

WEST BANK AND GAZA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

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, 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 West Bank. Although PA laws 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. Violence between Palestinians and Israelis continued, primarily in the West Bank and the periphery of Gaza. PA President Mahmoud Abbas granted legal recognition to the Council of Local Evangelical Churches, a coalition of evangelical churches operating in the West Bank and Gaza. Continued travel restrictions impeded the movements of Muslims and Christians between the West Bank and Jerusalem. The PA released in January an individual holding a Jerusalem identification card whom Palestinian courts had found guilty of participating in the sale of land in Jerusalem to Israelis, and who had been sentenced to life in prison with hard labor. 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. During the first six months of the year, Israeli police had investigated 31 allegations of nationalistic-based offenses committed by Israelis in the West Bank and 87 allegations against Palestinians. 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.” The Fatah branch in the city of Salfit in March praised Omar Abu Laila – suspected of carrying out an attack in which two Israelis were killed – following his killing by Israeli security forces. Anti-Semitic content also appeared in Fatah and PA-controlled media. The PA and the Palestinian

Liberation Organization (PLO) continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinians killed while engaged in violence, including killings against Israeli Jews. They also continued to provide separate stipends to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those convicted of acts of terrorism. Both the European Union and Norwegian parliaments called for funding restrictions to the Palestinian Ministry of Education if incitement to violence and anti-Semitism were not removed from Palestinian textbooks. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released a report in August 2019 that expressed concern for the first time about “hate speech in certain media outlets, especially those controlled by Hamas, social media, public officials’ statements, and school curricula and textbooks, which fuels hatred and may incite violence, particularly hate speech against Israelis, which at times also fuels anti-Semitism.” In his September UN General Assembly (UNGA) remarks, President Abbas said, “We... reaffirm our condemnation of terrorism in all its forms...” However, he concluded, “We salute our honorable martyrs, courageous prisoners and wounded heroes, and salute their resilient families whom we will not [abandon].” Senior Israeli and Palestinian leaders condemned violent acts, including property crimes, by Jewish individuals and groups against Palestinians. The European Union announced in March that it would conduct a review of new Palestinian school textbooks following a study that found them to be more radical than in the past and containing incitement and rejection of peace with Israel.

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 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.

In some cases, Palestinian and Israeli perpetrators justified incidents of violence on religious grounds. Palestinians violently clashed with Israeli security forces in multiple instances when Jewish groups visited Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. On two occasions, Israeli security forces prevented attempts to detonate explosive devices when Jewish worshipers visited the Tomb. In June and October, unknown persons also threw explosive devices at Rachel’s Tomb from the West Bank. Various Israeli and Palestinian groups continued to protest against interfaith social and romantic relationships and other forms of cooperation. Some Jewish settlers in the West Bank continued to justify “price tag” attacks on Palestinians and their property as efforts to obtain compensation for government actions against the settlers, or as necessary for the defense of Judaism. According to a report by the

Israeli MOJ, Israeli officials, including high-ranking politicians and senior officials from law-enforcement bodies, have declared an unequivocal zero-tolerance policy towards “price-tag” offenses by Israelis against Palestinians.

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. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and other senior officials advocated with Israeli authorities to issue permits for Gazans to travel to Jerusalem and the West Bank for religious reasons. U.S. government representatives, including the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total Palestinian population at 2.8 million in the West Bank and 1.9 million in the Gaza Strip (midyear 2019 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 427,000 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.

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 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 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.

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 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. A PA religious committee also provides some financial support for Christian cultural activities.

The Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Oslo Accords) stipulated that protection of 12 listed Jewish holy sites and visitors in Area A is the responsibility of the 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.”

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 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 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.

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.

Media reported the PA released in January an individual holding an Israeli residency card that Palestinian courts had found guilty of “seizing/tearing away part of the Palestinian Territories to a foreign State” – participating in a land sale in Jerusalem to Israelis – and who had been sentenced to life in prison with hard labor. Palestinian authorities arrested the defendant in 2018 for his involvement in the sale of a property in Jerusalem’s Muslim Quarter owned by Adeb Joudah al-Husseini, the representative of a Muslim family historically entrusted with safeguarding the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

On July 10, Israeli authorities arrested four individuals suspected of planning to plant an explosive device at Joseph’s Tomb prior to the arrival of 1,200 Jewish worshippers. On July 29, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) neutralized a pipe bomb planted near Joseph’s Tomb and responded to rioters when attacked with stones and burning tires, reportedly resulting in injuries to 13 Palestinians.

Israeli police and the IDF reported investigating other instances of religiously motivated attacks and making 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. The 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.

On April 25, a clash occurred in the majority Christian West Bank town of Jifna, near Ramallah, between town residents and armed persons media reported were affiliated with a faction of the Fatah political party. Some of the armed individuals demanded the Christians pay *jizya*, a historical Muslim poll tax, the Begin-Sadat Center reported.

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. During the first six months of the year, in the West Bank, Israeli police investigated 31 allegations of

what the MOJ described as involving “ideologically-based” offenses by Israelis, 21 of which involved “nationalistic-based” and public order offenses against Palestinians and others (e.g., the police or IDF) and 87 such allegations involving Palestinian offenses. This compared to 100 cases opened against Israelis during 2018, of which 68 were allegations of nationalistic-based offenses. By July Israeli authorities issued two indictments in these cases, including from prior years’ investigations. Offenses against property constituted 16 of these cases. Israeli authorities investigated four cases of Israelis allegedly physically assaulting Palestinians.

According to local human rights groups and media, Israeli authorities rarely prosecuted Jewish suspects in attacks against Muslims and Christians, failing to open investigations or closing cases for lack of evidence. The Israeli government stated it had made efforts to enhance law enforcement in the West Bank, which led to a decrease in ideologically based offenses and an increase in the numbers of investigations and rates of prosecution.

Attacks by Israeli citizens, some of whom asserted their right to settle in what they stated is the historic Jewish homeland in the West Bank, continued, as well as Palestinian attacks on settlers. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported 816 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 2019, and 140 Palestinians injured. In 2018, UNOCHA reported 712 attacks, and 195 Palestinians injured. In 2019 UNOCHA reported 175 attacks by Palestinians against Israelis in the West Bank, with 34 Israeli injuries. In 2018, UNOCHA reported 397 attacks by Palestinians and 47 Israelis injured. In November Nadav Argaman, head of the Israel Security Agency, said that in 2019 the agency had prevented more than 450 “significant terrorist attacks.” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center said terrorism in the West Bank in 2019 continued a multiyear trend of declining in number of incidents and casualties, due to efforts of Israeli security forces, security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, and a disinterest by the general Palestinian population in the West Bank to “take a significant part in terrorism and protest activities against Israel.”

In 2018, 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 authorities announced in January they had arrested five suspected perpetrators, yeshiva students from the nearby settlement of Rehelim. Authorities arraigned one of those arrested in May on a charge of manslaughter; at year’s end, he remained under house arrest awaiting trial. The other four were

conditionally released in January due to a lack of evidence. At year's end, the case remained under investigation.

PA President Abbas granted legal recognition on October 30 to the Council of Local Evangelical Churches, a coalition of evangelical churches operating in the West Bank and Gaza. The presidential decree authorized the council to issue civil documents for members such as birth and marriage certificates. The decree also allowed the churches to have legal rights, open financial accounts, and possess property rights. It permits members of the churches to address family matters, such as divorce and child custody, in the Christian religious court system most affiliated with them.

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 PA recognized Easter as a public holiday for government employees, after a public outcry in 2018 when it was only given as a holiday to Christian public servants.

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. During the year, Palestinian authorities established a procedure for registering future marriages involving Jehovah's Witnesses that would also enable couples to register their children and protect the children's inheritance rights.

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 begun by Israel during the Second Intifada (2000-

2005) 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.

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, and 23 percent in 1998.

President Abbas said on Palestinian media on March 24, "We want to achieve our right and our state peacefully... We will not choose a path other than negotiations to achieve our right." According to Palestinian media, however, based on a translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute, Abbas said on August 10 while visiting a refugee camp, "Jerusalem is ours whether they like it or not... We shall enter Jerusalem – millions of fighters! We shall enter it! All of us, the entire Palestinian people, the entire Arab nation, the Islamic nation, and the Christian nation... They shall all enter Jerusalem... We shall remain, and nobody can remove us from our homeland. If they want, they themselves can leave. Those who are foreign to this land have no right to it. So we say to them: Every stone you [used] to build on our land and every house you have built on our land is bound to be destroyed, Allah willing... No matter how many houses and how many settlements they declare that they [plan to build] here and there – they shall all be destroyed, Allah willing."

Palestinian leaders, media and social media regularly used the word “martyr” to refer to individuals killed during confrontations with security forces. 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 April 27, Omar Yunis allegedly attempted to carry out a stabbing attack on an IDF unit, whereupon Israeli soldiers shot and killed him. Fatah published on its official Facebook page a poster of Yunis referring to him as a “martyr.” 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 Salfit in March praised Omar Abu Laila – suspected of carrying out a terrorist attack in which two Israelis were killed – following his killing by Israeli security forces, and referred to him as a “martyr.” The Fatah Bethlehem Chapter in January commemorated the 1979 “martyrdom” of Ali Hassan Salameh, who was connected with the attack against the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics among other violent attacks.

The PA and the PLO continued to provide “martyr payments” to the families of Palestinians killed during terrorist acts, as well as stipends to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including 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. PA President Abbas reiterated support would continue for the families of the prisoners and “martyrs.” In accordance with the July 2018 Israeli Deduction Law – which states that Israel must deduct that portion of the revenues it collects for the PA equal to the expenditures by the PA in the previous year for payments to families of people killed, injured, or imprisoned for attacks on Israel – Israel withheld the monthly sum equal to what the PA paid to them (approximately 41.8 million shekels –\$12.1 million) from its monthly clearance transfers to the PA. The PA subsequently in March refused to accept any of the remaining approximately 496 million shekels (\$144 million) in tax revenues from Israel, which altogether represented approximately 65 percent of the PA’s budget. As the PA’s fiscal situation worsened, Israel and the PA eventually reached an agreement on October 5 for the PA to accept most of the taxes Israel collected on the PA’s behalf. In December Defense Minister Naftali Bennett announced that the Israeli government would begin withholding an additional 149 million shekels (\$43.1 million) annually from PA revenues for payments to families of Palestinians who were wounded or died while committing terrorist acts or in connection with terrorism. 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 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.

Israeli officials demolished a mosque under construction near Hebron in area C September 2 for lacking an Israeli building permit, according to UNOCHA and media reports. UNOCHA estimated the mosque would have served approximately 300 community members.

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, due to the threat of tensions and violence between Palestinian protestors and the visitors. The Kohlet Policy Forum, an Israeli NGO, assessed that the obligation to provide free access to Jewish religious sites in PA-administered areas of the West Bank lay entirely with the PA under Oslo II and that the PA had failed to fulfill that obligation.

An Israeli NGO reported in August that Israeli authorities and settlers prohibited access by Palestinians to several mosques in the 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.

The government 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. Some Israelis chose to privately visit Area A, without repercussions. 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 under Palestinian control, 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 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, which generally took place at night to limit the chance of confrontations with Palestinians who opposed the visit.

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). In June and October unknown individuals threw explosive devices at the shrine from the West Bank.

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 administrative responsibility for the site, although Israel retained full security responsibility for it. Some Muslim leaders publicly rejected a Jewish connection to the site. The IDF again restricted Muslim access 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, manned by soldiers and metal detectors, while granting Jews access via several entry points that lacked security screening. 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 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 in response to requests of Jewish worshippers at the site.

In his September UNGA remarks, President Abbas said “We... reaffirm our condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and sources.” However, he concluded, “We salute our honorable martyrs, courageous prisoners, and wounded heroes, and salute their resilient families, whom we will not [abandon].” He also said Israel is “[attempting] to violate the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Church of the Holy Sepulchre,” and to deny worshipers access to the holy sites. Following an August 15 terrorist attack near the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Israeli authorities briefly closed the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif while conducting a security search. On August 19, President Abbas’s Advisor on Religious Affairs and Chief Justice of the Sharia Court Mahmoud al-Habbash said the closure was a “declaration of war against Islam and the Muslims,” and he called on Muslims to “religiously defend” the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, the PA official news agency Wafa reported.

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. Anti-Semitic material continued to appear in official PA media. On October 7, a host on the program *The Cause in the Egyptian Halls* broadcast on PA TV, summarized a commentator’s remarks by saying that Israeli authorities were creating “a forgery of history” in respect to Jewish history in Jerusalem. On October 6, a guest speaker on another program on PA television, *Palestine This Morning*, said the children of Israel [Jewish people] were historically never present in the “land of Palestine.” On July 7, official Palestinian television aired a speech by Jordanian Ibrahim Badran describing Israel as “a barbaric, racist state that has outdone what Hitler did.” In March, the PA official daily newspaper *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* published an opinion piece which made anti-Semitic remarks regarding prominent U.S. Jewish officials, according to the National Council of Young Israel. On February 10, on social media, Fatah Central Committee Secretary Jibril Rajoub protested a conference on peace and security in the Middle East by describing the meeting as part of “a plan to carry out a ‘holocaust’ against this [Palestinian] cause.” Media reported that Fatah preemptively restricted access to its official Facebook page in September so it could only be viewed by those expressly invited due to concerns that the site would be shut down because of its content.

Both Palestinians and Israelis evoked ethnoreligious language to deny the historical self-identity of the other community in the region. On July 7, Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on social media, “The Palestinians’ connection to the Land of Israel is nothing compared to the 4,000-year connection the Jewish people have with the land.” On August 26, official PA television broadcast an interview with the PA minister of culture in which he said the State of Israel “came out of nowhere, without a history and without geography.”

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 the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se). The European Union announced in March that it would conduct a review of new Palestinian school textbooks following a study that found them to be more radical than in the past and containing incitement and rejection of peace with Israel. IMPACT-se reported in September that PA schoolbooks for the 2019-2020 school year contained material glorifying terror and promoting violence, with a “systematic insertion of violence, martyrdom, and jihad across all grades and subjects.” The Jerusalem-based Center for Near East Policy Research reported in August that PA teacher guides published in 2016-18 delegitimize Jews’ presence, and demonize Jews as “aggressive, barbarous, full of hate, and bent on extermination,” and “enemies of Islam since its early days.”

Both the European Union and Norwegian parliaments called for funding restrictions to the Palestinian Ministry of Education if incitement and anti-Semitism were not removed from Palestinian textbooks. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released a report in August that expressed concern for the first time about “hate speech in certain media outlets, especially those controlled by Hamas, social media, public officials’ statements, and school curricula and textbooks, which fuels hatred and may incite violence, particularly hate speech against Israelis, which at times also fuels anti-Semitism.”

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 the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), a government entity, 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 on ‘non-Jewish’ periods in the history of the land of Israel, [including] the Prehistoric, Early Bronze, Byzantine, Muslim, Mamluk and Ottoman periods.” Some NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in the West Bank continued to state 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. In July an Israeli court ruled that administration of the Tel Shiloh site could remain under the control of the Benjamin district council, with involvement of the Israeli Civil Administration in the site's management, instead of direct administration by Israeli authorities. Israeli NGOs Emek Sheveh and Yesh Din had filed the case, arguing that the site under the administration of the district council focused on its Jewish heritage and did not give sufficient weight to its Christian and Islamic history. Tel Shiloh is identified with the site of ancient Jewish worship before the construction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The ruins of a Byzantine Church are also located there, and sources stated that it also has significance for some Messianic beliefs in Christianity, as well as some Islamic attachment.

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 Israeli could face delays. 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. Israeli authorities issued permits for some Christians 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, including bishops and other senior clergy seeking to visit congregations or ministries under their pastoral authority, from entering Gaza. Israel facilitated visits by clergy, including bishops from non-Arab countries, to Gaza on multiple occasions.

At year's end, Christians held minister-level positions in three PA ministries (Finance and Health, plus Tourism, traditionally occupied by a Christian) 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 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 disavowed, as not representing Hamas's official position, the statements by its politburo member Fathi Hammad, who called for killing Jews while addressing protests on the Gaza periphery on July 12. Some Hamas leaders condemned the attack on a synagogue in Halle, Germany.

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 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. The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) 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 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.

On July 12, Fathi Hammad, a senior Hamas official, urged Palestinians abroad to kill Jews in Israel and beyond, “All of you seven million Palestinians abroad, enough of the warming up. You have Jews everywhere and we must attack every Jew on the globe by way of slaughter and killing, if God permits.” A Hamas official in Gaza said Hammad’s views did not represent the official position of Hamas.

Salafi Muslims in Gaza harassed a musical band with a female singer, eventually leading the band to seek refuge abroad.

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 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 March 18, a Palestinian shot and killed Rabbi Achiad Ettinger and an Israeli soldier and wounded another soldier near the West Bank settlement of Ariel. On August 8, an Israeli soldier in a religious studies program was abducted and killed while returning to his yeshiva in the West Bank settlement of Ofra. On August 23, media reported that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine detonated an explosive device at a popular tourist site near the West Bank settlement of Dolev, injuring a rabbi and his son and killing his daughter.

Palestinians at times violently protested when Jewish groups visited holy sites where freedom of access was guaranteed by the PA in the Oslo Accords 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, or evacuate Jewish worshippers. On two occasions, Israeli security forces prevented attempts to detonate explosive devices when Jewish worshippers visited the Tomb. In June and October, unknown persons also threw explosive devices at Rachel's Tomb from the West Bank. Media reported in October that vandals spray painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans on the tomb of Joshua Bin-Nun and Kalev Ben Yefune, in the Palestinian village of Kafel Harath (located in Area A), prior to an IDF coordinated visit by Jewish worshippers.

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, as necessary for the defense of Judaism. 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 pro-settlement Israelis against Palestinians.

Media reported that NGO Tag Meir, which monitors hate crimes, expressed concern in April after Rabbi Shlomo Avenir of Beit El in the West Bank wrote on a website that burning of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was "a divine punishment against Christianity," and that there was a religious duty ("mitzvah") for Jews to burn Christian churches in Israel, but that it was not worth doing as they would simply be rebuilt.

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.

According to the NGO Middle East Media Research Institute, Maryam Abu Moussa, identified as a "Gaza Return Activist," told a foreign television network that Palestinians would soon bury the Jews in "the ditches of Hitler." She added that when Hitler ordered the Russians to dig ditches to bury the Jews in World War II, they refused to do so because they were "humane." Conversely, she said when Hitler ordered the Jews to bury the Russians in ditches, "they did so immediately."

The Jehovah's Witnesses stated that burial of its members remained challenging since most cemeteries belong to churches. The 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.

According to polling information released in November by Arab Barometer, an international research consortium, "relatively few Palestinians favor a role for religion in politics." Approximately three quarters (73 percent) of Palestinians (74 percent in the West Bank and 73 percent in Gaza) said they agreed or strongly agreed that religious leaders should not interfere in voters decisions in elections." The survey stated, "A considerable proportion (53 percent overall; 49 percent in the West Bank and 59 percent in Gaza) think that laws in Palestine should be either mostly or entirely based on the sharia." Most Palestinians (45 percent in the West Bank and 51 percent in Gaza) said they believed that the most essential aspect of a government that applies sharia is a system without corruption, and 32 percent of respondents in both the West Bank and Gaza said that a government implementing sharia is one that provides basic services such as health facilities, schools, garbage collection, and road maintenance. Only 8 percent in the West Bank and 14 percent in Gaza said that the most essential aspect of the sharia was a government that used physical punishments to make sure people obey the law, and 3 percent in the West Bank and 2 percent in Gaza said that government employing sharia should restrict women's roles in public. The report concluded: "These results suggest that people conceptualize sharia based on instrumentalist characteristics, improving public services and preventing misappropriation of sources."

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. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and other senior officials advocated with Israeli authorities to issue permits for Gazans to travel to Jerusalem and the West Bank for religious reasons.

U.S. government representatives, including the Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development, 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.