

PROTECTING HOLY LAND CHRISTIANS

Issues Facing Christians in the Holy Land | December 2025

Executive Summary

- The Christian community in the Holy Land continues to face escalating violence, economic hardship, and restrictions on worship, with churches, schools, and hospitals suffering damage.
- Threats to Christian heritage - particularly in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza alongside issues of unjustified taxation - are the source of ongoing concerns that threaten the existence of the community and the churches.
- Urgent action is needed to bolster, support, and maintain the current ceasefire in Gaza, and uphold religious freedom, protect Christians as the living stones, and provide economic and diplomatic support to sustain their communities across the Holy Land.

Impact of War on Christians in Gaza and Reconstruction

The Christian community in the Holy Land continues to experience hardships, severely exacerbated by the war. The Holy Family Church in Gaza was struck in July, killing three people taking shelter there and injuring 10. Following this attack, Patriarch Theophilos III and Cardinal Pizzaballa visited the churches in solidarity with their communities in the Strip. In a May 2025 report, the UN estimated that half of all religious and cultural sites in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed. Several Christian sites - the Holy Family Church, Church of St Porphyrios, and Al Ahli Baptist Hospital - have been damaged since the start of the war. Less than 600 Christians continue to shelter within the two churches, which have only seen a small uptick in humanitarian support since the ceasefire. Al Ahli Baptist Hospital, which accommodated five times its capacity during the war, remains short on medical equipment and is not able to receive medicines due to restrictions on humanitarian aid entering Gaza. A Christian in Gaza reported that they have seen only a "slight improvement to daily life" since the ceasefire.

Recommendation: Hold relevant actors to account to ensure the currently reached ceasefire is bolstered, supported and maintained, with an adequate flow of aid reaching local people. Explore opportunities to offer economic support for rebuilding church-run hospitals, schools, and charities and access for Heads of Churches to Gaza. Furthermore, constructively engage the Churches as a partner in the interfaith dialogue put forward in Point 18 of President Trump's Peace Plan.

Settler Advances on Christian Communities and Heritage in the West Bank

In July 2025, Israeli settlers ignited a fire near a Christian cemetery and centuries-old Church of St George in Taybeh, the last remaining all-Christian town in the West Bank. This reflects a growing and intensifying trend impacting the community. Settlers have rendered some olive groves inaccessible and damaged crops, seeking to cripple the local economy of Christians. Following similar actions in Taybeh, Israeli settlers have begun encroaching on the Monastery of St Gerasimos near Jericho. These systematic attacks are growing more prevalent throughout the West Bank and increasing pressure on the Christian community in the Holy Land.

Recommendation: Liaise with Israeli counterparts in calling for these settlers to be held accountable by the Israeli authorities and ensure the protection of religious heritage for Christians under their authority.

Freedom of Religion and Access to Holy Sites

This year, violence and strict restrictions around the Old City and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher were unprecedented during the Holy Light celebration. Centuries-old processions were interrupted and attacked by radical Israelis in and around the Old City during the Holy Week. Christian rituals and traditions were not respected, and less than 2,000 Christians were permitted to reach the Holy Sepulchre following another year of

harsh restrictions and barricades throughout the Old City. Diplomats and worshippers alike - all of whom had valid permits to access the Old City - were subject to hours of waiting for access and, at times, violent treatment by police. Many Christians from the surrounding cities and towns, also with valid permits, were denied entry. This year also impacted children in an unprecedented way. The Scouts, a historic ministry and tradition of the churches, were barred by police from taking part in the liturgy. Police also drew a weapon on a Scouts leader, in front of children, and inside the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. In stark contrast, within the same week, during the Jewish festival of Passover, the Old City of Jerusalem was open to all Jewish families from across the Holy Land and abroad to attend in high numbers. Since 7 October 2023, Israeli authorities have limited access to Palestinian Christians. Among 40,000+ Christians seeking permits to enter Jerusalem for various holidays, only 6,000 were granted.

Recommendation: Press Israeli officials to commit to ensuring that all Christians, regardless of origin, be allowed to peacefully participate in the Holy Fire Ceremony, without restrictions, in accordance with the Status Quo and their right to worship. This includes ensuring that excessive barriers be removed and police are given religious literacy training about the importance of the ceremony to the local community. Worshippers should be able to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in a spirit of dignity and respect.

Taxation of Church property (Arnona)

The ongoing situation regarding the imposition of municipal taxes, also known as Arnona, on Church properties remains a serious concern and financial burden for the Churches. Israeli municipal authorities have been demanding that the Churches pay arnona for ecclesial buildings. These ecclesial properties house ministries that serve the wider community, violating treaties and agreements that span centuries. In 2025, Israeli Municipalities deducted educational funds of church schools and classified this punitive action as arnona debts. The Armenian Patriarchate is also facing a foreclosure case with the Jerusalem municipality over arnona debts as well. Furthermore, in August the Jerusalem Municipality froze the bank accounts of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. After petitioning from allies around the world, the freeze was lifted and talks with the Jerusalem Municipality began.

Recommendation: Petition the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - who holds this file in the Israeli government - and Local Municipalities to continue meaningful engagement with Churches on these matters and move towards a holistic - and lasting - solution.

Mount of Olives

A proposed plan to expand the Jerusalem Walls National Park, which would include church-owned properties on the Mount of Olives, was listed again for discussion by the Jerusalem Municipality's Local Planning & Construction Committee. Following a series of postponements, this was scheduled for 30 June 2025 but was delayed again to 31 December 2025. Despite the numerous delays, the plan has not changed. The joint effort of Elad - a radical group who seeks to Judaise the Old City - and Israel Nature and Parks Authority would choke off access to holy sites and limit the movement of clergy and worshippers. This plan follows other expansions of territory nearby, including E-1, and reflects a pattern of activity seen over the past years in the Jaffa Gate, Mount Zion, and other areas, such as the cable car and throughout Silwan including the Pool of Siloam. Each expansion in these areas further encroach on church property, erode the sanctity of holy sites, and endanger paths of pilgrimage.

Recommendation: Petition MKs and Government Officials to cancel this plan altogether, respect the sanctity and spiritual significance of the Christian presence on the Mount of Olives, and express written concern about the implications of this plan on Christian access to Holy Sites and Freedom of Worship.

Solution

To ensure the multi-religious character of the Old City, the Churches continue their call for Christian and Armenian Quarters to be protected and the Status Quo upheld. The urgent need to protect Christian communities and our places of worship extend throughout the West Bank, where settler attacks increasingly target our churches, people and properties. As the rebuilding of Gaza begins, we celebrate the ministries and steadfastness of our communities there who continued to serve despite all odds. We call upon the international community to help us rebuild these vital ministries and secure a lasting hope that has felt far too distant for far too long in our Holy Land. The Churches remain a key player in creating a sustainable peace for both Israelis and Palestinians, helping shape a future where all can flourish. External bodies and governments are strongly encouraged to urgently support Church institutions and the Christian presence through economic support, and diplomatic pressure on the specific issues above.

Report issued by the Council of Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem.