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All sources used are referenced and cited in the bibliography section. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned COI methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive or conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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COI QUERY RESPONSE– PALESTINE/WEST BANK

Situation of Christians in the West Bank, particularly in Bethlehem

1. Demographics overview

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported on 124 400 Arab Christians living in the “Occupied Palestinian Territory” as of the end of 2021.¹ The USDOS report on International Religious Freedom published in 2022 noted that ‘according to various estimates, 50 000 Christian Palestinians reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem’ living mostly in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus governorates.² According to The Times of Israel, the number of Christian residents in Bethlehem had decreased to 11 000, a significant drop compared to the 86% of the total population they represented in 1950, accounting for only 12% in 2016.³

More recent information on the demographics of the Bethlehem population could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA and within the time constraints of this response.

2. Treatment of Christians by the state and by society

2.1. *Treatment by the state*

Christians living in the West Bank are governed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) laws in the regions named Area A and Area B, as established in 1993 and 1995 respectively with the Oslo Accords [interim agreements signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel concerning the terms of governing functions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip].⁴ Bethlehem, Ramallah and Nablus are in Area A under full PA administration.⁵ In Area B, the PA has administration control but there is joint Israeli-Palestinian security.⁶ However, Israeli authorities continue to be responsible for the external security control in West Bank and Gaza.⁷

¹ Palestine, PCBS, Statistical Yearbook of Palestine 2022, December 2022, [url](#), p. 200

² USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) p. 6

³ Times of Israel (The), Christians worry ‘Silent Night’ may soon refer to their community in Bethlehem, 24 December 2016, [url](#)

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, Palestinian Authority, 30 July 2023, [url](#); ESCWA (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia), Palestine Under Occupation III: Mapping Israel’s Policies and Practices and their Economic Repercussions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2022, [url](#), p. 1

⁵ Just Vision, Areas A, B, C, n.d., [url](#)

⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, Palestinian Authority, 30 July 2023, [url](#)

⁷ UN Peacemaker, Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II), n.d., [url](#)

Legal framework concerning Christians in the West Bank

The PA Basic Law, which serves as an interim constitution in Palestine,⁸ establishes Islam as the official religion and the principles of Islamic Shari'a as a principal source of legislation. The same law also calls for respect of 'all other divine religions' and guarantees freedom of belief, worship and the performance of religious functions, 'provided public order or public morals are not violated'. The Basic Law also stipulates equality of all Palestinians before the law.⁹ Freedom House, in its report covering 2022, noted that blasphemy is a criminal offence in Palestine, without however specifying under which law.¹⁰ According to End Blasphemy Laws, a campaign coalition focusing on the abolition of blasphemy laws worldwide, in the West Bank 'the old Jordanian law against "defaming religion" is still in force and may result in a maximum penalty of life imprisonment'.¹¹ A report published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands in April 2022, noted that in West Bank blasphemy is punishable by life imprisonment 'under Article 278 of the 1964 Jordanian Criminal Code', and by a fine and a prison sentence of up to three months 'under Article 330 of the 1979 PLO Criminal Code'.¹² Freedom House also noted that, the PA's 2017 Electronic Crimes Law (ECL) 'criminalizes expression aimed at harming moral and religious values without defining those values, allowing for arbitrary enforcement'.¹³ Information on the implementation of the above-mentioned legislation and cases about the blasphemy law concerning the Christians in the West Bank, could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA and within the time constraints of this response.

In 2002, the Israeli government initiated the construction of a Barrier to halt Palestinian attacks within Israel. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Palestinian with West Bank ID cards who wish to enter East Jerusalem must obtain special permits from Israeli authorities. They are permitted to do so through four of the 14 Barrier checkpoints.¹⁴ The checkpoints imposed by Israel restricted movement between Jerusalem and West Bank and access of West Bank Christians to places of worship.¹⁵ For instance, Christian leaders stated during 2022 that the physical barrier 'hindered Bethlehem-area Christians from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem'.¹⁶ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in a report published in April 2023, noted concerning

⁸ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) p. 1

⁹ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Basic Law of the Palestinian National Authority, 4 March 2009, [url](#), pp. 5 – 7

¹⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - West Bank*, 2023, [url](#)

¹¹ End Blasphemy Laws, Palestine, last updated: 18 June 2020, [url](#)

¹² Netherlands (The), General Country of origin information report Palestinian Territories, 30 April 2022, [url](#), p. 54

¹³ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - West Bank*, 2023, [url](#)

¹⁴ UNOCHA, The humanitarian impact of 20 Years of the Barrier – December 2022, 30 December 2022, [url](#)

¹⁵ Kairos Palestine, Palestinian Christians - The Forcible Displacement and Dispossession Continues, May 2023, [url](#), p. 20; USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p.42

¹⁶ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p.42; KAS, Im Kreuzfeuer: Ohne Perspektive inmitten nationalistisch-religiöser Gewalt [In the Crossfire: Without Perspective in the Midst of Nationalist-Religious Violence], April 2023, [url](#), p. 2

the restrictions to travel from West Bank to Jerusalem that many West Bank Christians were completely denied entry, '[informal translation] often without justification'.¹⁷

Arab News, a Saudi Arabia English-newspaper, reported on 9 April 2023 that due to the required permits and checkpoints that Christian families from the West Bank and Gaza strip had to go through to arrive to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre 'were dissuaded from participating in the celebrations'.¹⁸

Regarding the rights of the Christians in the West Bank, USDOS mentioned in 2022 that the PA recognised the authority of several Christian religious groups 'to adjudicate personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance' and Christian cultural activities received financial support from the PA religious committee.¹⁹

The PA issued a decree in 2021 whereby Christian citizens should be represented by a minimum of seven seats of the legislative council.²⁰ USDOS further mentioned that in the West Bank, a 2017 presidential decree requires that Christians head nine municipal councils, including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and Beit Jala.²¹ Freedom House noted in 2022 with regards to political participation in West Bank that 'PA politics remain dominated by Arab and Muslim men'.²² Information on the implementation of the mentioned legislation could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA and within the time constraints of this response.

The following sources have been included due to the relevance of the information despite being published prior to the reference period of this query response.

An article published on 27 May 2019 by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA Center) cited incidents of attacks against Christians where 'the PA police did not intervene during the hours of mayhem' and 'as in the two previous incidents, no suspects were arrested'.²³

Concerning political participation of Christians, a 2017 Country Information Report on Palestine compiled by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government noted that, at the time of publication of the report, the Minister of Tourism, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of National Economy in Palestine were Christians.²⁴ According to the same source, under the special statute with regards to participation in

¹⁷ KAS, Im Kreuzfeuer: Ohne Perspektive inmitten nationalistisch-religiöser Gewalt [In the Crossfire: Without Perspective in the Midst of Nationalist-Religious Violence], April 2023, [url](#), p. 2

¹⁸ Arab News, Christians in Palestine hope against hope for a peaceful and joyous Easter, 9 April 2023, [url](#)

¹⁹ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) pp. 9-10

²⁰ Palestine, Central Electoral Commission, Decree No. () of 2021 On the Allocation of Legislative Council Seats to Christian Citizens, 20 February 2021, [url](#)

²¹ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) p. 11

²² Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - West Bank*, 2023, [url](#)

²³ BESA Center, The Persecution of Christians in the Palestinian Authority, 27 May 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Thematic Report: Palestinian Territories, 15 March 2017, [url](#), p. 17

municipal councils, ‘the mayor, deputy mayor and the majority of the municipal council of Bethlehem’ were Christian.²⁵

According to the same 2017 report by DFAT, 37 Christian schools operated in the West Bank. In West Bank, the government provided funding for the construction and maintenance of Islamic religious and worship sites, whereas Christian organisations also receive funding, although it was limited.²⁶

2.2. Treatment by society

Information on societal treatment of Christians in Bethlehem during the reference period was scarce among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this response. However, the following information may be relevant.

The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) conducted a survey between 27 January and 23 February 2020 to look into the reasons behind the emigration of Christians from Palestine. According to this survey, the majority of the Christian population indicated that ‘they feel integrated into Palestinian society’, whereas three out of ten Christians surveyed did not express the same views. The same survey reported that ‘the overwhelming majority indicated that it has not been exposed’ to incidents of harassment, including mocking of their religious beliefs, on behalf of the Palestinian society, with a percentage ranging between 10% to 18% that noted that they have faced exposure to incidents of similar nature.²⁷ According to the above-mentioned survey, 27% of the persons surveyed indicated that they had been exposed to curses and name calling due to their religion, whereas the percentage of those exposed to acts of this nature was higher among ‘the unreligious, the followers of groups other than the Greek Orthodox and the Latin Catholics, among the unmarried, and those with the least income’.²⁸

A 2023 article by NBC News noted that exact figures for anti-Christian incidents in general were difficult to obtain. However, citing data collected by Tag Meir, an umbrella organisation that seeks to fight racism and promote democratic values in Israel,²⁹ the article referred to ‘a dramatic rise in attacks by Jewish civilians on cemeteries, churches, monasteries and mosques in Israel and the occupied West Bank’ during the first three months of 2023.³⁰ The source reported that Tag Meir documented six incidents of anti-Christian attacks in the first three months of 2023, in comparison with two incidents in all of 2022 and three in 2021, in Israel and the occupied West Bank.³¹

²⁵ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Thematic Report: Palestinian Territories, 15 March 2017, [url](#), p. 17

²⁶ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Thematic Report: Palestinian Territories, 15 March 2017, [url](#), p. 17

²⁷ PSR, Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it, 8 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2, 9, 12

²⁸ PSR, Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it, 8 June 2020, [url](#), p. 12 – 13

²⁹ Tag Meir, About Us, n.d., [url](#)

³⁰ NBC News, Christians in the Holy Land say they’re under attack as Israeli-Palestinian violence soars, 20 April 2023, [url](#)

³¹ NBC News, Christians in the Holy Land say they’re under attack as Israeli-Palestinian violence soars, 20 April 2023, [url](#)

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), during 2022, 621 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank resulting in property damage were documented.³² USDOS noted that, according to the police, the most common offences also included attacks on Christian worship sites.³³ However, the source did not mention Bethlehem specifically with regards to the locations the attacks occurred. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in a report published in April 2023, noted that many West Bank Christians reported property damage and confiscation and threats under attacks by the Israeli army, although according to the source they '[informal translation] hardly experience any differences in the treatment of their cases compared to the Muslim population'.³⁴

USDOS noted that, throughout 2022, both in West Bank and Gaza, interfaith marriages 'encountered considerable societal and family opposition', including families disowning 'Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith'.³⁵ A report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, citing a confidential source from February 2022, noted that 'among Muslims, the general view is that Christians are a privileged group who have easier access to travel permits'.³⁶

United Nations Watch noted in a report submitted to the UN Human Rights Committee for its Initial Review of the State of Palestine that people who converted to Christianity from Islam in the West Bank or Gaza 'may face discrimination from both Muslims and Christians, may be rejected by his/her family or forcibly confined to his/her home, and in extreme cases may even be killed'.³⁷

The following sources have been included due to their relevance despite being published prior to the reference period of the present query response.

An article published in December 2019 by Providence, a U.S. based online magazine focusing on reporting on topics related to Christianity and Christian political theology, reported an incident of a mosque in Bethlehem cursing Christians during broadcasting Islamic religious verses. According to a Christian resident of Bethlehem, cited in the above-mentioned article, this was not a frequent phenomenon.³⁸

A 2019 article by Frankfurter Rundschau, a German daily newspaper cited a statement by Issa Kassasiye, the Palestinian ambassador to the Vatican, who noted that '[informal translation] tensions between Muslims and Christians [...] result more from neighbourhood disputes than from religious fanaticism'.³⁹

³² UNOCHA, Protection of Civilians Report: 5-24 July 2023, 29 July 2023, [url](#)

³³ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) p. 23

³⁴ KAS, Im Kreuzfeuer: Ohne Perspektive inmitten nationalistisch-religiöser Gewalt [In the Crossfire: Without Perspective in the Midst of Nationalist-Religious Violence], April 2023, [url](#), p. 3

³⁵ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, [url](#) p. 57

³⁶ Netherlands (The), General Country of origin information report Palestinian Territories, 30 April 2022, [url](#), p. 53

³⁷ United Nations Watch, Submission by United Nations Watch to the UN Human Rights Committee for its Initial Review of the State of Palestine; 138th Session, 24 May 2023, [url](#), p. 20

³⁸ Providence, Religious Freedom for Palestinian Christians? Not So Much, 17 December 2019, [url](#)

³⁹ Frankfurter Rundschau, Der Exodus aus Bethlehem [The Exodus from Bethlehem], 5 January 2019, [url](#)

3. Access to employment, social, and governmental services by Christians

Information on access to employment, social, and governmental services by Christians during the reference period could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA within the time constraints of this response. However, the following information may be relevant.

USDOS reported that in 2022 religious organizations providing education, health care, humanitarian aid, and social services to Palestinians claimed that the physical barrier erected by Israel during the Second Intifada impeded their work, especially in the West Bank Christian communities around Bethlehem south of Jerusalem.⁴⁰

The PSR survey found ‘a fifth to a quarter [of the surveyed Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip] feel discrimination when searching for jobs or when seeking PA services’.⁴¹ With regards to access to services from the PA, 92 % said it was ‘easy to obtain certificates, passports, or ID cards’, 62 % said it was ‘easy to obtain assistance from the police when needed’, and 42 % said it was ‘easy to obtain a building permit’.⁴²

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in a 2023 report providing information in the context of emigration of Christian Palestinians, noted that Christians from the Bethlehem region were occupied with the tourism sector, earning a better income ‘[informal translation] in comparison to Palestinians from regions that are not developed for tourism’.⁴³

The following source has been included due to its relevance despite being published prior to the reference period of the present query response.

A 2017 Country Information Report on Palestine compiled by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of the Australian Government noted that many West Bank Christians were employed in the civil service or in ‘senior positions in government and the private sector’. According to the same source, particularly in Bethlehem, ‘Palestinian Christian businesses rely on the tourism industry surrounding the religious sites’.⁴⁴

4. Incidents of violence or harm against Christians

In its report on the West Bank covering 2022, Freedom House noted that ‘security-related restrictions on movement, and vandalism or physical assaults against worshippers or places of worship’ affected Christian residents in different ways.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ USDOS, Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza - West Bank and Gaza, 15 May 2023, p. 42

⁴¹ PSR, Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it, 8 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

⁴² PSR, Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it, 8 June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁴³ KAS, Im Kreuzfeuer: Ohne Perspektive inmitten nationalistisch-religiöser Gewalt [In the Crossfire: Without Perspective in the Midst of Nationalist-Religious Violence], April 2023, [url](#), p. 2

⁴⁴ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Thematic Report: Palestinian Territories, 15 March 2017, [url](#), pp. 16 – 17

⁴⁵ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023 - West Bank*, 2023, [url](#)

Below follow some illustrative and non-exhaustive incidents against Christians, reported by media sources, between January and December 2022, in the West Bank, including Bethlehem:

- In January⁴⁶ and August 2022, the Orthodox priest who was head of the Jacob's Well Monastery in Nablus was attacked twice in areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority, whereas the sources reporting on these incidents did not specify who were the perpetrators.⁴⁷ However, information corroborating on these above-mentioned attacks could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA and within the time constraints of this response.
- On 28 January 2022, a group of masked Muslim men attacked and injured two Christians while they were working on their farm located in the southwest of Bethlehem.⁴⁸
- In March 2022, unidentified gunmen fired shots at Beit Al-Liqa, a Christian community and training centre located in Beit Jala⁴⁹, after a Palestinian Evangelical Pastor (founder of the centre) appeared on social media with Rabbi Yehuda Glick, a former member of the Israeli parliament.⁵⁰
- In October 2022, unidentified gunmen opened fire toward a hotel, owned by a Christian,⁵¹ in Bethlehem after a video on social media showed Jewish symbols displayed in the conference hall by a group of tourists.⁵²
- On 28 October 2022, In Beit Sahur, a Christian neighbourhood near Bethlehem, a group of Muslims attacked an Orthodox church throwing stones and injuring several people.⁵³ A few weeks earlier, in the same church, a Muslim man was accused of harassing young Christian women.⁵⁴

Information on incidents of violence or harm against Christians in the West Bank, and in particular, in Bethlehem, in 2023, could not be found among the sources consulted by the EUAA and within the time constraints of this response.

⁴⁶ Ma'an News Agency, "يستنكر الاعتداء على رئيس دير بنر يعقوب وحنّا يطالب بمعاقبة الفاعلين", [The "assembly" condemns the assault on the abbot of the Bir Ya'qub Monastery, and Hanna calls for the perpetrators to be punished], 25 January 2022, [url](#); WCC, WCC expresses concern about violence against Christians in Palestinian Authority areas, 3 February 2022, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Israel Today, Christians Once Again Under Palestinian Attack, 9 November 2022, [url](#)

⁴⁸ ICN, Holy Land: Call for prayer for Nassar Family and Tent of Nations, 29 January 2022, [url](#); Israel 365 News, Christians are attacked in Bethlehem. A rabbi calls on Israel to intervene, 21 November 2022, [url](#)

⁴⁹ Beit Jala is a city in the West Bank, about 10 km south of Jerusalem, on the western side of the road to Hebron, opposite Bethlehem.

⁵⁰ Gatestone Institute, Palestinians: Why are Attacks on Christians Being Ignored?, 31 October 2022, [url](#); Jerusalem Post (The), Palestinians: The 'criminal' pastor who met with the rabbi, 25 March 2022, [url](#)

⁵¹ Gatestone Institute, Palestinians: Why are Attacks on Christians Being Ignored?, 31 October 2022, [url](#); Israel 365 News, Christians are attacked in Bethlehem. A rabbi calls on Israel to intervene, 21 November 2022, [url](#)

⁵² WIN, Palestinians shoot up Bethlehem hotel after Jewish symbols found inside, 10 October 2022, [url](#); Times of Israel (The), Gunmen shoot at Bethlehem hotel after video circulates of Jewish symbols inside, 10 October 2022, [url](#)

⁵³ All Arab News, Church attacked by Muslims in Christian town near Bethlehem, 29 October 2023, [url](#); Israel Today, Christians Once Again Under Palestinian Attack, 9 November 2022, [url](#); Christian Post (The), Christian leaders denounce attack by Muslim men hurling stones at churchgoers near Bethlehem, 31 October 2022, [url](#)

⁵⁴ Middle East Forum, The Persecution of Christians in the Palestinian Authority, 25 December 2022, [url](#)

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