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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Israel and The Occupied Territories - The Occupied Territories

Executive Summary

The Occupied Territories, which include the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, are subject to the jurisdiction of Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), with the division of responsibilities overlapping in much of the territory. The PA Basic Law, which serves as an interim constitution, establishes Islam as the official religion, but calls for respect of "all other divine religions." Visits by Jewish Temple Mount activists to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during the Jewish High Holidays were preceded and followed by clashes between Israeli police and Muslim youth, in which at least 44 Palestinians and 13 police officers were injured. These clashes were followed in October by a wave of violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in which 127 Palestinians and 16 Israelis were killed in these areas between October 1 and December 31. The violence also spread to Israel beyond West Jerusalem. Observers said political grievances made it hard to attribute the violence solely to religious disputes. The Israeli government, citing security, continued to impose intermittent restrictions on Palestinian access to some religious sites, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and the Israeli National Police (INP) imposed an unprecedented eight-week long restriction on Muslim access beginning in August. The Israeli government, in accordance with the status quo agreement with the Jordanian authorities managing the site, acted to prevent non-Muslim worship at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, but some Jews conducted religious rituals on the site in violation of the status quo agreement. Travel restrictions such as limited access for Palestinians between the West Bank and Jerusalem for Yom Kippur, along with further construction of the separation barrier, impeded the movements of Muslims and Christians. Israeli authorities permitted Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall. They enforced gender separation for Jewish worshippers there. PA President Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and other leaders condemned so-called "price tag" attacks (violence and property crimes by Jewish settler groups, directed against Muslim and Christian Palestinians and their religious sites), but the media reported authorities rarely prosecuted cases successfully. Proselytizing religious groups not recognized by the PA, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelicals, had difficulty gaining acceptance of personal status documents they issued. Anti-Semitic material continued to appear in official PA media. Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization with de facto control of Gaza, enforced restrictions on Gaza's population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia.

Apart from the wave of violence between October and December, there were other deaths and incidents of violence which perpetrators justified on religious grounds. In July Jewish settlers attacked a Palestinian home in the West Bank village of Duma killing three people and leaving a four-year child badly burned. Rock-throwing

Palestinian youths attacked Jewish visitors to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus, the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and Israeli security forces on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on several occasions. Palestinians reportedly committed arson and vandalism against the Mount of Olives cemetery, Jerusalem's Pitchei Olam Synagogue, and Joseph's Tomb. Ultra-Orthodox Jews or Jews affiliated with Religious Zionism regularly harassed Christian clergy, Messianic Jews, and visitors and Jewish worshippers at religious sites who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions. "Price tag" attacks by suspected Jewish militants included arson at a Greek Orthodox Patriarchate building near Jerusalem's Old City and damage to a mosque outside Bethlehem in the West Bank.

Officials from the U.S. consulate general in Jerusalem met with PA officials to discuss religious tolerance and concerns about access to religious sites. Visiting senior U.S. government officials met with politicians and religious and civil society leaders to promote tolerance and cooperation against religious prejudice. Consulate general officers met with representatives of religious groups to monitor their concerns about access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship. Consulate general officers visited the sites of "price tag" attacks and issued public condemnations of these acts.

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 2015 estimates). According to U.S. estimates, the Palestinian residents of these territories are predominantly Sunni Muslims. According to 2013 statistics published by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 509,610 Jews live in Jerusalem – including areas in East Jerusalem Israel took over in 1967 and unilaterally annexed in 1980 – accounting for approximately 61 percent of the city's population. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reported in 2014 that 370,700 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. The Holy See estimates the Christian population in the West Bank to be below 2 percent of the overall population, or fewer than 54,000 Palestinians. According to a YMCA survey of Christians in Gaza, there were 1,313 Christians residing there as of March 2014. According to local Christian leaders, Palestinian Christian emigration has accelerated since 2001. A majority of Christians are Greek Orthodox; the remainder includes Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Copts, Maronites, Ethiopian Orthodox, and members of Protestant denominations. Christians are concentrated primarily in East 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 Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The inhabitants of the different portions of the Occupied Territories are subject to the jurisdiction of different authorities. Israelis (both Jewish and Arab) living in East Jerusalem fall under Israel's civil and criminal law system (the Israeli government formally annexed East Jerusalem in 1980, although no other government, including the United States, has recognized this annexation). Palestinian residents (not holding Israeli citizenship) of Jerusalem, are also subject to Israeli civil and criminal law. Israelis living in West Bank settlements are subject to a combination of Israeli civil and criminal law, and military law. Palestinians living in the portion of the West Bank designated as Area C in the Oslo II Accord fall under Israel's military legal system, while Palestinians who live in Area B fall under PA civil law and Israeli military law for criminal and security issues. Although per the Oslo II Accord, PA civil and security law applies to Palestinians living in Area A of the West Bank, Israel applies Israeli military law whenever its military enters Area A. The Gaza Strip officially comes under the jurisdiction of an interim PA government, although Hamas exercises de facto authority over it.

An interim Basic Law applies in the areas under PA jurisdiction. The Basic Law states Islam is the official religion, but calls for respect of "all other divine religions." 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 and stipulates all citizens are equal before the law. The Basic Law states the principles of sharia shall be the main source of legislation.

There is no specified process by which religious organizations gain official recognition; each religious group must negotiate its own bilateral relationship with the PA. Nineteenth century status quo arrangements reached with the Ottoman authorities, for example, recognize the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman

Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Coptic, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox Churches. Later agreements recognized the rights of the Episcopal (Anglican) and Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Legally recognized religious groups are empowered to adjudicate personal status matters. They may establish ecclesiastical courts to issue legally binding rulings on personal status and some property matters for members of their religious communities.

Churches not officially recognized, but with unwritten understandings with the PA based on the principles of the status quo agreements, including the Assemblies of God, the Nazarene Church, and some Baptist churches, may operate freely and some may perform some official functions such as issuing marriage licenses. Churches not recognized by the PA must obtain special one-time permission from the PA to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status matters if these groups want the ceremonies to be recognized by and registered with the PA. They may not proselytize.

By law, Islamic institutions and places of worship receive financial support from the government.

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

Islamic or Christian religious courts handle legal matters relating to personal status, including inheritance, marriage, dowry, divorce, and child support. For Muslims, sharia determines personal status law, while various ecclesiastical courts rule on personal status matters for Christians. Legally, members of one religious group may submit a personal status dispute to a different denomination for adjudication if the disputants agree it is appropriate to do so.

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.

Government Practices

Visits by Jewish Temple Mount activists to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during the Jewish High Holidays, as well as visits by Israeli officials to the site at these and other times, were preceded and followed by clashes between police and Muslim protesters, in which at least 44 Palestinians were injured by Israeli police using tear gas and rubber bullets, and 13 police officers were injured by protesters throwing rocks. These clashes were followed in October by a wave of violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in which 127 Palestinians and 16 Israelis were killed in these areas between October 1 and December 31. The violence also spread to Israel beyond West Jerusalem. Because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. Observers said national grievances may have motivated many of the Palestinian attacks. The Israeli government continued to limit access to a number of key religious sites, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, which saw an unprecedented eight-week long restriction on access for some Muslims beginning in August, as well as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and Rachel's Tomb. In addition, travel restrictions, such as limits on travel between the West Bank and Jerusalem for Yom Kippur, and further construction of the separation barrier impeded the ability of Muslims to enter Jerusalem and Christian clergy to reach churches to conduct services. The Israeli government and the PA sometimes prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting Jewish religious sites in PA-controlled territory for security reasons. The authorities permitted both Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall, although security restrictions limited the access of Palestinians to the Western Wall plaza. Jewish worshippers there observed a strictly-enforced separation by gender. Proselytizing Christian groups not recognized by the PA, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical groups, had difficulties gaining recognition of personal status documents they issued. Religiously intolerant material continued to appear in official PA media. Israeli and PA officials condemned so-called "price-tag" attacks and vandalism, but authorities were rarely able to prosecute cases successfully.

Following visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Jewish Temple Mount activists during the Jewish High Holidays in September and October, and increased Israeli police deployments to accommodate the historically large number of activist visitors, there were incidents of violence between Muslim worshippers and Israeli police. The police use of tear gas and rubber bullets in the clashes resulted in minor injuries such as tear gas inhalation and contusions to at least 44 Palestinians, who were throwing stones and, according to some press accounts, Molotov cocktails, which resulted in injuries of a similar nature to at least 13 Israeli police officers. Israeli police during some of these clashes broke windows and damaged doors and carpets of Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, the Jordanian-funded Islamic trust and charitable organization which continued to administer the site, complained on at least one occasion that INP officers entered the mosque itself – in full combat gear, including boots – to disarm protesters.

Similar clashes involving Palestinians and police 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 in Jerusalem's Silwan neighborhood and outside the Old City's Lions' Gate.

A wave of violence between Palestinians and Israeli citizens and Palestinians and Israeli security forces occurred in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza between October 1 and December 31, claiming the lives of 127 Palestinians and 16 Israelis. The violence also spread to Israel beyond West Jerusalem. Observers said national grievances made it hard to attribute the violence solely to religious disputes.

During visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Israeli government officials, including cabinet members, there were also incidents of physical violence between the Israeli police and Muslims. In these clashes, police use of tear gas and rubber bullets resulted in minor injuries to the stone-throwing Palestinians. For example, on July 26 and September 13, preceding and following visits by Minister of Agriculture Uri Ariel to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, there were clashes between police and Muslim protesters, in which the police barricaded the protesters inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque before opening the site to visiting Jewish Temple Mount activists. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on October 8 ordered police to bar sitting government ministers and members of Knesset from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, saying he believed it would help calm tensions at the site.

Palestinians reportedly threw stones and clashed with Israel Defense Forces (IDF) escorts during visits of Jewish groups to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. On October 18, visits by Jewish groups to religious sites in the West Bank, including Joseph's Tomb in Nablus, without a security escort, were followed by clashes between Jewish Israelis and local Palestinians resulting in minor injuries on both sides, before the IDF intervened to disperse Palestinian protesters.

According to observers, there were three categories of Christian religious groups active in the West Bank and Gaza: churches the PA recognized in accordance with status quo arrangements reached during Ottoman rule as well as Protestant churches with established episcopates; churches the PA did not officially recognize but which were established between the late 19th century and 1967 and continued to operate, such as some Protestant and evangelical churches; and a small number of churches which became active within the last decade and whose legal status remained uncertain.

Nonrecognized churches such as Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups, which faced a ban on their normal practice of proselytization, reported they were able to conduct most other operations unhindered by the PA. The PA, however, reportedly refused to recognize personal status legal documents issued by some of these non-recognized groups, which the groups said made it difficult for them to register newborn children under their fathers' names. Many nonrecognized churches advised members with dual citizenship to marry or divorce abroad in order to register the marriage officially in the second country.

The PA Ministry of Waqf (religious endowments) and Religious Affairs continued to pay 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 continued to provide limited financial support to some Christian clergy and Christian charitable organizations, but did not provide financial support to Jewish institutions in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The PA continued to implement its policy of providing imams with themes they were required to use in weekly Friday sermons in West Bank mosques and prohibited them from broadcasting Quranic recitations from minarets prior to the call to prayer.

Authorities continued to enforce rulings by Israel's High Court declaring the segregation of men and women on public streets and sidewalks in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Mea She'arim in Jerusalem to be illegal.

The Israeli government continued to control access by Muslims and Jews to the site referred to by Muslims as al-Haram al-Sharif (containing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque), and by Jews as the Temple Mount (which is the site of the first and second Jewish temples). Although the Waqf continued to administer some aspects of the site, the Israeli government restricted the Waqf's ability to control visitors' access. 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, but also imposed access restrictions on Muslim worshippers without coordination with the Waqf – particularly during Jewish holidays – which the Waqf and Palestinian Authority reported as a breach of the status quo. The INP continued to be responsible for security at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with police officers stationed both inside the site and outside each entrance to the site. Israeli police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and regulated traffic in and out of the site.

Waqf officials repeated previous years' complaints over what they said were violations of the status quo agreements by Israeli police regarding control of access to the site, saying Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions to allow non-Muslim visitors onto the site or to restrict access to broad categories of Muslim worshippers. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza but Waqf officials said they were able to exercise only a reduced oversight role. They reportedly could object to the presence of particular persons, such as individuals dressed immodestly or causing disturbances, but lacked the authority to

remove such persons from the site. Waqf officials reported the Israeli police on occasion briefly detained Waqf guards or expelled them from the site and from the vicinity of visiting Jewish activist groups.

The Israeli government cited security concerns in its frequent restrictions on access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by Muslims, which generally involved barring the entry of men, and sometimes women, under the age of 50. Local political and nongovernmental organization (NGO) observers said the frequency and duration of restrictions on Muslim access to the site for an eight-week period beginning in late August (corresponding to the Jewish High Holidays in September/October) was unprecedented.

On at least 27 days during the year, Israeli security authorities imposed age restrictions on Muslim visitors, including a consecutive eight-day period beginning at the end of September. The INP frequently banned male Muslim worshippers under 50 from accessing the site during morning non-Muslim visiting hours, Sunday through Thursday, when Jewish activist groups toured the site.

On several days in August Israeli police prohibited all Muslim women regardless of age from visiting the site during non-Muslim visiting hours, and issued “black lists” barring at least 50 Muslim women they accused of verbally harassing Jewish visitors to the site. Israeli authorities stated the reason for the blanket bans and black lists was the occurrence of altercations between groups of female Muslim worshippers and Jewish tourists, whom the Muslim worshippers perceived to be Jewish Temple Mount activists attempting to break the injunction against non-Muslim prayer on the site. Israeli authorities in September outlawed female and male groups accused of harassing Jewish visitors at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount; the groups, known as the “murabitat” and “murabitun” respectively, reportedly had no official membership.

According to media reports, the Israeli government provided improved access to the site for Muslims from Gaza in comparison to 2014, when Gazans were not allowed to transit to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to pray, permitting approximately 100-200 Gazans over the age of 60 to transit the Erez Crossing to Jerusalem for weekly Friday prayers at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for most weeks beginning during Ramadan in July and extending throughout the year.

Muslim officials, including representatives of the Waqf, continued to object to Israeli restrictions on access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for Muslim worshippers, and opposed calls from some Israeli groups to divide visiting hours between Muslims and non-Muslims and to allow non-Muslim prayer there.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount from entering the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque – a practice it started in 2003 when Israel ended coordination with the Waqf over non-Muslim visits – and lodged objections with Israeli police over non-Muslim visitors wearing religious symbols or religious clothing, such as Jewish prayer shawls, on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The INP sometimes acted upon these objections and enforced the restrictions of its own accord.

Israeli police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious paraphernalia, and prohibited them from praying publicly on the site. Israeli police continued to have exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance – the only entrance through which non-Muslims could enter the site – and allowed visitors through the gate during set visiting hours, although the police sometimes restricted this access due to what it stated were security concerns. Israeli police maintained checkpoints outside other gates to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including to prevent non-Muslims from entering these other areas, but did not coordinate with Waqf guards inside.

Despite the Israeli government's policy prohibiting non-Muslim worship at the site, some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration, including more than a dozen instances reported by Waqf officials from late August to early October. In most cases, Israeli police acted to prevent them from praying or removed them, but in other cases, some of which were documented on social media in photos and videos, the police appeared not to notice the acts of prayer. Some Jewish Temple Mount activists toured the site in bare feet, consistent with their interpretation of Jewish tradition at the temple, to which the Waqf raised objections. Israeli authorities sometimes barred individual Jewish Temple Mount activists who had repeatedly violated rules against non-Muslim prayer on the site, including members of the Knesset and Temple Mount movement leaders.

Some government coalition Knesset members and Israeli NGOs, such as the Temple Institute and Temple Mount Faithful, continued to call on the Israeli government to implement a temporal division at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to set aside certain hours for Jewish worship, similar to the arrangement used at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The Israeli government stated it considered agreements with Jordan restricting Jewish prayer at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to remain authoritative. Prime Minister Netanyahu restated his support for maintaining the status quo arrangement at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including the ban on Jewish prayer.

The Israeli government continued to permit both Muslims and Christians to pray at the Western Wall, the place of worship nearest the holiest site in Judaism, although Israeli police frequently limited access to Palestinians to

the Western Wall plaza for what they stated were security reasons. The Rabbi of the Western Wall continued to set the guidelines for religious observance mandating the strict separation of women and men, which the Israeli government continued to enforce. 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. The authorities continued not to permit women to bring a Torah scroll onto the plaza and prevented women from accessing the public Torah scrolls at the site, but they continued to allow both men and women to practice their religious rituals as desired on a temporary mixed gender platform located south of the Mugrabi ramp and adjacent to the Western Wall. The authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. Non-Orthodox mixed gender groups continued to use it for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. This accommodation of the desire for "egalitarian" Jewish prayer (permitting men and women to pray as they wished and together) remained a subject of debate in the Jewish community throughout the year. Ultra-orthodox Jewish leaders continued to oppose mixed-gender prayer spaces at the wall, and activist groups such as Women of the Wall (WOW), an NGO and prayer group, stated the platform accommodation as currently constructed was insufficient to meet their demands to conduct Jewish prayer services – including the use of Torah scrolls – at the traditional Western Wall site.

The Israeli police continued to assist WOW to enter the women's area of the Western Wall for its monthly service. In May police briefly detained a man after preventing him from passing a Torah from the men's section to a WOW-sponsored bat mitzvah celebration in the women's section. In February police did not intervene to prevent male protesters from throwing snowballs at the WOW during its monthly service.

In February Israeli police entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and expelled clergy, worshippers, and tourists, reportedly citing public safety concerns about the metal reinforcements and structure of the Sepulchre tomb itself, according to local press. Church leaders from the Greek Orthodox and Latin (Catholic) Patriarchates said the police action had not been coordinated with them. The Israeli police continued to put up security checkpoints in the Old City during major religious holidays, including the Orthodox Easter holiday, which Christian leaders said reduced the ability of congregants and clergy to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to participate in religious services. Some Christians said restrictions on pilgrims and coordination with the Israeli police had improved compared to 2014, however. During busy periods the Israeli police site commander continued to provide security and facilitate access to the church and managed tensions between followers of different streams of Christianity at the site. Other Christian leaders said police used excessive force in their efforts to regulate crowds in the Old City during the Easter events.

The Israeli government imposed increased movement restrictions on Palestinians in the West Bank, September 23-24, during the Yom Kippur holiday. As in previous such closures, authorities prohibited West Bank residents including those 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 it had increased the number of permits for Palestinians from the West Bank to access Jerusalem for religious holidays, but Palestinian Christian leaders said the Israeli government prevented many of these permits from being used in practice. For example, they stated Israel had granted permits to some but not all members of the same immediate family, including children, thereby discouraging the families – who refused to be separated – from traveling. In contrast to 2014, the Israeli government did not impose increased restrictions on Palestinian access to Jerusalem from the West Bank during Ramadan.

The Israeli government continued to prohibit 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). Some Jewish religious leaders said this restriction prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting several Jewish religious sites, such as Joseph's Tomb.

The IDF and the PA on occasion jointly provided security escorts for Jews to visit religious sites in the West Bank in Area A, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. Some Jews said securing an IDF escort required extensive coordination.

According to local Palestinian political leaders and the local press, Israeli authorities continued to prevent most Palestinians from accessing Rachel's Tomb, a Bethlehem shrine of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims and under Israeli jurisdiction in Area C, but continued to allow 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. Muslim leaders continued to oppose publicly, in statements to local media, the IDF's control of access, citing Oslo-era agreements which gave Israel and the PA shared responsibility for the site. The IDF again restricted Muslim access on 10 days corresponding to Jewish holidays and Jewish access on 10 days corresponding to Muslim holidays. The IDF restricted Muslims to one entry point with IDF security screening. The IDF granted Jews access to several entry points without security screening. Both Muslims and Jews were able to pray at the site simultaneously but in separate physical spaces. Israeli authorities continued to ban the Muslim call to prayer from the Ibrahimi Mosque, saying it disturbed the Jewish settlers in the surrounding areas.

The Israeli government continued building the separation barrier in areas north, east, and south of Jerusalem in the West Bank. Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem stated the barrier impeded their work. Clergy members stated the barriers and checkpoints impeded their movements between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries, as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship. For example, Christian leaders said the separation barrier hindered Bethlehem-area Christians from reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. They also said it made visits to Christian sites in Bethlehem difficult for Palestinian Christians who lived on the west side of the barrier. Foreign pilgrims and religious aid workers also reported difficulty or delays accessing Christian religious sites in the West Bank because of the barrier.

The Israeli Ministry of Defense (MOD) in August began construction on a section of the separation barrier south of Jerusalem near the Cremisan Valley convent of Salesian nuns and their school containing approximately 170 Muslim and Christian Palestinian students. Despite appeals from the convent and affected landowners, the Israeli High Court of Justice issued a ruling in July permitting the MOD to continue construction of the barrier, provided the MOD left a 225-meter (738-foot) gap near the convent. According to the convent leadership, local Christian advocacy NGOs, and Jerusalem-based church leaders, the barrier, if completed as proposed by the High Court, would still impede access to the convent and school from the Palestinian communities in nearby Beit Jala, and cut off area residents from their privately-owned agricultural lands. On August 20, Israeli security forces dispersed an open air Mass and interfaith public prayer demonstration against the barrier in the Cremisan Valley, using tear gas against protesters, according to the local press.

Although the PA removed the religious affiliation category from Palestinian identity cards in 2014, older identity cards continued to circulate, listing the holder as either Muslim or Christian per requirements existing before 2014.

The Israeli government retained its previous regulations regarding visa issuance for foreigners to work in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which Christian institutions said impeded their work by preventing many foreign clergy from entering and working. Christian advocates in the Latin (Catholic) and Anglican Churches, for example, continued to express concerns about the difficulty of obtaining permits. The Israeli government continued to limit Arab Christian clergy serving in the West Bank or Jerusalem to single entry visas, which local parish leaders in the West Bank said complicated needed travel to areas under their pastoral authority outside the West Bank or Jerusalem (such as Jordan). Clergy, nuns, and other religious workers from Arab countries said they continued to face long delays before they received visas, and reported periodic denials of their visa applications. The Israeli government stated visa delays or denials were due to security processing.

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

According to church leaders and lay Palestinians, a combination of factors continued to provide the impetus for increased Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank, including the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions; the difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; Israeli government family reunification restrictions; taxation problems; and economic hardship created by Israeli-imposed travel restrictions.

There continued to be instances in which official PA media carried religiously intolerant material. PA television broadcast interviews in March, May, and June in which program hosts agreed with guests who denied a historical Jewish presence in Jerusalem. On children's programs broadcast on PA television in March there were references to Jews as "evil." PA President Abbas issued public statements on September 17, during a period of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in Jerusalem, saying every drop of Palestinian blood spilled in Jerusalem was "pure" and Israeli security forces had desecrated the Al-Aqsa Mosque "with their dirty feet/shoes."

PA President Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat, and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL) – a group bringing together 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 to condemn so-called "price tag" attacks. The Israeli government continued to designate "price tag" vandals as members of "illicit organizations," and an Israeli police unit specialized in investigating "price tag" attacks and other attacks on places of worship. Israeli police and the IDF reported investigating all known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests where possible, although NGOs, religious institutions, and the media continued to report those arrests rarely led to successful prosecutions. Many "price tag" attacks reportedly continued to go unprosecuted.

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 interfaith dialogue about religious tolerance through the CRIHL, although the group did not meet in full during the year. The CRIHL issued joint statements condemning "price tag" attacks.

Observers of archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority, an Israeli government entity, exploited archaeological finds bolstering Jewish claims to the city, while overlooking other historically significant archaeological finds. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation continued to promote ongoing archaeological excavations north and west of the Western Wall plaza, including in tunnels underneath the Old City's Muslim Quarter, which the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf stated were altering the religious landscape of the area around the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Militant and terrorist groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, issued anti-Semitic statements in conjunction with 22 rocket and 11 other attacks launched from the Gaza Strip against Israel. For example, a Salafist group calling itself the Omar Brigades claimed responsibility for firing three rockets from Gaza on June 3 in a statement saying the group was continuing with its "jihad against the Jews, the enemies of God" and no one would be able to deter them.

There continued to be instances where Hamas "morality police" punished women with fines for infractions such as dressing "inappropriately," (e.g., wearing Western-style or close-fitting clothing, such as jeans or t-shirts, or not wearing a head covering) in public areas, although some of these restrictions were enforced less frequently than in the past, according to some human rights NGOs. An official in Gaza's Ministry of Education stated there were no legal requirements for students in elementary or secondary schools to wear a head covering.

Christian groups reported Hamas tended to tolerate the small Christian presence in Gaza and did not force Christians to abide by Islamic law. Many Christians stated although religious tolerance had improved in Gaza, Israeli military operations in 2014 had 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 or NGOs in Gaza.

According to media accounts, Hamas' de facto control of Gaza continued to prevent the PA from investigating and prosecuting Gaza-based cases of religious discrimination, including reported anti-Christian bias in private sector hiring and in police investigations of anti-Christian harassment.

Hamas-run media, continued to broadcast anti-Semitic programming encouraging violence against Jews. For example, a host on Hamas-run Al-Aqsa television in a September 4 segment applauded a child he was interviewing who said he wanted to become an engineer to "blow up Jews," and encouraged the child to continue to "wage jihad."

In June leaflets bearing the Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) insignia were found, distributed throughout the Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Hanina, threatening local Christians with death if they did not leave Jerusalem during Ramadan. Palestinian leaders, citing the overwhelming rejection of Da'esh among Palestinians in local polling, publicly stated their suspicion the leaflets were not authentic, and condemned the fliers and any threats to the Palestinian Christian community.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In addition to the wave of societal violence between October and December, there were other deaths and incidents of violence which perpetrators justified on religious grounds. In July Jewish settlers attacked a Palestinian home, killing an 18-month-old boy and his parents. Palestinian youths threw stones and Molotov cocktails and committed other acts of violence against Jewish visitors to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus and the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. Ultra-Orthodox Jews harassed Christian clergy, Messianic Jews, Jewish worshippers, and visitors to religious sites. Palestinian media continued to publish and broadcast anti-Semitic material. Suspected Jewish militants carried out "price tag" attacks against Christian and Muslim religious properties. Palestinian youths reportedly committed arson and vandalism against the Mount of Olives cemetery, the Pitchei Olam Synagogue, and Joseph's Tomb in the West Bank. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In July an attack on a Palestinian home with homemade incendiary devices in the village of Duma, south of Nablus, killed an 18-month-old boy and critically wounded his four-year-old brother and parents; the mother and father both later succumbed to their burns. The perpetrators spray-painted "revenge" in Hebrew and a Star of David on the house. Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned the attack. Police arrested several Jewish settlers as suspects; their case remained pending as of the end of the year.

Palestinian youths continued to commit acts of violence against Jewish visitors to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus and the Mount of Olives, resulting in some injuries to the visitors from rocks thrown by the Palestinian attackers.

Local Christian clergy said some Jewish Israelis in Jerusalem continued to subject them to abuse, including insults and spitting. These incidents occurred most often near churches on the seam line between East and West Jerusalem, in the Old City, and near the shared holy site of the Cenacle (devotional site of the Last Supper)/David's Tomb near the Old City.

Drivers who operated motor vehicles in or near ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods on the Sabbath in Jerusalem reported incidents of harassment – such as slurs or spitting – by Ultra-Orthodox Jewish residents in those neighborhoods. According to local press, some Ultra-Orthodox groups continued to criticize Jerusalem residents who did not adhere to their strict interpretation of Orthodox Jewish law on issues including whether businesses in non-ultra-Orthodox majority neighborhoods in Jerusalem – such as a major movie theater completed in West Jerusalem – could remain open on the Sabbath.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall continued to harass verbally visitors and Jewish worshippers who did not conform to Jewish Orthodox traditions, such as modest dress or gender segregation at the Western Wall plaza. Members of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements continued to criticize gender segregation and rules governing how women pray at the Western Wall.

Ultra-Orthodox men and women continued to harass individuals participating in prayer services at the Western Wall organized by WOW, which held prayer services every month except September. The harassment included physically confiscating Torah scrolls WOW participants sought to use in religious services at the women's section of the Western Wall, according to local press and religious freedom NGOs. 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.

According to Jehovah's Witness and evangelical Christians, established Christian groups opposed their efforts to obtain official recognition from the PA because of their proselytizing.

Jewish proponents of accessing and performing religious rituals at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, such as the Temple Mount Faithful and the Temple Institute, continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer at the site along with the construction of a third Jewish temple there, although Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the site. The northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, a political and religious group opposed to participation in local or national governance, which the Government of Israel declared illegal in November, continued to call on members to "defend" the Al-Aqsa mosque. Members of the movement remained present at the site to counter what they said were violations of the status quo.

During demonstrations in Jerusalem in September and October, the Jewish Israeli organization Lehava protested against social relationships between Jews and Palestinians. The Jewish Israeli organization Yad L'Achim reportedly continued to pressure Jewish women not to date Palestinian men and to warn Palestinian men to stay away from Jewish women. The organization also continued to encourage people to inform on Jewish-Palestinian couples.

According to Palestinian sources, most Christian and Muslim families in the Occupied Territories reportedly continued to pressure their children, especially their daughters, to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who challenged this societal norm, particularly Palestinian Christians or Muslims who sought to marry Jews, reportedly encountered considerable societal and family opposition. Families sometimes disowned Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith. NGOs and local clergy reported it was more difficult for Christian Palestinians to obtain a divorce because of restrictions by some churches, including the Anglican/Episcopal Churches, against deciding divorce cases in their courts handling personal status issues.

Palestinian media outlets continued to broadcast anti-Semitic programming.

In October Lehava organized marches in which participants chanted "death to Arabs," according to local press.

According to local press and social media, Israeli settlers in the West Bank continued to justify their attacks on Palestinian property, such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees or "price tag" attacks, 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. For example, the right-wing group "Returning to the [Temple] Mount" during a march into the Old City on December 10 distributed t-shirts advocating rebuilding a Jewish temple and destroying the Dome of the Rock, according to press and media accounts.

According to local press, in February in two separate "price tag" attacks, Jewish residents of Jerusalem were suspected of setting fire to an annex of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate near Jerusalem's Old City, and to a mosque outside Bethlehem in the West Bank. The attacks were accompanied by anti-Christian and anti-Muslim graffiti, respectively. According to the press, Jewish residents were also suspects in arson attacks on cars in East Jerusalem in January, March, and October and in the vandalism of other cars with graffiti. Additional "price tag" attacks included arson, vandalism, and anti-Muslim graffiti on mosques in the West Bank, as well as anti-Christian graffiti on churches, and the desecration of Muslim and Christian cemeteries in Jerusalem.

Local NGOs reported Palestinians continued to commit arson and vandalism against Jewish gravestones in the Mount of Olives cemetery. Although the data was incomplete, the NGOs estimated the number of occurrences was not as high as in 2014, which was the high-water mark for such incidents. According to Israeli police, Palestinian youths were the prime suspects in the July desecration of the Pitchei Olam Synagogue, located in downtown Jerusalem, in which the perpetrators set fire to curtains covering the Ark and spray-painted swastikas on the walls. On October 16, Palestinians reportedly vandalized and set fire to Joseph's tomb in the West Bank, causing significant damage to parts of the complex; PA President Abbas condemned the attack.

The CRIHL publicly condemned the desecration of gravestones in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, the arson and vandalism attack on the Pitchei Olam Synagogue, and other acts of religious intolerance throughout the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials from the U.S. Consulate general in Jerusalem met with PA officials to discuss religious tolerance and perceived changes to the status quo of religious sites. Consulate general officers raised with local authorities the views and concerns expressed by both majority and minority religious groups.

Visiting senior Department of State officials, including the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism, traveled to Jerusalem and the West Bank as part of trips to Israel in May, September, and November, for meetings with politicians and local religious and civil society leaders to discuss religious tolerance and the need for cooperation against religious prejudice. They also met with Jews, Christians, and Muslims who had suffered from "price-tag" attacks.

The Consul General and consulate general officers met regularly with representatives of the full range of religious groups in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and where possible, the Gaza Strip. This included meetings with the Waqf and Muslim leaders in Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank; meetings with Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox rabbis, and representatives of various Jewish institutions; regular contacts with leaders of the CRIHL, the Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Armenian Orthodox patriarchates; and meetings with leaders of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, as well as with leaders of Christian evangelical groups. These meetings included discussions of the groups' concerns about religious tolerance, access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship.

Consulate general officers visited the Mount of Olives cemetery and environs to obtain firsthand knowledge of attacks on Jewish worshippers there. The Consul General and other consulate general officers continued to visit the sites of "price tag" attacks, including the arson attack in Duma. Consulate general officers investigated a range of charges, including allegations of damage to places of worship, intolerant speech, and allegations concerning access to religious sites, and issued statements condemning these acts, including statements against "price tag" attacks.

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