, and some of them were holding a banner reading "We should stand strong and proud Jews. Faithfully for Generations."

Attacks on Christian private properties:

Examples include attacks on restaurants, stores, houses, cars.

- On the evening of January 26, a large group of young Israeli settlers, carrying flags, chanting and shouting, walked through the New Gate, one of the entrances to the Christian quarter of the Old City. Some tourists were sitting at the tables of the Armenian restaurant "Taboon and Wine",

when suddenly the marchers started harassing them and damaging the premises. The youth had gathered near the Old City to take part in the weekly demonstration organized by the right-wing party Otzma Yehudit's founder Baruch Marzel. Usually the demonstration enters the City through Damascus Gate. This time, fearing an escalation due to the killing of 9 people during a military operation in Jenin in previous days, the police re-routed the demonstration to the New Gate, provoking Marzel's anger who accused the government of giving in to Hamas. The violent clashes lasted less than ten minutes and images were shared on social media platforms. According to media reports, the police arrived one hour after the fact and made no arrests.

- On August 9, graffiti was found on the door of a Christian home in the Old City. The writing in Hebrew read "Ben Gvir was here."

Violations of Freedom of Religion (FoRB):

Examples include requests to remove religious symbols, limitations of access to religious sites, limitations in freedom of movement to attend religious services etc.

- On July 18, the Abbot of the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, dom Nikodemus Schnabel, crossed the public area in front of the Western Wall while accompanying the German Education Ministry Bettina Stark-Watzinger. While the official delegation was walking in the plaza (and not approaching the prayer area of the Jewish holy site), Abbott Nikodemus was asked by an employee of the Western Wall Heritage

"It's not about 'don't go to church' – it's more like we don't want the mark of this Christianity" [in our city].³⁴

Mother Agapia Stephanopoulos, a former administrator of the Orthodox School of Bethany in Jerusalem

Foundation to remove the pendant cross he was wearing. The scene was filmed and posted on Twitter by a reporter from the German daily Der Spiegel, and the video shows the employee telling Schnabel that the cross he was wearing was "really big and inappropriate for this place". Father Nikodemus answered explaining that there was no provocation, and as a Roman Catholic abbot the cross is part of his dress code, "you want me not to dress as my faith, that is the reality." Eventually the delegation was allowed to continue to cross till Dung Gate, where the German Ministry was headed. The western Wall Heritage Foundation released a statement apologizing "for the distress that was caused", but it defended the actions of the employee.

- On September 1st, a few Coptic nuns came to the surgery room of a major hospital in Jerusalem to receive treatment. While sitting in the waiting room, the woman at the desk called them to come close to her and asked them to hide their cross, saying that she found it disrespectful to her religious feelings. They refused to do so, and she asked them repeatedly every time they had to cross through the room where she was working.

State-Church Relations:

- Restrictions on Attendance at the Holy Fire Ceremony on the occasion of the Eastern Easter: The Holy Fire ceremony, deeply rooted in tradition for over a thousand years, involves the burning of fire in a crowded church with limited emergency access and holds immense symbolic importance for the local Christian population. The ceremony, attended by tens of thousands of people, presents a significant challenge in the relations between the Churches and Israeli authorities. While the Police strive to ensure safety for the event, the Churches hosting this vital liturgy seek to accommodate as many faithful as possible to partake in the miracle of the Holy Fire. This conflicting interest often leads to tensions between the authorities and churches, leaving both parties dissatisfied and upset. In recent years, the Churches have voiced complaints that the police do not engage in discussions but simply issue orders without considering their needs. Since the tragedy during a Jewish religious gathering on Mount Meron in 2021, in which 45 men and boys were killed in a crush,³⁵ the police have become even stricter, reducing the number of attendees from the traditional 8000 to 1800. Permits are not always issued to the appropriate individuals in a timely manner, leaving local Christians feeling ignored and disrespected. In 2023, police

34 Columbia News Service, "Amid Rising Attacks on Christian Sites in Jerusalem, Urgency Grows Among Clergy", May 26, 2023 <https://columbianewsservice.com/2023/05/26/amid-rising-attacks-on-christian-sites-in-jerusalem-urgency-grows-among-clergy-and-advocates/>

35 Times of Israel, "State inquiry blames Netanyahu but does not sanction him for deadly 2021 Meron crush", March 6, 2024 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/state-inquiry-blames-netanyahu-but-does-not-sanction-him-for-deadly-2021-meron-crush/>



Access to the Old City was restricted during the Eastern ceremony of the Holy Fire, April 2023. | Photo: Adi Marer

blocked access entirely to the Christian quarter and reacted violently against Christians seeking to attend the ceremony - or even merely enter the old City of Jerusalem. The Churches view the authorities' decision to cap the number of attendees as a violation of freedom of religion. Effective communication, coordination, and negotiation between the police and the churches are essential to address this complex situation.

- On August 18, thousands of Orthodox Christians who were planning to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration at the church on Mount Tabor were forced to suspend the celebration after authorities denied the permit, again based on safety reasons. Thousands of pilgrims had traveled from abroad for the occasion. According to Wadie Abu Nassar, a representative of the Christian communities, a few days before the holiday, a meeting had taken place between the Orthodox Council in Nazareth and the authorities, agreeing that the event would take place, but in

fact the permit was denied shortly before the ceremony was due to begin, causing chaos for thousands of pilgrims.

Defacement of public property:

- In February, a sign at the entrance to the Last Supper room on Mount Zion was vandalized - with the writing in Arabic covered with stickers and the word Jesus erased.
- During the same month, graffiti in Hebrew reading "Take revenge on the Gentiles" was found on an electricity pole in the Armenian Quarter.
- In April, different graffiti in Hebrew invoking revenge against the gentiles was scribbled on an electricity pole near the tunnel in the Armenian Quarter.
- In June, all of the names of Christian sites were defaced on the public signs installed in the Jewish Quarter.
- In July, the symbols of the cross and the church were erased from a road sign in Galilee, on the road leading to the Mount of Beatitudes.

Pilgrims light candles at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.
April 2023. Photo: Adi Marer



ANNEX II: Who are Christians living in Israel and East Jerusalem?

This section aims to provide a concise overview of the Christian landscape in Israel and East Jerusalem. The following paragraphs present the main traits of the 13 officially recognized Churches, as well as information regarding the size of communities and the different areas in which they are predominantly located.

Greek Orthodox/Byzantine Church

The Greek Orthodox Church is affiliated with the Eastern Orthodox Church and maintains communion with other patriarchates such as Constantinople, Russia, Romania, Serbia, and others. Traditionally, the clergy originates from Greece, while the parishioners predominantly consist of Palestinians. The Arab orthodox community is the largest in the West Bank and second in Israel and Jerusalem with about 40,000 community members in Israel. Since 1724 a community of Arab Orthodox followed the Patriarch of the Greek Catholic of Antioch and went into union with Rome. The Greek Catholics Melkites comprise the biggest number of Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem, with two bishops representing them in Israel and Palestine.

The Armenian Orthodox Church

The Armenians hold the distinction of being the first nation to embrace Christianity at the onset of the 4th century, under the leadership of the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin. Since the 5th century, they have maintained an independent church. Evidence, both written and archaeological, suggests Armenian presence in the Holy Land dating back to the 5th century, possibly even earlier. The Armenian Church enjoys significant privileges in key holy sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity, Mary's Tomb, as well as numerous monasteries and churches scattered throughout Jerusalem, Jaffa, Ramla, Haifa, and Bethlehem. Within these sacred spaces, clergy hail from Armenia or its diaspora officiate, alongside lay members of the community. This community encompasses families who migrated to Israel during the 19th century, descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide who sought refuge after the initial Holocaust, as well as immigrants arriving from the Republic of Armenia following its independence, under the provisions of the Law of Return, akin to those for Jews with familial ties.



Greek Orthodox Palm Sunday at the Holy Sepulcher, 2022. | Photo: Adi Marer

The Coptic Orthodox Church

The Coptic Orthodox Church carries on the legacy of St. Mark the Apostle and has historically served as a significant hub for theological discourse and the birthplace of the monastic movement. Since the early days of Christianity, a community of monks has resided around the holy sites. Over time, a community of laypeople gradually joined, primarily during the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, a small community of approximately 1500 people resides in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Nazareth.

The Syrian Orthodox Church

The Syriac community upholds the heritage of Antioch, the first place where Jesus' followers were referred to as Christians, and preserves the Aramaic of the region, which was likely spoken by Jesus. This small community of approximately 1500 individuals residing in the Jerusalem area and Bethlehem consists of clergy from various regions across the Middle East and families of survivors of the Sayfo (Syriac Genocide), who arrived after World War I.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church

The Ethiopian Church holds the distinction of being the first Christian community in Sub-Saharan Africa and is the largest among the Oriental churches. It has preserved ancient Christian traditions unique to its region. After the conversion of the Ethiopian kingdom in the 4th century, it was under the authority of the Coptic Church and achieved autocephalous status only in 1959. The community in the Holy Land consisted of a small group of monks, nuns, and their bishop. Today, the church hosts many asylum seekers from Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church dispatched its official representatives to the East following the establishment of the Crusaders' kingdom, shortly after the Great Schism. After the defeat of the Catholic kingdom, it was the Franciscan brothers who received the papal bull, entrusting them with the responsibility of guardianship over the Holy Land in 1342. In the mid-19th century, an archbishop was dispatched to Jerusalem with the title of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. In the mid-20th century, with the establishment of Israel and Jordan, the Apostolic Delegation to the Holy Land was founded,



The ordination of Rev. Sally Azar, the first Palestinian woman to serve as a pastor of the Lutheran Church in the Holy Land. | Photo: The Lutheran World Federation

which includes a representative also serving as the Vatican Ambassador to Israel in Tel Aviv since 1994. In addition to over 100 different religious communities and orders of clergy in the Holy Land, the approximately 25,000 parishioners in Israel and Jerusalem are predominantly Palestinians, with a minority of Hebrew speakers and individuals from various nationalities.

The Maronite Church

The Maronite Church is based in Lebanon and went into union with Rome during the Crusades. Most of the Maronites in the Holy Land are living in the Galilee with additional congregations in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Jaffa and the overall community stands at about 4000 people.

The Anglican and Lutheran Churches

These Churches came to Jerusalem in 1841 as one entity, and in the first 40 years shared the appointment of bishops between England and Germany. In the late 19th century, the churches ended their agreement and set up separate ministries. Both have installed Palestinian bishops since the 1970s and their combined members number around 5000 people.

Other Churches:

- Church of Scotland
- Mennonite Central Committee
- Society of Friends
- Romanian Orthodox Church
- Russian Orthodox Church
- Baptist Church

Messianic Jews

A few thousand Israelis identify as Messianic Jews, remaining faithful to their Jewish origin, heritage and history while also believing in Jesus. They belong to independent communities that shape their liturgical practices and faith according to their community's norms. These groups are not organized under any umbrella organization and are not officially registered as Christians by the State of Israel. They prefer to distance themselves from traditional churches. According to data collected by the Caspari Institute in Jerusalem, in 2020 the number of Israeli Messianic believers living in Israel stood at 15,323 people. Most of them speak Russian and the second most spoken language is Hebrew. According to the researchers at the Caspari Institute, the Israeli Messianic movement can legitimately be called an immigrant movement.

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Cover Photo: Anglican Cemetery on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, in the aftermath of the attack on January 1st, 2023, which damaged dozens of tombs.
Credit: Federica Sasso

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