

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	476
Land:	Gaza-Vestbredden
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2020 Report on International Religious Freedom, Israel - West Bank and Gaza
Udgivet:	12. maj 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2021

Document #2051576

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel — West Bank and Gaza

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[ISRAEL](#)

Executive Summary

West Bank and Gaza Strip residents are subject to the jurisdiction of separate authorities, with different implications on the fabric of life. Palestinians in the occupied West Bank are subject to Jordanian and Mandatory statutes in effect before 1967, military ordinances enacted by the Israeli military commander in the West Bank in accordance with its authorities under international law, and in the relevant areas, Palestinian Authority (PA) law. Israelis living in the West Bank are subject to military ordinances enacted by the military commander and Israeli law and Israeli legislation. The PA exercises varying degrees of authority in the small portions of the West Bank where it has some measure of control. Although PA laws theoretically apply in the Gaza Strip, the PA does not have authority there, and Hamas continues to exercise de facto control over security and other matters. The PA Basic Law, which serves as an interim constitution, establishes Islam as the official religion and states the principles of sharia shall be the main source of legislation, but provides for freedom of belief, worship, and the performance of religious rites unless they violate public order or morality. It also proscribes discrimination based on religion, calls for respect of “all other divine religions,” and stipulates all citizens are equal before the law. On December 4, Israeli security forces arrested Muayad al-Alfi in Nablus in suspicion of aiding in the 2009 killing of Rabbi Meir Chai near the settlement of Shavei Shomron. On May 18, an Israeli court found Israeli Jewish settler Amiram Ben Uliel guilty of murder, attempted murder, arson, and “conspiracy to commit a crime motivated by racism” in the 2015 deaths of three members of the Dawabsheh family. On February 17, Israeli police arrested a Palestinian man who attempted to stab a Border Police officer at a security checkpoint for the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. The Israeli government continued to allow controlled access to religious sites in Jerusalem, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount (the site containing the foundation of the first and second Jewish temples and the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque). Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site. In January, worshippers at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and mosques in Gaza and the occupied West Bank engaged in a protest campaign called “The Great Fajr [Dawn] Campaign,” after the dawn prayers. Islamic organizations, including Hamas, called on worshippers to gather for Friday fajr prayers starting in January at the site and the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in the West Bank to defend them against Israeli “violations.” On July 2, the Jerusalem Police informed the Waqf that they had petitioned the Jerusalem Magistrate’s Court requesting the closure of the Gate of Mercy, a building within the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, explaining that the move was necessary because of evidence that the building had been used in 2003 by an organization affiliated with Hamas. According to press reports, the Samaria Regional Council (which provides municipal services for Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank), in coordination with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), including the Ministry of Defense’s coordinator of government activities in the territories (COGAT), organized monthly visits to the site of Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. Palestinians at times violently protested when Jewish groups visited, throwing rocks and bottles at IDF personnel providing security, who responded by firing tear gas and rubber bullets. On November 20, Israeli security forces detained a Palestinian resident of the occupied West Bank suspected of planting an explosive device at Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem. In April, the Israeli government approved a 2019 decision by former Israeli Minister of Defense Naftali Bennett to bypass the Hebron Municipality and expropriate land at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of Patriarchs. Press reports stated that the land expropriated for the project was owned by the PA’s Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) and Religious Affairs. In May, Hifhi Abu Sneineh, the mosque’s imam, condemned the decision and said it was a “blatant and serious” violation of the Hebron protocol of the Oslo Accords. Some official PA media channels, as well as social media accounts affiliated with the ruling Fatah political movement, featured content praising or condoning acts of violence, at times referring to assailants as “martyrs.” Senior Fatah and PA official Jibril Rajoub made several public remarks during the year extolling martyrs and prisoners in Israeli prisons convicted of terrorism. Anti-Semitic content also appeared in Fatah and PA-controlled media. In an August 15 interview on Palestine TV, Mahmoud al-Habash, religious advisor to PA President Mahmoud Abbas, when asked about some Arab governments’ recognition of Israel, said, “It is normalizing relations with those who murdered your father and brothers. It is normalizing relations with the enemies of the Prophet Mohammed, who want to [build] a temple at the destination of Mohammed’s Night Journey [referring to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount].” The PA and the Palestine Liberation

Organization (PLO) continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinians killed while engaged in violence, including killings of Israeli Jews, and also continued to provide separate stipends to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those convicted of acts of terrorism involving Jewish targets. In September, the Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO) IMPACT-se said that its annual review of Palestinian education found that extreme nationalism and Islamist ideologies remained widespread throughout the curriculum, including science and mathematics textbooks. Norway reduced funding to the Palestinian Ministry of Education due to incitement to violence and anti-Semitism in Palestinian textbooks. Following the announcement of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab countries, Muslims and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem sometimes harassed Muslim visitors from the Gulf who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in coordination with the Israeli government or vilified the visitors on social media. The PA-appointed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (who has no authority over the site) issued a fatwa denying access to the site to Muslims from countries that established diplomatic relations with Israel, but the Jordanian government Islamic Religious Endowment (Waqf), which administers the site, rejected it, stating that Muslim visitors from those countries were brought by Israeli officials without coordination with the Waqf.

Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization with de facto control of Gaza, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other extremist groups disseminated anti-Semitic materials and advocated violence through traditional and social media channels as well as during rallies and other events. Hamas also continued to enforce restrictions on Gaza’s population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia.

According to local press and social media, some settlers in the West Bank continued to justify “price tag” attacks on Palestinian property, such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, vandalism of cars and buildings, arson, and slashing of tires as necessary for the defense of Judaism. (“Price tag” attacks refer to violence by Jewish individuals and groups against individuals, particularly Palestinians and Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel, and property with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions taken by the government contrary to the attackers’ interests.) According to media reports, on July 27, arsonists set fire to the Bir wal-Ihsan Mosque in al-Bireh City in a suspected price tag attack. The arsonists spray-painted graffiti on the walls of the mosque; *Reuters* said that the graffiti was a reference to “a biblical, historical, and political claim that includes the West Bank.” On February 22, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued a statement that, according to press reports, “condemned” the February 21 gathering of thousands of Israeli settlers on land owned by the Patriarchate in Tayasir in the northern Jordan River Valley. Various Israeli and Palestinian groups continued to protest against interfaith social and romantic relationships and other forms of cooperation.

Senior U.S. officials worked for increased normalization between Israel and predominantly Muslim countries, which would improve access for Muslim worshippers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Senior U.S. officials publicly raised concerns about anti-Semitism by PA officials and more broadly in Palestinian society throughout the year. Senior White House officials and other U.S. officials repeatedly pointed out that Palestinian leaders did not consistently condemn individual terrorist attacks nor speak out publicly against members of their institutions, including Fatah, who advocated violence. U.S. embassy officials met with Palestinian religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and a broad range of issues affecting Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. They met with political, religious, and civil society leaders to promote interreligious tolerance and cooperation. U.S. representatives 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 and also met with local Christian leaders to discuss their concerns about ongoing Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank.

This section of the report covers the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem territories that Israel occupied during the June 1967 war. In 2017, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Language in this report is not meant to convey a position on any final status issues to be negotiated between the parties to the conflict, including the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the borders between Israel and any future Palestinian state.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total Palestinian population at 2.9 million in the West Bank and 1.9 million in the Gaza Strip (midyear 2020 estimates). According to the U.S. government and other sources, Palestinian residents of these territories are predominantly Sunni Muslims, with small Shia and Ahmadi Muslim communities. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reports an estimated 441,600 Jewish Israelis reside in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. According to various estimates, 50,000 Christian Palestinians reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and according to media reports and religious communities, there are at most 1,000 Christians residing in Gaza. According to local Christian leaders, Palestinian Christian emigration has continued at rapid rates. A majority of Christians are Greek Orthodox; the remainder includes Roman Catholics, Melkite Greek Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Coptic Orthodox, Maronites, Ethiopian Orthodox, Syrian Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, other Protestant denominations, including evangelical Christians, and small numbers of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Christians are concentrated primarily in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus; smaller communities exist elsewhere. Approximately 360 Samaritans (practitioners of Samaritanism, which is related to but distinct from Judaism) reside in the West Bank, primarily in the Nablus area.

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics estimates 563,200 Jews, 345,800 Muslims, and 12,850 Christians live in Jerusalem, accounting for approximately 99 percent of the city’s total population of 936,400, as of 2019.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

West Bank and Gaza Strip residents are subject to the jurisdiction of different authorities. Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to Jordanian and Mandatory statutes in effect before 1967, military ordinances enacted by the Israeli military commander in the West Bank in accordance with its authorities under international law, and in the relevant areas, PA law. Israelis living in the West Bank are subject to military ordinances enacted by the Israeli military commander and Israeli law and legislation. West Bank Palestinian population centers mostly fall into Area A, as defined by the Oslo-era agreements. The PA has formal responsibility for security in Area A, but Israeli security forces frequently conduct security operations there. The PA and Israel maintain joint security control of Area B in the West Bank. Israel retains full security control of Area C (which constitutes approximately 60 percent of the West Bank) and has designated most Area C land as either closed military zones or settlement zoning areas.

Palestinians living in the portion of the occupied West Bank designated as Area C in the Oslo II Accord are subject to military ordinances enacted by the military commander. Palestinians who live in Area B fall under PA civil and criminal law, while Israel retains the overriding responsibility for security. Although per the Oslo II Accord, only PA civil and security law applies to Palestinians living in Area A of the West Bank, Israel applies military ordinances enacted by its military commander whenever the Israeli military enters Area A as part of its overriding responsibility for security. The city of Hebron in the West Bank – an important city for Jews, Muslims, and Christians as the site of the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs – is divided into two separate areas: area H1 under PA control and area H2, where approximately 800 Israeli settlers live and where internal security, public order, and civil authorities relating to Israelis and their property are under Israeli military control.

The Oslo Accords stipulate that protection of 12 listed Jewish holy sites and visitors in Area A is the responsibility of Palestinian police and created a joint security coordination mechanism to ensure “free, unimpeded and secure access to the relevant Jewish holy site” and “the peaceful use of such site, to prevent any potential instances of disorder and to respond to any incident.” Both sides agreed to “respect and protect the listed below religious rights of Jews, Christians, Muslims and Samaritans” including “protection of the Holy Sites; free access to the Holy Sites; and freedom of worship and practice.”

Israeli government regulations recognize 16 sites as holy places for Jews, while various other budgetary and governmental authorities recognize an additional 160 places as holy for Jews.

The Israeli Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled since 1993 that Jews have the right to pray on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, but police may restrict this right in the name of public order and safety. The court reiterated in 2019 that its precedent on this issue is nonintervention in government decisions, “except in highly unusual cases when the decision constitutes a major distortion of justice or is extremely unreasonable.” The court upheld this position again in a decision on May 19.

The Israeli “Nakba Law” prohibits institutions that receive Israeli government funding from engaging in commemoration of the Nakba, or “catastrophe,” the term used by Palestinians to refer to the displacement of Palestinians during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence. Activities forbidden by the law include rejection of the existence of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” or commemorating “Israel’s Independence Day or the day on which the State was established as a day of mourning.”

In 2007, Hamas staged a violent takeover of PA government installations in the Gaza Strip and has since maintained a de facto government in the territory, although the area nominally falls under PA jurisdiction.

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. It criminalizes the publishing of writings, pictures, drawings, or symbols of anything that insults the religious feelings or beliefs of other persons. The Basic Law also proscribes discrimination based on religion and stipulates all citizens are equal before the law. The law states the principles of sharia shall be the main sources of legislation. It contains language adopted from the pre-1967 criminal code of Jordanian rule that criminalizes “defaming religion,” with a maximum penalty of life in prison. Since 2007, the elected Palestinian Legislative Council, controlled by Hamas, has not convened. The Palestinian Constitutional Court dissolved the Palestinian Legislative Council in December 2018 and called for new elections. The President of the PA promulgates executive decrees that have legal authority.

There is no specified process by which religious organizations gain official recognition; each religious group must negotiate its own bilateral relationship with the PA. The PA observes 19th century status quo arrangements reached with Ottoman authorities, which recognize the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Armenian Catholic Churches. The PA also observes subsequent agreements that recognize the rights of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Council of Local Evangelical Churches (a coalition of evangelical Protestant churches present in the West Bank and Gaza). The PA recognizes the legal authority of these religious groups to adjudicate personal status matters, such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Recognized religious groups may establish ecclesiastical courts to issue legally binding rulings on personal status and some property matters for members of their religious communities. The PA Ministry of Religious Affairs is administratively responsible for these family law issues.

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. By law, members of one religious group may submit a personal status dispute to a different religious group for adjudication if the disputants agree it is appropriate to do so.

The PA maintains some unwritten understandings with churches that are not officially recognized, based on the basic principles of the status quo agreements, including with the Assemblies of God, Nazarene Church, and some evangelical Christian churches, which may operate freely. Some of these groups may perform some official functions, such as issuing marriage licenses. Churches not recognized by the PA generally must obtain special one-time permission from the PA to perform marriages or adjudicate personal status matters if these groups want the actions to be recognized by and registered with the PA. These churches may not proselytize.

By law, the PA provides financial support to Islamic institutions and places of worship. A PA religious committee also provides some financial support for Christian cultural activities.

The Israeli government provides separate public schools for Jewish and Arab children with instruction conducted in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. For Jewish children, there are separate public schools available for religious and secular families. Individual families may choose a public school system for their children regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Minor children have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference. By law, Israel provides the equivalent of public school funding to two systems of “recognized but not official” (a form of semiprivate) ultra-Orthodox religious schools affiliated with ultra-Orthodox political parties, the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System. Churches, however, receive only partial government funding to operate “recognized but not official” schools. Palestinian residents in Jerusalem may send their children to one of these church schools or a private school operated by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf; both include religious instruction. Some Israeli-funded public schools in Jerusalem use the PA curriculum.

Religious education is part of the curriculum for students in grades one through six in public schools the PA operates as well as some Palestinian schools in Jerusalem that use the PA curriculum. There are separate courses on religion for Muslims and Christians. Students may choose which class to take but may not opt out of religion courses. Recognized churches operate private schools in the West Bank, which include religious instruction. Private Islamic schools also operate in the West Bank.

Palestinian law provides that in the defunct Palestinian Legislative Council, six seats be allocated to Christian candidates, who also have the right to contest other seats. There are no seats reserved for members of any other religious group. A 2017 presidential decree requires that Christians head nine municipal councils in the West Bank (including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and Beit Jala) and establishes a Christian quota for the same, plus one additional municipal council.

PA land laws prohibit Palestinians from selling Palestinian-owned lands to “any man or judicial body corporation of Israeli citizenship, living in Israel or acting on its behalf.” While Israeli law does not authorize the Israel Land Authority, which administers the 93 percent of Israeli land in the public domain, to lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners have been allowed to lease if they could show they qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return.

Although the PA removed the religious affiliation category from Palestinian identity cards issued in 2014, older identity cards continue to circulate, listing the holder as either Muslim or Christian.

The Israeli Law of Citizenship and Entry, renewed annually, prohibits residence status for non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza, including those who are spouses of Israeli residents or citizens, unless the Ministry of Interior makes a special determination, usually on humanitarian grounds.

The Jordanian Waqf administers Islamic courts in Jerusalem for Muslim residents, with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Jordan having appellate authority.

There is no Israeli legal requirement regarding personal observance or nonobservance of the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat) from sunset on Fridays until sunset on Saturdays and on Jewish holidays. The law, however, declares in the context of labor rights that Shabbat and Jewish holidays are national days of rest, while permitting non-Jewish workers alternate days of rest. The law criminalizes (up to one month imprisonment) employers who open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat, except those who are self-employed. There are exceptions for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. The law instructs the Israeli Minister of Labor and Welfare to take into account “Israel’s tradition,” among other factors, when considering whether to approve permits to work on Shabbat. The law prohibits discrimination against workers who refuse to work on their day of rest, based on their religion and regardless of whether they are religiously observant.

Israeli law states public transportation operated and funded by the national government may not operate on Shabbat, with exceptions for vehicles bringing passengers to hospitals, remote localities, and non-Jewish localities and for vehicles essential to public security or maintaining public transportation services.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Because religion and ethnicity or nationality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, on December 4, Israeli security forces arrested Muayad al-Alfi in Nablus on suspicion of aiding in the 2009 killing of Rabbi Meir Chai near the settlement of Shavei Shomron.

On May 31, the *Times of Israel* reported that Israeli military prosecutors had charged Salah Hammad, a Palestinian security officer, with the killing of Ben-Joseph Livnat, an Israeli, and the injuring of three others in 2011 when he and two other officers opened fire on the Israelis’ car after the men had visited Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus without permission. Israeli military courts previously found other members of the Palestinian patrol guilty and sentenced them to prison terms.

On May 18, a court in Lod found Israeli Jewish settler Amiram Ben Uliel guilty of murder, attempted murder, arson, and “conspiracy to commit a crime motivated by racism” in the 2015 deaths of a Palestinian couple, Saad and Riham Dawabshe, and their 18-month-old son Ali in an arson attack. The prosecution said Ben-Uliel had spray-painted the words “revenge” and “long live the Messiah” at the site before committing the attack. A 19-year-old man arrested as a juvenile with Ben Uliel pleaded guilty in 2018 to his role as an accessory and entered prison in December to begin serving the remaining 10 months of a three-and-a-half-year sentence, with credit for previous time served under house arrest. On September 14, the court sentenced Ben Uliel to three life sentences plus 20 years. Ben Uliel’s attorney said he planned an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court. According to press reports, a crowd-sourced funding campaign endorsed by a number of rabbis began raising money for his defense team to challenge the convictions.

On February 17, Israeli police arrested a Palestinian man who attempted to stab a Border Police officer at a security checkpoint for the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

Israeli police and the IDF reported investigating other instances of religiously motivated attacks and subsequent arrests. In general, however, NGOs, religious institutions, and media continued to state that arrests in religiously motivated crimes against Palestinians rarely led to indictments and convictions. Palestinians stated that they faced procedural difficulties in filing complaints with Israeli police, who are located at stations within settlements or at military-run liaison offices outside those settlements. Data from the NGO Tag Meir, which tracks hate crimes, and media reports indicated in recent years Israeli authorities had indicted few suspects in attacks on religious sites.

The Israeli government stated that authorities maintained a zero-tolerance policy against what it described as “Israeli extremists’ attacks” on Palestinians and made efforts to enhance law enforcement in the West Bank, including through task forces, increased funding, and hiring additional staff members. The Israeli government said that there were “numerous investigations” of ideologically motivated criminal incidents in 2020.

In a fact sheet that it released in January, the Israeli NGO Yesh Din stated, “After 15 years of monitoring Israeli law enforcement authorities in their handling of complaints filed by Palestinian victims of ideological crimes committed by Israelis, the picture that emerges demonstrates that the State of Israel is failing in its duty to protect Palestinians in the occupied territories from those who would harm them and, in fact, leaves them defenseless as they face assault and harassment.” According to Yesh Din statistics, Israeli police failed in the investigation of 82 percent of the files opened between 2005 and 2019 and 91 percent of all investigation files were closed without an indictment.

Attacks by Israeli citizens, some of whom asserted their right to settle in what they stated is the historic Jewish homeland of Judea and Samaria in the West Bank, continued, as well as Palestinian attacks on settlers. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported 772 attacks by Israeli settlers and other Israeli civilians against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem during the year, with 168 Palestinians injured. This compared with 819 attacks and 140 Palestinians injured, respectively, in 2019. UNOCHA updated its metrics to incorporate more information from civil society about violence against Israelis. During the year, “in the context of the occupation and conflict,” UNOCHA estimated that there were 24 Palestinian fatalities and 2,694 Palestinians injured and three Israeli fatalities and 40 Israelis injured in West Bank violence, including in East Jerusalem. The Israeli government said that UNOCHA did not provide information about actions by Hamas in its public statistics and did not fully cover attacks targeting Israelis.

The Israeli government said that the Israeli intelligence community foiled “423 major terrorist attacks” against Israeli civilians (primarily targeting the majority Jewish Israeli civilians), of which 417 were planned by Palestinians from the West Bank and six by Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Of these, 70 percent were organized by Hamas, while “independent terrorists” organized the remaining attacks. The nongovernmental Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center said 40 significant terrorist attacks occurred in the West Bank, an increase from 34 in 2019 after five consecutive years of decline. Meir Amit assessed that the West Bank remained relatively quiet due to efforts of Israeli security forces and limited motivation by the general Palestinian population in the West Bank to carry out terrorist attacks. Meir Amit also reported that the Israel Security Agency prevented 430 “significant terrorist attacks” in the West Bank and Jerusalem, down from 654 in 2019.

On October 20, the trial of an Israeli Jewish minor, accused in the 2018 killing of a Palestinian woman, Aysha al-Rabi, a resident of Bidya village, began at the Central District Court in Lod. Prosecutors accused the minor, then 17, of throwing a two-kilogram (4.4 pound) stone through al-Rabi’s windshield “with the intent of using it to harm Arab passengers out of an ideological motive of racism and hostility toward Arabs.” In 2019, authorities arrested and later released four other suspects who, like the defendant, were yeshiva students from the settlement of Rehelim. According to press reporting, the prosecution linked the defendant’s DNA to the stone that caused al-Rabi’s death and also linked him to Kahanism, which *Haaretz* described as a “far-right anti-Arab ideology inspired by Rabbi Meir

Kahane.” In January, authorities acknowledged that the stone throwing that killed al-Rabi, a mother of eight, was a terror attack but declined to recognize her as a victim of terrorism. Press reports said that authorities said the decision was reached because al-Rabi was not an Israeli citizen and the killing occurred outside Israel’s recognized borders. At year’s end, the trial was continuing, and the accused remained under supervised house arrest.

The government of Israel continued to discourage 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), with large road signs warning Israelis against entering these areas and stating it was dangerous for Israelis and against Israeli law to do so. Significant numbers of Arab Israelis, and some Jewish and other Israelis, chose to privately visit Area A without repercussions, according to media and individuals who visited. Media reported that, while these restrictions in general prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting numerous Jewish religious sites, the IDF provided special security escorts for Jews to visit religious sites in Area A under Palestinian control, particularly Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus, a site of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and the Shalom al Israel Synagogue in Jericho. Some Jewish religious leaders said the Israeli government policy limiting travel to parts of the West Bank prevented Jewish Israelis from freely visiting several religious sites in the West Bank including Joseph’s Tomb, because they were denied the opportunity to visit the site on unscheduled occasions or in larger numbers than permitted through IDF coordination. IDF officials said requirements to coordinate Jewish visits to Joseph’s Tomb were necessary to ensure Jewish Israelis’ safety. The Israeli government said that Jewish worshippers could only visit Areas A and B of the West Bank with the protection of the IDF and that the PA was not fulfilling its commitments to ensure freedom of religion for Jewish worshippers in these areas under the Oslo Accords. Palestinian and Israeli security forces coordinated some visits by Jewish groups to PA-controlled areas within the West Bank, which generally took place at night to limit the chance of confrontations with Palestinians who opposed the visit. The PA suspended security coordination with Israel in May and resumed coordination in late November. Israeli authorities stopped informing Palestinian authorities of these visits during the PA’s suspension of coordination and continued to provide security escorts to Jewish sites in PA-controlled territory, with some clashes occurring between Israeli security forces and Palestinians.

Palestinians at times violently protested when Jewish groups visited holy sites in areas under Palestinian control, where freedom of access was guaranteed by the PA in the Oslo Accords in the West Bank, particularly Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus (located in Area A). According to press, the Samaria Regional Council (which provides municipal services for Israeli settlements in the northern West Bank), in coordination with the IDF, organized monthly visits to the site. On February 25, Israeli authorities neutralized an explosive device planted near Joseph’s Tomb prior to the arrival of 2,000 Jewish worshippers. Palestinian protestors also clashed with IDF personnel providing security for the visit, throwing rocks at the IDF soldiers, who fired rubber bullets and used tear gas in response. Although routine visits paused after February 25 due to the COVID-19 outbreak, approximately 150 Jewish worshippers prayed at the tomb on June 3. According to the *Times of Israel*, due to the suspension of security cooperation between the Government of Israel and the PA, Palestinian security personnel withdrew from the site prior to the Israeli group’s arrival but returned after the pilgrims departed, when, according to press reports, they prevented an attempted arson attack on the site by Palestinian protestors. The Israeli government said Palestinian Civil Police protected the site throughout the year, except during visits organized by the IDF, and prevented more than one attack on the site by Palestinians.

Approximately 2,500 pilgrims visited the site on June 22 on the anniversary of Joseph’s death. *Haaretz* stated that this visit to the shrine was “essentially a political event” because worshippers said they would be praying for the success of plans announced by the government to annex parts of the West Bank. Media reported that Palestinians threw stones at IDF military escorts during the visit and that the IDF used tear gas to disperse the crowd. Press reports stated that an unspecified number of protestors were injured in the incident.

On December 3, as the IDF secured a route for buses carrying Jewish worshippers, Palestinians gathered, throwing stones and setting fire to tires. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets in response. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights, located in Gaza City, stated that two Palestinians were injured in the encounter. On December 30, the Palestinian news agency *Wafa* reported that, after protestors attempted to block Jewish worshippers from entering the shrine, the IDF used rubber bullets and tear gas, resulting in nine Palestinians requiring medical attention. The Israeli government said the IDF facilitated six visits to the site during the year, with “terrorists” attacking the worshippers and IDF with stones and Molotov cocktails each time.

On November 20, Israeli security forces detained a Palestinian resident of the West Bank suspected of planting an explosive device at Rachel’s Tomb, a Bethlehem shrine of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Israeli jurisdiction in Area C. Israeli security forces shot and injured an individual in August suspected of attempting to throw a firebomb at the site. The shrine remained separated from the West Bank by a barrier built during the 2000-2005 Second Intifada, and Palestinians were able to access it only if permitted by Israeli authorities. Residents and citizens of Israel continued to have relatively unimpeded access. Israeli police closed the site to all visitors on Saturdays for the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat).

The Israeli government continued to allow controlled access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with only Muslims permitted to engage in religious worship there. The Israeli government stated it understood the post-1967 status quo pertaining to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to allow non-Muslim visitors but prohibit non-Islamic worship on the compound, while Israel respected Jordan’s “special role” at the site, as reflected in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Muslim representatives stated that they generally had a different understanding of the status quo and that the Waqf should have full autonomy in administering the site (reflecting wide Palestinian and Muslim rejection of Israeli authority or sovereignty at the site) and that only Muslim worshippers were entitled to unrestricted access to the site.

In January, worshippers at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and mosques in Gaza and the occupied West Bank engaged in a protest campaign called “The Great Fajr [Dawn] Campaign,” after the dawn prayers. Hamas and other Islamic organizations had called on worshippers to gather for Friday Fajr prayers starting in January at the site and at the Ibrahim Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in the West Bank to defend them against “violations” by Israeli Jews. Media reported on January 17 that police dispersed protestors at the site after Friday dawn prayers. Press reports said that Palestinian demonstrators chanted slogans recalling the Muslim massacre of Jews at the Battle of Khaybar, near Medina, in the seventh century. Police broke up the impromptu demonstration without incident. Clashes between police and demonstrators occurred at other times near the site in January and February. Press reported that at least 10 Palestinian Muslims were injured by rubber bullets fired by police on January 31 and that police turned away “hundreds” of worshippers from the site on February 7.

The Jordanian Waqf in Jerusalem administered the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supported maintenance and salary of the Waqf staff in Jerusalem. The issue of the use of the Gate of Mercy (Bab al-Rahma), a building within the Haram al-Sharif/Temple that was reopened by the Waqf in 2019 after it had been closed since 2003, remained unresolved. The Israeli government stated it regarded the reopening as a violation of the status quo.

On July 12, an Israeli court asked the Waqf to provide its views within 60 days regarding the closure of the Bab al-Rahma site after the Israeli police requested the court on July 2 to extend the current court-ordered closure and stated the building, if open, would be used by Hamas, according to media. Police also asked the Waqf to close the building permanently. In response, the Waqf said it did not recognize the authority of Israeli courts over the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Throughout the year, Muslim worshippers could generally enter the site, although Israeli police regularly conducted security searches there.

Israeli media reported that Israeli security forces arrested six Muslim worshippers at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on January 7 for “shouting nationalist rhetoric.” Video of the incident showed police kicking one of those arrested. Police and the Waqf reached agreement to close the site from March 22 to May 31 to both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Waqf said it sought to close the site on one other occasion but kept it open because Israeli authorities did not agree to simultaneously close it to non-Muslim visitors. The Israeli government stated that the public regulations in place at that time did not mandate closure of the site. Israeli government authorities closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, other houses of worship, and holy sites for Passover, Eid al-Fitr, and Easter holidays, as well as for the Ramadan and Lenten seasons, due to the pandemic. Christian leaders stated that they were frustrated when Israel restricted indoor gatherings, including religious services, to 10 persons, saying that the cap was based on the number of men required for a minyan (a Jewish prayer quorum) and did not allow for greater numbers by taking into account the size of religious buildings and ability to socially distance safely. Israeli authorities made exceptions to health restrictions for Easter and Christmas services, allowing greater but still limited public attendance.

Israeli government restrictions on gatherings for prayer varied from March through December due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During a nationwide lockdown in the spring, no gatherings were allowed, including for prayer; at other times, prayer gatherings of 10 to 20 persons were allowed, including in roped-off groups at the Western Wall. Guidelines at other periods were more lenient.

Israeli authorities briefly closed the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on January 29 after two Palestinians were arrested for attempting to carry out a stabbing attack against police.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the only restrictions imposed by Israel during the year were due to COVID-19.

On September 6, an association of Muslim leaders in Jerusalem issued a statement accusing police and authorities of violating the sanctity of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount by erecting ladders and installing loudspeakers at the entrance to the Lions Gate. The Waqf posted photos showing police and other staff mounting the roof and installing the equipment. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the speakers were installed outside the compound and were for the safety of individuals visiting the site.

Israeli authorities in some instances barred specific individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, including Jewish activists believed to have violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Islamic prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site or incited others to violence, and public figures whose presence authorities feared would inflame tensions. Banned individuals included Waqf guards and administrative and maintenance staff and imams delivering sermons at the site. The Wadi Hilweh Center reported that Israeli authorities banned 46 Waqf staff during the year. The government stated that police banned individuals from accessing the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount only in cases of violation of public order or a disturbance to the freedom of worship. The government said that these bans were authorized according to procedures by police officials and courts and targeted both Jews and Muslims who “called for violence and disrupted the peace” at the site. According to the government, 225 individuals, including Jews and Muslims, were banned from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for different time periods. The Wadi Hilweh Information Center reported that Israeli authorities banned 315 individuals from the site during the year.

While the government stated it was rare for any individual to be barred entry to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, human rights and civil society organizations said Israeli authorities banned Palestinians resident in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, and Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel from the site. Palestinian civil society organizations said that starting in November, police checked the identification of individuals entering the Old City to visit the site for Friday prayers and would bar from entry persons with West Bank identification cards and return them to the West Bank.

Media reported that Israeli authorities barred a number of prominent Muslims from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for periods of time, including for six months, including Radwan Amr, director of the manuscripts department at al-Aqsa Mosque, and Sheikh Issam Amireh, a senior leader of the Hizb al-Tahrir political party, after he called the beheading of a teacher by a Muslim terrorist in France a “great honor for all Muslims” during a sermon at the site. On January 18, the Israeli police barred Ekrima Sabri, the imam of the al-Aqsa Mosque, head of the private Islamic Higher Committee in Jerusalem and the former Palestinian Grand Mufti, from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for a period of four months, after accusing him of incitement in a January 17 sermon. On May 29, authorities detained him again and later informed him that he would not be allowed to visit the site for an additional four months. On October 28, police raided the office of the deputy director of the Waqf, Najeh Bkirat, in the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and told him to report to the intelligence services in seven days, when he was told that he would be banned from entering the site for six months. According to media, he was banned for “incitement” against the normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries and visitors from those countries to the site, as well as possible linkages to Hamas. Later, on November 26, authorities presented him with an order that he would not be allowed in the site for three months. Bkirat told the International Middle East Media Center in November that since 2003, police had banned him from the site 21 times for a period of more than seven years, adding, “In 2019, I was admitted into the mosque only for one week.”

Human rights and civil society organizations said Israeli authorities at times restricted some Muslims based on gender and age from entering the site. Israeli authorities have not issued permits for Gazans to visit the site during Islamic holidays since 2017, when it issued several hundred permits for Gazans during Ramadan, according to UN reports. Muslims who are Israeli citizens, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, or foreigners already present in Israel do not need permits to visit the site.

The Waqf also said that Israeli authorities interfered in the administration of the site by the Waqf, including maintenance and restoration work there. Israeli officials and activists stated the Waqf sometimes attempted to conduct repairs without coordinating with Israeli authorities. For example, pictures on the Waqf’s Facebook page showed their personnel digging at the site on March 31, while the site was closed to visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the police banning of individual Waqf staff members, the Waqf said that it had a reduced capacity to administer the site because Israeli authorities refused to grant permits to new staff hired to work at the site, leaving the Waqf seriously understaffed.

The IDF continued occasionally to limit access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, another site of significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the tomb of Abraham. Palestinian leaders continued in statements to local media to oppose the IDF’s control of access, citing Oslo-era agreements that gave Israel and the PA shared responsibilities for the site, although Israel retained full security responsibility for it while the Oslo Accords and 1997 Hebron Accords gave “civil powers and responsibilities” including “planning authority” for the site to the Hebron municipality. Some Muslim leaders publicly rejected a Jewish connection to the site.

The IDF again restricted Muslim access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs during the 10 days corresponding to Jewish holidays and Jewish access during the 10 days corresponding to Islamic holidays. The IDF restricted Muslims to one entry point, which was manned by soldiers with metal detectors, while granting Jews access via several entry points. Citing security concerns, the IDF periodically closed roads approaching the site and since 2001 has permanently closed Shuhada Street, the former main Hebron market and one of the main streets leading to the holy site, to Palestinian-owned vehicles. The government said the closure was done to prevent confrontations. Both Muslims and Jews were able to pray at the site simultaneously in separate spaces, a physical separation that was instituted by the IDF in November 1994 following an attack earlier in the year by an Israeli that killed 29 Palestinians. Israeli authorities continued to implement frequent bans on the Islamic call to prayer from the Ibrahimi Mosque, stating the government acted upon requests by Jewish religious leaders in Hebron in response to requests of Jewish worshippers at the site. The news website *al-Monitor* reported that Israeli authorities banned calls to prayer at the Ibrahimi Mosque 56 times during the month of April; Passover was celebrated from April 8 to 16.

On March 31, the PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs issued a statement condemning the IDF for preventing mosque attendants and guards from entering the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of Patriarchs in Hebron due to COVID-19 restrictions and limiting access to only one person to perform the call for prayer. On May 26, according to media reports, the IDF dispersed hundreds of Muslim worshippers who had arrived at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron to perform prayers. Media reported the IDF allowed only 50 persons to pray inside the mosque and another 100 worshippers to pray in its courtyard, per Israeli restrictions to control the COVID-19 outbreak. The Palestinian Authority had reopened mosques to the general public as of May 26.

On July 31, Hebron mayor Tayseer Abu Sneh said the IDF banned the entry to the Ibrahimi Mosque of thousands of Muslim worshippers trying to perform Eid al-Adha prayers and allowed only 35 individuals to attend the Eid prayers and sermon. The Israeli government said it managed access to the site in accordance with the status quo and based on the principle of religious freedom and in coordination with the Hebron municipality and PA Waqf managing the site. According to the Israeli government, Israeli authorities and the Waqf coordinated access during

the Eid to allow 850 Muslim worshippers to enter the site in small groups, in accordance with the COVID-19 restrictions in place during the Eid, which limited access for both Muslim and Jewish worshippers. According to the Israeli government, authorities made the same arrangements during the celebration of the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday, when only Muslims were allowed access to the site, and for Yom Kippur, when only Jews were allowed access. Israeli authorities closed the site to Palestinian worshippers for Jewish holidays, including Rosh Hashana (September 18-20) and Yom Kippur (September 27-28), and then on September 30 closed the building due to COVID-19. Jewish worshippers living within one kilometer (0.6 miles) were still able to pray in the complex’s outside courtyard. On September 30, the imam of the Ibrahimi Mosque, Hifthi Abu Sneineh, said that the IDF had prevented staff and Muslim worshippers from accessing the mosque and attending prayers under what he said was the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic. Abu Sneineh said that the IDF evacuated staff and worshippers from the mosque after the noon prayer on Tuesday and closed all entrances to the site. He also stated the IDF banned the director of the Waqf, Jamal Abu Aram, along with a number of staff, from accessing it on Tuesday. Abu Sneineh said the IDF blocked Muslim worshippers from performing prayers but allowed Jewish worshippers to access the mosque to commemorate Yom Kippur. The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs issued a statement stating that this measure was a “blatant and serious” violation, an attack on the sanctity of the mosque, a provocation to the feelings of Muslims, a serious threat, and an attempt to control the rest of the mosque. The Israeli government said that the two sides at the site had an agreement to allow exclusive access to the Jewish and Muslim communities on specific holy days throughout the year specific to the two faiths.

In April, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit approved a 2019 decision by former Israeli Minister of Defense Naftali Bennett, shortly before Bennett left office, to bypass the Hebron municipality and expropriate land at the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of Patriarchs in Hebron. COGAT issued an expropriation order on May 13. The Israeli government stated it intended to renovate the site and establish elevators to make it accessible to persons with disabilities in order to “promote the rights of people with disabilities and allow access to religious sites for every population.” The Israeli government said it proceeded with the plan after multiple attempts to gain PA, Hebron municipality, and Waqf support for increased access to the site for persons with disabilities. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, “Hebron’s Jewish community and right-wing politicians and activists have long lobbied to make the site wheelchair accessible.” The paper stated that the only way that Jewish sanctuaries within the site could be reached is by climbing a long staircase.

Press reports stated that the land expropriated for the project was owned by the PA’s Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. In May, Hifthi Abu Sneineh condemned the decision and said it was a blatant violation of the Hebron Protocol of the Oslo Accords and that “The Israeli authorities did not notify the Waqf in charge of managing the mosque of the details of the project. The settlement project will facilitate the Judaization of Ibrahimi Mosque.” Separately, he told the *Middle East Eye* website, “This is their [Israelis’] goal: to make life harder for the Palestinians, and make life easier for the settlers. To restrict Palestinian worship, promote Jewish visitation, and forever change the history and Islamic character of this place.” On June 18, Palestinians from Hebron and the Israeli NGO Emek Shaveh filed objections with COGAT regarding the project. Emek Shaveh stated, “The plan is more political than humanitarian and marks a breach of the status quo, creating additional friction between Jews and Muslims in a place which is already suffering from extreme tension.” An Israeli court dismissed the case in August. On December 27, the Knesset Finance Committee voted to transfer 1.5 million shekels (\$467,000) to the elevator project. Member of the Knesset Moshe Gafni, the committee chair, said, “It is enormously important to allow public sites to be accessible to the disabled, even more so for a sacred site like the Tomb of the Patriarchs.” On May 14, members of the Fatah chapter in the Hebron district organized a protest in front of the site to protest the decision and said the Ibrahimi Mosque is a purely Islamic site, with all its parts and courtyards, and has no Jewish heritage.

On November 19, the Judea and Samaria planning committee rejected petitions by Emek Shaveh and Palestinian residents of Hebron against the plan. Emek Shaveh said it objected to the plan because it did not include a documentation and conservation study as is standard for construction at historical monuments and that the staff officer for archaeology at the Civil Administration was not involved in overseeing the plan. The NGO stated that the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarch was arguably the most important historical and holy site in the West Bank. Emek Shaveh also argued that the elevator, which was planned to be built near the Jewish end of the complex, would not aid Muslim worshippers who wished to access their prayer halls because of the stringent security checks that they would be forced to endure. A case in an Israeli court was pending at the end of the year.

On December 4, Israeli police arrested an Orthodox Jewish man for trying to set fire to the Church of All Nations at the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The suspect poured flammable liquid inside the Catholic church and set it on fire before a church guard detained him and police took him into custody. On December 31, an Israeli judge found the assailant mentally incompetent and remanded him to a psychiatric institution for up to 20 years.

Israeli authorities and settlers, who are often armed, prohibited access by Palestinians to several mosques in the occupied West Bank located within Israeli settlements. Israeli authorities declared all legal settlements as restricted Israeli military zones. Palestinians were unable to visit them without Israeli government approval.

In an October 7 report, the Israeli NGO Machsom (“Checkpoint”) Watch stated that the Israeli government has used three strategies to “erase” Muslim religious sites in the West Bank: enclosing sites within closed military zones, including sites in nature reserves; divesting shrines of their Islamic religious identity by opening them to the general public; and declining to recognize the site as having any religious significance in Islam. The NGO said that Israeli authorities give more weight to sites associated with Biblical prophets than to sites that are significant only to

Muslims. Machsom Watch said that Israeli authorities deny Palestinians any access to 13 sites in the West Bank that are of traditional heritage, worship, and Muslim prayer or that are important to multiple faiths. The NGO said some of these sites are dilapidated and frequently the object of vandalism by Israeli settlers.

The Israeli government said it coordinated access to the Prophet Samuel’s mosque during the year for 1,500 Palestinian residents of the Nebi Samuel and al-Khalaila villages. The site has both a mosque and synagogue and, with the villages, is located in the West Bank, but inside the Israeli barrier.

Israeli police continued to be responsible for security at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with police officers stationed both inside the site and at entrances. Police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and inside buildings on the site and regulated pedestrian traffic exiting and entering the site. Israeli police continued to maintain exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance, through which non-Muslims may enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, and allowed visitors through the gate during set hours. Police sometimes restricted this access, citing security concerns.

Some Jewish groups performed religious acts such as prayers and prostration on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount despite the ban on non-Islamic prayer. The Israeli government reiterated that non-Islamic prayer was not allowed on the grounds of the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, who reiterated this view at a campaign event in March. NGOs, media, and Jewish Temple Mount advocacy groups continued to report that in practice, police generally allowed discreet non-Muslim prayer on the site. Police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious articles. Police allowed Jewish male visitors who were visibly wearing a *kippah* (head covering) and *tzitzit* (fringes), and those who wished to enter the site barefoot (in accordance with interpretations of *halacha* – the body of Jewish religious law), to enter with police escort.

The Waqf continued to restrict non-Muslims who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount from entering the Dome of the Rock and other buildings dedicated for Islamic worship, including the al-Aqsa Mosque, unless they were participating in a Waqf-sponsored visit. It also lodged objections with Israeli police concerning non-Muslim visitors wearing religious symbols or religious clothing. Israeli police sometimes acted upon these objections.

Waqf officials repeated previous years’ complaints over their lack of control of access to the site. The Waqf objected to non-Muslims praying or performing religious acts on the site and to individuals whom they perceived to be dressed immodestly or who caused disturbances, but they lacked authority to remove such persons from the site. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions regarding entry and barring of Muslim and non-Muslim visitors to the site. Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza, but Waqf officials exercised only a limited oversight role. The government extended visiting hours in the afternoon by 30 minutes to prevent large groups forming at the entrance for non-Muslims in accordance with COVID-19 health restrictions. Following the announcement of the normalization agreements establishing relations between Israel and several Arab countries, Muslim visitors from the Gulf were at times harassed in person and vilified on social media by Palestinian Muslims for visiting the site as part of visits to Israel. The PA Mufti of Jerusalem issued a fatwa denying access to the site to Muslims from countries that established diplomatic relations with Israel, but the Jordanian Waqf rejected the fatwa. The Waqf stated that Muslim visitors from those countries were brought by Israeli officials without coordination with the Waqf. The government welcomed these visits as a positive outcome of normalization and as demonstrating freedom of religion.

On May 4, the NGO Returning to the Mount filed a petition to the Supreme Court demanding the state allow Jewish visitors to enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, arguing that the arrangement at that time – under which only Muslim Waqf staff were allowed to enter the site due to the COVID-19 pandemic – discriminated against Jews who wished to visit. The court rejected the petition on May 19, stating it did not find grounds to interfere with the state’s discretion. On June 23, the Supreme Court ordered the government to respond by November 21 to a petition by the NGO Moked Israeli Center for the Advancement of Democracy and Protection of Human Rights, which objected to a sign near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount discouraging non-Muslim visitors from entering the site. The case was ongoing at year’s end. The Waqf and others criticized non-Muslim visitors who entered the site escorted by the police as “settlers” and said they “stormed” the site.

Many Jewish religious leaders, including the government-appointed Rabbi of the Western Wall, continued to say Jewish law prohibited Jews from entering the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for reasons of ritual purity. Some Jewish religious leaders, Knesset members, and activists called for reversing the policy of banning non-Islamic prayer at the site to provide equal religious freedom for all visitors.

The government continued to allow Knesset members and ministers to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site. Members of the Knesset were required to inform the Knesset guard at least 24 hours prior to the visit to allow for coordination with the police.

At the main Western Wall plaza, the place of worship nearest the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Judaism’s holiest site, the government continued to enforce a regulation prohibiting the performance of “a religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, which harms the feelings of the public towards the place.” Authorities interpreted this prohibition to include mixed-gender Jewish prayer services, to the objection of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements. The organization Women of the Wall argued that its monthly presence at the wall for more than 30 years had established the group as part of the “customs of the place.”

Authorities continued to prohibit visitors from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall plaza and women from accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. Authorities, however, permitted women to pray with *tefillin* and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions.

Pending COVID-19 limitations, authorities allowed Women of the Wall to hold its monthly service in the women’s area of the main Western Wall plaza, but in a barricaded area or as a pod at the rear of the main plaza along with other separated prayer pods. However, during the period when the Western Wall was open for prayer by only 10 persons due to COVID-19 regulations, Women of the Wall reported that Rabbi of the Western Wall Shmuel Rabinowitz rejected their April 19 request for a group of 10 women from Jerusalem to pray at the Western Wall, despite having approved similar requests for ultra-Orthodox visitors from outside of Jerusalem.

Representatives of Women of the Wall complained of a lack of effort by police or ushers from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation (WWHF), which administers the Western Wall main plaza, to intervene when ultra-Orthodox women and men disrupted their monthly prayer service with screaming, whistling, and pushing. In response, the government stated that large numbers of Israeli police, ushers, and security personnel maintained order on occasions when Women of the Wall prayed there. Women of the Wall filed a petition to the Supreme Court in March 2017 to require ushers and police to prevent disruption to their services. The case was ongoing as of the end of the year.

Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform south of the Mughrabi ramp and adjacent to the Western Wall, but not visible from the main Western Wall plaza, for non-Orthodox “egalitarian” (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. Authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism, including for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. The Supreme Court criticized the government on November 4 for its lack of progress since 2018 on upgrading the area to a permanent egalitarian prayer space. The government blamed the delay on multiple rounds of national elections, COVID-19, and an obstacle posed by a Jerusalem municipality planning committee, but it also stated that it was not under a legal obligation to implement the construction plan. The court ordered the government to make progress by April 4, 2021. This case is a combination of lawsuits against the government, some dating back to 2013, that would allow prayer for all religious streams of Judaism at the Western Wall. In 2017, the government “froze” a 2016 agreement with non-Orthodox Jewish groups that would have offered them symbolic recognition in addition to upgrading the egalitarian prayer space. In 2018, a special government committee approved expansion of the temporary platform. The non-Orthodox Jewish movements stated that upgrading the prayer space alone would not fulfill their 2016 agreement with the government. The court case was ongoing at year’s end. In addition, observers have stated that scaffolding has prevented visitors from touching the sacred wall in the egalitarian prayer space since a rock fell there in 2018. Over the same period, the WWHF managed large construction projects in the main plaza, making routine inspections for loose rocks at the main plaza without blocking access to the wall.

The government continued to promote the establishment of a cable car route from the First Station cultural complex in Jerusalem to the Dung Gate of the Old City that would pass over a Karaite cemetery. In September, the Jerusalem municipality published a tender for the construction of the cable car, and on September 9, a Jerusalem local planning committee approved the expropriation of more than 10,000 square meters (108,000 square feet) of private lands, mostly in Silwan, for construction of the project. According to the Karaite community, the cable car would desecrate the cemetery, thus preventing its further use. While the original plan included a physical roof over the cemetery, which would contradict Karaite customs, the approved plan does not include a roof. Nonetheless, the project’s infrastructure still posed a problem for the Karaite community, according to community representatives. The government stated the cable car was meant to solve accessibility problems to holy sites such as the Western Wall, but some NGOs said the project was meant to specifically promote Jewish touristic sites in East Jerusalem and to reinforce Israel’s claims of sovereignty over the area. The plan was pending final government approval at year’s end. A petition against the cable car was also pending at year’s end.

The barrier that divided the majority of the West Bank from Israel also divided some communities in Jerusalem, affecting residents’ access to places of worship, employment, agricultural lands, schools, and hospitals as well as the conduct of journalistic, humanitarian, and NGO activities. The government stated that the barrier was needed for security reasons.

On July 20, the IDF seized a 1,500-year-old Byzantine-era baptismal font from Taqqou’a town, southeast of Bethlehem. The eight-ton font had been moved in 2000 from an ancient church in the archeological site of Khirbet Taqqou’a and had again been moved in 2002. Taqqou’a municipality retrieved the font and placed it in the vicinity of the mayor’s house, pending the construction of a local museum, according to media reports. According to press reports, the whereabouts of the font remained unknown after it was moved in July. The Israeli government said the Israeli Civil Administration (CA), which is part of COGAT, took the item as part of the CA’s efforts to “restore archeological items” and to “stop the theft of antiques” in the West Bank.

The PA continued to provide imams with themes they were required to use in weekly Friday sermons in West Bank mosques and to prohibit them from broadcasting Quranic recitations from minarets prior to the call to prayer.

Unrecognized religious groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses faced a continued PA ban on proselytization but stated they were able to conduct most other functions unhindered. Palestinian authorities generally recognized on a case-by-case basis personal status documents issued by unrecognized churches. The PA, however, continued to refuse to recognize personal status legal documents (e.g., marriage certificates) issued by some of these unrecognized churches, which the groups said made it difficult for them to register newborn children under their fathers’ names or

as children of married couples. Many unrecognized churches advised members with dual citizenship to marry or divorce abroad to register the action officially in that location. Some converts to unrecognized Christian faiths had recognized churches with which they were previously affiliated perform their marriages and divorces. Members of some faith communities and faith-based organizations stated they viewed their need to do so as conflicting with their religious beliefs.

Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem continued to state that the barrier begun by Israel during the Second Intifada impeded their work, particularly south of Jerusalem in West Bank Christian communities around Bethlehem. Clergy members stated the barrier and additional checkpoints restricted their movements between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries as well as the movement of congregants between their homes and places of worship. Christian leaders continued to state the 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 government previously stated it constructed the barrier as an act of self-defense and that it was highly effective in preventing terrorist attacks in Israel.

Christian expatriate workers in Israeli settlements complained that lack of public transportation on Saturdays prevented them from participating in religious activities and worship in Jerusalem.

According to a November 9 *Times of Israel* report, Jerusalem mayor Moshe Lion and his administration proposed a plan to designate seats on Jerusalem community councils as either ultra-Orthodox or not. Jerusalem is the country’s only municipality to use community councils, which were established to provide greater communication between the city’s diverse population groups and the municipal government. Each council has 15 members, nine elected and the other six appointed. Lion said the proposal was designed to reduce conflicts on the councils and to ensure that the views of minority communities were represented on each council. Members of both the ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox communities expressed concerns about the proposal, with one describing it as “undemocratic.” While there are eight community councils serving Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, none of them has elected members.

The Government of Israel’s Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) listed 28 dedicated cemeteries in Israel and West Bank settlements for civil burial and burial of persons the government defined as “lacking religion.” Only three of the cemeteries, however, were available for use to the broader general public in Israel and Israeli West Bank settlements regardless of residence, one of which has been full for several years. The other cemeteries, located in Israeli agricultural localities, were permitted to bury only “residents of the area.” This, according to the NGO Hiddush, left the majority of the Israel’s population deprived of the ability to exercise its right to be buried in accordance with secular or non-Orthodox religious views, as mandated by Israeli law. The two MRS-administered cemeteries in West Bank settlements were available only for the burial of Israeli citizens. On December 12, the Supreme Court, as a part of a petition by Hiddush, issued an order instructing the state to explain why it would not allow civil burial in agricultural localities for individuals who were not local Israeli residents and who do not have another alternative. The case was pending as of the end of the year.

According to the website of Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center, the Israeli government maintained an agreement with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that no member of the Church “will engage in proselytizing of any kind” within Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, as a condition of its lease of land for its campus on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

After workers sent by the Jerusalem municipality demolished a wall and stairs in the Islamic al-Yusufiye Cemetery to make way for a park, local Palestinians gathered in protest and the work stopped. On December 24, the Jerusalem District Court issued a temporary restraining order against the municipality, forcing the city to suspend its work. The cemetery, which is hundreds of years old, is affiliated with the Islamic Waqf and adjacent to the Old City.

Hizb al-Tahrir, a global pan-Islamic Salafi movement founded in Jordanian-controlled Jerusalem in 1953, among other groups criticized the PA for at times reopening parts of the economy while maintaining COVID-19 restrictions on religious sites. On September 7, the heads of Christian churches in Bethlehem issued a statement in which they commended President Abbas and the Palestinian leadership, including Intisar Abu Amara, the chief of staff at the President’s office, for what they said as their effective role in support of the Palestinian Christian community, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reported PA government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said at an April 13 press conference that Israelis “are not only exporting [the virus]. They are agents of this virus...These are not accusations. These are facts.”

In an August 27 interview with Israel’s Kan TV, Yasser Arafat’s widow, Suha al-Tawil, said the PA, particularly Intisar Abu Amara, discriminated against PA Christian staff. The accusation was made following a PA decision to recall her brother, Ghabi al-Tawil, the PA ambassador to Cyprus. PA officials said al-Tawil was dismissed from his position after he refused to receive Fatah activists at the PA embassy who were organizing a protest against the Emirati-Israeli normalization agreement. Following the interview, heads of Christian churches in Bethlehem released a joint statement warning against attempts to harm Christian-Muslim relations.

Palestinian leaders, media, and social media regularly used the word “martyr” to refer to individuals killed during confrontations with Israeli security forces, whether those individuals were involved in confrontations or were innocent bystanders. Some official PA media channels, social media sites affiliated with the Fatah political movement, and terrorist organizations glorified terrorist attacks on Jewish Israelis, referring to the assailants as “martyrs.” On May 12, IDF sergeant Amit Ben Ygal was killed by a rock thrown by a Palestinian during a security operation in the West Bank. According to a report by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, *Palestinians Ramp Up Incitement to Murder Jews*, Fatah then began a widespread social media campaign that referred to Ben Ygal’s death by including the phrase, “If you don’t have a gun, kill an IDF soldier with a rock.” Several local Fatah chapters posted memorials, including photographs, of suicide bombers. On several occasions on PA television, senior PA and Fatah official Jibril Rajoub extolled “martyrs” and prisoners serving sentences in Israeli prisons for conducting terrorist attacks. On June 17, on the 90th anniversary of the execution by British mandate officials of three persons convicted of involvement in the 1929 massacre of the Hebron Jewish community, a PA television presenter praised their actions and “martyrdom.”

The PA and the PLO continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinians killed during terrorist acts or to those who were killed as bystanders in Israeli-Palestinian confrontations, as well as stipends to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those awaiting charges and those convicted of acts of terrorism. Such payments and separate stipends were initiated by the PLO in 1965 and have continued under the PA since the signing of the Oslo Accords with Israel in 1993 and 1995. On April 16, Fatah Central Committee member Mahmoud Aloul, speaking about Palestinian Prisoners’ Day, said on official PA Palestine TV, “The first amount of money Fatah was able to collect was allocated to prisoners’ and martyrs’ families. The Americans and Israelis tried to stop us from supporting Palestinian martyrs’ and prisoners’ families, but our decision was clear and it was given by President Abbas when he said that even if we had a few pennies, then we would offer them to the families of martyrs and prisoners.”

The Israeli Deduction Law provides that Israel must deduct a portion of the revenues it collects for the PA that is equal to the expenditures by the PA in the previous year for payments to families of persons killed, injured, or imprisoned for attacks on Israel. On October 26, Qadri Abu Bakr, the director of the PLO Commission for Prisoner Affairs, addressing the Deduction Law, said, “If we agree to deduct this money, it means that we agree that they are truly a group of terrorists – murderers, as Israel calls them. We would be defining their struggle as a crime and defining as a crime our people’s struggles for more than 50 years...” In accordance with the Israeli Deduction Law, Israel withheld a monthly sum equal to what the PA paid to these individuals and families (approximately 41.8 million shekels – \$13 million) from its monthly transfers of tax revenues to the PA from January-March. Israel then suspended the deductions pending approval of the new amounts by the Israeli Security Cabinet, which did not occur until December due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The PA stated that these payments were social payments for families who lost their primary breadwinner. The Israeli government stated that the payments incentivized, encouraged, and rewarded terrorism, with higher monthly payments for lengthier prison sentences tied to more severe crimes.

The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs continued to pay for construction of new mosques, maintenance of approximately 1,800 existing mosques, and 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.

The PA’s Palestinian Broadcasting Company’s code of conduct states it does not allow programming that encourages “violence against any person or institution on the basis of race, religion, political beliefs, or sex.” Some official PA media channels as well as social media accounts affiliated with the ruling political movement Fatah, however, featured content praising or condoning acts of violence against Jews. Fatah announced September 26 that Facebook had restricted its ability to promote stories on its site. The Israeli NGO Palestinian Media Watch (PMW) stated this was due to concerns PMW had raised about Fatah’s promotion of terror and incitement to violence against Jewish Israelis. Following the announcement of diplomatic normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, on September 15, Fatah Central Committee-member Jibril Rajoub on official PA television referred to Prime Minister Netanyahu as “a distorted copy of Mussolini,” and said the situation was similar to “everything that had happened in the 1930s and 1940s in Europe.” Referring to statements made by Arab governments regarding their recognition of Israel, Rajoub stated, “I think that even their speeches were written for them...in Tel Aviv, of course....”

Both Palestinians and Israelis evoked ethnoreligious language to deny the historical self-identity of the other community in the region or to emphasize an exclusive claim to the land. On September 18, on official PA television, PA Grand Mufti Muhammed Hussein said, “If an inch of the Muslims’ lands is stolen, jihad becomes a personal religious commandment for everyone.” Anti-Semitic material continued to appear in official PA media. A Christian columnist for the official PA daily, *Muwaffaq Matar*, wrote, “Christian Palestinians understood the danger of Judaization to their existence and to their holy sites...They also know that the Zionist plot is not limited only to Judaizing the holy sites of the Muslim Palestinians...Therefore, they view the sale of Palestinian lands to the Israeli racist colonialist occupiers and settlers as a betrayal of Jesus. They think that whoever does this...is not eligible to represent the church or any Christian citizen in Palestine.”

Press reports stated that on November 18, after a Jewish settler placed a *hanukkiyah* (Hanukkah candelabra) on the roof of the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Mahmoud al-Habash, the PA President’s religious affairs advisor, told the official *Wafa* news agency, “The occupation state...is exploiting every opportunity, and particularly the so-called ‘Jewish holidays,’ in order to commit crimes and plans that desecrate our Islamic holy sites in Hebron.” According to press, he also said that the Ibrahimi Mosque is a pure Islamic heritage site to which those who are not Muslim have no rights. The newspaper *al-Hayat al-Jadida* reported that the PA’s Supreme Fatwa

Council had called the action “a blatant violation, a true provocation of Muslims’ sensibilities, and an additional aggressive attempt to erase Islamic history in service of the goal to Judaize the Ibrahimi Mosque and create a fake Jewish character for it.”

In a July 18 appearance on Palestine TV, PA Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki, in response to a question about an incorrect report that Apple Maps and Google Maps had removed the name “Palestine” from their apps, said, “It is clear that these two companies have obvious orientations. It is obvious who owns them, and the Israeli-Jewish influence on them is also obvious.”

The *Middle East Monitor* website, in a report that it attributed to the Palestinian news agency *Wafa*, said that the Palestinian Authority had condemned the “continuous and increasing aggression” of Israeli Jewish settlers on Palestinians and their properties in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. According to the report, the PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the settlers’ attacks as “part of a campaign supported and run by the occupation state and its institutions, aiming to Judaize Area C.”

In an August 15 interview on Palestine TV, Mahmoud al-Habash, commenting on the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab states, said, “Normalization [of relations] is treason, full stop. It is treason. It is normalizing relations with those who murdered your father and brothers. It is normalizing relations with the enemies of the Prophet Mohammed, who want to [build] a temple at the destination of Mohammed’s Night Journey [referring to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount].”

Anti-Semitic, militaristic, and other adversarial content continued to be directed against Israel in Palestinian textbooks, while references to Judaism were absent in the context of discussions of other religions, according to Palestinian Media Watch and IMPACT-se. Norway announced June 4 that it intended to withhold half of its funding designated for the PA’s education system until textbooks no longer promoted “hate and violence.” Foreign Minister Ine Marie Eriksen Soreide said that Norway had raised these concerns with senior PA leaders.

In September, IMPACT-se released a report on the new Palestinian school curriculum (West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – UNRWA) for the 2020-21 academic term. The NGO reviewed each revision of the school curriculum released over the previous five school years. IMPACT-se’s report on the 2019-20 textbooks found no substantive changes from the previous revision of the curriculum. According to IMPACT-se, a Palestinian cabinet announcement on May 18 approved a plan to make changes to the PA curriculum for the then upcoming 2020-21 school year, and the PA presented the plan at a meeting with donor nations in Ramallah on May 21. However, the NGO said its analysis of the new curriculum “found it [the curriculum] to have moved further from meeting UNESCO standards, and the newly published textbooks were found to be more radical than those previously published. According to the report, there “is a systematic insertion of violence, martyrdom and jihad across all grades and subjects. Extreme nationalism and Islamist ideologies are widespread throughout the curriculum, including science and math textbooks.” Marcus Sheff, the CEO of IMPACT-se, told the *Jerusalem Post* in a September 22 report, “It is disastrous that 1.3 million Palestinian children are condemned to yet another year of sitting in PA and UNRWA schoolrooms to be fed hate and incitement on a daily basis.” In addition to providing teachers with training in human rights and tolerance in education to equip them to discuss controversial materials in PA textbooks, UNRWA publicly asserted there is no place for anti-Semitism in its programs.

According to the Jewish Telegraph Agency, on May 14, the European Parliament passed three resolutions that condemned the PA for using school textbooks that promote hate and violence. The resolutions were passed as amendments by the Committee on Budgetary Control in a budgetary report. One resolution called on the European Commission to make sure that “no Union funds are used to finance textbooks and educational material which incite religious radicalization, intolerance, ethnic violence and martyrdom among children.” The resolution said the European representatives were “concerned that problematic material in Palestinian school textbooks has still not been removed and is concerned about the continued failure to act effectively against hate speech and violence in school textbooks.” According to the resolutions, money allocated for textbooks should “be used for drafting and teaching curricula which reflects UNESCO standards of peace, tolerance, coexistence, and nonviolence.”

In 2019, the European Union commissioned the German NGO Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research to conduct a review of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 PA curricula to assess the extent of inciteful content. The findings are due in early 2021.

The Jerusalem-based Center for Near East Policy Research (CNEPR) reported in February that PA teacher guides published by the PA Ministry of Education between 2016 and 2018 delegitimized the State of Israel, demonized Israel and Jews, and lacked any attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict peacefully. In 2019, CNEPR described excerpts from the guides referring to Jews as “aggressive, barbarous, full of hate, and bent on extermination,” and “enemies of Islam since its early days.”

In November, Israeli media reported that the government had agreed to pay 400,000 shekels (\$124,000) in compensation to the Old Yosef Chai Yeshiva in the West Bank settlement of Yitzhar to cover the cost of the building’s use by security forces since it was seized in 2014. The yeshiva, which the *Times of Israel* said was a “hotbed of violence against local Palestinians and Israeli security forces,” released a statement saying that total damage to the building was more than 800,000 shekels (\$249,000) and that the government’s payment was “the beginning of rectification.” In the statement, the yeshiva added that it hoped to return to its original location at Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus.

Under the Israeli Antiquities Law, excavations within a sacred site require the approval of a ministerial committee, which includes the Ministers of Culture, Justice, and Religious Affairs. The government stated that Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) researchers “have greatly intensified their research on ‘non-Jewish’ periods in the history of the land of Israel, [including] the Prehistoric, Early Bronze, Byzantine, Muslim, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods.” Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and Muslim leaders continued to protest archaeological excavations and construction work done at the City of David National Park in the Silwan neighborhood outside the Old City and in the Old City near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, including an elevator being installed at the rear of the Western Wall plaza. Some NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the IAA emphasized archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims while minimizing historically significant archaeological finds of other religions. Archeologists from the NGO Emek Shaveh continued to dispute the government’s representation of the “Pilgrim’s Road,” a tunnel dug by the IAA and inaugurated in Silwan in 2019, as being historically part of the pilgrimage route to the Jewish Second Temple; Emek Shaveh said the excavation method did not establish with certainty the date and purpose of the road. NGOs such as the City of David Foundation and the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies continued to support the government’s position.

Some NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in the West Bank continued to state that the IAA exploited archaeological finds to bolster Jewish claims while overlooking other historically significant archaeological finds involving other religions or the needs of Palestinian residents at these sites. Emek Shaveh reported on September 9 that Israel’s Civil Administration issued expropriation orders for the antiquity sites Deir Sam’an and Deir Kala’, located in Area C of the West Bank, northwest of Ramallah. According to Emek Shaveh, both sites are on privately-owned Palestinian property and next to Israeli settlements. The expropriation orders stated that the sites were being expropriated for the purpose of preservation and safeguarding archaeology and were the first expropriation orders by Israeli authorities for archaeological sites in the West Bank since 1986. Emek Shaveh said that Israeli authorities were “using archaeological sites as a pretext for barring Palestinians from sites in Area C.”

The NGO Regavim’s Preserving the Eternal Project criticized the PA for damaging historical sites or attempting to erase Jewish heritage in areas under the PA’s control as well as in Area C and for failing to fulfill its obligations under the Oslo Accords to “protect and safeguard all archaeological sites,” including ensuring freedom of access to them. Regavim stated in September that constant vandalism and looting at historical sites in the West Bank “will be exacerbated if jurisdiction is transferred to the Palestinian Authority, which is intent on obliterating the physical record of Jewish connection to the Land of Israel...The physical remains of biblical history will be decimated under Palestinian custodianship.” Regavim identified sites the PA failed to protect or allow free access to, including the ancient synagogue at Samu’a; Tel Aromah in Area B; Mount Ebal (Tel al-Burnat) in Area C; Fatzalis, straddling Areas B and C; Sebastia or Ancient Samaria; and Archilau. According to media, Israeli forces shot and killed a 15-year-old protestor during clashes with Palestinian protestors in response to a tour of Tel Aromah organized by Regavim and the Samaria Regional Council in March.

The Israeli government retained its previous regulations regarding visa issuance for foreigners to work in the West Bank, regulations Christian institutions said impeded their work by preventing many foreign clergy and other religious workers from entering and working. The government continued to limit Arab Christian clergy serving in the West Bank to single-entry visas, which local parish leaders said complicated needed travel to other 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 in receiving visas and reported periodic denials of their visa applications. The government stated visa delays or denials were due to security processing and visitors from states without diplomatic relations with Israel. The Israeli government said during the year it did not receive any applications from clergy from states that did not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel and that religious workers from all countries working in the West Bank received visas that allow multiple entries. Officials from multiple churches expressed concerns that non-Arab visa applicants and visa-renewal applicants also faced long delays. While Christian clergy generally were able to obtain visas, Christian leaders said Israel’s visa and permit policy adversely affected schoolteachers and volunteers affiliated with faith-based charities working in the West Bank. In recent years, Israeli authorities issued permits for some Christians to exit Gaza to attend religious services in Jerusalem or the West Bank and for Muslims from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for Ramadan. Due to COVID-19, Israeli authorities did not issue permits to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to travel for Ramadan or Christmas during the year. The Israeli government said it did issue some permits for Gazan Christians to visit Israel and use Ben Gurion airport to travel abroad during Easter.

The Israeli NGO Gisha noted that while Israeli authorities did not issue permits to Gazans due to COVID-19, thereby essentially restricting them from being able to go to Israel or the West Bank except for urgent humanitarian cases, it permitted foreigners for much of the year to enter Israel for religious study and to attend weddings, funerals, and bat or bar mitzvahs. Furthermore, Israelis were able to move freely inside Israel as well as to and from settlements in the West Bank, including for religious worship and gatherings. Gisha said that even in previous years, religious travel from Gaza was extremely limited; no Muslims were issued permits for religious travel in 2019, according to Gisha and UN reports. In 2015, Israel issued 11,214 permits for Muslim worshippers to travel for Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, or Friday prayers at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, which dropped to just 600 in 2017 and 2018, according to Gisha.

According to church officials, Israel continued to prohibit some Arab Christian clergy, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority, from entering Gaza. The Israeli government said it approved 64 of 83 requests during the year to visit Gaza for religious reasons from religious organizations and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, including for individuals from 19 nationalities, including Egypt and Jordan.

According to the NGO HaMoked, there were approximately 10,000 Palestinians living in Israel, including Jerusalem, on temporary stay permits under the citizenship and entry law with no legal guarantee they could continue living with their families. There were also cases of Palestinian spouses of Palestinian residents living in East Jerusalem without legal status. Some Palestinian residents moved to Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the barrier to live with their nonresident spouse and children while maintaining Jerusalem residency. According to Christian religious leaders, this situation remained an especially acute problem for Christians because of their small population and consequent tendency to marry Christians from the West Bank or elsewhere (Christians who hold neither citizenship nor residency). A Christian religious leader expressed concern that this was a significant element in the continuing decline of the Christian population, including in Jerusalem, which negatively impacted the long-term viability of their communities.

According to NGOs, community members, and media commentators, factors contributing to Christian emigration included political instability; the inability to obtain residency permits for spouses due to the 2003 Law of Citizenship and Entry; limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions; difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; loss of confidence in the peace process; and economic hardships created by the establishment of the barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions. The government stated such difficulties stemmed from the “complex political and security reality” and not from any restrictions on the Christian community.

While the law does not authorize the Israel Land Authority (ILA), which administers the 93 percent of the country in the public domain, to lease land to foreigners, in practice, foreigners were allowed to lease if they could show they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. This public land includes approximately 12.5 percent owned by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), whose statutes prohibit sale or lease of land to non-Jews. The application of ILA restrictions historically limited the ability of Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who were not citizens to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of Jerusalem. In recent years, however, an increasing number of Palestinian citizens in Jerusalem have acquired property built on ILA-owned land. Arab citizens are allowed to participate in bids for JNF land, but sources stated that the ILA will grant the JNF another parcel of land whenever an Arab citizen of Israel wins a bid. Despite a 2018 Supreme Court ruling that the ILA Executive Council must have representation of an Arab, Druze, or Circassian member to prevent discrimination against non-Jews, there were no members from these groups on the council at year’s end.

On June 24, the Jerusalem District Court denied a request by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to block the transfer of three properties in Jerusalem’s Old City to Ateret Cohanim, a Jewish prosettlement organization, which signed a 99-year lease for the properties in 2004. The court’s decision followed similar ruling by the Supreme Court in 2019 and a lower court in 2017. The Patriarchate had argued that its official who signed the lease was not authorized to do so. The Church filed the district court lawsuit after the Supreme Court decision, stating it had new evidence of corruption and fraud involving the sale. Following the decision, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate released a statement saying it received the ruling with “surprise” and that “We believe the court erred in its decision and intend to launch an appeal at the Supreme Court.”

On July 7, 13 heads of churches and Christian communities in Jerusalem issued a joint statement that the court’s ruling on the three properties threatened the Christian presence in the city. The heads of the churches said that they stood united in their “commitment to safeguarding the historical status quo of the Holy Sites and rights of the churches which are universally recognized.” According to the statement, the case represented a “systematic attempt to undermine the integrity of the holy city, to obstruct the Christian pilgrim route, and to weaken the Christian presence in Jerusalem.” The heads of the churches called on the Israeli government “to act in order to safeguard the integrity of the Christian heritage and patrimony in the Old City, as well as the holy sites and the rights of the residents of the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem.”

At year’s end, Christians held minister-level positions in three PA ministries (Finance, Health, and Tourism) and the cabinet-level office of Deputy Prime Minister for Public Information.

The PA Ministry of Foreign Affairs publicly condemned killings and terrorist attacks in France “under the slogan of religion” following the beheading of a teacher who had displayed cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a class on free speech. The ministry rejected the killing of any human being regardless of his religion, nationality, or race, and stated, “Religion is innocent from such crimes that completely contradict the Islamic tolerant teachings.” The ministry also rejected insulting religious figures, symbols, and teachings and called for the prohibition of such insults through changes to national laws.

On January 10, a Catholic church, St. John the Baptist Chapel, near Qasr al-Yahud, located on the banks of the Jordan River, opened for prayer for the first time since the 1967 Six-Day War. The Israeli and Jordanian Armies laid approximately 6,500 landmines around the church during the 1967 and 1973 wars, resulting in its closure. Between 2018 and April, a British NGO, the HALO Trust, and Israeli authorities worked to clear the area of more than 1,150 landmines. A Catholic Church official specifically thanked Israeli President Reuven Rivlin for his support of the restoration efforts.

ACTIONS OF FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other militant and terrorist groups continued to be active in Gaza. Hamas remained in de facto political control of Gaza.

On October 13, a group of approximately 15 gunmen associated with the PIJ terrorist organization kidnapped and beat three worshippers from a mosque east of Khan Younis in Gaza during dawn prayers. According to media and NGO reports, the assailants targeted the victims because of a PIJ factional dispute. The kidnappers released all three victims, two of whom suffered broken bones, later that morning. Hamas stated it launched an investigation into the incident.

Hamas leaders and other militant groups continued to call for the elimination of the State of Israel, and some called for the killing of “Zionist Jews” and advocated violence through traditional and social media channels as well as during rallies and other events.

Hamas also continued to enforce restrictions on Gaza’s population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia, including a judicial system separate from the PA courts. Hamas courts occasionally prohibited women from departing Gaza due to ongoing divorce or family court proceedings, despite having Israeli authorization to travel. Media outlets reported the Hamas-affiliated Islamic University of Gaza required hijabs for all females. Gazan civil society leaders said Hamas in recent years had moderated its restrictions on dress and gender segregation in public.

Palestinians in Gaza reported interference by Hamas in public schools at the primary, secondary, and university levels. Hamas reportedly interfered in teaching methodologies or curriculum deemed to violate Islamic identity, the religion of Islam, or “traditions” as defined by Hamas. Hamas also interfered if there were reports of classes or activities that mixed genders. UNRWA, however, reported no Hamas interference in the running of its Gaza schools.

Christian groups reported Hamas generally tolerated the small Christian presence in Gaza and did not force Christians to abide by Islamic law. According to media accounts, Hamas continued neither to investigate nor prosecute Gaza-based cases of religious discrimination, including reported anti-Christian bias in private sector hiring and in police investigations of anti-Christian harassment. Media reports quoted Gazan Christians as saying that Hamas generally did not impede private and communal religious activities for the Christian minority in Gaza. Hamas continued to not celebrate Christmas as a public holiday in Gaza, unlike in the West Bank.

On May 12, Hamas member of the defunct Palestinian Legislative Council Marwan Abu Ras said in an address uploaded to YouTube by the Palestine Islamic Scholars, “The criminal Zionist enemies of Allah occupy the al-Aqsa Mosque. They defile it day and night, kill Muslims, and violate the sanctity of Muslim women and holy places. Hating them is an obligation, according to the sharia.”

Senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahhar, in an interview with Iran’s al-Alam TV discussing the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab states, said, “We cannot consider [normalization with Israel] to be ‘normal.’ It is a misleading term that is interchangeable with treason, or with stabbing the resistance in the back, or with betraying Allah and His Messenger. Particularly, and this is the central issue...This is primarily because it goes against what Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad...[The Quran says:] ‘Oh, believers do not...’ This is a total prohibition...‘Do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies...for they are allies of each other. Whosoever does so shall be counted as one of them.’ This means that normalization transfers anybody who normalizes with Israel from Islam to Judaism, from belief to heresy.”

In a July 3 interview on al-Aqsa TV, Nasser Maarouf of the Palestine Islamic Scholars Association said, “Millions of people were killed [in the two world wars], all because of these Jews, who ran wild, tyrannized the world, and spread corruption in it. Their corruption affects all walks of life. Look at the poverty all over the world. Look at the blood that is being spilled all over the world. Look at the honor of women being violated all over the world. If you check, you find that it is the Jews who are behind all that. They are the ones feeding all corruption on earth, and they are the ones financing it.”

In a rally in Gaza that was televised on July 9, Rajaa al-Halabi, head of the Hamas Women’s Movement, said, “These are the Jews. They are the ones who slayed the prophets, the ones who acted treacherously and violated [sanctities]...Indeed, my dear sisters, our conflict with the Zionist enemy is a matter of faith, not of borders. Needless to say, we will not make do with what we have here. We will not make do with partitioning the land and taking only a part of it. This land will be ours in its entirety, Allah willing, because our conflict with the Zionist enemy is an existential conflict, not a conflict about borders. This enemy, who came from all corners of the world, has no place here, but this is what Allah wanted for them... This is our fate, my beloved sisters – to be Allah’s hand on Earth, the hand that will finish off the Israelites, this Zionist enemy, Allah willing. Allah brought them here in droves, so that Palestine becomes their graveyard, Allah willing.”

Some Muslim students in Gaza continued to attend schools run by Christian institutions and NGOs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity or nationality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

There were incidents of deadly violence that perpetrators justified at least partly on religious grounds. Actions included killings, physical attacks and verbal harassment of worshippers and clergy, and vandalism of religious sites. There was also harassment by members of one religious group of another, social pressure to stay within one’s religious group, and anti-Semitic content in media.

According to local press and social media, some settlers in the West Bank continued to justify their attacks on Palestinian property, or price tag attacks, such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, vandalism of cars and buildings, arson, and slashing of tires as necessary for the defense of Judaism. According to the *Times of Israel*, on January 28, Israeli police opened an investigation into “an apparent hate crime” after a classroom in a school in the northern West Bank village of Einabus was set on fire. The attackers also left Hebrew graffiti on the school wall, apparently referencing the Israeli government’s then recent razing of the unauthorized outpost of Kumi Ori, which was established in contravention of Israeli law: “Only the enemy’s property should be destroyed. Regards from Kumi Ori.”

In late February, according to press reports, vandals damaged several cars in the village of Yasuf; Yesh Din reported that vandals, believed to be residents of nearby settlements, slashed the tires on 13 vehicles. Those responsible also sprayed graffiti on two buildings, a Star of David on one building, and writing on the other that said in Hebrew, “There will be war over Judea and Samaria.”

On June 11, the *Times of Israel* reported that a parked car in the village of Jamma’in had been set on fire during the night with Hebrew graffiti that said “the nation of Israel lives” sprayed on a neighboring building. The price tag attack came three days after 12 cars in the nearby village of Sawiya were vandalized and the same graffiti and a Star of David sprayed on a village wall. According to the press report, Yesh Din stated that during the three-month March to May period, 44 price tag attacks against Palestinian villages occurred, 21 involving violence against Palestinians and the remainder targeting property.

According to media reports, on July 27, arsonists set fire to the al-Bir wal-Ihsan Mosque in al-Bireh City in a suspected price tag attack. The arsonists spray-painted graffiti on the walls of the mosque that said, “Siege for Arabs and not Jews” and “The land of Israel is for the people of Israel.” *Reuters* said that the graffiti was a reference to “to a biblical, historical and political claim that includes the West Bank.” After the attack, then Israeli Minister of Economy Amir Peretz condemned the incident on Twitter, calling for “the criminals and hatemongers” responsible for the blaze in the city of al-Bireh to be brought to justice.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Israeli officials, including high-ranking politicians and senior officials from law enforcement bodies, have declared an unequivocal zero-tolerance policy towards the phenomenon of price tag offenses by prosettlement Israelis against Palestinians. The Nationalistic Motivated Crimes Unit of the Judea and Samaria Police District of the Israeli National Police is tasked with preventing and investigating ideologically based offenses in the West Bank and with supporting other police districts in the investigation of such crimes. The Israeli government maintained an interagency team overseeing law enforcement efforts in the West Bank related to incitement, “violent uprisings,” and “ideological crimes.”

The Israeli government said that several times during the year, graffiti was sprayed on Joshua’s Tomb in the Palestinian village of Kifl Hares in the West Bank.

On February 22, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued a statement that, according to press reports, “condemned” the February 21 gathering of thousands of Israeli settlers on land owned by the Patriarchate in Tayasir in the northern Jordan River Valley. The settlers gathered on the property without permission. The Patriarchate statement said that similar incidents had occurred in the past and that it “is very concerned not only from the settlers’ violations of its properties, but also from the lack of action by the Israeli authorities to put an end to such offenses.” According to media, the settlers gathered to signal support for annexation of the Jordan Valley.

According to members of more recently arrived faith communities in the West Bank, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, established Christian groups opposed the efforts of the recent arrivals to obtain official PA recognition because of the newcomers’ proselytizing.

Political and religious groups in the West Bank and Gaza continued to call on members to “defend” al-Aqsa Mosque.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to state that burial of its members remained challenging since most cemeteries belong to churches. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the challenge was greatest in Bethlehem, where churches from the main traditions control most graveyards and refused access to them.

According to Palestinian sources, some Christian and Muslim families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip pressured their children, especially daughters, to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who challenged this societal norm, particularly Palestinian Christians or Muslims who sought to marry Jews, encountered considerable societal and family opposition. Families sometimes reportedly disowned Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith. Various Israeli and Palestinian groups continued to protest against interfaith social and romantic relationships and other forms of cooperation.

In a September 16 interview on a Lebanese television outlet, Nasser al-Laham, the editor in chief of the *Ma'an News Agency*, said that the Arab states “who normalize [their relations with Israel] believe – and I don’t know who planted this conviction in their brains – that the Israelis love them. They [Arabs] are clearly not well versed in the Bible, the Talmud, or *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.” Al-Laham also stated, “Zionists do not love Arabs. The Zionists came to replace [the Arabs] and not to occupy them...They [Israelis] are after the billions of the Gulf.”

In late October, Hizb al-Tahrir and others organized largely peaceful protests in the West Bank to condemn perceived insults to Islam following the beheading of a teacher in France and another terrorist attack in response to the teacher displaying cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a class on free speech.

Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem harassing or spitting on them. In one incident in June, a Catholic friar reported being assaulted in public by three men wearing *kippot* (yarmulkes), including by being spit at and verbally attacked, and fearing imminent physical risk. When the attackers began physically assaulting the friar, bystanders intervened and forced the attackers to leave. According to the friar, police did not respond to telephone calls for assistance during the attack but recorded a complaint filed by the victim.

During the funeral of Iyad Halak, a special needs student who was fatally shot on May 30 by police officers, hundreds of mourners reportedly chanted “Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of [the Prophet] Mohammed will return,” a taunt referring to the Muslim massacre and expulsion of the Jews of Khaybar in the seventh century. Israeli police in Jerusalem’s Old City fatally shot Halak, a Palestinian resident with autism, June 30 after he allegedly failed to follow police orders to stop. Police stated they believed Halak was carrying a “suspicious object.” Defense Minister Benny Gantz expressed regret for the incident and called for a quick investigation. On October 21, the Department for the Investigation of Police Officers in the Ministry of Justice issued a statement that the prosecution intended to indict, pending a hearing, a police officer suspected of the shooting on charges of reckless homicide. According to the Ministry of Justice, investigators carefully examined the circumstances of the incident and determined that Halak had not posed any danger to police and civilians who were at the scene, that the police officer discharged his weapon not in accordance with police procedures, and that the officer had not taken proportionate alternative measures which were at his disposal.

On June 10, Women of the Wall and the Israel Religious Action Center filed a petition against Rabbi David Yosef of the Har Nof neighborhood of Jerusalem demanding a disciplinary hearing following repeated statements in which he allegedly incited against and disparaged Women of the Wall. The case was pending at year’s end.

Authorities opened an investigation following a suspected arson and price tag attack against a mosque in the Beit Safafa neighborhood of Jerusalem on January 24. The press reported that the suspect left Hebrew graffiti on an outside wall of the building that appeared to be a reference to Kumi Uri, a settler outpost in which the IDF had demolished buildings earlier in the month.

The NGO Tag Meir continued to organize visits to areas where price tag attacks had occurred and to sponsor activities promoting tolerance in response to the attacks.

Although the Chief Rabbinate and rabbis of many ultra-Orthodox denominations continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site due to the ongoing *halakhic* debate about whether it is permissible or forbidden for Jews to enter the Temple Mount, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. Many among the self-identified “national religious” Zionist community stated they found meaning in visiting the site. Groups such as the Temple Institute and Yaraeh continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer there as well as for the construction of a third Jewish temple on the site. In some cases, Israeli police acted to prevent individuals from praying and removed them; in other cases reported by the Waqf, on social media, and by NGOs, police appeared not to notice the activity. According to local media, some Jewish groups escorted by Israeli police performed religious acts, such as prayers and prostration. Some Jewish visitors publicly noted that the National Police were more willing to permit them to engage in silent prayer. According to the Wadi Hilweh Information Center, visits by activists associated with the Temple Mount movement decreased to 18,500 from 30,000 in 2019, largely due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Despite Israeli labor law, some foreign domestic workers in Jerusalem stated that some employers did not allow their domestic workers to take off their day of worship.

Bethlehem residents said political instability affected tourism, Bethlehem’s key economic sector. Christians also criticized the PA for failing to better protect their communities and way of life, which was under pressure from lack of economic opportunities and other drivers of emigration. Bethlehem has traditionally had the highest unemployment rate among West Bank cities, which sources stated was a factor compelling many young Christians to emigrate. Due to its heavy reliance on the tourism industry, COVID-19 had significant impacts on the local economy, which Christian leaders feared would lead to increased emigration. The local Chamber of Commerce estimated that unemployment rose from 26 percent just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to 50 percent at the end of the year, compared with 14.9 percent for the West Bank in the last quarter of the year. Community leaders estimated Bethlehem and surrounding communities were only 12 percent Christian in 2019, compared with more than 70 percent in 1950, and 23 percent in 1998.

On October 6, *Haaretz* reported that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were virtually no Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land and that the religious tourism sector was “silently collapsing” after a record-breaking year in 2019. The Vatican website *AsiaNews* reported that tourism revenues would be close to zero for Palestinian Christians. *AsiaNews* said that through August, the Christian community had lost approximately \$320 million.

On June 19, the *Catholic News Agency* cited a poll by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research on behalf of the Philos Project, an NGO that advocates for Christians in the Near East, which found that Christians were leaving the West Bank because of economic distress and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nearly six in 10 Palestinian Christians (59 percent) cited economic hardship as the main reason they considered emigrating. The vast majority (84 percent) said they feared the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands by Israel; a similar share of Christians (83 percent) said they were concerned about both attacks by Jewish settlers and the denial of their civil rights by Israel. While Christian and Muslim Palestinians both said they might emigrate for economic reasons, the survey showed that Christians also felt unsafe or insecure, not just because of the threat of attacks by settlers, but from their Muslim neighbors. Nearly eight in 10 Christians (77 percent) said they were worried about radical Salafist groups “in Palestine.” A large minority (43 percent) stated they believed that most Muslims did not want them “in Palestine” and 44 percent believed that Christians were subject to discrimination when applying for jobs. The Philos Project stated that Palestinian Christians were twice as likely as Palestinian Muslims to emigrate. According to the NGO, Christians as a share of the Palestinian population fell from nearly 10 percent in 1922 to 6 percent in 1967, to just 1 percent of the population in 2020.

In a survey conducted by the Arab Center of Washington, D.C. and released in November, 80 percent of Palestinian respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, “No religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions infidels.” The results were among the highest in the region, which had a 65 percent rate of agreement overall.

In a survey by a Dubai-based public relations firm in the first three months of the year that involved a team of international experts, 28 percent of Palestinians between the ages of 18 and 24 agreed that religion is “the most important” factor to their personal identity, compared with 40 percent overall for youths polled in the 17 Arab states included in the survey.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior White House and other U.S. officials publicly raised concerns about anti-Semitism by PA officials and more broadly in Palestinian society throughout the year. Senior White House officials and other U.S. officials repeatedly and publicly pointed out that Palestinian leaders did not consistently condemn individual terrorist attacks nor speak out publicly against members of their institutions, including Fatah, who advocated violence.

Senior U.S. officials spoke publicly about the importance of maintaining the status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The embassy awarded grants to the Jerusalem Intercultural Center for an interreligious community economic development program in the Old City of Jerusalem. Additionally, the embassy presented a grant to the Interfaith Encounter Association to bring together three interfaith groups in Jerusalem’s Jewish and Palestinian neighborhoods to meet with U.S. experts, coordinators, and fellow interfaith groups. The embassy also issued public statements condemning attacks on places of worship, including an attempted arson attack on the Church of All Nations at the Garden of Gethsemane.

On April 20 and 23, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with Israeli government and civil society representatives to discuss increasing COVID-themed manifestations of anti-Semitic tropes against Israel and Jews, especially online. The Special Envoy and his counterparts agreed that increasing education, monitoring, legislation, and law enforcement could help combat this trend.

Embassy-supported initiatives focused on interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated a shared society for Arab and Jewish populations. Embassy officials advocated for the right of persons from all faiths to practice their religion peacefully, while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.

Throughout the year, embassy officials used embassy social media platforms to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups.

U.S. government representatives met with representatives of a range of religious groups from Jerusalem, the West Bank, and when possible, the Gaza Strip. Engagement included meetings with Orthodox, ultra-Orthodox, and Reform rabbis as well as representatives of various Jewish institutions; regular contacts with the Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Armenian Orthodox patriarchates; and meetings with the Holy See’s Custodian of the Holy Land, leaders of the Anglican and Lutheran Churches, the Syrian Orthodox Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and leaders of evangelical Christian groups as well as Muslim community leaders. U.S. government representatives also met with political and civil society leaders to promote tolerance and cooperation to combat religious prejudice. These meetings included discussions of the groups’ concerns about religious tolerance, access to religious sites, respect for clergy, attacks on religious sites and houses of worship, as well as concerns by local Christian leaders about ongoing Christian emigration from the West Bank and Gaza.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom
(covering 2020)

Country:

State of Palestine

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel/west-bank-and-gaza/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 May 2021

Document ID:

2051576

Austrian Red Cross
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Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

