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Executive Summary

Religious freedom in the Occupied Territories falls under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel, or Hamas (which maintains de facto control in the Gaza Strip). The laws and policies of the PA and Israel protect religious freedom and in practice the two governments generally upheld these laws. The de facto Hamas authorities in Gaza continued to restrict religious freedom in both law and practice, including by arresting or detaining Muslims in Gaza who did not abide by Hamas' own strict interpretation of Islam.

The PA does not have a constitution, but the Palestinian Basic Law generally functions as a temporary constitution. The basic law provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the performance of religious rites unless such practices violate public order or morality. PA policy generally protected the free practice of religion, although problems persisted, including the authorities' refusal to recognize personal status documents issued by certain groups of Christians. The Basic Law states that Islam is the official religion and the principles of sharia (Islamic law) shall be the main source of legislation. It also proscribes discrimination based on religion, stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, and holds that basic human rights are liberties that shall be protected.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal, military, and economic control in the Occupied Territories. Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty provides for the protection of religious freedom. The Israeli government generally respected the right of freedom of religion within the Occupied Territories during the year, although the government's closure policies and the separation barrier restricted the ability of Palestinian Muslims and Christians to reach some places of worship. Israeli security authorities at times restricted Muslim and Christian worship within Jerusalem. Israeli policies also limited the ability of Israeli Jews to reach places of worship in areas under Palestinian control.

Since the 2007 Hamas coup in the Gaza Strip, Hamas, which the United States has designated a foreign terrorist organization, has exercised de facto authority over the territory and has enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law, including imposing religious restrictions on women enforced by a "morality police" who punished women for dressing "inappropriately." Christians raised concerns that Hamas failed to protect their rights as a religious minority.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Christians and Muslims generally enjoyed good relations during the year in the Occupied Territories. However, tensions remained high within Jewish communities and between Jews and non-Jews; continuing violence heightened those tensions. Some supporters of Jewish settlements continued to carry out "price tag" attacks (property crimes and violent acts primarily against Muslim and Christian Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, their religious sites, and cemeteries). Muslim Palestinians sometimes threw stones at Jews visiting holy sites such as Joseph's Tomb in Nablus.

U.S. consulate general officials in Jerusalem monitored the status of religious freedom and raised instances of abuses and discriminatory practices with relevant government officials at all levels, as well as with religious and human rights groups. The Consul General actively supported the efforts of the Council of Religious Leaders in the Holy Lands (CRIHL), an umbrella body that includes the representatives of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the PA Ministry of Islamic Waqf (Endowments), and the PA Islamic sharia courts, as well as the leaders of major Christian denominations in Jerusalem, to denounce acts of violence, religious intolerance, and vandalism at holy sites.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 2.7 million in the West Bank and 1.8 million in the Gaza Strip (July 2013 estimates). Roughly 98 percent of the Palestinian residents of these territories are Sunni Muslims. According to the 2010 Statistical Yearbook of the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 491,800 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 the West Bank. Although there is no official count, in 2008 there were about 52,000 Christians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem according to a survey conducted by the Lutheran ecumenical institution, Diyar Consortium. According to local Christian leaders, Palestinian Christian emigration has accelerated since 2001. Lower birth rates among Palestinian Christians also contribute to 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, but smaller communities exist elsewhere. Approximately 400 Samaritans reside in the West Bank, as well as a small number of evangelical Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The laws and policies of the PA generally protect religious freedom. The PA does not have a constitution but has stated 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. It 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, stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law, and holds that basic human rights and liberties shall be protected. A 1995 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.

Islamic institutions and places of worship receive preferential financial support from the government by law. The Ministry of Awqaf (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. It provides imams with themes they

are required to use in Friday sermons and prohibits them from broadcasting quranic recitations from minarets prior to the call to prayer.

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 the West Bank; the Israeli government controls most Jewish holy sites in the West Bank.

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.

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

PA President Mahmoud Abbas has informal 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 religion.

Churches in the West Bank and Gaza are in three categories: churches the PA recognizes in accordance with status quo agreements reached under Ottoman rule in the late 19th century and Protestant churches with established episcopates; churches that the PA does not recognize but which exist and operate, such as some Protestant churches, including evangelical ones, that were 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 specific process by which religious organizations gain official recognition; rather, each religious group seeks 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 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.

The third category consists of a small number of groups that normally proselytize, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups. These churches also generally operate unhindered by the PA, although they must agree not to proselytize. The PA refuses to recognize personal status legal documents issued by some groups in this category.

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

The site Muslims refer to as the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) contains the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque. Jews refer to the same place as the Temple Mount and recognize it

as 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). However, the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a Jordanian-funded and administered Islamic trust and charitable organization, administers the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

Since 1967, the Israeli government as a matter of stated policy generally prohibits non-Muslim worship at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and many Jewish leaders promote the view that Jewish law prohibits Jews from entering the compound due to the risk of accidentally defiling the (unknown) location of the Temple's Holy of Holies. They instead direct worshippers to the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism. The Israeli High Court ruled in 1997 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." However, in a number of instances, Israeli police reportedly have facilitated the entrance of Jewish groups that attempted to perform religious acts at the site.

The Rabbi of the Western Wall, an Israeli government appointee, sets the guidelines for religious observance at the Western Wall, such as the strict separation of women and men on the main plaza, although a platform open to both men and women where each person has the right to practice their religious rituals as they desire has been erected south of the Mughrabi ramp, adjacent to the Western Wall. In April the Jerusalem District Court ruled that it was illegal to arrest or fine women for conducting prayers at the Western Wall while wearing certain prayer shawls and/or phylacteries or reading aloud from the Torah. Women are still not permitted to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza and have been prevented from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the holy site.

Under Oslo-era agreements, both Israel and the PA share responsibility for the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, although disagreements over division of responsibilities are significant.

Israel exercises varying degrees of legal, military, and economic control in the Occupied Territories. Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty provides for the protection of religious freedom. Its closure and curfew policies and its separation barrier restrict that freedom, however. Israeli security authorities at times restrict Muslim and Christian worship within Jerusalem. Israeli policies also limit the ability of Israeli Jews to reach places of worship in areas under Palestinian control.

Since the 2007 Hamas coup in the Gaza Strip, Hamas has exercised de facto authority over the territory. Hamas enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic law, including imposing religious restrictions on women enforced by a "morality police" that punishes women for dressing "inappropriately."

Government Practices

There were reports of detentions affecting religious freedom.

The Public Committee against Torture, an Israeli non-governmental human rights organization, reported in July that some Palestinian women in Israeli detention were prevented from wearing a headscarf during interrogation.

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 government, however, enforced its 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. The women's section is less than half the size of the men's section.

Israeli police in April arrested five members of Women of the Wall, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and prayer group that organized monthly women's services at the Western Wall, for wearing certain prayer shawls and singing at the holy site. The charges were subsequently dismissed by a Jerusalem District Court Judge, who ruled that it was not a violation of "local custom" for women to wear prayer shawls or phylacteries or to pray aloud at the wall. Following that ruling, there were no further arrests, and in May Women of the Wall wore prayer shawls and prayed out loud protected by police from ultra-Orthodox men who threw chairs, bottles, bags of garbage, and rocks. Women of the Wall continued to hold prayer services every month except September, each time facing harassment from ultra-Orthodox men and women. In July and August police barred Women of the Wall from entering the women's section of the Western Wall, citing security concerns. The group was restricted to the back of the plaza, away from the wall. In October the group was surrounded by approximately 2,000 schoolgirls who cursed them and attempted to drown out their prayer.

The Israeli government continued to debate alternative prayer sites at the Western Wall and erected a platform south of the Mughrabi ramp open to both men and women where each person has the right to practice their religious rituals as they desire. The platform, near the site of the archeological excavations near Robinson's Arch, is equipped to accommodate about 450 worshippers and was designated for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. Women of the Wall rejected the new platform as insufficient, but offered in October to move to the new area provided the Israeli government agreed to their conditions, including that there be one entrance and one contiguous national plaza for all three prayer sections, that the area receive full equality in funding with the traditional prayer area, that the women have access to a divider should they wish to pray separately from men, and that the Rabbi of the Western Wall not administer the site. Women of the Wall continued to petition to use their own Torah scrolls on the Western Wall plaza. Some members of the Women of the Wall rejected any compromise and maintained their insistence on praying in the women's section of the main plaza.

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 and curfews hindered residents from practicing their religions at key holy sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

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 government made some accommodations for Palestinian Christians in the West Bank to access Jerusalem for religious purposes, granting 20,000 permits without age restrictions for West Bank Christian Palestinians to visit Israel during Christmas. Israeli authorities issued 500 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. They issued no permits for Gazans between 16 and 35 years of age.

Christian leaders said that Israeli security authorities continued to obstruct access to Jerusalem for Palestinian Christian residents of the West Bank, including clergy, which significantly reduced their ability to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Israeli police severely restricted Palestinian Christian access to the Old City and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre during the March 31 Easter holiday and the May 4 Orthodox Easter "holy fire" service. Christians accused police of using excessive force, and a video showed Israeli police dragging and beating a Coptic priest. Israel issued 21,000 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 Orthodox Christians in Gaza 500 permits to celebrate Easter in the West Bank from April 30 to May 12.

The Israeli government kept in place an amended visa issuance process for foreigners working in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which also significantly impeded the work of Christian institutions. Christian advocates stated that the difficulty of obtaining permits gradually worsened over the past decade. 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, 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 generally prohibited Arab Christian clergy from entering Gaza, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority.

Israel made few accommodations for Palestinian Muslims to enter Jerusalem for religious purposes, except during Ramadan. Men and women above age 60 and children 12 and under were allowed to enter Jerusalem without permits every day during the month of Ramadan, except Saturdays. Every Friday during Ramadan and on the Night of Destiny (Laylat al Qadr), Israel also allowed men between the ages of 40 and 60 and women of all ages to enter Jerusalem without a permit. The requirement for males between the ages of 13 and 40 to obtain permits remained in place. During Ramadan Israeli authorities also temporarily permitted Palestinians to use three additional checkpoints (Gilo, Shu'fat Camp, and Az Zeitoun) along the separation barrier in addition to the Qalandiya crossing. The Israeli government continued to deny Gaza residents access to East Jerusalem. The Israeli government also issued extra permits for West Bank identity card holders to enter East Jerusalem and Israel for "family visits." According to the Israeli Civil Administration, one million Palestinians entered Israel throughout the month. As in previous years, Israel eased a number of additional restrictions on Palestinian movement in the West Bank, including opening two key roads leading into the cities of Ramallah and Hebron to Palestinian traffic.

The Israeli government continued building a separation barrier started in 2002 due to security concerns. This barrier, like restrictions on permits, limited access to holy sites and seriously impeded the work of religious organizations that provide education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians, particularly in and around East Jerusalem.

The separation barrier significantly 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 obtaining access to Christian holy sites in the West Bank because of the barrier and Israeli restrictions on movement in the West Bank.

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. An Israeli court ruled in April following a seven-year legal battle that the Israeli government could proceed with 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, will separate the convent and school from the Palestinian communities they serve, and cut off area residents from their lands.

Since early 2001, following the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the Israeli government has 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 holy sites, although the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) occasionally provided security escorts for groups to visit selected Jewish holy sites. Beginning in

2009, the Israeli Ministry of Defense gradually lifted restrictions on Arab Israelis visiting Area A cities in the West Bank.

The PA and IDF jointly provided Jews access for approved visits to holy 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.

Again during the year, Israeli authorities severely limited the access of Palestinians to Rachel's Tomb, a Bethlehem shrine holy 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 holy site revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the tomb of Abraham. The IDF restricted Muslim access for 10 nonconsecutive days, including Passover and Yom Kippur; Jews were restricted 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. On October 2, Israeli soldiers reportedly entered the mosque and placed an Israeli flag on a wall.

The Israeli National Police (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 in general allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the INP sometimes restricted this access citing security concerns. The INP did not coordinate its decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site with the Waqf. 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 effective authority to remove persons from the site.

The Israeli government restricted access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Muslims from Jerusalem and the West Bank and provided Muslims from Gaza no opportunity to access the site. Israeli security authorities in Jerusalem frequently restricted Muslim residents of Jerusalem from entering the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site for Friday prayers. Citing security concerns, authorities also frequently barred entry of male residents under the age of 50. Infrequently authorities would close the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount entirely, often after skirmishes at the site between Palestinians and Israeli police.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, most frequently Jerusalem Islamic Waqf employees, and sometimes also barred Jewish activists who had repeatedly violated rules against non-Muslim prayer on the site. Israeli authorities banned all non-Muslim visitors to the site for the last two weeks of Ramadan, citing security concerns. Waqf officials complained that Israeli police violated agreements regarding control of access to the site. 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 concerns expressed by the Islamic Waqf. Israeli police detained Mohammed Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories, for close to eight hours on May 8 and questioned him about his alleged involvement in inciting disturbances on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The detention drew criticism from Palestinian and Jordanian officials.

Although most Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site -- in November a group of prominent rabbis signed a letter reaffirming a strict religious prohibition -- other prominent rabbis reiterated their 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.

Despite Israeli government prohibitions against non-Muslim worship at the site, Jewish groups did visit, escorted by Israeli police, and sometimes performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration. Waqf officials criticized the visits, and in some instances the visits sparked violence between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli police. Jewish visits to the site increased during the Jewish holidays in September, when visits occurred almost daily in groups of 10 to 300 individuals. Muslim worshipers often clashed with police escorts facilitating Jewish visits. During this period, Israeli police at times imposed restrictions on Muslim and non-Muslim access to the site, for example on September 3 limiting access to Muslims over 50. In several instances Israeli police prevented non-Muslim access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in anticipation of clashes, including before a major clash on September 24. Muslims also were denied access completely to the site on at least one day during September.

On September 24, Israeli police and Palestinians clashed at the Damascus Gate entrance to the Old City after Palestinians gathered to protest what they viewed as repeated "incursions" by Jewish worshipers, including settlers, onto the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. This clash resulted in at least 40 Palestinian injuries and 12 arrests. The press also reported that Israeli forces mishandled Jerusalem Grand Mufti Mohammad Hussein during the clashes. On October 14, Israeli police briefly detained 10 men who raised the Israeli flag, prayed, and sang the Israeli national anthem on the site.

According to the Waqf, Jewish visits to the site surpassed 9,000, and more than 4,000 Israeli security personnel also toured the site. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his Eid al-Adha message in October pledged to uphold the status quo at holy sites, some Israeli groups 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. Some members of the Israeli Knesset also called for reversing the policy of banning non-Muslim prayer at the site, and the Knesset's Interior Committee held at least two hearings to discuss the issue and to press the INP to allow Jewish visitors to pray at the site. Some Israeli officials visited the site and issued statements asserting Israeli control over it. For example, on September 4, Minister of Housing and Construction Uri Ariel visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, saying, "I intend to continue going there to strengthen Israeli sovereignty ... it is ours, and it is not subject to any argument or negotiations." Palestinians objected to any change at the site and condemned the minister's statements.

The Israeli authorities imposed a full closure on the West Bank September 13-14 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.

Since 2011, the PA has refused to recognize documents issued by the First Baptist Church of Bethlehem, such as marriage certificates. A small number of proselytizing groups, including some evangelical Christians, continued to meet official resistance in their efforts to obtain recognition in areas Israel and the PA administered. Since 2008, the PA has refused to register marriages of Jehovah's Witnesses, which has also led to problems 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 in an effort to prevent preaching that could be perceived as encouraging violence. Before the policy went into effect in 2009, imams sometimes delivered intolerant and anti-Semitic sermons.

Some observers of archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to allege that the Israel Antiquities Authority, a 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.

Construction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in West Jerusalem continued. The center intends to open a museum on the grounds of the Mamilla cemetery, a 1,000-year-old Muslim cemetery containing the gravesites of several prominent Palestinian families and, according to Islamic tradition, several of Prophet Muhammad's companions and tens of thousands of Salah ad-Din's warriors. Supporters of the center cited an 1894 ruling by an Islamic court stating that the cemetery was no longer sacred because it was abandoned, and claimed that it served as a municipal parking lot for almost 50 years. The museum continued to face opposition from human rights groups and relatives of those buried in the cemetery, who disputed the Wiesenthal Center's assertions. A Columbia University historian and professor whose ancestors are buried at the Mamilla Cemetery in 2012 publicly refuted the Wiesenthal Center's assertions and claimed that Israeli authorities "systematically disrespected" Muslim and Christian sites of cultural, religious, and historical significance.

PA President Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the CRIHL continued to denounce so-called "price tag" attacks. The INP arrested 15 persons in connection with "price tag" incidents between October and the end of the year. Several prosecutions were ongoing as of the end of the year. For example, police in October arrested 14 Orthodox Jewish teenagers for participating in over 20 "price-tag attacks" against Israeli Arabs in East Jerusalem and brought charges against 12 of them. Many "price tag" attacks, however, continued to go unprosecuted.

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, and they accused Israeli officials of attempting to foster animosity among Palestinians by exaggerating reports of Muslim-Christian tensions. 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, and taxation problems were the impetus for increased Christian emigration.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the heads of churches in Jerusalem, the PA Ministry of Islamic Waqf, and the PA Islamic 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.

On August 21, commemorating the 44th anniversary of an attempt by a Christian Australian national to set fire to the al-Aqsa mosque, PA Minister of Religious Affairs Mahmoud Al-Habbash on Palestinian television accused the arsonist of being in collusion with the "occupation."

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 several instances, however, in which official media carried

explicitly intolerant material. For example, in July Palestinian state television aired a video of two Palestinian girls reciting an anti-Semitic poem. In August it aired a program in which the host called a woman convicted of killing Israelis a "hero." The Norwegian Holocaust Center, an NGO, in February accused Palestinian state television of spreading anti-Semitism and demonizing Israel.

The head of Islamic courts of the PA declared in July that Islamic courts would not issue divorce certificates to couples seeking divorce during Ramadan.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Hamas maintained control of Gaza throughout the year, used it as a base for attacks against Israel, and sometimes exploited its security apparatus to arrest or detain Muslims in Gaza who did not abide by Hamas' strict interpretation of Islam.

Terrorist organizations, 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 in October reportedly refused to allow 86 Palestinians to leave Gaza to visit Saudi Arabia to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage, purportedly harassing them and confiscating their passports at the Rafah crossing into Egypt before turning them back.

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 in February implemented a "modest" dress code at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza, according to Palestinian press, drawing criticism from the PA Minister of Higher Education.

Hamas largely tolerated the small Christian presence in Gaza and did not force Christians to abide by Islamic law. Hamas' religious ideology, however, negatively affected Christians, according to church leaders. For example, local religious leaders received warnings before Christian holidays against any public display of Christianity. Christians raised concerns that Hamas failed to defend their rights as a religious minority, including by failing to investigate crimes directed at Christian institutions. Local officials sometimes advised converts to leave their communities to prevent harassment against them. Hamas in June passed a law banning co-ed schools, which Christian school administrators feared would force them to build new facilities and hire new employees or close, but which did not yet lead to any school closures by the end of the year. The administrators stressed that gender segregation went against Christian ideals of co-existence and respect for the opposite sex. Christian educators denied reports that Hamas had banned Muslim students from attending Christian schools.

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

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

Women of the Wall won the right to wear prayer shawls and to pray out loud at the Western Wall without fear of arrest, although they continued to face criticism and harassment. In addition, the Israeli government erected a platform south of the Mughrabi ramp open to both men and women where each person has the right to practice their religious rituals as they desire.

The Israeli government increased Palestinian access to Jerusalem during Ramadan by applying less stringent age restrictions as compared to the previous year. For example, on July 12 (the first Friday of Ramadan), 85,000 Palestinians holding West Bank identity cards entered East Jerusalem

through the checkpoints around the city, according to estimates provided by the Israeli government, a threefold increase from the first Friday of Ramadan in 2012. Despite the crowded conditions, access through the checkpoints generally proceeded without incident.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including an increase in vandalism against Christian sites. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Relationships between Palestinian Christians and Muslims were generally good, with both groups focusing more on ethnic and political similarities than religious differences. Tensions, however, 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 sites holy to Christians and Muslims. 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 continued to justify violence against Palestinian persons and property as necessary for the defense of Judaism. 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.

Some settlers continued to carry out "price tag" attacks against Palestinians. The CRIHL and NGO Search for Common Ground (SFCG) documented nine "price tag" attacks in Jerusalem and the West Bank including six against Muslim sites and three against Christian sites. 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, settlers defaced two mosques in the Palestinian town of Tekoa near Bethlehem on April 7, spray-painting "price tag" and "stone terror" on the mosques' walls. On February 13, vandals desecrated the Muslim Mamilla cemetery in Jerusalem in an apparent "price tag" attack, spray painting "death to Arabs" and "Muhammad is dead" on tombstones. In October four individuals were arrested for smashing headstones in a Christian cemetery near Jerusalem's Old City. SFCG and the CRIHL documented 15 additional attacks on holy sites in Jerusalem and the West Bank including eight on Jewish sites, two on Christian sites, one on a Muslim site, and four on multi-religious sites. Other attacks on Christian sites included an attack on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah, where vandals spray-painted anti-Christian language and stole church property, and an April 19 attack where settlers broke into the Latin Convent in Taybeh and raised an Israeli flag. Local Christian clergy said they were subjected to frequent abuse by ultra-Orthodox youths in Jerusalem's Old City, including insults and spitting.

Palestinians reportedly threw stones and clashed with IDF escorts during visits of Jewish groups to Joseph's tomb in Nablus in January, February, and May. On September 12, Palestinians reportedly threw Molotov cocktails at IDF soldiers escorting hundreds of Jews to the tomb, and one Palestinian fired an automatic weapon. In March five Palestinians threw Molotov cocktails and stones at Israeli security forces on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, causing several injuries.

Throughout the year the CRIHL strongly criticized acts of religious intolerance, including attacks on September 29 on graves in the Protestant cemetery on Mount Zion; on a Christian cemetery in Silwan, Jerusalem on October 1; and on a mosque in the West Bank village of Burqa on October 10. It also issued a statement condemning vandalism in May of synagogues in Bat Yam and Haifa, a mosque in Umm Al-Qutuf, graves in As-Sawiya, and the Church of the Dormition on Mount Zion.

Orthodox Jews continued to harass Messianic Jews in Jerusalem. The ultra-Orthodox anti-missionary organization Yad L'Achim 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.

Incidents of desecration of Jewish graves on the Mount of Olives were down compared with the previous year, according to NGOs that monitor these incidents, but Palestinian youths reportedly threw stones at Jewish visitors there, resulting in at least one hospital visit.

There were occasional 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. A small number of Gaza Christians were rumored to have converted to Islam during the year, although sources conflicted concerning whether the conversions were voluntary.

Mainstream independent Palestinian news outlets, including Al Quds, Al Ayyam, and Ma'an, often 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. Such articles included descriptions of Jews as "Allah's enemy" and "murderers of all prophets" as well as political rhetoric longing for a world without Israel that crossed the line into anti-Semitism. Media outlets carried cartoons demonizing Israel and broadcast anti-Semitic rhetoric, including by academics and clerics, accusing Jews of trying to take over the world and exploit the Holocaust to their advantage.

Other nonofficial PA and nonmainstream Palestinian media outlets, particularly those controlled by Hamas, continued to use inflammatory language. Hamas television broadcast content that sometimes praised "holy war" as a means to expel the Jewish presence in the region. Some children's programs glorified "martyrdom."

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. Most Christian and Muslim families in the Occupied Territories pressured their children, especially their daughters, to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who challenged this societal norm, particularly Palestinian Christians or Muslims who married Jews, encountered considerable societal and family opposition. Families sometimes disowned Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith. NGOs reported that it was more difficult for Christian Palestinians to obtain a divorce because of restrictions by some churches.

Established Christian groups often did not welcome less established churches. A small number of proselytizing groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christians, encountered opposition to their efforts to obtain official recognition from the PA, both from Muslims who opposed their proselytizing and from established Christian groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials from the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem regularly met with representatives of religious groups to monitor their concerns and raised with local authorities the views and experiences related in these meetings. Consulate general officers encouraged respect for religious freedom and appreciation for the "other." The consulate general maintained steady contact with representatives of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf. U.S. government officials had frequent contact with Muslim leaders in Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank. The consulate general also maintained regular contact with leaders of the Christian and Jewish communities in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and where possible, the Gaza Strip. During the year the Consul General attended a

meeting with members of the CRIHL, and met with the Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Armenian Orthodox patriarchates, and with leaders of the Anglican and Lutheran churches. Consulate general officers similarly met with a wide array of religious leaders and communities, including leaders of the Syrian Orthodox community and Christian evangelical groups. The Consul General and consulate general officers also met with Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox rabbis, and with representatives of various Jewish institutions. Consulate general officers visited religious sites in Jerusalem and the West Bank important to Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

During the year the consulate general investigated a range of charges, including allegations of damage to places of worship, intolerant speech, and allegations concerning access to holy sites. Consulate general officers met with representatives of the Bethlehem and Ramallah-area Christian communities. During Ramadan the consulate general hosted two iftar dinners. During the dinner in Nablus, the Consul General spoke about the importance of cultural exchanges and mutual understanding.

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