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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - The Occupied Territories

Executive Summary

The Israeli government, which exercised varying degrees of legal, military, and economic control in the Occupied Territories, restricted Palestinian access to religious sites, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, more frequently than last year. The Israeli government, in accordance with the status quo understandings with Jordanian authorities that manage the site, limited Jewish religious observance at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Some Jewish groups sought to legally overturn this policy or modify it to permit Jewish prayer. Some Jewish groups sought to visit the site for religious purposes, actions that were at times followed by a violent response from Muslim worshippers. Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL, an umbrella body of Jewish, Christian and Muslim institutions including the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, the PA Ministry of Waqf and Religious Affairs, and leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem) continued to denounce so-called "price tag" attacks (property crimes and violent acts, often by settler groups, primarily against Muslim and Christian Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, their religious sites, and cemeteries). The Israeli government made some arrests in connection to "price tag" attacks, but many perpetrators continued to escape prosecution. The PA refused to recognize certain religious groups, forcing them to seek personal status documents, such as marriage certificates, through other denominations or abroad. The PA policy of preventing preaching that could be perceived as encouraging violence or sermons with intolerant or anti-Semitic messages continued. Intolerant and anti-Semitic material, however, was still sometimes broadcast over official PA media. The PA condemned the June killing of three Israeli teenagers. Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization with de facto control of Gaza (despite the appointment of an interim technocratic government in May), enforced restrictions on Gaza's Muslim population based on its strict interpretation of Islam.

There were incidents of violence which perpetrators justified on religious grounds, as well as vandalism and graffiti using intolerant speech, harassment of clergy, and religious intolerance. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In June Palestinian militants affiliated with Hamas kidnapped and subsequently murdered three Jewish Israeli teenagers, one a U.S.-Israeli dual citizen. In an apparent revenge attack two weeks later, three Jewish Israelis kidnapped and murdered a Palestinian minor. On October 29, a Palestinian East Jerusalem resident shot an Israeli activist (and American citizen) after the activist spoke at a conference advocating expanded Jewish visitation and prayer on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Police killed the attacker during a subsequent attempt to arrest him in East Jerusalem. Incidents of violence against Jewish visitors to the Mount of Olives by

Palestinian youths continued to increase, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that monitor these incidents, resulting in some injuries.

Officials from the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem regularly discussed issues of religious freedom and tolerance with PA officials, including concerns about access to religious sites in the Occupied Territories. Consulate officers met with representatives of religious groups to monitor their concerns, and raised with local authorities the views and experiences related in these meetings, including concerns about access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship. Consulate general officers encouraged respect for religious freedom and the need for tolerance, and issued public condemnations of actions that impinged on religious freedom, such as so-called "price tag" attacks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population is 2.7 million in the West Bank and 1.8 million in the Gaza Strip (July 2014 estimates). Roughly 98 percent of the Palestinian residents of these territories are Sunni Muslims. According to the 2014 Statistical Yearbook of the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 515,200 Jews live in Jerusalem, accounting for approximately 62 percent of the city's population. The Israeli Ministry of Interior reported in 2012 that 350,150 Jews reside in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Although there is no official count, in 2008 there were approximately 52,000 Christians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem according to a survey conducted by the Diyar Consortium, a Lutheran ecumenical institution. According to local Christian leaders, Palestinian Christian emigration has accelerated since 2001. A lower birth rate among Palestinian Christians is also a factor in their shrinking numbers. A majority of Christians are Greek Orthodox; the remainder includes Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Armenian Orthodox, Copts, Maronites, Ethiopian Orthodox, and members of Protestant denominations. Christians are concentrated primarily in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus, although smaller communities exist elsewhere. Approximately 400 Samaritans (practitioners of Samaritanism, which is related to but distinct from Judaism) as well as a small number of evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses reside in the West Bank.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The PA does not have a constitution but states that the Palestinian Basic Law functions as its temporary constitution. The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion, and the principles of sharia shall be the main source of legislation. The Basic Law provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the performance of religious rites unless they violate public order or morality. The Basic Law also proscribes discrimination based on religion and stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law. A PA presidential decree stipulates that all laws in effect before the advent of the PA continue in force until the PA enacts new laws or amends the old ones.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas has advisers on Christian affairs. Six seats in the 132 member Palestinian Legislative Council (which has not met since 2007) are reserved for Christians; there are no seats reserved for members of any other religious group.

Christian religious groups in the West Bank and Gaza fall into three categories: churches the PA recognizes in accordance with status quo arrangements reached during Ottoman rule and Protestant churches with established episcopates; churches that the PA does not recognize but which are present and operate, such as some Protestant churches, including evangelical churches, established between the late 19th century and 1967; and a small number of churches that have become active within the last decade and whose legal status is less certain. There is no specified process by which religious organizations gain official recognition; rather, each religious group must seek bilateral agreements with the PA individually.

The PA respects the 19th century status quo agreements reached with Ottoman authorities. These agreements specifically established the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Coptic, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox churches. The Episcopal (Anglican) and Evangelical Lutheran churches were added later to this list. These religious groups are permitted to have ecclesiastical courts whose rulings are considered legally binding on personal status and some property matters for members of their religious communities. Civil courts do not adjudicate such matters.

Churches in the second category (which includes the Assemblies of God, the Nazarene Church, and some Baptist churches) have unwritten understandings with the PA based on the principles of the status quo

agreements, although they are not officially recognized. They generally are permitted to operate freely, and some are able to perform certain personal status legal functions, such as issuing marriage certificates, but obtaining official recognition would provide a simplified process.

The third category consists of a small number of groups that normally proselytize, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups. These churches are forbidden to proselytize, but otherwise generally operate unhindered by the PA. The PA refuses to recognize personal status legal documents issued by some groups in this category, which these communities report makes it difficult to, for example, register newborn children under their fathers' names.

Islamic or Christian religious courts handle all legal matters relating to personal status, including inheritance, marriage, dowry, divorce, and child support. For Muslim Palestinians, personal status law is derived from sharia, while various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status matters for Christians. All legally recognized religious groups are empowered to adjudicate personal status matters, and most do so in practice. The PA does not have a civil marriage law. Legally, members of one religious group may agree to submit a personal status dispute to a different denomination for adjudication. Churches the PA does not recognize must obtain special permission to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status matters; many unrecognized churches advise their members to marry or divorce abroad.

Religious education is compulsory for students in grades one through six in schools the PA operates. There are separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians.

Islamic institutions and places of worship receive preferential financial support from the government by law. The Ministry of Waqf (religious endowments) and Religious Affairs pays for the construction of new mosques, the maintenance of approximately 1,800 existing mosques, and the salaries of most Palestinian imams in the West Bank.

The ministry also provides limited financial support to some Christian clergy and Christian charitable organizations. The PA does not provide financial support to Jewish institutions in Israeli settlements in the West Bank; the Israeli government controls most Jewish religious sites in the West Bank.

The PA requires Palestinians to declare their religious affiliation on identification papers.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal, military, and economic control in the Occupied Territories. Israelis living in East Jerusalem fall under Israel's civil and criminal law system, whereas Israelis living in West Bank settlements are subject to a combination of Israeli civil and criminal law and military orders. Arab citizens of Israel living in Jerusalem and Palestinian residents (not holding Israeli citizenship) of Jerusalem are subject to Israel's civil and criminal system. Palestinians living in Area C of the West Bank fall under Israel's military legal system, whereas Palestinians who live in Area B fall under PA civil law and Israeli military law for criminal and security issues. The PA has formal responsibility for security and civil control in Area A, however, since 2002 Israeli security forces have regularly conducted security operations in Area A cities, often without coordinating with PA security forces.

Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization, exercises de facto authority over the Gaza Strip, despite the fact that the PA appointed an interim technocratic government in May. Hamas "morality police" enforce a strict interpretation of Islamic law. For example, Hamas arrested women for "ethical crimes" such as "illegitimate pregnancy."

Government Practices

The Israeli government continued to apply travel restrictions that impeded access to particular places of worship in the West Bank and Jerusalem for Muslims and Christians. The Israeli government's strict closures, curfews, and permitting system hindered residents from practicing their religions at key religious sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Both in Israeli- and PA-administered areas, small numbers of proselytizing groups continued to meet official resistance in their efforts to obtain recognition, such as marriage registration, forcing them to seek personal status documents through other denominations or abroad. The PA also continued to refuse to register marriages of Jehovah's Witnesses, although Jehovah's Witnesses had some success this year in obtaining birth certificates for children born to unrecognized couples.

The PA continued to implement a policy of unifying the message in weekly sermons in West Bank mosques to prevent preaching that could be perceived as encouraging violence or sermons with intolerant or anti-Semitic messages. It provided imams with themes they were required to use in Friday sermons and prohibited them from broadcasting Quranic recitations from minarets prior to the call to prayer.

The PA condemned the June killing of three Israeli teenagers.

Official PA media generally sought to control and eliminate statements and material that could encourage violence, including criticism about the policies and actions of the Government of Israel and Israeli citizens. There were some instances, however, in which official media carried explicitly intolerant material. For example, on December 25, an op-ed was published by the PA official daily *Al Hayat al-Jadida* for Christmas that made an attempt to link the crucifixion of Jesus to the persecution of Palestinian Christians; the article suggested that followers of the Jewish faith were responsible for both.

PA President Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the CRIHL continued to denounce so-called “price tag” attacks, which are property crimes and violent acts, often but not exclusively committed by settler groups, primarily against Muslim and Christian Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, their religious sites, and cemeteries. The Israeli government continued to designate “price tag” vandals as members of “illicit organizations,” and an Israeli police unit specializing in nationalist crimes, including “price tag” attacks and attacks on places of worship, investigated such criminal acts. The Israeli National Police (INP) reported investigating all known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests where possible, although NGOs, religious institutions and press reports noted that those arrests rarely led to successful prosecutions. Dozens of persons, including minors, were arrested in connection with “price tag” attacks during the year, including attacks on Christian institutions before Pope Francis’ May visit. For example, in July police arrested three Jewish residents of the Israeli settlement of Ma’ale Adumim for spray painting “Death to Arabs” and “Price Tag” on neighborhood walls on June 22. On January 15, vandals set fire to a mosque in the West Bank village of Deir Istiya and spray-painted the mosque walls with hate messages against Palestinians and Muslims. Some perpetrators of “price tag” attacks were sentenced, some investigations were ongoing and some prosecutions were pending at year’s end. On December 21, two Israelis were sentenced to 30 months in prison for perpetrating an arson attack motivated by racism (burning Palestinian cars in the West Bank), the most significant sentence handed down for “price tag” related violence by the end of the year. On December 11, the INP arrested three members of Lehava, an Israeli anti-miscegenation group, who reportedly confessed to setting fire to Jerusalem’s Arabic-Hebrew bilingual Max Rayne Hand in Hand school. Many “price tag” attacks, however, continued to go unprosecuted, many for lack of sufficient evidence.

The Israeli government continued to control access by Muslims to the site referred to as Haram al-Sharif (containing the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque), and by Jews to the Temple Mount (which is the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples). The location has been under Israeli control since 1967 when Israel captured the eastern sector of the city (the Israeli government formally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, and Israel applies its laws in East Jerusalem, although no other country, including the U.S., has recognized this annexation). The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a Jordanian-funded and administered Islamic trust and charitable organization, continued to administer the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. In accordance with status quo agreements with the Waqf, the Israeli government continued to prevent non-Muslim worship and prayer at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, although it ensured limited access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to everyone regardless of religious belief. This policy repeatedly has been upheld by the Israeli Supreme Court and was enforced by the police, who cited security concerns. The Israeli government instead directed Jewish worshippers to the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism. The Waqf restricted non-Muslims from entering the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque, and prohibited non-Muslim religious symbols to be worn on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount (a practice enforced by the INP).

The INP was responsible for security at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with police stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance to the site. The INP conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza, regulated traffic in and out of the site, screened non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia, and generally prohibited them from praying publicly on the site. Israeli police had exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the site – and generally allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the INP sometimes restricted this access due to security concerns.

Citing security concerns, the Israeli government restricted access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Muslims from Jerusalem and the West Bank, frequently barring entry of male, and sometimes female, residents under the age of 50. The Israeli government in November stated that the INP had imposed age restrictions 76 times up until that point in the year, compared with 12 times in 2013 and three times in 2012. According to media reports, the Israeli government provided Muslims from Gaza very occasional access to the site, including permitting entry to 1,500 Muslim Gazans over age 60 during Eid al-Adha on October 5, 6, and 7, and 200 Gazans on Fridays in December – primarily Muslims over age 60. Israeli security authorities frequently restricted Muslim residents of Jerusalem from entering the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site for Friday prayer, and imposed age restrictions on male prayer on several days during Ramadan, including every Friday and on the Night of Destiny (Laylat al Qadr). On several days in August Israeli police prohibited all Muslim women regardless of age from visiting the site during non-Muslim visiting hours. Israeli authorities cited altercations between specific groups of female worshippers and Jewish tourists attempting to break the injunction against non-Muslim prayer on site as a reason for these temporary blanket bans. Infrequently authorities would close the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount entirely for short periods, often after skirmishes at the site between Palestinians and Israeli police. Following the October 29 attack on a Israeli-American activist and a subsequent shootout in the Abu Tor neighborhood of East Jerusalem in which police killed his attacker during an arrest attempt, on October 30, INP denied entry to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for all Muslims for a full day.

Waqf officials described the closure as unprecedented since 1967, though some reports indicate the site was also completely closed to Muslims in 2000. On November 14, the Israeli government lifted all age restrictions on Muslims seeking to enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

A wide range of Muslim officials, including representatives of the Waqf, objected to Israeli-imposed access restrictions for Muslim worshipers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and opposed calls from some Israeli groups to divide visiting hours between Muslims and non-Muslims and to allow non-Muslim prayer there. Waqf officials reported Israeli police violated status quo agreements regarding control of access to the site, as the INP did not fully coordinate with the Waqf its decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site. Waqf employees were stationed inside each gate and on the plaza. They could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but they lacked the authority to remove persons from the site.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, most frequently Jerusalem Islamic Waqf employees; they also sometimes barred Jewish activists who had repeatedly violated rules against non-Muslim prayer on the site, including Israeli members of the Knesset. Israeli authorities banned all non-Muslim visitors to the site for the last two weeks of Ramadan, citing security concerns. Israeli reinforcement of the ramp leading to the Mughrabi Gate of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, as well as excavations in the immediate vicinity, continued during the year despite calls from the Islamic Waqf to coordinate any excavation or construction and concerns that the excavations could destabilize the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Israeli authorities briefly constructed a second ramp on the site in August, before removing it a few weeks later after criticism from the Waqf and Jordanian officials.

Some prominent members of the Israeli government coalition in the Knesset called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site, and the Knesset's Interior Committee held hearings to discuss the issue and to press the INP to allow Jewish visitors to pray at the site. These discussions intensified following the October 29 assassination attempt against a Jewish activist (and U.S. citizen) well known for advocating Jewish prayer at the site. Some Israeli officials, including cabinet members, visited the site and issued statements asserting Israeli control over it. For example, on September 24, Minister of Housing and Construction Uri Ariel visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and stated, "The sovereignty over the Temple Mount is in our hands and we must strengthen it." Some government coalition Knesset members and Israeli NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, called on the Israeli government to implement a time-sharing plan at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount that would set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to one used at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism also reportedly was considering a plan to open another gate to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to non-Muslims – a move condemned by Muslim leaders as a change from the status quo at the site. Despite an Israeli High Court ruling stating that "Jews, even though their right to the Temple Mount exists and stands historically, are not permitted to currently actualize their right to perform public prayer on the Temple Mount," the Israeli government considered international agreements with Jordan restricting Jewish prayer at the site to remain authoritative. The Israeli prime minister reiterated his support for maintaining the status quo arrangement at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, as did Chief of the INP Yohanan Danino. Following the October attack on a Jewish activist, Danino specifically called on Knesset members and Israeli officials to avoid inflaming tensions through provocative actions such as visits to the site. Knesset member Moshe Feiglin, however, visited the site several times following the attack, and the Israeli Attorney General, on November 25, upheld the right of members of the Knesset to visit the site according to the visitation rules for members of the non-Muslim public.

Despite Israeli government prohibitions against non-Muslim worship at the site, some Jewish groups who were escorted by Israeli police performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration. Israeli police then acted to prevent them from praying and arrested those who did. Waqf officials criticized the visits, and in some instances the visits sparked violence between Palestinian worshippers and the Israeli police. Jewish visits to the site increased compared to 2013, particularly during Jewish holidays in September and October. Waqf officials documented more than 15,000 Jewish visits to the site in 2014 (compared to 9,000 in 2013), and Jewish visitors attempted to enter the Al Aqsa mosque building or broke away from their tour groups in an attempt to perform religious rituals at least 42 times during the year. During September and October, Israeli police at times imposed restrictions on Muslim and non-Muslim access to the site, for example on September 24, prohibiting access to Muslims under age 50. In several instances Israeli police prevented non-Muslim access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in anticipation of clashes. Israeli police also temporarily denied Muslims access to the site on at least one day during September to accommodate Jewish visits. Clashes sometimes occurred in areas of the Old City and East Jerusalem where Muslim worshippers who had been denied entry to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount had gathered to pray, such as on the last Friday of Ramadan when worshippers from Jerusalem's Wadi Joz neighborhood, blocked from the Old City by Israeli police, prayed in the street, then clashed with police after the conclusion of prayers.

The Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism, was open to visitors from all religions during the year, and the Israeli government permitted Muslims and Christians to make individual prayers at the site. The rabbi of the Western Wall, appointed by the Israeli Prime Minister and chief rabbis, continued to set the guidelines for religious observance at the Western Wall, including the strict separation of

women and men. The Israeli government continued to enforce this prohibition on mixed gender prayer services at the site on all visitors. Men and women at the Western Wall had to use separate areas to visit and pray, with the women's section being less than half the size of the men's section. Women were not permitted to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza and were prevented from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the religious site. Women were permitted to pray with tefillin and prayer shawls pursuant to an April 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. The Israeli police continued to assist Women of the Wall (WOW), an NGO and prayer group, in entering the women's area of the Western Wall for their monthly service.

A platform, south of the Mugrabi ramp and adjacent to but not touching the Western Wall, was open to both men and women where each person could practice their religious rituals as desired. The platform was equipped to accommodate about 450 worshippers and designated for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. Non-Orthodox and mixed gender groups used this structure for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs.

A public debate about accommodating "egalitarian" Jewish prayer, i.e., permitting men and women to pray as they wished, continued throughout the year. Israel's Cabinet Secretary Mandelblit continued to chair a committee on "egalitarian prayer" at the Western Wall. The Israeli government developed plans to construct an "egalitarian prayer" space at the Robinson's Arch area of the wall in accordance with a 2013 agreement between the government and Jewish groups dissatisfied with restrictions placed on prayer, including gender segregation and a prohibition on women singing out loud, or holding or reading from Torah scrolls. The government halted an effort to give administration of this new area to the organization Elad (the City of David Foundation), an association dedicated to asserting Jewish presence in the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan, abutting the Old City. Some groups alleged this compromise did not sufficiently accommodate women who wanted to lead prayers in a women-only setting.

The PA and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) jointly provided Jews access for approved visits to religious sites in the West Bank in Area A, particularly to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. Jewish groups visited the site during hours of darkness and with a significant PA and IDF security escort. Some Jews complained that securing an IDF escort required extensive coordination.

Israeli authorities prevented most Palestinians from accessing Rachel's Tomb, a Bethlehem shrine of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Israeli jurisdiction, but allowed relatively unimpeded access to Jewish visitors.

The IDF continued to limit access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, a site revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the tomb of Abraham. Under Oslo-era agreements, both Israel and the PA shared responsibility for the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, although in practice the IDF controlled access to the site, a situation opposed by Muslim leaders. The IDF restricted Muslim access for 10 nonconsecutive days, including Passover and Yom Kippur; Jews were restricted in their access for 10 nonconsecutive days corresponding to Muslim holidays. Muslims could enter only through one entry point and had to submit to intensive IDF security screening. Jews had access to several entry points and were not required to submit to security screening. Both Muslims and Jews were able to pray at the site simultaneously. In only one place, through the tomb of Abraham, was each able to see the other through a clear plastic divider. Israeli authorities repeatedly banned the Muslim call to prayer at the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron on the grounds that it disturbed the Jewish settlers in the surrounding areas.

Israeli police obstructed access through security checkpoints to the Old City's Church of the Holy Sepulchre during major religious holidays, including the April 19 Orthodox Easter "holy fire" service and the April 20 Orthodox Easter holiday, which reduced Christians' ability to enter Jerusalem and the Old City to participate in religious services. Christian leaders said these restrictions significantly reduced the ability of congregants and clergy to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Some Christians also noted, however, that restrictions on pilgrims and coordination with the Israeli police had improved compared to 2013. During busy periods the Israeli police site commander provided security, facilitated access to the site, and managed tensions between followers of different streams of Christianity at the site. Some Christians accused police of using excessive force in its efforts to regulate crowds in the Old City during the Easter events.

The process by which the Israeli government granted Palestinians access to various sectors of the Occupied Territories at times involved de facto discrimination based on religion.

The Israeli authorities imposed a full closure on the West Bank October 3-4 during the Yom Kippur holiday. During the closure, authorities prohibited West Bank residents who held Israeli-issued access permits from entering Jerusalem or Israel, except those working for international organizations or in a humanitarian capacity.

The Israeli government announced that it increased the number of permits for non-citizen Palestinian Muslims from the West Bank for religious holidays, but in practice the Israeli government prevented many of these permits from being used. In contrast to 2013, the Israeli government imposed increased restrictions on

Palestinian access to Jerusalem from the West Bank during Ramadan. Palestinian men 50 years and over and women 40 years and over (in some cases 45) were allowed access without a permit. Palestinians with Israeli-issued entry permits were denied entry to Jerusalem on some days if they did not meet these age restrictions. All Palestinians from the Hebron district were denied any travel rights for two weeks in June and again on some days in July. In 2013, men over age 40, women and girls of all ages, and boys under age 12 were allowed access to Jerusalem without permits for Ramadan. The Israeli government continued to deny Gaza residents' access to East Jerusalem during Ramadan except for 1,500 Gaza residents allowed to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during the Eid al-Adha holiday.

The Israeli government prohibited Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the PA (Area A). This restriction prevented Jewish Israelis from routinely visiting several Jewish religious sites, although the IDF occasionally provided security escorts for groups to visit selected Jewish religious sites. Beginning in 2009, the Israeli Ministry of Defense gradually lifted restrictions on Arab Israelis visiting Area A cities in the West Bank.

Israel issued 20,000 permits for West Bank residents to enter Jerusalem during Easter. During Christmas and Easter Israeli authorities issued permits to only some members of many families. This may have reduced the overall number of permits used, as some families opted not to be separated during the holidays. Israel in April granted Christians in Gaza 600 permits to celebrate Easter in the Jerusalem and the West Bank from April 17 to April 28. No permits were granted to Gazans ages 16-35. Christian groups reported they faced access restrictions similar to those in place for Easter during the pope's visit to the West Bank and Jerusalem in May. Among other restrictions, Christians living in the Old City reported being confined to their homes for long periods during the pope's visit.

The Israeli government extended the hours of certain checkpoints and granted 25,000 permits without age restrictions for West Bank Christian Palestinians to visit Israel and Jerusalem during Christmas. Israeli authorities issued 700 permits to members of Gaza's Christian community under the age of 16 and over the age of 35 to enter Israel, Jerusalem, and the West Bank for religious reasons and family visits during Christmas. Israeli authorities also issued 500 permits for West Bank Christians to visit Gaza. They issued no permits for Gazans between 16 and 35 years of age.

The Israeli government kept in place an amended visa issuance process for foreigners to work in Jerusalem and the West Bank, preventing many of them from entering, which also significantly impeded the work of Christian institutions. Christian advocates continued to express concerns about the difficulty of obtaining permits. Israeli authorities continued to limit to a single entry visas for Arab Christian clergy serving in the West Bank or Jerusalem, complicating their travel, particularly to areas under their pastoral authority outside the West Bank or Jerusalem. They stated this disrupted their work and caused financial difficulties for their sponsoring religious organizations. Clergy, nuns, and other religious workers from Arab countries faced long delays in receiving visas, and sometimes authorities denied their visa applications. The Israeli government indicated that delays or denials were due to security processing for visas and extensions.

Israel prohibited some Arab Christian clergy from entering Gaza, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority.

The Israeli government continued building a separation barrier for security concerns. The barrier, like restrictions on permits, limited access to religious sites and impeded the work of religious organizations that provided education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians, particularly in and around East Jerusalem. The barrier and checkpoints also impeded the movement of clergy between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship. The separation barrier impeded Bethlehem-area Christians, including clergy, from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and made visits to Christian sites in Bethany and Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who live on the Jerusalem side of the barrier. Foreign pilgrims and religious aid workers occasionally experienced difficulty accessing Christian religious sites in the West Bank because of the barrier and Israeli restrictions on movement in the West Bank.

The Israeli High Court of Justice ruled in August that the Israeli government must justify its proposed construction of the separation barrier south of Jerusalem near the Cremisan convent of Salesian nuns and their school of approximately 170 students. The barrier, if completed as the IDF has proposed, would separate the convent and school from the Palestinian communities they serve, and cut off area residents from their lands. As of the end of the year, the High Court had not made its final ruling on the case.

Some observers of archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority, an Israeli government entity, exploited archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims to the city while overlooking other historically significant archaeological finds. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation continued to promote ongoing archaeological excavations north of the Western Wall plaza.

Church leaders and lay Palestinians maintained that the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions, difficulties in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits for Christian clergy, Israeli government family reunification restrictions, taxation problems, and difficult economic conditions due to Israeli-imposed movement restrictions were the impetus for increased Christian emigration. Both Muslim and Christian Palestinians continued to deny Israeli claims that Muslim persecution of Christians has spurred Christian migration from Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the heads of churches in Jerusalem, the PA Ministry of Waqf and Religious Affairs, and the PA sharia courts continued dialogue through the CRIHL.

Authorities generally enforced repeated rulings by Israel's High Court that the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem was illegal, and that gender segregation on public buses could not be imposed or ordered, but could occur only on a voluntary basis.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Hamas maintained de facto control of Gaza throughout the year and used it as a base for attacks against Israel.

Militant and terrorist groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, launched indiscriminate rocket and mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip against Israeli citizens. Terrorists often issued statements containing anti-Semitic rhetoric in conjunction with the attacks.

Hamas enforced restrictions on Gaza's Muslim population based on a strict interpretation of Islam. For example, Hamas operated a women's prison during the year to house women convicted of "ethical crimes" such as "illegitimate pregnancy." Hamas "morality police" punished women for infractions such as dressing "inappropriately," (i.e., wearing Western-style or close-fitting clothing, such as jeans or T-shirts, or not wearing a head covering). Hamas largely tolerated the small Christian presence in Gaza and did not force Christians to abide by Islamic law. Christians raised concerns that Hamas failed to defend their rights as a religious minority, but on at least one occasion some praised Hamas' investigation of a terrorist attack on a Christian school. Many Christians stated that religious tolerance had improved in Gaza, but that Israel's military operations in July damaged many Christian buildings and destroyed Christian homes, leaving them concerned about their continued ability to live there. Muslim students continued to attend schools run by Christian institutions in Gaza.

Due to Hamas' continued de facto control of Gaza, the PA was unable to investigate and prosecute Gaza-based cases of religious discrimination.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were incidents of violence which perpetrators justified on religious grounds, vandalism and graffiti using intolerant speech, harassment of clergy, and religious intolerance. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In June Palestinian militants affiliated with Hamas kidnapped and subsequently murdered three Jewish Israeli teens, one a U.S. citizen. In an apparent revenge attack two weeks later, three Jewish Israelis kidnapped and murdered a Palestinian minor. Relations between Palestinian Christians and Muslims were generally good, with both groups focusing more on ethnic and political similarities than religious differences, according to Muslim and Christian clergy and congregants. Some Christians reported feeling increased tensions with Muslims in the wake of Israeli military operations in Gaza. Tensions were substantial between Jews and Palestinian Christians and Muslims, largely as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's control of access to Christian and Muslim religious sites. Different interpretations of Judaism led to strained relations among Jews living in Jerusalem and the West Bank, and some non-Orthodox Jews and Christians experienced discrimination and harassment by some Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews.

Israeli settlers in the West Bank who attacked Palestinian persons and property continued to justify such violence as necessary for the defense of Judaism, for example when they uprooted Palestinian olive trees or conducted "price tag" attacks. Some Jewish groups continued to call for the destruction of the Islamic Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque to enable the building of a third Jewish temple.

Palestinians reportedly threw stones and clashed with IDF escorts during visits of Jewish groups to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. For example, on September 17, Palestinians reportedly threw stones and Molotov cocktails at IDF soldiers escorting Jewish visitors to the tomb, and on December 22, Israeli visitors to the site reported that unknown persons had vandalized it. Palestinians on many occasions, for example on November 5, threw

Molotov cocktails and stones at Israeli security forces on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, causing several injuries.

Incidents of violence against Jewish visitors to the Mount of Olives by Palestinian youths continued to increase, according to NGOs that monitor these incidents, resulting in some injuries.

Some settlers continued to carry out "price tag" attacks against Palestinians. These included acts of vandalism, arson, and anti-Muslim graffiti on mosques located primarily in the West Bank, as well as anti-Christian graffiti on churches and desecration of Muslim and Christian cemeteries in Jerusalem. For example, on May 5, vandals wrote "Death to Arabs, Christians and all those who hate Israel" in Hebrew on the Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, and on May 9, "Price Tag, David the king of the Jews, Jesus is trash" was spray painted in Hebrew next to the Romanian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem. Local Christian clergy said they were subjected to frequent abuse by ultra-Orthodox youths in Jerusalem's Old City, including insults and spitting.

WOW organized monthly women's services at the Western Wall and continued to hold prayer services every month except September, typically facing harassment from ultra-Orthodox men and women. WOW continued to advocate for the right for women to bring a Torah scroll onto the Western Wall plaza and to read aloud from it there.

Orthodox Jews continued to harass Messianic Jews in Jerusalem. Yad L'Achim, an NGO opposed to missionary activity and intermarriage with Muslims, continued to target and harass Messianic Jews, including by distributing posters that depicted threatened missionaries. Some ultra-Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall harassed visitors and Jewish worshippers who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions. Members of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements publicly criticized gender segregation and rules governing how women pray at the Western Wall.

In Jerusalem, some ultra-Orthodox Jews criticized Jerusalem residents who did not adhere to their strict interpretation of Orthodox Jewish law. For example, Ultra-Orthodox Jews opposed allowing a new movie theater to be open on Saturday. Ultra-Orthodox Jews in October threw stones at Jerusalem city buses because posters on them showed pictures of women.

Although many Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, other prominent rabbis reiterated the view that entering the site was permissible, and Jewish proponents of accessing and performing religious rituals at the site were increasingly vocal. For example, groups such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute regularly called for increased Jewish access and prayer at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, as well as the construction of a third Jewish temple on the site. The Temple Institute in August began a crowdfunding campaign to finance architectural plans for the third temple, and a promotional video on its website depicted the third temple built atop the al-Aqsa Mosque site. The northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, a controversial political and religious group opposed to participation in local or national governance, frequently called on members to "defend" al-Aqsa mosque and spoke of the religious site as "under attack," and tens of members of the movement may have received funding to remain present at the site to counter violations of the status quo.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination involving Christians and Muslims who converted to other faiths, and societal attitudes continued to be a barrier to conversions.

Mainstream independent Palestinian news outlets, including *Al Quds*, *Al Ayyam*, and *Ma'an*, generally avoided publishing material that promoted hatred and limited their criticism to governmental policies and actions of individuals and not of ethnic or religious groups. They sometimes, however, carried anti-Semitic opinion pieces. Language in op-eds directed accusations of war crimes, barbarism and colonialism, at Israeli "Zionists," "settlers," and "the occupation army." Media outlets sometimes carried cartoons demonizing Israel and broadcast anti-Semitic rhetoric, including by academics and clerics, accusing Jews of trying to take over the world and exploiting the Holocaust to their advantage. For example, in November a Palestinian magazine published a cartoon depicting Jewish activist Yehuda Glick, a controversial proponent of building a new Jewish temple on the site where the Al-Aqsa Mosque is currently located, as a snake wearing a Yarmulke with the star of David on it.

Nonofficial PA and nonmainstream Palestinian media outlets, particularly those controlled by Hamas, continued to use inflammatory language. Hamas-run media was overtly anti-Semitic in some of its programming, including children's television shows, in demonizing Jewish people and encouraging violence against them.

Interfaith dating remained a sensitive issue. Yad L'Achim reportedly pressured Jewish girls not to date Palestinian men, ran a hotline encouraging people to inform on Jewish-Palestinian couples, and distributed fliers warning Palestinian men to stay away from Jewish women. The Jewish Israeli organization Lehava also demonstrated against relationships between Jews and Palestinians, and reportedly chanted racist slogans such as "Death to Arabs" at demonstrations in Jerusalem. Most Christian and Muslim families in the Occupied