

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	398
Land:	Gaza-Vestbredden
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2018 International Religious Freedom Report
Udgivet:	21. juni 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	27. juni 2019

WEST BANK AND GAZA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

This section includes the West Bank and Gaza. In December 2017, the United States recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is the position of the United States that the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) exercised varying degrees of authority in the West Bank and no authority over Jerusalem. Although PA laws apply in the Gaza Strip, the PA did not have authority there, and Hamas continued 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. Violence between Palestinians and Israelis continued, primarily in the West Bank and the periphery of Gaza. Continued travel restrictions impeded the movements of Muslims and Christians between the West Bank and Jerusalem. 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.” Several local Fatah chapters on social media referred to individuals who had engaged in terrorist attacks as martyrs and posted memorials, including photographs of suicide bombers. The Fatah branch in the city of Tubas and the Fatah youth organization posted a photograph in March celebrating a suicide bomber from the second Intifada who killed one Israeli and injured 90 others. Anti-Semitic content also appeared in Fatah and PA-controlled media. In October Palestinian authorities detained a Palestinian-U.S. citizen Jerusalem identification card holder, prosecuted him for possible involvement in sale of Palestinian-owned property to a Jewish Israeli group, and found him guilty of “seizing/tearing away part of the Palestinian Territories to a foreign state,” sentencing him to life in prison with hard labor. In April the Palestinian Supreme Fatwa Council reiterated an Islamic legal ruling (fatwa) reemphasizing previous rulings that sale of Palestinian-owned lands, including in Jerusalem, to “enemies such as the state of Israel,” is forbidden to Muslims according to sharia. According to media sources, the ruling considered the land to be Islamic public property and not personal

private property, based on previous rulings by Palestinian and other Muslim religious legal scholars. Palestinian officials also condemned the sale of Palestinian land to Jewish Israelis in nationalistic terms. Palestinian leaders did not always publicly condemn individual terrorist attacks or speak out publicly against members of their institutions who advocated for violence. PA President Mahmoud Abbas maintained a public commitment to nonviolence. The PA and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinian individuals killed during the commission of a terrorist act. The PA and PLO also continued to provide payments to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those convicted of acts of terrorism against Israelis. President Abbas said he would use his last penny “on the families of the prisoners and martyrs.” Following the September fatal stabbing of a Jewish settler in the West Bank by a Palestinian, President Abbas told Israeli government leaders that “everybody loses from violence.” On April 30, however, President Abbas delivered a speech at a meeting of the Palestinian National Council, in which he said massacres of Jews, including the Holocaust, were related to their conduct in “social behavior, [charging] interest, and financial matters,” and not their religion. He issued a statement on May 4 apologizing to those offended by the remarks, condemning anti-Semitism in all its forms, and called the Holocaust the most heinous crime in history. Senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders condemned violent acts by Jewish individuals and groups against Palestinians, including property crimes. The Israeli government arrested or detained alleged suspects in such attacks. Local human rights groups and media stated that authorities rarely convicted alleged Israeli offenders.

Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization with de facto control of Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other extremist groups disseminated anti-Semitic materials and incited 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.

In some cases, perpetrators justified incidents of violence on religious grounds. On January 9, a Palestinian shot and killed an Israeli rabbi at a traffic junction near the Israeli settlement outpost (a term used to describe a settlement that, under Israeli law, is illegal and unauthorized) of Havat Gilad, west of Nablus in the West Bank. Israeli police opened an investigation into the death of Aysha al-Rabi, a Palestinian resident of the West Bank, killed October 12 when a thrown stone broke through her car windshield. At year’s end, an Israeli police investigation continued into the possible involvement of yeshiva students from a nearby settlement. On multiple

occasions, Palestinians threw rocks at Jewish visitors to Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. Various Israeli and Palestinian groups opposed to interacting with members of other religions continued to protest against interfaith social and romantic relationships and other forms of cooperation. Some Israeli settlers in the West Bank continued to justify their attacks on Palestinian property, or "price tag" attacks (violence by Jewish individuals and groups against non-Jewish individuals and property with the stated purpose of exacting a "price" for actions taken by the government against the attackers' interests), such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, as necessary for the defense of Judaism.

U.S. government representatives met with Palestinian religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and a broad range of issues affecting Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities. U.S. officials 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total Palestinian population at 2.8 million in the West Bank and 1.8 million in the Gaza Strip (July 2018 estimates). According to the U.S. government and other sources, Palestinian residents of these territories are predominantly Sunni Muslims. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reports an estimated 412,000 Jewish Israelis reside in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. According to various estimates, 50,000 Christians reside in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and according to media reports and religious communities, there are approximately 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.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

West Bank and the 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 Military Commander and Israeli law and Israeli legislation. Palestinians living in the portion of the 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 the Military Commander whenever its 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 due to 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. 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 comes 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. 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 criminalizing “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 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 nineteenth century status quo arrangements reached with the 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) and Evangelical Lutheran Churches. 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's 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 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.

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 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 religious 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 132-member 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 presidential decree requires that Christians head 10 municipal councils in the West Bank (including Ramallah, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and Beit Jala) and establishes a Christian quota for 10 West Bank municipal councils.

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 the law does not authorize the Israel Land Authority (ILA), 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 since 2014, older identity cards continue to circulate, listing the holder as either Muslim or Christian.

Government Practices

In October Palestinian authorities detained a Palestinian-U.S. citizen Jerusalem identification card holder and investigated him for involvement in brokering the sale of Palestinian property to Jewish Israelis. After a one-week trial, the Palestinian Grand Criminal Court found him guilty of “seizing/tearing away part of the Palestinian Territories to a foreign State” and sentenced him to life in prison with hard labor. Authorities also froze his bank accounts as well as those of the owners of the property, according to media.

Israeli police and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reported investigating known instances of religiously motivated attacks and making arrests where possible. 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. Israeli NGO Yesh Din also reported Palestinian victims generally feared reprisals by perpetrators or their associates. Both of these factors increased Palestinian victims’ reluctance to file official complaints, according to Yesh Din.

The Israeli government stated that authorities maintained a zero-tolerance policy against Israeli extremists' attacks on Palestinians and have made efforts to enhance law enforcement in the West Bank, including through taskforces, increased funding, and hiring additional staff members. During the first six months of the year, Israeli police had investigated 115 allegations of nationalistic-based offenses committed by Israelis in the West Bank and 405 allegations against Palestinians. In all of 2017, Israeli police investigated 183 and 609 allegations, respectively. At the end of June, Israeli authorities had opened 35 new investigations of ideologically-based offenses and disturbances of public order by Israelis against Palestinians, compared with 29 in all of 2017. By June Israeli authorities issued four indictments in these cases, two of which were from prior years' investigations, while in 2017 four indictments were issued, including three from prior years' investigations. Offenses against property constituted 65 percent of these cases. Israeli authorities investigated 15 cases of Israelis allegedly committing bodily harm against Palestinians. As of the end of June, however, Israeli authorities had not investigated any cases involving Israeli stone-throwing at Palestinians in the West Bank. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported 21 incidents of Israelis throwing stones at Palestinian homes and vehicles during the same six-month period.

As of October, Israeli authorities had issued 27 restraining orders against 25 Israelis from entering the West Bank and four orders prohibiting Israelis from entering specific areas in the West Bank. In 2017, Israeli authorities issued one detention order and 55 restraining orders against 41 Israelis, including minors, prohibiting their presence in the West Bank to deter and prevent ideologically based offenses. The Israeli government stated the special unit it established in 2013 in the West Bank's Judea and Samaria Police District to combat nationalist crimes was fully operational, with 60 police officers, and 20 auxiliary officers.

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. The Mufti of Jerusalem issued fatwas prohibiting Palestinian participation in Jerusalem municipal elections, and sales of Palestinian-owned lands to Israelis. In April the Palestinian Supreme Fatwa Council reiterated an Islamic legal ruling (fatwa) reemphasizing previous rulings that sale of Palestinian-owned lands, including in Jerusalem, to "enemies such as the state of Israel," is forbidden to Muslims according to sharia.

Nonrecognized churches, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and some evangelical Christian groups, faced a continued PA ban on proselytization but stated they were able to conduct most other functions unhindered by the PA. Palestinian authorities generally recognized on a case-by-case basis personal status documents issued by nonrecognized churches. The PA, however, continued to refuse to recognize personal status legal documents (e.g., marriage certificates) issued by some of these nonrecognized 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 nonrecognized churches advised members with dual citizenship to marry or divorce abroad to register the action officially in that location. Some converts to nonrecognized 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. During the year, Palestinian authorities established a procedure for registering future marriages involving Jehovah's Witnesses, which would also enable couples to register their children and protect the children's inheritance rights. Palestinian authorities generally recognized on a case-by-case basis documents from a small number of churches that were relatively recently established in the West Bank and whose legal status remained uncertain.

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 security barrier that was begun by Israel during the second Intifada (2000-2005), impeded their work, particularly south of Jerusalem in the 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 Sepulcher 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 attacks in Israel.

In addition, 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. During the year, Bethlehem had the highest unemployment rate among West Bank cities, which sources stated was a factor compelling many young Christians to emigrate. Community leaders estimated Bethlehem and surrounding communities were only 12 percent Christian, compared with more than 70 percent in 1950.

Palestinian leaders often did not publicly condemn individual terrorist attacks or speak out publicly against members of their institutions who advocated for violence. Media and social media regularly used the word “martyr” to refer to individuals killed during confrontations with Israeli security forces. Some official PA media channels, social media sites affiliated with the Fatah political movement, terrorist organizations, and individuals glorified terrorist attacks on Jewish Israelis, referring to the assailants as “martyrs.” Several local Fatah chapters on social media referred to individuals who had engaged in terrorist attacks as martyrs and posted memorials, including photographs of suicide bombers. The Fatah branch in the city of Tubas and the Fatah youth organization posted a photograph on March 11 of Wafa Idreis, a suicide bomber who carried out an attack during the second Intifada, and which killed one Israeli and injured 90 others.

The PA and the PLO continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinian individuals killed during the commission of a terrorist act. The PA and the PLO also continued to provide payments to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those convicted of acts of terrorism against Israelis. These payments and separate stipends for prisoners were first initiated by the PLO in 1965 and have continued under the PA since the Oslo Accords with Israel. President Abbas said he would use his last penny “on the families of the prisoners and martyrs.”

The PA Ministry of Waqf 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 Israeli government and the PA sometimes prevented Jewish Israelis from visiting Jewish religious sites in PA-controlled territory in the West Bank for security reasons.

The Israeli government continued to prohibit Israeli citizens in unofficial capacities from traveling to the parts of the West Bank under the civil and security control of the PA (Area A). While these restrictions in general prevented Jewish Israelis

from visiting several Jewish religious sites, the IDF provided special security escorts for Jews to visit religious sites in Area A, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus, a site of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Some Jewish religious leaders said this policy limiting travel to parts of the West Bank prevented Jewish Israelis from freely visiting several Jewish 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. Palestinian and Israeli security forces coordinated some visits by Jewish groups to PA-controlled areas within the West Bank.

Rachel's Tomb, a Bethlehem shrine of religious significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims under Israeli jurisdiction in Area C, remained separated from the West Bank by the security barrier built during the second Intifada, and Palestinians could only access it if Israeli authorities permitted them to cross the barrier. 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 IDF continued 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 administrative responsibility for the site, although Israel retained full security responsibility for the site. Some Muslim leaders publicly rejected a Jewish connection to the site. The IDF again restricted Muslim access on 10 days corresponding to Jewish holidays and Jewish access on 10 days corresponding to Islamic holidays. The Israeli government said these restrictions allowed a greater number of worshipers to access the site on special days for the two faiths. The IDF restricted Muslims to one entry point with IDF security screening. The IDF granted Jews access via several entry points without security screening. The Israeli government said police guard posts were located at both crossings, and manned by soldiers and equipped with metal detectors. Entrance was denied to individuals identified as posing a threat to the security of the site or its worshipers. 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 Israeli government said the road closure was 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 following a 1994 attack 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 regarding the needs of Jewish worshippers at the site.

Following the September fatal stabbing of a Jewish settler in the West Bank by a Palestinian, President Abbas told Israeli government leaders that “everybody loses from violence.” On April 30, however, Abbas spoke at a meeting of the Palestinian National Council, stating the massacres of Jews, including during the Holocaust, were related to their “social behavior, [charging] interest, and financial matters,” and not their religion. He issued a statement on May 4 apologizing to those offended by his remarks, condemning anti-Semitism in all its forms, and called the Holocaust the most heinous crime in history.

Religiously intolerant and anti-Semitic material continued to appear in official PA media. On October 5, the official Palestinian TV aired a speech by PA Islamic Law Judge Muhannad Abu Roomi describing Jews as “fabricators of history” who “dance and live on the body parts and blood of others.” In another instance, a guest on a Palestinian TV program on April 10 stated that the Holocaust was a lie, and that many Jews “colluded with Hitler to create a gateway to bring settlers to Palestine.” On December 14, Osama al-Tibi delivered a Friday sermon at the Taqwa mosque in al-Tira, near Ramallah, broadcast on Palestine TV. In his sermon, al-Tibi said he was not able to mention all of the Jews' despicable traits, and that “Allah ... turned them into apes and pigs.”

There continued to be anti-Semitic and militaristic and adversarial content directed against Israel in Palestinian textbooks as well as the absence of references to Judaism alongside Christianity and Islam when discussing religion, according to Palestinian Media Watch and the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education. The two NGOs also reported that PA schoolbooks for the 2017-2018 school year contained material glorifying terror and promoting violence. In September media reported a European Parliament committee voted to freeze more than \$17 million in aid to the PA over incitement against Israel in its textbooks.

NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in the West Bank continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), an Israeli government entity, exploited archaeological finds to bolster Jewish claims, while overlooking other historically significant archaeological finds of other religions or the needs of Palestinian

residents at these sites. 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 the IAA conducted impartial evaluations of all unearthed archeological finds, and the IAA was obligated by law to document, preserve, and publish all findings from excavations. It added that IAA researchers “have greatly intensified their research of ‘non-Jewish’ periods in the history of the land of Israel, [including] the Prehistoric, Early Bronze, Byzantine, Muslim, Mamluk and Ottoman periods.”

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 from entering and working. The Israeli government continued to limit Arab Christian clergy serving in the West Bank to single entry visas, which local parish leaders in the West Bank 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 Israeli government stated visa delays or denials were due to security processing, and visitors from states without diplomatic relations with Israeli could face delays. Officials from multiple churches expressed concerns that non-Arab visa applicants and visa renewal applicants also faced long delays. Christian leaders said Israel’s visa and permit policy for individuals wishing to work and reside in the West Bank adversely impacted faith-based operations in the West Bank. While clergy generally were able to obtain visas, Christian leaders said this policy adversely affected school teachers and volunteers affiliated with faith-based charities working in the West Bank. NGOs and religious leaders said this policy did not appear to specifically target faith based organizations, but rather, appeared to be part of a broader Israeli tightening of visa issuance in response to the international “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement.” Israeli authorities issued permits for some Christians in Gaza to exit Gaza to attend religious services in Jerusalem or the West Bank. Christian leaders said Israel issued insufficient permits to meet the full demand, and the process was lengthy and time consuming.

According to some church officials, Israel continued to prohibit some Arab Christian clergy from entering Gaza, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority. Israel facilitated visits by clergy, including bishops from non-Arab countries, to Gaza on multiple occasions, including delegations from Europe, North America, and South Africa.

At year's end, Christians held minister-level positions in three PA ministries (Finance, Economy, and Tourism) and the cabinet-level office of deputy prime minister for public information.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

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

Hamas leaders continued to call for the elimination of the state of Israel, and some Hamas leaders called for the killing of Zionist Jews. Some Hamas leaders condemned, however, the terrorist attack on a U.S. synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Hamas also continued to enforce restrictions on Gaza's population based on its interpretation of Islam and sharia, including a separate judicial system from the PA courts. At times Hamas courts prohibited women from departing Gaza due to ongoing divorce or family court proceedings, despite having Israeli authorization to travel. Human Rights Watch issued a report in October regarding accusation of torture and abuse of detainees in PA and Hamas detention, based on 86 cases and dozens of interviews with former detainees, lawyers, and family members. The report included an example from 2017 of Hamas police detaining a social worker and investigating him for "offending religious feelings." Media 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.

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 to neither 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 quoted Gazan Christians as saying that Hamas generally did not impede private and communal religious activities for the Christian minority in Gaza, but continued to not celebrate Christmas as a public holiday, unlike in the West Bank.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were incidents of deadly violence that perpetrators said was justified at least partly on religious grounds. Because religion and ethnicity or nationality were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize much of this violence as being solely based on religious identity. Actions included killings, physical and verbal attacks on worshipers 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.

On January 9, a member of Hamas's Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades shot and killed Rabbi Raziel Shevach at a traffic junction near the Israeli settlement outpost of Havat Gilad, west of Nablus in the West Bank. On March 28, an Arab Israeli, Abed al-Hakim Asi, was charged in Central District Court for the February 5 fatal stabbing of Rabbi Itamar Ben Gal at a bus stop near the Ariel settlement, located between Nablus and Ramallah. Following these two attacks, Israeli settlers from neighboring areas threw stones at Palestinian vehicles and houses, destroyed olive orchards, sprayed anti-Palestinian graffiti, and blocked road access to Nablus.

On October 12, Aysha al-Rabi, a Palestinian resident of Bidya village, died when an unidentified individual threw a two-kilogram (4.4 pound) stone through her car windshield. Israeli police opened an investigation and at year's end continued to investigate the possible involvement of yeshiva students from the nearby Israeli settlement of Rehelim.

In July a Palestinian teenager climbed over the wall of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank near Ramallah and stabbed three Israelis, killing one. Neighbors of the victim killed the 17-year-old. In response, the Israeli defense minister tweeted, "The best answer to terror is the accelerated settlement of Judea and Samaria."

Palestinians at times violently protested when Jewish groups visited holy sites in the West Bank, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus. Palestinians threw stones and Molotov cocktails and clashed with IDF escorts during visits of Jewish groups to Joseph's Tomb (located in Area A) on several days during the year. The IDF used tear gas, rubber bullets, and live fire to disperse Palestinian protesters, secure the site, and/or evacuate Jewish worshippers.

According to local press and social media, some Israeli 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, as necessary for the defense of

Judaism. NGO Tag Meir reported that in April unknown assailants attempted to set a mosque near Nablus on fire, leaving graffiti on the building that stated “price tag and revenge.”

According to local human rights groups and media, Israeli authorities rarely prosecuted Jewish attacks against Muslims and Christians successfully, failing to open investigations or closing cases for lack of evidence. The Israeli government stated it maintained a zero-tolerance policy towards “price-tag” offenses by Israeli extremists and other violence against Palestinians in areas of the West Bank under its responsibility. It also stated it had made efforts to enhance law enforcement in the West Bank, which led to a decrease in ideologically-based offences, and an increase in the numbers of investigations and rates of prosecution.

A crowd of Christian Palestinians threw stones, bottles, and eggs at Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III on January 6-7 when he arrived in Bethlehem’s Manger Square to preside over midnight Mass on Orthodox Christmas. Members of the crowd, who also pounded the patriarch’s car with their fists, chanting “traitor, traitor,” accused the Greek Orthodox Church of selling Palestinian-owned property and land to Israeli Jewish groups. According to media, the controversy dated back to 2004, when three companies associated with a settler group obtained a long-term lease on three buildings belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. The church launched a legal battle against the agreement, calling it “illegal” and “unauthorized.” In 2017, a district court in Israel rejected the church’s argument. The church appealed the decision to the Israeli Supreme Court in November 2017, and the appeal was still pending at year’s end.

According to members of more recently arrived faith communities in the West Bank and Jerusalem, established Christian groups opposed their efforts to obtain official recognition from the PA 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.

According to Palestinian sources, most Christian and Muslim families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip pressured their children, especially their daughters, to marry within their respective religious groups. Couples who challenged this societal norm, particularly Palestinian Christians or Muslims who sought to marry Jews, encountered considerable societal and family opposition. Families sometimes reportedly disowned Muslim and Christian women who married outside their faith.

In an article published by the independent Palestinian *Ma'an News Agency*, former Hamas official Mustafa al-Lidawi invoked the blood libel to describe how Jews prepared pastries for the Purim holiday.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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. These meetings included discussions of the groups' concerns about religious tolerance, access to religious sites, respect for clergy, and attacks on religious sites and houses of worship.

U.S. government representatives met with political, religious, and civil society leaders to promote tolerance and cooperation to combat religious prejudice. They also 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 with local Christian leaders to discuss their concerns about ongoing Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank.