

WEST BANK AND GAZA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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

Executive Summary

West Bank and Gaza Strip residents are subject to the jurisdiction of separate authorities. Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to Jordanian and British Mandate statutes in effect before 1967, military ordinances enacted by the Israeli military commander in the West Bank, and, in the relevant areas, Palestinian Authority (PA) law. Israelis living in the West Bank are subject to Israeli laws, Israeli legislation, and military ordinances enacted by military commanders. The PA exercises varying degrees of authority in those areas of the West Bank where it has some control. Although PA laws apply in the Gaza Strip, the PA does not exercise authority there, and Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, holds de facto control over security and other governmental institutions. 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. The Basic Law 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.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (UNOCHA), 237 Palestinians and 30 Israelis were killed in conflict-related violence prior to October 7, including

199 Palestinians and 26 Israelis killed in the West Bank, 34 Palestinians killed in Gaza, and four Palestinians and four Israelis killed inside the Green Line (the demarcation line set out in the 1949 Armistice). UNOCHA also reported that between January 1 and October 6, 9,378 Palestinians were injured by Israeli security forces and Israeli settlers. According to the government of Israel, prior to the October 7 terrorist attacks on Israel, 23 Israelis were killed and 134 Israelis were injured in terror attacks in the West Bank, Jerusalem, inside the Green Line, and in attacks launched from Gaza.

On October 7, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other Palestinian terrorists launched a large-scale attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing an estimated 1,200 individuals, injuring more than 5,400, and abducting 253 hostages. Israel responded with a sustained, wide-scale military operation in Gaza. According to the United Nations, which relied on information from the Hamas-led Ministry of Health in Gaza, Israel's military operation had killed more than 21,000 Palestinians (approximately 1 percent of Gaza's population) and injured more than 56,000 (more than 2 percent of Gaza's population) by year's end, displaced the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza, and resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis with estimates of 50-70 percent of buildings destroyed or damaged. By the end of December, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported a total of 22,404 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza during the year, including 22,141 since October 7. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international media reported that during fighting between Israel and Hamas that followed the October 7 Hamas terror attack on Israel, Israel's military campaign killed Muslims and Christians sheltering in mosques and churches in Gaza and damaged dozens of religious sites.

During the year, the Israeli government confiscated land and conducted hundreds of demolitions of Palestinian property in the West Bank for lack of Israeli-issued permits, construction in areas designated for Israeli military use, or location of structures within the barrier's buffer zone, and in East Jerusalem. The United Nations reported that approximately 4,000 Palestinians were displaced during the year in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, due to policies and practices implemented by Israeli authorities

or Israeli settlers, which marked the highest ever recorded by the United Nations since it began systemically recording displacements in 2009. Israeli authorities also continued a policy of demolishing the homes of Palestinians who committed terror attacks. The Israeli Supreme Court accepted the state's argument that this was a deterrent measure but some Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights NGOs and the United Nations said the demolitions were a form of "collective punishment" that violated international law.

The Israeli government continued to allow controlled access to religious sites in Jerusalem, including the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount (the site containing the foundation of the First and Second Jewish temples and where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque are located). Israeli authorities often barred access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site to specific individuals at different points during the year, particularly to male Muslims under a certain age. On April 1, Israeli police shot and killed a Palestinian at the site during Ramadan. Israeli Security Forces (ISF) stated the man assaulted an officer, but Palestinians at the site said the Palestinian was killed after trying to intervene when Israeli police and border guards assaulted a Palestinian woman. On April 2, Israeli police detained a Jewish activist suspected of preparing to perform a ritual animal sacrifice for Passover, which coincided with Ramadan. According to multiple media reports, Israeli police forcibly entered the al-Aqsa Mosque twice during Ramadan, on April 4 and April 5, injuring approximately 56 Palestinians and arresting more than 350 individuals. Israeli officials said they entered the al-Aqsa compound to apprehend hundreds of Palestinian "agitators" who had barricaded themselves inside the mosque, reportedly armed with fireworks and stones; some individuals in the compound said they wanted to prevent religious Jews from carrying out animal sacrifices at the site during Passover. After Hamas's October 7 attacks, which the group called "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," the Israeli National Police (INP) restricted the entry of Muslim worshipers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for weekly Friday prayers in response to Hamas's calls for mass Palestinian rallies in East Jerusalem.

Waqf officials expressed concerns regarding their lack of control of access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site and objected to non-Muslims wearing religious symbols or religious clothing and praying or performing religious acts on the site contrary to the historic status quo. During the year, there were multiple instances of Jews performing religious acts at the site, contrary to the historic status quo, although police arrested multiple Jewish individuals suspected of planning to conduct ritual animal sacrifices there. Israeli authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform adjacent to the Western Wall for non-Orthodox “egalitarian” (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. In February, the Israeli Supreme Court heard petitions demanding the government implement the 2016 agreement between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish communities to establish a permanent egalitarian plaza but did not issue a ruling by year’s end. At the main Western Wall Plaza, authorities continued to prohibit mixed-gender Jewish prayer services, over the objections of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements. In July, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ruled Western Wall security checks should be conducted fairly and impartially and that security guards should not search for Torah scrolls.

During the year, there were violent protests by Palestinians when Jewish groups accompanied by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) visited holy sites in areas in the West Bank under Palestinian control, particularly Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. The IDF responded to violent demonstrators with gunfire, in certain cases killing Palestinians. In August, masked Palestinians threw rocks, glass bottles, and Molotov cocktails at Jews praying at Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem. On May 18, thousands of Jewish nationalists, some chanting anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slogans and vandalizing Palestinian property, marched through Jerusalem and the Old City’s Muslim Quarter under Israeli police protection during “Jerusalem Day” celebrations, commemorating Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war. Several members of the Israeli government, including National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, joined the procession.

The IDF provided special security escorts for Jews, with little to no consultation with Palestinian authorities, to visit religious sites in Area A

(those parts of the West Bank for which the PA has formal responsibility for civil administration and security under the Oslo II Agreement) under Palestinian control, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus and the Shalom al Israel Synagogue in Jericho. It continued periodically to limit Muslim access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, a site of significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In statements to local media, Palestinian leaders continued to oppose the IDF's control of access, citing Oslo Accords-era agreements that gave Israel and the PA shared responsibilities for the site.

Christian heads of churches in Jerusalem continued to raise public concerns that the Christian presence and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem were under threat. The statements identified pressure points on Christians that included violence and harassment against clergy and worshipers by individuals that they described as violent Jewish extremists; vandalism and desecration of church properties; attempts by settler organizations to obtain strategic property in and around the Christian quarter of the Old City and the Mount of Olives; and restrictions on residency permits for Christian Palestinians as part of Israel's Citizenship and Entry Law.

Religious groups the PA did not recognize, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, faced a continued PA ban on proselytizing 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. Prior to the October 7 Hamas terror attack, Israeli authorities issued limited permits for some Christians to exit Gaza to attend religious services in Jerusalem or the West Bank and for Muslims from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for Ramadan. NGOs said restrictions on freedom of movement of Palestinians continued to infringe upon religious freedom. Both Palestinian and Israeli officials evoked ethnoreligious language to deny the historical self-identity of the other community in the region or to emphasize an exclusive claim to the land.

The "UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East" (UNRWA) used the PA curriculum in Gaza schools. In March, an

international (NGO Watch) and an Israeli NGO (IMPACT-se) issued a joint report saying the curricula in UNRWA schools contained material that incited “hatred, antisemitism, and terrorism,” and that UNRWA hired educators and staff who posted content on social media glorifying jihad and martyrdom, praising Hamas and Adolf Hitler, and perpetuating negative stereotypes of Jews and antisemitic conspiracy theories. The NGOs said such posts increased following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack. UNRWA stated it investigates all allegations against staff and takes warranted disciplinary measures, up to and including termination. Israeli government officials stated the PA curriculum contained antisemitic and inciteful content and restricted its use in Jerusalem classrooms. Palestinians and PA officials stated the Israeli-edited version of the PA curriculum used in East Jerusalem schools whitewashed or removed references to Palestinian identity, history, and national aspirations.

Hamas exercised de facto control of Gaza during most of the year. Hamas as well as the U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization PIJ and other violent extremist groups disseminated antisemitic materials and advocated violence through traditional and social media channels as well as during rallies and other events. In public schools at the primary, secondary, and university levels, Hamas reportedly interfered in teaching methodologies or curriculum it deemed to violate Islamic identity, religion, or “traditions,” as defined by Hamas. During the year, Hamas 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. Activists also stated Hamas’s interpretation of Islam was discriminatory toward women.

During the year, there were reports of violent incidents between civilians that perpetrators justified, at least partially, on religious grounds, including individual killings, physical attacks and verbal harassment of worshippers and clergy of all faith traditions, and vandalism of religious sites in Jerusalem and the West Bank. One Israeli NGO said that in most instances, the government failed to take legal action against Israeli settler violence committed against Palestinians. Individuals experienced social pressure to

stay within one's religious group. Palestinian media contained antisemitic content.

On October 9, the U.S. government joined other nations in a statement condemning Hamas for the October 7 terror attack. In October 18 remarks during a visit to Israel, the President said, "October 7th ... a sacred Jewish holiday, became the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. It has brought to the surface painful memories and scars left by a millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people. The world watched then, it knew, and the world did nothing. We will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever." Senior U.S. officials, in meetings with PA representatives both before and after the October 7 attacks, raised concerns about PA officials' statements or social media postings that promoted antisemitism or encouraged or glorified violence. U.S. officials issued public statements aimed to combat antisemitism and promote nonviolence more broadly in Palestinian society throughout the year. U.S. government officials repeatedly and publicly pointed out that Palestinian officials and party leaders did not consistently condemn individual terrorist attacks nor speak out publicly against members of their institutions who advocated violence.

U.S. officials repeatedly underscored to the Israeli government the need to hold accountable violent extremist settlers and terrorists who attacked Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem. U.S. embassy officials met with political and civil society leaders to discuss human rights and a broad range of issues affecting Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, including promotion of 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total Palestinian population at 3 million in the West Bank and 2.1 million in the Gaza Strip (midyear 2023).

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, and Christian communities.

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reported an estimated 465,400 Israeli Jews resided in Israeli settlements in the West Bank in 2021. Israeli statistics do not consider settlements in East Jerusalem as part of the West Bank. Palestinian officials, who do consider settlements in the area of Jerusalem as part of the West Bank, count 751,000 Jewish residents in the West Bank.

According to various estimates, 50,000 Palestinian 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. Local Christian leaders state Palestinian Christian emigration has continued at rapid rates. The majority of Palestinian Christians are Greek Orthodox; other Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Melkite Greek Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Coptic Orthodox, Maronites, Ethiopian Orthodox, Syrian Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, other Protestant denominations, including evangelical Christians, and small numbers of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). According to media reports, an estimated 2,100 Jehovah's Witnesses live either in Israel or the Palestinian territories. Within the West Bank, Christians are concentrated primarily in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Nablus governates; smaller communities exist elsewhere. Approximately 450 Samaritans (practitioners of Samaritanism, which is related to but distinct from Judaism) reside in the West Bank, primarily on Mount Gerizim in the Nablus area.

The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics estimates that as of 2021, 585,000 Jews, 354,000 Muslims, and 12,850 Christians live in Jerusalem, accounting for most the city's total population of 951,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Residents of the West Bank and Gaza are subject to the jurisdiction of different authorities. Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to Jordanian and British Mandate statutes in effect before 1967, military ordinances enacted by the Israeli military commander in the West Bank, and, in relevant areas, PA law. Israeli authorities apply separate regimes to prosecution in the West Bank based on the defendant's nationality. Israeli authorities try Israelis living in West Bank settlements under Israeli civilian law at the nearest Israeli court inside the Green Line established following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Israeli authorities try Palestinians in the West Bank under military law in Israeli military courts. In 2007, Hamas staged a violent takeover of PA government installations in the Gaza Strip and has since maintained de facto authority in the territory, although the area nominally falls under PA jurisdiction.

West Bank Palestinian population centers mostly fall into Areas A and B, as defined by the Oslo-era agreements, with most Palestinian agricultural lands and rural communities located in Area C. Under the Oslo II Accords, the PA has formal responsibility for civil administration and security in Area A, but Israeli security forces frequently conduct security operations there that are not coordinated with or ignore the PA. The PA maintains civil administration in Area B in the West Bank, while Israel maintains security control in this area. PA civil and criminal law applies to Palestinians in Area B. Israel retains full security and administrative control of Area C (which constitutes approximately 60 percent of the West Bank) and has designated more than half Area C land as either closed military zones or settlement zoning areas. The city of Hebron in the West Bank – an important city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, 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 protection.

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

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

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

The Jordanian Waqf in Jerusalem administers the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supports maintenance and salary of the Waqf staff in Jerusalem.

Israeli military law allows the indefinite administrative detention without charge or trial of Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza detained or imprisoned by Israel.

Israeli law prohibits institutions that receive Israeli government funding from engaging in commemoration of the *Nakba* (“catastrophe”), an Arabic term used to refer to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence. The law forbids activities that include rejection of the existence of Israel as a “Jewish and

democratic state” or commemorating “Israel’s Independence Day or the day on which the State was established as a day of mourning.”

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 publishing writings, pictures, drawings, or symbols that insult 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 a principal source of legislation. It contains language adopted from the pre-1967 criminal code in effect under 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, which did not occur. The President of the PA promulgates executive decrees that have legal authority.

There is no specified process for religious groups to gain official PA recognition in the West Bank; each religious group must negotiate its own bilateral relationship with the PA. The PA observes 19th-century status quo arrangements reached with Ottoman authorities that recognize the presence and rights of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, and Armenian Catholic Churches. The PA also observes subsequent agreements that recognize the rights of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Council of Local Evangelical Churches (a coalition of evangelical Protestant Churches present in the West Bank and Gaza).

The PA recognizes the authority of these religious groups to establish ecclesiastical courts to adjudicate personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, dowry, child support, inheritance, and some property matters for

members of their religious communities. The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs is administratively responsible for family law issues. For Muslims, sharia determines personal status law. The Jordanian Waqf administers Islamic courts in Jerusalem for Muslim residents, with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Jordan having appellate authority. By law, members of one religious group may submit a personal status dispute to a different religious group for adjudication if the disputants agree it is appropriate to do so.

The PA maintains some unwritten understandings with churches that are not officially recognized, based on the basic principles of the status quo agreements, including with the Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, and some evangelical Christian churches, which allow these churches to 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. The 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.

Although Israel has no constitution, a series of “Basic Laws” enumerate fundamental rights, which serve as the country’s constitutional foundation. The Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty describes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and references the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, including freedom of conscience, faith, religion, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law, which applies to citizens and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem.

In West Jerusalem, the Israeli government provides separate public schools with an Israeli-designed curriculum for Jewish and Arab/Palestinian children with instruction conducted in Hebrew and Arabic, respectively. For Jewish children, there are separate public schools available for religious and secular families. Individual families may choose a public school system for their children regardless of ethnicity or religious observance. Minors have the right to choose a public secular school instead of a religious school regardless of parental preference. The Israeli Ministry of Education requires all students to receive religious education in schools, including secular and religious schools, whether public or private. Non-Jewish students are required to study Judaism, in addition to their own religion. By law, Israel provides the equivalent of public-school funding to two systems of “recognized but not official” (a form of semiprivate) ultra-Orthodox religious schools affiliated with ultra-Orthodox political parties: the United Torah Judaism-affiliated Independent Education System and the Shas-affiliated Fountain of Torah Education System. Churches in East Jerusalem receive partial government funding to operate “recognized but not official” schools. Palestinian residents in Jerusalem may send their children to one of these church schools, a private school that follows an internationally approved curriculum, or a private school operated by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf (which also includes religious instruction). However, there remain some Israeli-subsidized schools in East Jerusalem as well as some Christian schools that use a version of the PA curriculum modified by the Israeli Ministry of Education. However, the Israeli government was increasingly making efforts to prevent the use of any PA curriculum.

Religious education is mandatory for students in grades one through six in public schools the PA operates as well as in 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 that include religious instruction. Private Islamic schools also operate in the West Bank.

Palestinian law provides that in the defunct Palestinian Legislative Council, six seats be allocated to Christian candidates, who also have the right to contest other seats. There are no seats reserved for members of any other religious group. A 2017 PA 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 representation on these councils and 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 since 2014, older identity cards continue to circulate, listing the holder as either Muslim or Christian.

On March 5, the Knesset reenacted the Israeli Law of Citizenship and Entry through March 2024. The law explicitly prohibits the interior minister from granting citizenship or resident status to non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, including those who are spouses of Israeli residents or citizens. The law allows a quota of 58 cases in which the minister of interior can make a special determination, usually on humanitarian grounds, for family reunification. The figure is based on the total number of approvals of requests in 2018.

There is no Israeli legal requirement regarding personal observance or nonobservance of the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat) from sunset on Fridays until sunset on Saturdays and on Jewish holidays. The law, however, declares in the context of labor rights that Shabbat and Jewish holidays are national days of rest, while permitting non-Jewish workers alternate days of rest. The law criminalizes (with up to one month’s imprisonment) employers who

open their businesses and employ Jews on Shabbat, except those who are self-employed. There are exceptions for essential infrastructure and the hospitality, culture, and recreation industries. The law instructs the Israeli minister of labor and welfare to consider “Israel’s tradition,” among other factors, when deciding whether to approve permits to work on Shabbat. The law prohibits discrimination against workers who refuse, based on their religion and regardless of whether they are religiously observant, to work on their day of rest.

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

Government Practices

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

According to UNOCHA, a total of 237 Palestinians were killed by Israelis between January and October 6, including 199 Palestinians killed in the West Bank, 34 killed in Gaza, and four killed inside the Green Line, almost exclusively by the IDF during counterterrorism operations. UNOCHA also reported that during that period, 9,378 Palestinians were injured by Israeli security forces and Israeli settlers. According to the Israeli government, prior to the October 7 attacks, 23 Israelis were killed and 134 Israelis were injured in terror attacks from Gaza, the West Bank, in Jerusalem, and inside the Green Line. On October 7, Hamas, PIJ, and other Palestinian terrorists launched a large-scale attack on Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing an estimated 1,200 individuals, injuring more than 5,400, and abducting approximately 253 hostages.

The United Nations reported that since it began recording casualties in 2005, 2023 was already the deadliest year on record for Palestinians in the West Bank before October 7, and there was additionally a significant intensification of killings and other incidents of violence in the West Bank following October 7. Palestinian fatalities rose to more than four per day as the IDF increased its military operations in the West Bank dramatically. Israeli security forces were responsible for 97 percent of Palestinian fatalities after October 7. According to UNOCHA, Israeli forces killed 494 Palestinians and settlers killed 15 Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem during the year. Palestinian casualties included at least 121 children. According to the United Nations, which relied on information from the Hamas-led Ministry of Health in Gaza, Israel's sustained, wide-scale military operation in Gaza following October 7, killed more than 21,000 Palestinians (approximately 1 percent of Gaza's population) and injured more than 56,000 (more than 2 percent of Gaza's population) by the end of the year, displaced the vast majority of Palestinians in Gaza, and resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis with estimates of 50-70 percent of buildings destroyed or damaged. By the end of December, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported a total of 22,404 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza during the year, including 22,141 since October 7.

National Public Radio (NPR) reported that on April 1, Israeli police shot and killed Palestinian Mohammed al-Osaibi at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during Ramadan. Police said al-Osaibi tried to grab an officer's gun at the entrance to the site. According to international media, Palestinian worshipers at the site said police shot the man after he tried to prevent police and border guards from assaulting a Palestinian woman at the site. CNN reported that while initially police said there was no security camera coverage, after CNN provided evidence that security cameras were pointed at the scene, Israeli authorities reported that "some footage might not be shared with media because it's still closed for investigation." The Associated Press (AP) reported on April 14 that the Israeli state attorney's office said police acted "lawfully in self-defense" and closed the case.

Major media outlets reported ISF killed 10 Palestinians and injured more than 20 during a January 26 raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank to detain a senior PIJ militant. The Palestinian President's Office condemned the incident as "a massacre" and PA President Mahmoud Abbas called for three days of mourning following the Jenin operation.

In a December raid on Jenin, the IDF said it killed 10 Palestinians and arrested 50 others, while seizing weapons and explosive devices, and discovering 10 tunnel shafts and seven labs used to manufacture explosives. The Palestinian news agency Wafa reported the IDF killed 12 Palestinians and wounded dozens more. The IDF suspended several soldiers who appeared on a video posted to social media singing Hannukah songs and a Jewish prayer, *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear, O Israel"), from a mosque, and a military spokesman said the behavior was "completely contrary to IDF values," adding that "the soldiers will be disciplined accordingly." Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef wrote the IDF's senior chaplain asking him "to explain to soldiers that they must not harm the religious sentiments of the adherents of other faiths." In a statement, Palestinian presidency spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeinah said, "Israeli occupation forces' desecration of a mosque in the Jenin camp is shameful and condemnable behavior." He warned against "dragging the region into a religious war."

UNOCHA and numerous international and Israeli human rights NGOs reported IDF soldiers either directly participated in, aided, or idly witnessed violent settler acts. According to UNOCHA, IDF soldiers were involved in or present at approximately 50 percent of incidents of settler violence. International and Israeli NGOs reported certain settler attacks involved settlers who joined an IDF reserve unit or donned a military uniform, which the NGOs said had blurred the line between the IDF and violent settler groups.

Reports from various NGOs highlighted concern regarding the Israeli government's approach to investigating Palestinian fatalities and holding IDF members accountable. In a joint report published in June, Yesh-Din, Ir-Amim, HaMoked, Combatants for Peace, and other Israeli NGOs said 79

percent of complaints against Israeli soldiers for alleged harm to Palestinians went uninvestigated. Similar concerns were raised regarding Israel's police force, including the border police. The NGOs reported complaints filed to the Department of Internal Police Investigations resulted "almost exclusively in dismissal and further shielding of violent border police officers" and that allegations of border police harassment against Palestinians added to the accountability gap. When investigations did occur, the NGOs reported, only 21.4 percent advanced, and only 0.87 percent led to indictments. They stated that any convictions usually resulted in lenient sentences.

On November 7, NGO Heritage for Peace released a report documenting the damage or destruction of more than 100 religious and cultural sites in Gaza during the first month of Israel's military campaign. According to the BBC, there were 117 religious sites in Gaza damaged or destroyed between October 7 and December 31. Of these, the BBC stated it independently verified through satellite imagery and user-submitted content 74 cases, comprising 72 mosques and two churches. The Hamas-run Health Ministry of Gaza reported 145 mosques in Gaza were completely destroyed and 243 partially destroyed during fighting between Hamas and Israel.

International news outlets reported that on October 19, Israeli missiles struck the 12th century Greek Orthodox Church of St. Porphyrius compound in Gaza City where approximately 500 Muslims and Christians were sheltering, killing 18 and injuring several others. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople condemned the airstrike. Media reported refugees also sheltered in the Catholic Holy Family Parish and the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Porphyrius I, both in Gaza City. On December 11, Catholic NGO Aid to the Church in Need reported the Holy Family Parish had been damaged by shrapnel from Israeli strikes.

International media outlets reported that on October 22, amid rising violence in the West Bank, Israeli airstrikes hit a compound beneath the al-Ansar Mosque in the Jenin refugee camp that the Israeli military said Hamas and PIJ terrorists were using to organize "an imminent terror attack."

Medics told Reuters at least one person was killed. On December 9, NPR reported Israeli airstrikes had largely destroyed the Omari Mosque, the oldest mosque in Gaza City.

On October 31, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued a statement condemning Israel's bombing of the Arab Orthodox Cultural Center during airstrikes on Gaza on October 30. According to church officials, Israeli authorities called the director of the center instructing him to immediately evacuate the center, causing hundreds of persons who were sheltering to leave.

On November 4, the Rosary Sisters in Gaza said Israeli airstrikes severely damaged their school, which had been evacuated beforehand. The Catholic school served 1,250 Christian and Muslim students and was one of the largest educational institutions in Gaza.

On December 16, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued a statement saying IDF snipers shot and killed two civilians, Nahida Khalil Anton and Samar Kalmal Anton, as they walked to the convent used by the Missionaries of Charity, the order of Catholic nuns founded by Mother Teresa, on the grounds of the Holy Family Parish. Independent Catholic News (ICN) reported seven others sustained injuries while trying to protect those inside the church compound. According to ICN, earlier that morning, an IDF tank fired on the convent, damaging the building and displacing its inhabitants. On December 17, Pope Francis condemned the killings and called for an end to hostilities; the IDF issued a statement saying there were "no reports of a hit on the church" and that the IDF "does not target civilians, no matter their religion."

According to a December report by the NGO Euro-Med Monitor, the Israeli military bulldozed and "desecrated at least 11 Muslim cemeteries in the Gaza Strip, including al-Fallujah, Ali bin Marwan, Sheikh Radwan, and al-Shuhada cemeteries, in addition to the St. Porphyrius Church Cemetery in Gaza City, destroying dozens of graves and creating large holes in these cemeteries. The NGO said the remains of some dead bodies were scattered

or disappeared. Euro-Med Monitor said the Israeli military bulldozed the Sheikh Shaaban Cemetery in Gaza City on December 17-20, and the Beit Hanoun Cemetery in northern Gaza on December 25.

The news website Times of Israel reported that on January 25, Israeli police demolished the East Jerusalem family home of Udai Tamimi. In 2022, Tamimi killed Israeli officer Noa Lazar and wounded four others during shooting attacks at checkpoints to Shuafat refugee camp and the Ma'ale Adumim settlement before guards shot and killed him. The demolition displaced five family members, including one child. Jerusalem District Police Commander Doron Turgeman said in a statement, "This is an important activity to raise awareness, be a deterrent, and is moral. Every terrorist should know that the consequences of carrying out an attack and murdering civilians or members of the security forces will go beyond the effort to neutralize them." The Israeli Supreme Court accepted the state's argument that the demolition was for deterrence and not punishment. Some Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights NGOs, however, said "punitive demolitions" were a form of "collective punishment" toward Palestinian family members and "a violation" of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states, "No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed." During protests against the home demolition, Palestinian residents of the Shuafat refugee camp area clashed with police, and police shot and killed a 17-year-old Palestinian who appeared to have a gun, later found to be a toy. Hamas praised the camp residents for their "great sacrifices in their struggle of resisting occupation," and pledged the Israeli aggression would not go unpunished.

The Times of Israel reported that on June 8, the IDF demolished the Ramallah family home of Eslam Froukh, whom authorities charged with carrying out deadly twin bombing attacks in Jerusalem in 2022, killing two and wounding more than 20 Israeli Jews. Israeli security officials reported Froukh was affiliated with ISIS.

According to *Haaretz*, the Jerusalem Municipality expedited the pace of demolishing unauthorized Palestinian construction in East Jerusalem

following October 7. From January to September, there were an average of 10 demolitions per month of homes constructed without permits; from October to December the average was 17 per month. *Haaretz* reported authorities demolished 140 homes during the year, a 60 percent increase from 2022. In addition to homes, authorities demolished 84 other structures, including shops and warehouses. *Haaretz* reported Palestinians and human rights organizations said Israel's stringent permitting regulations made obtaining permits to building East Jerusalem "nearly unattainable," forcing Palestinians there to resort to illegal construction.

According to UNOCHA, Israeli authorities displaced approximately 444 Palestinians, including 224 children, in Area C and East Jerusalem since October 7, following the demolition of their homes, which they had constructed illegally due to lack of Israeli-issued permits in those areas. Authorities reportedly conducted punitive demolitions of 19 homes and displaced 95 Palestinians, including 42 children, between October and December, compared with 16 homes demolished and 78 persons displaced between January and September. UNOCHA reported ISF military operations across the West Bank following October 7 destroyed an additional 92 homes, displacing 587 Palestinians, including 257 children.

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

On July 12, the Times of Israel reported Israeli authorities indicted Israeli settler David Oved from Yitzhar settlement for the terrorist offenses of rioting resulting in damage, particular damage, and insulting a religion. Israeli prosecutors accused Oved of breaking into a mosque in the village of Urif and defacing Qurans, and said he acted out of nationalistic religious

motives with the aim of instilling fear or panic in the public. His case was pending at year's end.

On July 6, the Jerusalem District Court acquitted the border police officer who in 2020 shot and killed Iyad Hallak, an unarmed and autistic Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem, of reckless manslaughter. On September 4, the NGO Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel said the State Attorney's Office would not challenge the acquittal. The officer shot and killed Hallak, who was on his way to his special needs school in the Old City, after mistakenly believing the mobile phone Hallak was holding was a weapon and after Hallak did not obey orders to remain still. Police shot repeatedly in his direction, first hitting him in the leg, and then in the chest. The court ruled the officer acted in self-defense and accepted his argument that he believed at the time that he was in danger. Following the acquittal, Border Police Commander Amir Cohen and Israeli Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai praised the decision and approved the officer resuming his duties. According to *Haaretz*, Hallak's family said they were shocked by the acquittal and would pursue other legal action, alleging "there is one justice [system] for Jews and another for the Arabs." More than one hundred demonstrators marched in West Jerusalem protesting the acquittal, with police forcefully breaking up the march and arresting nine after marchers attempted to block traffic. On September 5, Adalah and Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights filed a petition to the Supreme Court on behalf of Hallak's parents against the Jerusalem District Court's decision.

On February 20, Adalah published analysis of the amendment to the citizenship law, passed in February, that allowed the government to revoke the citizenship or residency of individuals convicted of involvement in terrorism. According to Adalah, "It is impossible to overstate the extent to which the new law is intended to violate fundamental rights – specifically those of Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem." Adalah stated the amendment violated international law while allowing Israelis who financially support the convicted killers of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and West Bank Palestinians as well as other Jews convicted of nationalist crimes to go unpunished.

On April 2, Israeli police detained a Jewish activist with the activist group Temple Mount Administration, an activist group whom they suspected of preparing to perform a ritual animal sacrifice for Passover, which coincided with Ramadan. The same day, National Security Minister Ben Gvir publicly called on Jews to visit the Temple Mount holy site for Passover, but to refrain from prohibited ritual sacrifice there.

According to multiple media reports, Israeli police forcibly entered the al-Aqsa Mosque overnight April 4-5 to remove approximately three hundred worshipers who had remained overnight after evening prayers during Ramadan. Police reported dozens of youths had brought fireworks, sticks, and stones with the intent to violate public order at the site and attempted to barricade themselves in the mosque, some saying they wanted to prevent Jews from carrying out animal sacrifices at the site. Reportedly, more than 50 Palestinians and two Israeli police officers were injured, and police arrested more than 350 Palestinians. According to Reporters Sans Frontiers and local media, Israeli police arrested and assaulted two media workers reporting from the al-Aqsa Mosque, Wehbe Makieh, a freelance camera operator reporting for Al Mayadeen TV, and freelance photojournalist Atta Awisat. Palestinian militants in Gaza and in Lebanon fired rocket salvos toward Israel shortly after the police raid, and in various statements blamed “provocations” at the site for the launches.

On April 5, Israeli police entered the al-Aqsa compound again to disperse thousands of worshippers who had gathered in the courtyard for Ramadan prayers. Media outlets reported that footage shared on social media showed Israeli officers striking individuals with batons, and eyewitnesses reported Israeli police smashed doors and windows to enter the mosque and deployed stun grenades and metal-tipped rubber bullets once inside. Israeli police stated its forces entered al-Aqsa after “hundreds of rioters and mosque desecrators barricaded themselves” inside. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society reported at least six Palestinians sustained injuries, two of whom were hospitalized. Police said youth again brought fireworks and rocks to cause disturbances.

On May 18, Reuters reported thousands of Jewish nationalists, some of them chanting “Death to Arabs,” “Mohammed is dead,” “May your village burn,” and other racist and anti-Muslim slogans, marched through Jerusalem and the Old City’s Muslim quarter under Israeli police protection during “Jerusalem Day” celebrations, commemorating Israel’s capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war. During the “Flags Parade,” participants threw objects at nearby journalists, pounded on shop doors in Palestinian neighborhoods, and spray painted and affixed anti-Palestinian slogans to Palestinian property. Several members of the Israeli government, including National Security Minister Ben Gvir, joined the procession. While there were physical altercations between Jews and Palestinians, media reported less violence than in previous years. Police said they arrested two individuals. Some participants carried flags belonging to Lehava (an acronym for “prevention of assimilation in the Holy Land,” which also translates as “flame”), described by press as a radical right-wing Jewish supremacist group. Reuters reported that earlier in the day, hundreds of Jewish pilgrims, including some members of the Knesset (MKs), toured the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex.

Ben Gvir visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on May 21, declaring, “We are in charge here. I am happy to go up to the Temple Mount, the most important place for the Jewish people.” He added, “We are in charge in Jerusalem and in all of the Land of Israel.” The PA and Arab governments denounced the visit, pointing out that it was contrary to the historic status quo.

According to media reports, Palestinians protested both nonviolently and violently, and IDF fired at both violent and unarmed demonstrators, when Jewish groups visited holy sites in areas in the West Bank under Palestinian control, particularly Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. *Haaretz* reported that on October 5, approximately 100 Palestinians sustained injuries by rubber bullets, live fire, and smoke inhalation during clashes with Israeli security during an IDF-facilitated pilgrimage to Joseph’s Tomb. In July, the IDF reported to the Times of Israel that as thousands of Jewish worshipers

visited the site, among them Israeli Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai and Chanmael Dorfman, chief of staff to Israeli National Security Minister Ben Gvir, Palestinians shot weapons, threw explosives, burned tires, and threw stones at the convoy. Israeli forces shot and killed 19-year-old Palestinian Bader al-Masri during the clashes and wounded three other Palestinians.

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 a barrier built during the 2000-2005 Second Intifada, and Palestinians were able to access it only if permitted by Israeli authorities. Residents and citizens of Israel continued to have relatively unimpeded access. Israeli police closed the site to all visitors on Saturdays for the Jewish Sabbath. The *Jerusalem Post* reported on August 11 that masked Palestinians threw rocks, glass bottles, and Molotov cocktails at Jews praying at Rachel's Tomb. Israeli border police detained one suspect, whom they said was a Bethlehem resident.

The Religious Freedom Data Center and the group Protecting Holy Land Christians, an ecumenical campaign led by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Council of Patriarchs, and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, documented 71 attacks against Christian holy sites and clergy in Jerusalem during the year, including six between October and December. The center said data collection was limited due to the ongoing Gaza conflict and reduced visitor flow to Jerusalem. A city official said that as of September 1, police arrested or detained 21 suspects and conducted 16 investigations. On October 4, Israeli police apprehended five Jewish suspects on suspicion of spitting on Christians and churches in the Old City of Jerusalem. In response, the Jerusalem District Commander ordered the establishment of a special investigation team in to address acts of spitting and hate towards Christians in the Old City.

For several years, Israeli officials, including high-ranking politicians and senior officials from law enforcement bodies, have declared an unequivocal zero-tolerance policy toward the phenomenon of "price tag" offenses committed by Israeli settlers against Palestinians. ("Price tag" attacks refer

to violence by Jewish individuals and groups against individuals, particularly Palestinians and Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel, and property with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions taken by the government contrary to the attackers’ interests.) The Nationalistic Motivated Crimes Unit of the INP’s Judea and Samaria Police District was tasked with preventing and investigating ideologically based offenses in the West Bank and with supporting other police districts in the investigation of such crimes. The Israeli government maintained an interagency team overseeing law enforcement efforts in the West Bank related to incitement, “violent uprisings,” and “ideological crimes.”

Some Israeli government officials made public statements against “Israeli extremists’ attacks” on Palestinians and reported efforts to enhance law enforcement in the West Bank, including through task forces, increased funding, and hiring of additional staff members. Other Israeli government officials at times dismissed the seriousness of the violence. According to Reuters, on June 24, Israel’s military, police, and domestic security service chiefs issued a joint statement saying settler attacks on Palestinian villages in the West Bank were “nationalist terrorism” that merited increased countermeasures. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant condemned reports that settlers set fire to at least two homes in Umm Safa near Ramallah. Israel’s Channel 12 reported Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Ben Gvir downplayed settler violence toward Palestinians during a November cabinet meeting, prompting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to state it was a serious issue and to encourage security chiefs to do more to combat it.

On November 14, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by well-known activist Ariel Danino against his administrative detention. According to *Haaretz*, Defense Minister Gallant signed the order putting Danino into detention without trial for four months on October 29. Security sources told the newspaper Danino was being detained for his involvement in violence against Palestinians. Israeli media reported that prior to his detention, Danino threatened on social media to kill Palestinians and called for blowing up al-Aqsa Mosque and blaming it on rockets from Gaza. *Haaretz* reported

Danino lived in the unauthorized outpost of Kumi Ori in the West Bank, near the Yitzhar settlement.

The Israeli NGO Yesh Din stated it had monitored 1,664 investigations into cases of violence committed by Israeli settlers and other civilians against Palestinians in the West Bank between 2005-2023. According to the NGO, the government closed 93.7 percent of these cases without indictment and failed to investigate 81 percent of the closed cases. Yesh Din said only 54 percent of the 107 indictments authorities brought resulted in full or partial convictions, which “proves the Israeli law enforcement system fails in fulfilling its duty to protect Palestinians from Israeli violence.” Yesh Din said it documented 160 cases of “settler violence against Palestinians or [crimes against] their property between January and September.” In 92 cases (57.5 percent), the victims chose not to file a complaint with the police, with 86 such victims saying they mistrusted law enforcement or feared filing a complaint would harm them or result in a permit revocation.

According to the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B’tselem), there were at least 95 instances during the year of settlers attacking Palestinian communities when Israeli forces were present. B’tselem stated that on April 16, soldiers entered the Palestinian town of Kifl Hares, forcing business owners to close their shops. Later that night, hundreds of settlers, accompanied by soldiers, entered the town. Some settlers threw stones at Palestinian homes, damaging windows and balcony railings. Local residents requested protection from the soldiers, but the soldiers responded with tear gas and stun grenades, including against local youths who tried to fend off the settlers. According to B’tselem, on October 12, settlers and soldiers arrived at the family home of ‘Amer al-Mahariq in a-Radhem, cut water pipes and electrical cables, threatened him, and told him he had 24 hours to leave the community. The family left the community the next day.

Haaretz reported that on June 20, two Palestinian gunmen killed four Israelis at a gas station near the West Bank settlement of Eli. An Israeli civilian shot and killed one of the attackers at the scene and the IDF located

and killed the second assailant later that day. Hamas praised the attack but did not take credit, and said the attack was a response to Israeli raids in Jenin and “aggression against the al-Aqsa Mosque.” On June 21, *Haaretz* reported Jewish settlers, some armed, set fire to houses and vehicles in the nearby Palestinian West Bank town of Turmus Ayya. Residents of Turmus Ayya said the settlers had just attended a funeral in Eli for the four shooting victims and that Israeli security forces accompanied them, did nothing to prevent settler violence, and shot live ammunition to repel Palestinians “trying to defend themselves,” killing one Palestinian. Israeli police said Palestinians “rioted” after police and firefighters arrived in the village, and *Haaretz* quoted a senior police official as saying the Palestinian who died was shooting at police. Israeli defense officials said settlers damaged approximately 15 homes by arson and stone throwing and torched approximately 30 cars.

The Jordanian Waqf in Jerusalem continued to administer the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, while the Jordanian Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Holy Places supported maintenance and Waqf staff salaries in Jerusalem. Israeli police continued to assert responsibility for security at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with police officers stationed both inside the site and at entrances. Israeli police conducted routine patrols on the outdoor plaza and inside buildings on the site and regulated pedestrian traffic exiting and entering the site.

The Israeli government continued to allow controlled access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and said freedom of worship at the site was a supreme value. The government expressed continued support for the historic status quo pertaining to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount to allow non-Muslim visitors but prohibit non-Islamic worship on the compound, while stating that Israel respected Jordan’s “special role” at the site, as reflected in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Israeli police continued to maintain exclusive control of the Mughrabi Gate entrance, through which non-Muslims may enter the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, and allowed visitors through the gate during set hours. According to Israeli

police, 289,967 tourists and 23,570 Israelis visited the site between January and August.

The Waqf continued to facilitate approved non-Muslim visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and restrict non-Muslims who visited the site from entering the Dome of the Rock and other buildings dedicated for Islamic worship, including the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Waqf officials repeated previous years' concerns regarding their lack of control of access to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount; they criticized Israeli authorities for implementing age and gender restrictions on Muslim worshippers attempting to access the site at various times throughout the year. In addition to police banning individual Waqf staff members from the site, the Waqf said it had a reduced capacity to administer the site because Israeli authorities refused to grant permits to new staff hired to work there, leaving the Waqf seriously understaffed. The Waqf said Israeli authorities continued to interfere in its administration of the site, including delaying longstanding maintenance and restoration work. Israeli officials and activists stated the Waqf sometimes attempted to conduct repairs without coordinating with Israeli authorities.

Waqf employees remained stationed inside each gate and on the plaza but exercised only limited oversight. The Waqf objected to non-Muslims wearing religious symbols or religious clothing and praying or performing religious acts on the site and to individuals whom Waqf officials perceived to be dressed immodestly or who caused disturbances, but said it lacked authority to remove such persons from the site. Israeli police sometimes acted upon these objections. Waqf officials stated Israeli police did not coordinate with the Waqf on decisions regarding entry and barring of Muslim and non-Muslim visitors to the site.

Human rights and civil society organizations said Israeli authorities banned some Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, and Arab/Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Human rights and civil society organizations repeated

concerns expressed by Waqf officials that Israeli authorities at times restricted some Muslims from entering the site based on gender, age, and place of residency. Waqf officials reported multiple times that Israeli police prohibited entry of male Muslim worshipers under the age of 50 during Ramadan and after October 7. Since 2017, Israeli authorities did not issue permits for Gazans to visit the site during Islamic holidays. Muslims who were Israeli citizens, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, or foreigners already present in Israel did not need permits to visit the site. Palestinian civil society organizations said that, in a practice that began in 2020, police continued to check the identity cards of individuals entering the Old City to visit the site for Friday prayers and would bar from entry those with West Bank identity cards and return them to the West Bank.

On April 12, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that, keeping with past precedent, non-Muslim visitors would not be allowed to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount until the end of Ramadan on April 21. In early April, Israeli police suspended non-Muslim access during the final 10 days of Ramadan, as they had in previous years, and closed the site to non-Muslim visitors during the afternoon of the first 20 days of the holiday. Israel National Security Minister Ben Gvir publicly criticized the decision, which Netanyahu said the security establishment “unanimously” supported.

On March 30, the Times of Israel reported the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced women of all ages, children up to the age of 12, and men older than 55 from the West Bank would be allowed to enter the Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount for Friday prayers during Ramadan without permits. COGAT announced it would allow an unspecified number of Palestinian women above age 50 and men above age 55 from Gaza to visit Jerusalem between Sundays and Thursdays during Ramadan. It would also approve visits by West Bank Palestinians to family members in Israel and foreigners to the West Bank, subject to security approval.

Israeli authorities also barred specific named individuals from the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site, including Jewish activists believed to have

violated the status quo understanding prohibiting non-Islamic prayer, Muslims believed to have verbally harassed or acted violently against non-Muslim visitors to the site or incited others to violence, and public figures whose presence authorities feared would inflame intercommunal tensions. Other banned persons included Waqf guards, administrative and maintenance staff, and imams delivering sermons at the site, as well as prominent activists. Authorities usually banned individuals for a period of months, then allowed them to return. The PA Governorate of Jerusalem reported that Israeli authorities banned 577 individuals from the site during the year, compared with 427 in 2022.

Media outlets reported that after October 7, in response to Hamas's calls for mass Palestinian rallies in East Jerusalem, the INP restricted the entry of Muslim worshipers to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount for weekly Friday prayers, allowing only Old City resident men above the age of 50, women, and children. Other worshipers performed prayers by roadsides outside the Old City amid a heavy Israeli security presence. According to Waqf officials, on October 13 (the first Friday following October 7), Israel limited access to Friday prayers at the site to 5,000 elderly worshippers. The Israeli NGO Ir Amim, writing on December 6th, said, "The [continuing] imposition of entry bans on Muslim worshippers for 60 consecutive days is unprecedented and incomparable to any limitations imposed by Israeli police in past crises." According to the NGO, access to the site for Jewish visitors and Temple Movement activists remained "unfettered" during the same period.

Media reported that in July, Israeli authorities barred Sheikh Ekrima Sabri — former imam of al-Aqsa Mosque, former Palestinian Grand Mufti, and current head of the private Higher Islamic Council in Jerusalem — from traveling abroad for six months. The ban followed a trip by Sabri to Jordan, Algeria, Turkey, and Malaysia. His attorney said the ban was "on the pretext that his travel constitutes a security threat to the occupation state." Israeli authorities renewed the travel ban in December and summoned Sabri for questioning on incitement charges. Regional news outlets reported that on February 8, Israeli authorities banned Sheikh Najeh Bakirat, deputy director-general of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, from entering the Haram al-

Sharif/Temple Mount site for six months and extended the order for an additional six months on July 2. In July, the Israeli authorities deported Bakirat to the West Bank for six months. The deportation order of the Commander of the Home Front stated Bakirat was “active in the Islamic resistance movement (Hamas)” and that “his presence in Jerusalem poses a threat to security.”

Although the Chief Rabbinate and most ultra-Orthodox rabbis continued to discourage Jewish visits to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site due to the ongoing *halachic* (Jewish legal) debate about whether it is permissible or forbidden for Jews to enter the Temple Mount, some Orthodox rabbis continued to say entering the site was permissible. According to a *Jerusalem Post* report, a sign placed by the Chief Rabbinate remained at the entrance to the site used by Jews, reading, “According to Torah Law, entering the Temple Mount is strictly forbidden due to the holiness of the site.” According to an Islamic Waqf official, there were 48,223 Jewish visitors to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during the year, approximately the same number as in 2022. According to data compiled by Israeli NGOs, 50,098 non-Muslims visited during the year, compared with 51,483 in 2022.

Groups such as the Temple Institute, Beyadenu, and Returning to the Temple Mount continued to call for increased Jewish access and prayer as well as the construction of the third Jewish temple on the site. A group of activists, including the Temple Institute, remained dedicated to rebuilding “the Holy Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Biblical commandments.” Mount Moriah is the site of the Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif compound.

According to local media, some Jewish groups performed religious acts, such as prayers and prostration on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, despite the ban on non-Islamic prayer. Jewish Temple Mount advocacy groups continued to report police generally allowed discreet non-Muslim prayer on the site and that during the year, some Jewish groups performed more overt religious acts there, such as prayers and prostrations. Video posted to social

media on September 4 showed police arresting former MK and activist Yehuda Glick after he broadcast the sound of the shofar (a ram's horn traditionally sounded during Jewish celebrations of Rosh Hashanah) via his mobile phone on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. *124 News* reported that during September celebrations of Rosh Hashana, Israeli police detained three Israeli Jewish activists at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount after one of them reportedly blew a shofar. The Jordanian Foreign Ministry issued a statement objecting to what it characterized as "extremists" and their "provocative practice," which it said was contrary to the historic status quo.

Police continued to screen non-Muslims for religious articles when visiting the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Police allowed Jewish males wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit* (fringes) and those who wished to enter the site barefoot (in accordance with interpretations of *halacha*, Jewish religious law) to enter with a police escort. On July 18, the Palestinian *al-Qastal* news site posted a video on social media of a group of Jewish men, at least one of them wearing a prayer shawl, reciting aloud what the *Jerusalem Post* subsequently identified as the Priestly Blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*) on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Hamas's head of international relations Basem Naim said, "The continuation of these provocations and violations of our sanctities is liable to ignite a sweeping religious war in the region, affecting everyone and not stopping at borders." Hamas issued a statement saying, "We warn the occupation and its settlers against their continued desecration of al-Aqsa, which will remain purely Islamic, and we will defend it by all available means."

Haaretz reported that on April 2, Israeli police arrested Rafael Morris, head of the group Returning to the Temple Mount, on suspicion that he planned to conduct a Passover sacrifice on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount on Passover eve. As it had done in 2022, the group again circulated flyers and posted on social media offering cash prizes to anyone who managed a living sacrifice on the site or who was arrested while trying to do so. The Times of Israel reported on April 5 that police detained several Jewish activists who planned to sacrifice goats and sheep on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount ahead of Passover. According to press reports, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz,

the chief rabbi of the Western Wall and the Holy Sites, in April banned the bringing of animals to the Temple Mount to prevent Jews from trying to bring Passover sacrifices on the holy site. Returning to the Temple Mount issued a statement saying that on May 5, Israeli police in Jerusalem detained for questioning five Israeli Jews who intended to sacrifice a lamb on that day.

On October 1, police arrested a Jewish man, Yair Hanoach, a member of Returning to the Temple Mount, at a light rail station near Jerusalem's Old City on his way to sacrifice a lamb on the Temple Mount. After Hanoach's arrest, Returning to the Temple Mount released a statement saying, "There is no more room for Muslim rule on the Temple Mount: The time has come to build a Jewish temple and renew the sacrificial rites."

In August, Israeli media and NGOs reported several Israeli ministries including the Ministries of Agriculture, Jerusalem Affairs, and Heritage, improperly assisted the Temple Institute in 2022 to import five red heifers from the United States in an unsuccessful plan to perform a ritual sacrifice associated with rebuilding the Jewish temple on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

The Israeli government continued to allow MKs and ministers to visit the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site. MKs were required to inform the Knesset guard at least 24 hours prior to the visit to allow for coordination with police. On January 3, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef wrote a letter to Israeli National Security Minister Ben Gvir, who visited the site later that day, stating, "As a minister representing the government of Israel you should be acting according to Chief Rabbinate instructions, which have long forbidden visiting the Temple Mount."

Israeli and Palestinian media, citing accounts from a Temple Mount activist group, reported that on July 27, Ben Gvir joined more than 2,100 Jews who visited the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount during Tisha B'Av – a day of fasting when Jews commemorate the destruction of the temples. According to the Times of Israel, this was Ben Gvir's third visit to the site as a minister.

While there, he said, “This place is the most important place for the people of Israel where we need to return and show our governance.” Negev and the Galilee Development Minister Yitzhak Wasserlauf, a member of Ben Gvir’s Jewish Power party, also joined, later posting on social media his hope for the “redemption” of the Jewish people and “the building of the [Third] temple soon in our days.” Police said they arrested 16 Jewish visitors and two Palestinians over disturbances at the site. Prior to the visit, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yosef reportedly accused Ben Gvir of “sinning and causing others to sin” by visiting the Temple Mount.

The issue of the use of the Gate of Mercy (Bab al-Rahma), a building within the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount that the Waqf reopened in 2019 after it had been closed since 2003, remained unresolved. The Israeli government stated it regarded the reopening as contrary to the historic status quo. An Israeli court in 2022 extended a 2020 court order to close the site, but as of year’s end, the INP had not fully enforced the order. The Waqf said it did not recognize the authority of Israeli courts over the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Throughout the year, Muslim worshippers could generally enter the site, although Israeli police sometimes conducted security searches there, removed Waqf staff, or temporarily prohibited access to the Gate of Mercy.

According to media, during Yom Kippur in September, a group of Jewish young men climbed on gravestones in the Bab al-Rahmeh Muslim cemetery, located outside the Old City walls adjacent to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Quds News Network, a Palestinian social media organization often described as pro-Hamas, posted a video on social media sites that showed the group singing, dancing, and jumping from grave to grave. Police appeared to remove the youth from the gravestones but allowed them to remain in the cemetery. The Waqf condemned the act of “desecration” by “Jewish extremists” under police protection, but an INP spokesperson denied the claim, saying police officers were removing them from the scene. Mustafa Abu Zahra, head of the Islamic Cemeteries Committee in Jerusalem, told *al-Arab al-Jadid* that settlers had turned their holiday into an aggression against Muslim graveyards.

On December 27, police arrested an Israeli suspected of desecrating the Bab al-Rahma cemetery. According to press and social media reports, the man, a West Bank settler, hung a severed donkey's head among the graves. According to the Waqf, the suspect was "a Jewish extremist." Police said at the time of his arrest he was carrying an axe. Police said the man was "unbalanced" and "had broken the law and disrupted public order" by his actions. Authorities also took an accomplice into custody.

Media outlets reported that on December 7, the first night of Hannukah, Jewish "ultranationalists" clashed with police at the start of what had been a planned march through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. The group Jewish Truth organized the march, saying its purpose was to call for "full Jewish control over the Temple Mount and Jerusalem" and for the authority of the Waqf to be abolished. Police stopped the march of approximately 150 individuals, preventing the marchers from reaching the Western Wall and saying that the marchers had violated the terms of their permit by carrying inflammatory signs, leading provocative chants, and running. Some demonstrators chanted "Eject the Waqf." One sign read, "A [bulldozer] on the Temple Mount is the true victory."

Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and Muslim leaders continued to protest archaeological excavations and construction work done at the City of David National Park, in the Silwan neighborhood outside the Old City, and in the Old City near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Some NGOs monitoring archaeological practices in Jerusalem continued to state the Israel Antiquities Authority emphasized archaeological finds that bolstered Jewish claims, while minimizing historically significant archaeological finds of other religions.

At the main Western Wall Plaza, the place of Jewish worship nearest the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and Judaism's holiest site, authorities continued to prohibit the performance of any "religious ceremony that is not in accordance with the customs of the place, [or] which harms the feelings of the public toward the place." Authorities interpreted this prohibition to include mixed-gender Jewish prayer services, over the

objections of the Jewish Conservative and Reform movements. The organization Women of the Wall, whose members were mostly Reform and Conservative Jewish women and whose goal was to secure the official right for women to pray at the Western Wall, stated their monthly presence at the wall for more than 30 years had established them as part of the “customs of the place.”

Authorities continued to allow use of a temporary platform south of the Mughrabi Bridge and adjacent to the Western Wall, but not visible from the main Western Wall Plaza, for non-Orthodox “egalitarian” (mixed gender) Jewish prayers. Authorities designated the platform for members of the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism, including for religious ceremonies such as bar and bat mitzvahs. The upgrade of the egalitarian plaza, per a 2016 agreement between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish communities, that provided for the construction of a permanent plaza for mixed-gender prayer managed by non-Orthodox groups and a merged entry to all prayer spaces adjacent to the Western Wall remained pending at year’s end. On February 28, the Supreme Court held a hearing on petitions demanding implementation of the 2016 agreement, which the government put on hold in 2017, but did not issue a ruling by the end of the year. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on February 16, ahead of the hearing, the state’s response to the petitions included Prime Minister Netanyahu’s position that the renovation of the southern plaza would “continue as quickly as possible,” and that the “management of the southern plaza will continue in accordance with the format that has existed in recent years.” The Israel Religious Action Center, which represented the petitioners, said successive Israeli governments had not done the bare minimum to implement the agreement since 2020.

The Israeli government continued to execute a five-year-plan, begun in 2022, to upgrade infrastructure at the Western Wall and encourage visits, spending portions of 110 million New Israeli Shekels (NIS) (\$30.3 million) it allocated for the purpose. The plan did not include the egalitarian plaza.

Authorities continued to prohibit visitors from bringing private Torah scrolls to the main Western Wall Plaza and women from accessing the public Torah scrolls or giving priestly blessings at the site. More than 100 Torah scrolls were housed in the men's section. Authorities, however, permitted women to pray with *tefillin* and prayer shawls pursuant to a 2013 Jerusalem District Court ruling stating it was illegal to arrest or fine them for such actions. On February 9, Prime Minister Netanyahu released a video stating the government would not act upon a proposal by the ultra-Orthodox Shas party to criminalize women reading from the Torah, praying with tefillin and prayer shawls, or performing other religious acts at the plaza. On July 20, the Jerusalem Magistrate Court ruled Western Wall security checks should be conducted fairly and impartially and that security guards should not search for Torah scrolls. The ruling, however, did not prohibit Western Wall ushers employed by the ultra-Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation, a governmental body that administers the main Western Wall Plaza, from enforcing Western Wall procedures. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that despite the ruling, on August 18, security guards, escorted by ushers, searched Women of the Wall members' bags for Torah scrolls and confiscated one scroll.

Authorities continued to allow Women of the Wall to hold its monthly service in a barricaded portion of the women's area of the main Western Wall Plaza. Ultra-Orthodox protesters harassed and attacked Women of the Wall members repeatedly during their monthly services by screaming, cursing, blowing whistles, and spitting on or pushing them. Representatives of Women of the Wall said police and ushers from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation were reluctant to intervene when ultra-Orthodox women and men disrupted the women's monthly prayer service. A 2017 petition to the Supreme Court by Women of the Wall asking that ushers and police prevent disruption of their services was pending at year's end.

Media outlets reported that on February 22, MK Gilad Kariv, a Reform rabbi, used his parliamentary immunity to bring Torah scrolls for use by Women of the Wall, as he has done on several occasions in the past. Kariv has referred to the prohibition as illegal. Yitzhak Pindrus, MK of an ultra-Orthodox party,

attempted to physically block Kariv from reaching the area. Police intervened when Orthodox protesters spat on, shoved, and verbally abused a Women of the Wall group that included Reform rabbis from the United States as it made its way to the Western Wall.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on March 23, two Jewish teenagers set fire to prayer books belonging to the Women of the Wall group. Police arrested the individuals.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that on May 21, security guards confiscated a Torah scroll that the Women of the Wall group attempted to bring onto the plaza for prayers.

The IDF continued periodically to limit access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, a site of significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the tomb of Abraham. The Israeli government said there were longstanding entry arrangements which should not be considered as restricting access. Palestinian leaders continued in statements to local media to oppose the IDF's control of access, citing Oslo Accords-era agreements that gave Israel and the PA shared responsibilities for the site, although Israel retained full security responsibility for it; the Oslo Accords and 1997 Hebron Accords gave "civil powers and responsibilities" including "planning authority" for the site to the Hebron Municipality. Some Muslim leaders publicly rejected a Jewish connection to the site.

The IDF again restricted Muslim access to the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs for 10 days corresponding to Jewish holidays and Jewish access during the 10 days corresponding to Islamic holidays. The IDF restricted Muslims to one entry point, which was staffed by soldiers with metal detectors, while granting Jews access via several entry points. Citing security concerns, the IDF periodically closed roads approaching the site and, since 2001, had 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 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 the IDF instituted in 1994 following an attack by an Israeli that killed 29 Palestinians. PA officials reported Israeli authorities continued to implement frequent bans on the Islamic call to prayer from the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs said Israel prevented calls to prayer at the site 704 times during the year.

In June, the Israeli Defense Ministry's Civil Administration inaugurated an elevator to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities on the Jewish side of the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs, and *Haaretz* reported Muslim worshippers with disabilities could only use the elevator if they applied in advance. An Israeli official previously said the Palestinians had declined an offer to build a second elevator on the Muslim side of the site, which he said also had fewer steps to climb than the Jewish side.

According to Brigham Young University's Jerusalem Center, the Israeli government maintained an agreement with the Church of Jesus Christ stating no member of the Church would engage in proselytizing "directly or indirectly" within Israel, the West Bank, or Gaza as a condition of its lease of land for its campus on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

The Israeli 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 the danger and illegality of entering these areas. The Israeli government said Jewish worshippers could only visit Areas A and B of the West Bank with the protection of the IDF and that the PA was not fulfilling its commitments under the Oslo Accords to ensure freedom of religion for Jewish worshippers in these areas. 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 visits. Media outlets reported the IDF provided special security escorts for Jews to visit some religious sites in Area A, particularly Joseph's Tomb in Nablus and the Shalom al Israel Synagogue in Jericho. Some Jewish religious leaders said

the Israeli government policy limiting travel to parts of the West Bank prevented them from freely visiting several religious sites there, including Joseph's Tomb, on unscheduled occasions or in larger numbers than permitted through IDF coordination. Significant numbers of Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel, some Israeli Jews, and other Israeli citizens, chose to privately visit Area A without legal repercussions, according to media.

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

Haaretz reported Israeli police-imposed attendance restrictions at the Orthodox Holy Fire celebrations in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem on April 15, Orthodox Easter. Israeli police said the crowd control and attendance restrictions were safety measures prompted by the 2021 stampede disaster at Mount Meron in which 45 persons died. Christian leaders reported the restrictions were unnecessary and that the letter cited by police purportedly from the churches recommending restrictions was not authorized by the churches. Authorities agreed to increase attendance to approximately 2,200 Christians inside the church, and more than 1,000 worshippers congregated in the church courtyard. Thousands more gathered in surrounding alleys. Media reported police clashing, sometimes violently, with pilgrims as they attempted to pass through checkpoints erected throughout the Old City without church-issued entry permits, but there were no injuries reported.

According to church officials, Christians in Gaza applied for a total of 981 COGAT permits to visit Jerusalem for Easter celebrations in April, but officials never received an official count of permits issued. Church officials said the permits lasted only for a short period of time and most were rescinded shortly after being issued. Church officials also expressed concern

that Israeli authorities failed to account for the impact of families separated over the holiday in their issuance of permits.

On January 30, *Haaretz* reported the Israeli government would not appeal a 2022 Jerusalem District Court order halting the registration of the St. Alexander Nevsky Church in Jerusalem's Old City as being owned by the Russian government. The decision shifted responsibility for determining the ownership of the contested religious site back to the Prime Minister's office. In 2022, the Jerusalem District Court ruled the Israeli cabinet, rather than the Israeli Justice Ministry's Land Registrar or the court, had sole authority to approve any transfer of ownership of the church. The court was responding to a petition by the Orthodox Palestine Society of the Holy Land, which owned the property until 2020, when the Land Registrar, acting on the request of the Prime Minister's Office, registered the ownership to the Russian government.

The plan to expand the Jerusalem Walls National Park in the Old City to parts of the Mount of Olives, where there are Christian holy sites, remained on the Jerusalem Local Planning Committee calendar, but the committee postponed discussion to August 2024. According to the plan, promoted by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and first initiated in 2022, the expansion was designed to restore long-neglected lands and better preserve historical landscapes without harming church properties incorporated into the national park. Critics pointed out the proposed park expansion would include many holy sites that belonged to various Christian denominations as well as several that were important in Jewish and Muslim traditions. According to the online news site +972 Magazine, the government excluded a nearby Jewish cemetery after Jewish religious authorities opposed its inclusion. The website said that under the plan, existing residents would retain ownership of their land, but lose all autonomous rights over their property. According to the British newspaper the *Guardian*, the Armenian, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox Churches accused the Israel National Parks Authority of promoting a project "whose apparent sole purpose is to confiscate and nationalize one of the holiest sites for Christianity ... under the guise of protecting green spaces." In December, the EU Heads of

Mission in Jerusalem and Ramallah expressed concern these and other Israeli development “projects in and around Jerusalem’s Old City threaten to alter permanently the character of numerous holy sites and undermine the established religious equilibrium ... Pursuing these plans could have a detrimental impact on the holy sites, the paths of pilgrimage, and the viability of Jerusalem’s communities. It [also] would pose a serious threat to the special status of Jerusalem as well as to the peaceful coexistence of all three monotheistic religions in Jerusalem.”

On July 30, a 202-meter (663-foot) suspension bridge over the Hinnom Valley opened to the public. According to the Israeli NGO Emek Shaveh, authorities advanced the bridge project in collaboration with the Elad Foundation, a private settlers’ organization that ran the City of David archaeological park. The bridge linked an Elad-owned events center built in the Palestinian area of Abu Tor/al-Thuri to Mount Zion across the Hinnom Valley. Emek Shaveh issued a statement saying the bridge was “part of a series of projects which are creating large settler strongholds in Palestinian space aimed at linking West Jerusalem to the southwest and southeast of the Historic Basin through a continuum of Judeo-centric attractions.”

On July 23, a Jerusalem municipality committee approved the expropriation of approximately 10,000 square meters for construction of an aerial cable car over the Old City. Israeli NGOs reported that on December 9, the Jerusalem Municipality affixed notices around the predominantly Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan and its vicinity concerning the expropriation of 12 plots of land along the planned cable car route. In 2022, the Supreme Court rejected petitions opposing the government’s plan for the cable car, which would pass above a cemetery belonging to the Karaite Jewish religious movement. According to the Karaite community, the cable car would desecrate the cemetery, thus preventing its further use. The petitioners also included store owners in Jerusalem’s Old City and Palestinian residents of Silwan. The government stated the cable car was meant to solve accessibility problems to holy sites such as the Western Wall, but some NGOs said the project was meant to promote Jewish tourism sites in East Jerusalem and reinforce Israel’s claims of sovereignty over the area.

The Israeli government and settler organizations in Jerusalem made efforts to increase property ownership by Israeli Jews in Jerusalem. Civil society organizations and PA representatives stated the efforts sought to emphasize Jewish history in Palestinian neighborhoods. UNOCHA and NGOs such as Bimkom and Ir Amim said the goal of Jerusalem municipal and Israeli national policies was to decrease the number of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem; these groups cited the Israeli government's goal of "maintaining a solid Jewish majority in the city," as stated in the Jerusalem Municipality's master plan.

During the year, media reported on a continuing dispute between the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate and an Australian-Jewish developer over a large section of the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City that was purported to have been illegally sold to the developer by a since-defrocked Armenian Orthodox priest. In May, the PA and Jordanian governments suspended their recognition of the Patriarch in protest against the alleged deal. Several times in October and November, clashes between workers affiliated with the developer and Armenian Orthodox protesters required Israeli police intervention to prevent violence. On December 28, the Patriarchate sued in the Jerusalem District Court to cancel the transaction.

Some former mosques and Islamic cemeteries remained sealed and inaccessible. These sites belonged to the defunct pre-state Waqf (distinct from the present Jordanian-administered Waqf in Jerusalem) until it was confiscated by Israel after the 1948 War of Independence. Other former mosques continued to be used for secular purposes.

The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs continued to pay for construction of new mosques and maintenance of approximately 1,800 existing mosques. In its annual report, the ministry said several mosques in the West Bank were subject to attacks by Israeli settlers and the IDF, especially in Hebron and during continuous incursions into the cities of Jenin and Tulkarem.

In May and June, according to +972 Magazine, the government approved 340 million NIS (\$94 million) to “salvage preserve, develop, and prevent antiquity theft in Judea, Samaria, and the Jordan Valley” and to develop “settler-controlled” archaeological sites in East Jerusalem. The news site characterized this as part of an ongoing effort by religious settlers to anchor archeology in biblical literalism and use it as a central justification for the settlement enterprise, a narrative used to erase Palestinian claims to the land and to displace the Palestinian population.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, present in Jerusalem since 1887, remained officially unrecognized by Israel, although the government “acknowledged” the church. The church lacked tax-exempt status on its properties or its own ecclesiastical courts to adjudicate divorce, inheritance, or custody issues, but the state recognized marriages performed by church clergy. Church leaders reported the group requested recognition from the Israeli foreign affairs and interior ministries during the year but that, as of year’s end, the government took no action.

The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs 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 Hamas-run Waqf Ministry in Gaza sent Friday instructions to imams. PIJ also controlled many mosques in Gaza, but sources said the imams generally followed Waqf guidance to avoid problems with Hamas.

The PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs continued to pay the salaries of most Palestinian imams in the West Bank. The ministry also continued to provide limited financial support to some minority religious groups, including Christian clergy and Christian charitable organizations.

Religious groups that were not recognized by the PA, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, faced a continued PA ban on proselytizing 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 and to register the action officially in that location. Some converts to unrecognized Christian faiths arranged for recognized churches with which they were previously affiliated to perform their marriages and divorces. Members of some faith communities and faith-based organizations stated they viewed their need to do so as conflicting with their religious beliefs.

Religious organizations providing education, health care, and other humanitarian relief and social services to Palestinians in and around East Jerusalem continued to state the physical barrier begun by Israel during the Second Intifada in 2003 impeded their work, particularly south of Jerusalem in West Bank Christian communities around Bethlehem. The barrier also divided some communities in Jerusalem, affecting non-Jewish residents' access to places of worship and employment, agricultural lands, schools, and hospitals as well as the conduct of journalism and NGO and humanitarian activities. 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.

Following Hamas's October 7 attack, church officials in Jerusalem complained the general closure of the West Bank by Israeli authorities impeded the ability of their clergy and staff to travel and operate church facilities and schools.

According to church officials, prior to October 7, 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 or leaving Gaza. Earlier in the year, Israeli authorities continued to issue permits for some Christians to exit Gaza to attend religious services in Jerusalem or the West Bank and for Muslims from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for Ramadan. The NGO Gisha reported that prior to October 7, restrictions on freedom of movement of Palestinians in Gaza continued to infringe upon their religious freedom.

During the Christmas season, the Israeli authorities did not issue any permits for Palestinians to enter Israel from the West Bank or Gaza due to the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict, citing security concerns, compared with 8,000 permits issued to West Bank Palestinians and 500 permits to Gazan Palestinians in 2022. In a November 10 statement, the patriarchs and heads of churches of Jerusalem called upon Christians in the region to refrain from usual festivities during the Christmas season and to "focus more on the spiritual meaning of Christmas in their pastoral activities and liturgical celebrations" in honor of those who had lost homes or family members. The church leaders also called for acts of solidarity with those who were suffering, as well as for peace, a humanitarian ceasefire, and de-escalation of violence.

During the year, Christian expatriate workers in Israeli settlements continued to report that lack of public transportation on Saturdays prevented them from participating in religious activities and worship in Jerusalem.

The Israeli Ministry of Religious Services (MRS) listed 21 dedicated cemeteries in Israel and West Bank settlements for burial of persons the

government defined as “lacking religion,” and 33 cemeteries for civil burial, but only three were available for use by the general public regardless of residence, and one had been full for several years. The Israeli government permitted other cemeteries located in agricultural localities to bury only “residents of the area.” This, according to the religious freedom advocacy NGO Hiddush, left the majority of Israel’s population unable to exercise the right, as mandated by law, to be buried in accordance with secular or non-Orthodox religious views. The two MRS-administered cemeteries in West Bank settlements were available only for the burial of Israeli citizens.

Textbooks used in East Jerusalem schools continued to fall under the jurisdiction of the Jerusalem Education Administration, a joint body of the municipality and the Israeli Ministry of Education. A curriculum committee continued to review and edit textbooks issued by the PA to remove content considered to be antisemitic or to incite violence against Israel, and the Israeli education ministry required schools to use edited textbooks. Palestinians and PA officials said the Israel-approved curriculum whitewashed or removed references to Palestinian identity or national aspirations, including removal of Palestinian flags, pictures of Palestinian leaders, or texts about the Palestinian “right of return.” Some municipality officials stated their plans to phase out the edited version of the PA curriculum and to compel schools to use either the Israeli curriculum or an internationally approved alternative.

UNRWA reported it administered 183 schools across the Gaza Strip, educating more than 286,000 students, and 96 schools in the West Bank, educating more than 45,800 students. In accordance with its policy of using “host country curricula,” UNRWA used the PA curriculum in these schools, supplemented by UNRWA-developed materials. UNRWA stated its educational programs promoted “values of tolerance.” In recent years, UNRWA said it conducted reviews of new textbooks introduced by the PA to ensure they aligned with UN values.

In March, the NGO United Nations Watch and the Israeli NGO IMPACT-se issued a number of joint reports examining UNRWA’s teacher hiring

practices and educational materials. The reports were very critical of UNRWA, stating there were violations of neutrality in hiring and use of curricula that incites hatred, antisemitism, and terrorism. In response to these allegations, UNRWA affirmed in public statements it has zero tolerance toward hate speech and incitement to discrimination and/or violence and has consistently acted when allegations of neutrality breaches occur. UNRWA noted it uses host country textbooks and trains teachers to address material not in line with UN values or UNESCO standards through a Critical Thinking Approach. It also launched immediate investigations into those alleged to participate in these activities.

Most Palestinian individuals, as well as non-Jewish Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, and Lebanese married to Israeli citizens, remained ineligible for Israeli citizenship or residency under the Law on Citizenship and Entry, which the Knesset in March reenacted through March 2024. Known locally as the “family reunification law, NGOs reported this legislation significantly impacted tens of thousands of individuals by restricting their ability to cohabitate. The law also prohibited Palestinians with Israeli citizenship or residency from extending their legal status to spouses holding PA passports, as well as spouses from designated “enemy states.” Supporters of the law said it was necessary for security reasons, but according to the NGO Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI), security records released by Shin Bet in 2022 documented that only 35 Palestinians with legal status in Israel were involved in activities that posed a security risk during the previous 20 years.

ACRI and other civil rights organizations, including Adalah, PHRI, HaMoked, and Society of St. Yves, characterized the law as discriminatory, racist, contrary to international law, a violation of constitutional rights, and unfair because it labels all Palestinians as security risks. Human rights NGOs criticized restricting the rights of entire populations on the assumption that they were prone to terrorism as “collective punishment.” A petition by a group of NGOs on behalf of families affected by the law calling for its revocation remained pending before the Supreme Court at year’s end. In contrast, Jewish foreign spouses of Israeli Jews received automatic

citizenship, while non-Jewish spouses may obtain citizenship after holding a residence permit for five years, allowing them to reside in Israel or Israeli settlements across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. According to Israeli NGO HaMoked, the Israeli Minister of Interior decided in July to “gradually” begin processing temporary residency status applications under the law for Palestinian women aged 40-50 who were spouses of an Israeli citizen or resident and had been staying in Israel under a permit for at least 10 years, among other conditions. The law allows a quota of 58 humanitarian “family reunification” requests per year for individuals with no ties to specific countries, with 132 requests submitted in 2023 and 14 approved.

According to the HaMoked, there were approximately 12,000 Palestinians living in Israel, including in Jerusalem, on temporary stay permits because of the citizenship and entry law, with no legal guarantee they could continue living with their families. There were also cases of Palestinian spouses of Palestinian residents living in East Jerusalem without legal status. Some Palestinian residents moved to Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the security barrier to live with their nonresident spouse and children while maintaining Jerusalem residency. According to Christian religious leaders, this situation remained an especially acute problem for Christians because of their small population and consequent tendency of Christian citizens or residents of Israel to marry Christians from the West Bank or elsewhere (i.e., who held neither citizenship nor residency). Christian religious leaders expressed concern that this was a significant element in the continuing decline of the Christian population, including in Jerusalem, thereby compromising the long-term viability of Christian communities.

According to NGOs, community members, and media commentators, additional factors contributing to Christian emigration included political instability, limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions, difficulties some Christian clergy experienced obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits, loss of confidence in the peace process, and economic hardships created by the establishment of the barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions. The Israeli government previously stated such difficulties stemmed from the “complex

political and security reality” and not from any restrictions it had placed on the Christian community.

Palestinians and human rights NGOs continued to describe the 1970 Legal and Administrative Matters Law, which allows Israeli Jewish claimants to obtain property in East Jerusalem that was owned by Jews prior to 1948, as favoring Jews and discriminating against Palestinians. A 2017 Norwegian Refugee Council report on the law noted that no reciprocal laws exist for Arab Israelis or Palestinians to reclaim property lost in Israel or Jerusalem, and said that in practice, the law was only applied against Palestinian property owners or tenants on behalf of Jewish claimants – typically by means of trusts which operated on behalf of or bought property rights from potential inheritors of disputed property. Palestinians who abandoned property in Israel in the same period sometimes had a right to compensation only but not to reclaim the property. Israeli NGO Terrestrial Jerusalem stated this law was used primarily to benefit third parties or trusts and to date, the group was unaware of any case in which this law returned property ownership to the descendant of the Jews who owned contested property prior to 1948.

In some cases, private Jewish organizations acquired legal ownership of reclaimed Jewish property in East Jerusalem, including in the Old City, and through protracted judicial action sought to evict Palestinian families living there. Since 1967, Israeli authorities designated approximately 35 percent of East Jerusalem for Israeli neighborhoods and settlements, according to NGOs, and another 35 percent as green space and national parks. A significant portion of this land previously was private, Palestinian-owned land. Palestinians were able in some cases to rent or purchase Israeli-owned property, including privately owned buildings built on Israeli government-owned land, but faced significant legal and governmental barriers to both. Israeli NGOs stated that after accounting for Israeli neighborhoods and settlements, Israeli government property, and declared national parks, authorities only designated about 15 percent of the land in East Jerusalem for residential development and construction.

While Israeli law does not authorize the government's Israel Land Authority (ILA), which administers the 93 percent of Israel's public lands, to lease land to foreigners, in practice foreigners were allowed to lease if they could show they would qualify as Jewish under the Law of Return. Approximately 13 percent of public land remained owned by the quasi-governmental Jewish National Fund (JNF), whose statutes prohibited sale or lease of land to non-Jews. The application of ILA restrictions historically limited the ability of Muslim and Christian residents of Jerusalem who were not Israeli citizens to purchase property built on state land, including in parts of Jerusalem. Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel could participate in bids for JNF land, but sources stated the ILA granted the JNF another parcel of land whenever an Arab/Palestinian citizen of Israel won a bid. Despite a 2018 Supreme Court ruling that the ILA Executive Council must have representation of an Arab, Druze, or Circassian member to prevent discrimination against non-Jews, there were no members from these groups on the council at year's end.

The Times of Israel reported on March 14 that Meir Rubinstein, mayor of the ultra-Orthodox West Bank settlement Beitar Illit, ordered that Arabs be taken off buses entering the city, "even if they have Israeli citizenship." The media report said the mayor "took pride in the practice, acknowledging that it's illegal." The mayor's comments came after an explosive device left on a local bus caught fire but did not explode.

In an August 24 speech in front of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, PA President Abbas suggested Jews were targeted during the Holocaust due to their "social role" as money lenders rather than their religion. Abbas echoed claims by some that Ashkenazi Jews were not descended from ancient Israelites but from an ancient Turkish people known as the Khazars, who converted to Judaism en masse. According to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Abbas's use of this antisemitic trope, which was first coined by an Israeli professor in Tel Aviv, was an attempt to "deprive contemporary Jews of pre-medieval Jewish lineage and history connecting them back to the land," thereby delegitimizing Jewish claims to Israel.

In June, local media reported MK Amit Halevi proposed dividing the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, with Muslims controlling the southern portion and Jews controlling the central and northern portions of the site. Halevi said, “We will take the northern end and pray there. The entire mountain is sacred to us, and the Dome of the Rock is the place on which the Temple stood. This should be our guideline.” Palestinian political and religious leaders roundly denounced Halevi’s statements as dangerous, extremist, and unacceptable. In several statements during the year, Palestinian officials described Israeli government and Temple Mount activists’ actions as attempting to physically or temporally divide the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount contrary to the historic status quo.

Palestinian leaders, media, and social media regularly used the word “martyr” to refer to individuals killed during confrontations with Israeli security forces, whether those individuals were involved in confrontations or were innocent bystanders. Some official PA media channels, social media sites affiliated with Fatah, and terrorist organizations glorified terrorist attacks on Israeli Jews, referring to the assailants as “martyrs.” The PA continued to send “martyr payments” to families of Palestinians killed while committing terrorist acts or killed in Israeli military actions, including victims of airstrikes in Gaza, as well as stipends to Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including those awaiting charges and those convicted of acts of terrorism.

Both Palestinian and Israeli officials evoked ethnoreligious language to deny the historical self-identity of the other community in the region or to emphasize an exclusive claim to the land. During a speech on May 15 at the United Nations marking the anniversary of the Nakba, PA President Abbas denied Jewish ties to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, saying, “Israel has been digging [underneath the al-Aqsa Mosque] for 30 years in an attempt to find anything that would prove its [past] existence there, but they did not find anything... They lie and lie, like Goebbels [said]: ‘Lie and lie, until people believe it.’” The *Jerusalem Post* reported that in his speech, Abbas emphasized that “the ownership of al-Buraq [Western] Wall and the Haram al-Sharif [Temple Mount] belongs exclusively and only to the Islamic Waqf alone.”

During a March speech in Paris, Israeli Finance Minister Smotrich said, “Who was the first Palestinian king? What language do the Palestinians have? Was there ever a Palestinian currency? Is there a Palestinian history or culture? Nothing. There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.” While making these statements, he stood at a podium draped in a variation of the Israeli flag displaying an enlarged map of Israel that included the West Bank, Gaza, and most of Jordan as part of Israel.

On March 20, PA Presidency spokesperson Nabil Abu Rudeineh said in a televised interview with PA-official Palestine TV, “The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the al-Aqsa Mosque are among the foundational pillars of history, and they are Palestinian holy places, and not Jewish holy places. There is no historical proof – despite all the excavations – that they [the Jews] had any kind of presence in this land.”

On March 24, PA-official Palestine TV broadcast a sermon by Mahmoud al-Habbash, PA Supreme Shari’ah judge and advisor to President Abbas on Islamic affairs, from a mosque in Ramallah in which al-Habbash said, “They [the Jews] are without a history, without an entity throughout history. They have no existence in this land as an entity in any of the historical periods. All of their claims are invalid and debunked by the historical facts... We are the truth in this land, and they are the dream and the invention. They are the legend and the myth. We are the fact. For more than 5,000 or 6,000 years we have been in this land, living in it, populating it, and building a civilization in it.”

In an August 23 interview with Channel 12, Israeli National Security Minister Ben Gvir said, “My right, the right of my wife and my children to move around Judea and Samaria is more important than freedom of movement for the Arabs.” On October 6, Ben Gvir posted on social media, “Our [Israeli] lives come before the freedom of movement (and commerce) of the Palestinians... We will continue to tell this truth and work toward its realization.” Ben Gvir made his remarks while commenting on the Israeli

army's closure of commercial shops in Huwara in the West Bank following an attack by a Palestinian against a settler's car on October 5.

In a radio interview on November 5, Israel's Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu said one of Israel's options in the conflict against Hamas could be to drop a nuclear bomb on the Gaza Strip. Prime Minister Netanyahu disavowed Eliyahu's comments and suspended the minister from cabinet meetings.

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 Fatah-affiliated social media accounts, however, featured content praising or condoning acts of violence against Jews. On March 11, the Fatah Media and Culture Facebook page posted praise for the "heroism" of Dalal al-Mughrabi, a Fatah member who participated in the 1978 Coastal Road massacre in Israel in which Palestinian militants hijacked a bus and killed 38 Israeli civilians, including 13 children. Accompanying the post was a video in which the narrator stated, "All guns should be directed at Israel, this is what Dalal al-Mughrabi, the 'bride of Yafa' had taught us."

Antisemitic material continued to appear in official PA media. On July 7, Palestine TV broadcast remarks by President Abbas's advisor al-Habbash during which he said, "A group from among the people of the Book [i.e., Jews] wants to deceive you ... and turn you back from your religion ... Satan does not have to be in the form of a demon, hidden, he can also be in your form but he is Satan. And they are still fighting us until they turn us back from our religion ... This goes back to the initial point of the conflict, the conflict between good and evil ... they have left the path of humanity and followed Satanism."

In April, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa told the AP that the Christian community in the Holy Land had come under increasing attack, with the government emboldening Jewish violent

extremists who harassed clergy and vandalized property on an unprecedented level. Cardinal Pizzaballa said the violent extremists “feel they are protected ... that the cultural and political atmosphere now can justify, or tolerate, actions against Christians.”

Media outlets reported that on May 28, dozens of “religious Jews” led by Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Arie King and Rabbi Zvi Thau, spiritual leader of the far-right Noam party, protested and chanted “missionaries go home” as hundreds of evangelical Christians from around the world arrived at the Davidson Center near the Western Wall for an organized prayer event called “Pentecost 2023 – A Global Day of Prayer for Jerusalem and the Nations.” In response to this and other incidents, on June 6, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, issued a statement against the harassment of Christians in Jerusalem, stating, “We were sorry to hear from non-Jewish clerics that a number of young Jews and some who pretend to be G-d-fearing, persecute them with curses, blasphemies and more, as they walk the streets of the city ... such behavior is strictly forbidden.”

On June 23, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that during a Jerusalem city council meeting, an argument erupted after a member of a secular political party called for the council to condemn recent attacks by “far-right Jews” against Christians in the Old City of Jerusalem. According to the report, one councilman responded that he was still waiting for the Pope to condemn the Holocaust, and Jerusalem Deputy Mayor King said, “We support tourism but not missionaries.”

During the year, the Israeli government retained its previous visa issuance regulations 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. Christian leaders said Israel’s visa and permit policy also adversely affected schoolteachers and volunteers affiliated with faith-based charities working in the West Bank. 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. Officials from multiple churches expressed

concern that Christian non-Arab visa applicants and visa-renewal applicants also faced long delays. The Israeli government said the large number of requests resulted in delays in process times.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to the quasi-governmental Independent Commission for Human Rights, the International Commission to Support Palestinian People's Rights, and the Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, Muhammed al-Sufi, a Muslim preacher critical of Hamas, died within hours of being assaulted in a Hamas-run detention facility in April. According to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, the Forensic Medicine Department in Gaza City informed the family that the forensic report stated the cause of death was arteriosclerosis, which Palestinian rights groups stated may have been caused by torture and warranted an investigation.

On October 7, during the Jewish Sabbath and on the eve of the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, the U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Hamas and PIJ, and other violent extremist groups attacked Israel, killing more than 1,200 persons, including at least 42 U.S. citizens and 36 children. At least 843 of the victims were civilians, and more than 5,400 Israelis and foreigners were injured in the terrorist attacks. Attackers committed assault, including sexual assault, and took approximately 253 Israeli and foreign men, women, and children hostage. During a six-day ceasefire November 24-30, Hamas and Israel negotiated the release of 78 hostages in exchange for 180 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli custody.

Prior to the October 7 terrorist attack, Hamas and PIJ as well as other militant and terrorist groups continued to be active in Gaza. Hamas remained in de facto political control of Gaza during the year. A professor at the Fletcher School at Tufts University and an expert on humanitarian law told the *Times*, "There is no question [that the Hamas assault] involved multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity, some of which are ongoing. Those are not close calls."

On October 17, an explosion in the parking lot damaged al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, managed by the Anglican Diocese, resulting in many fatalities and injuries among displaced Palestinians sheltering there. Reports of the number of fatalities varied widely; the Anglican Diocese reported 200 persons killed. The patriarchs and heads of churches of Jerusalem issued a statement later that day expressing solidarity with the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and mourning the civilian victims of the hospital explosion. On November 26, Human Rights Watch said the explosion resulted when an apparent rocket-propelled munition, such as those commonly used by Palestinian armed groups, hit the hospital grounds. The NGO said that while misfires of this type of weapon are frequent, further investigation was needed to determine who may have launched the rocket and whether the laws of war were violated.

Hamas leaders and other militant groups continued throughout the year to call for the elimination of the State of Israel, and some called for killing “Zionist Jews” and advocated violence through traditional and social media channels as well as during rallies and other events. Praising the October 7 terror attack initiated by Hamas and other Gaza-based militant groups, senior Hamas figure and former politburo chairman Khaled Mashaal called for Muslims around the world to join Hamas’s war against Israel in a “Global Day of Rage” on October 13.

During the year, Hamas 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 enforced an interpretation of Islam in Gaza that some activists stated was discriminatory toward women. Hamas courts occasionally prohibited women from departing Gaza due to ongoing divorce or family court proceedings, despite their having Israeli authorization to travel. Community members reported the Hamas-affiliated Islamic University of Gaza required hijabs for all women. According to press and NGO reports, school personnel forced some women students in Gaza to wear a hijab or other forms of body-covering dress, and in some cases teachers in Hamas-run schools in Gaza sent girls home for not wearing attire they deemed acceptable, although enforcement

was not systematic. There were sporadic reports of security officers requiring a man to prove that a woman with him in a public space was his spouse. Gazan civil society leaders, however, said Hamas had reduced its restrictions on dress and gender segregation in public in comparison with previous years.

Palestinians in Gaza reported continued interference by Hamas in public schools at the primary, secondary, and university levels. Hamas reportedly interfered in teaching methodologies or curriculum it deemed to violate Islamic identity, religion, or “traditions,” as defined by Hamas. Hamas also interfered when there were reports of classes or activities that mixed genders. UNRWA, however, reported no Hamas interference in the administration of its Gaza schools. Many Muslim students in Gaza continued to attend schools run by Christian institutions and NGOs.

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 anti-Christian harassment.

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.

During the year, there were incidents of deadly violence that perpetrators justified at least partly on religious grounds. Actions included individual killings, physical attacks and verbal harassment of worshippers and clergy, and vandalism of religious sites. There were reports of inter- and intra-community abuses, social pressure to stay within one’s religious group, and antisemitic and anti-Muslim content in public discourse and media.

Attacks in the West Bank on Palestinians by Israeli citizens, some of whom asserted their right to settle in what they stated was the historic Jewish homeland of “Judea and Samaria,” continued, as well, to a lesser extent, as Palestinian attacks on settlers. UNOCHA recorded 1,133 incidents of settler violence during the year, including 923 attacks against Palestinian property. UNOCHA recorded 343 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem from October 7 to December 14, resulting in Palestinian casualties or property damage or both, an average of 35 incidents per week, compared with 21 incidents between January 1 and October 6. By comparison, UNOCHA recorded 849 such attacks in 2022 and 496 in 2021. Yesh Din said, “2023 was the most violent year in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank in both the number of incidents and their severity.” The group said settlers killed at least 10 Palestinians and set fire to dozens of homes and vehicles. The Israeli government again said UNOCHA did not provide information about actions by Hamas in its public statistics and did not fully cover attacks targeting Israelis.

Shin Bet reported that on January 27, a Palestinian gunman killed seven Israelis and injured at least three others near a synagogue in the East Jerusalem neighborhood/settlement of Neve Yaakov. Police shot and killed the attacker in a confrontation after he fled the scene. According to the Times of Israel, Hamas praised the attack, but no terror group took responsibility.

Haaretz reported that on January 28, a 13-year-old Palestinian shot and wounded two Israelis outside the City of David archeological center in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan. Following this and the Neve Yaakov attack, *Haaretz* reported police investigated but made no arrests in 35 cases of Jewish nationalist “revenge” crimes targeting Palestinians in the West Bank from January 27 to 30, including rock throwing, property destruction, and vandalism. In one incident, settlers set a car on fire and spray-painted “Jews wake up” in the Palestinian village of Jalud.

On February 10, a Palestinian East Jerusalem resident drove their car into a bus stop in the East Jerusalem neighborhood/settlement of Ramot, killing three Israelis, including an eight-year-old, and wounding four others. An off-duty police officer shot and killed the assailant at the scene.

Throughout the year, Jewish individuals and groups committed hate crimes and violence against Palestinians and their property, often with the stated purpose of exacting a “price” for actions taken by the Israeli government against the attackers’ interests. The most common offenses, according to police, were attacks on vehicles, defacement of real estate, harm to Muslim and Christian holy sites, assault, and damage to agricultural lands.

According to local press and social media, some settlers in the West Bank continued to justify their attacks on Palestinian property, or “price tag” attacks, such as the uprooting of Palestinian olive trees, vandalism of cars and buildings, arson, and slashing of tires, as necessary for the defense of Judaism.

Media outlets reported that on February 26, a Palestinian man in the village of Huwara shot and killed two Israeli brothers from the West Bank settlement of Har Bracha while they drove through the village. Media outlets reported approximately 400 Israeli settlers descended on and attacked Huwara, resulting in widespread destruction including the torching of Palestinian-owned cars, businesses, and approximately 30 homes and the death of one Palestinian. The report, citing Palestinian medical sources, said settlers shot and killed one Palestinian, shot and wounded two other persons, stabbed a third person, and beat a fourth with an iron bar. Healthcare workers treated approximately 95 Palestinians for tear gas inhalation during riots in the town of Za’atara, south of Huwara. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that in addition to the one death, 390 Palestinians were injured in the attack. Following the violence, MK Zvika Fogel told Galey Israel Radio, “A closed, burnt Huwara – that’s what I want to see. That’s the only way to achieved deterrence. After a murder like yesterday’s, we need burning villages when the IDF doesn't act.” Minister Smotrich said, “the village of Huwara should be wiped out...I think the State of Israel should do it.” Major General Yehuda Fuchs, who oversaw Israeli forces in the West

Bank, called the settlers' actions a "pogrom." Media reported that on March 7, Israeli forces killed the unnamed Palestinian attacker from February 26 during a raid on the West Bank city of Jenin which left five other Palestinians dead and 26 injured.

A week after the initial riot in Huwara, on March 7, settlers again attacked residents, cars, and stores in Huwara with live ammunition, hatchets, rocks, and pepper spray. The Israeli NGO Yesh Din said IDF soldiers were present during the second attack but did not intervene. *Al-Jazeera* reported on the existence of a film of Israeli soldiers dancing with settlers in Huwara after the second attack, which took place during the Jewish holiday of Purim.

According to *Haaretz*, Israeli settlers on March 20 punctured the tires of 25 Palestinian cars and spray painted "Price Tag" on a nearby wall in the West Bank town of Salfit. A victim reported the settlers arrived from the Nof Avi settlement outside Salfit. Media reports described the "price tag" violence as a response to a Palestinian shooting at a vehicle in Huwara the day before and injuring one Israeli.

Some Israeli and Palestinian officials, as well as numerous NGOs, said some Israeli settlers used violence against Palestinians in the West Bank to intimidate them from using land settlers sought to acquire. According to UNOCHA, during the year, 1,539 individuals, including 756 children, were displaced due to settler violence and access restrictions. UNOCHA said at least 198 Palestinian households comprising 1,208 persons, including 586 children, were displaced amid settler violence and access restrictions between October 7 and year's end, representing 78 percent of all displacements reported. The displaced households were from at least 15 herding/Bedouin communities.

Political and religious groups in the West Bank and Gaza continued to call on members to "defend" al-Aqsa Mosque and holy sites in Jerusalem.

Media outlets reported that on March 19, Israeli police arrested an Israeli man after he attacked priests at the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem

with an iron bar during Lent. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Holy Synod, and the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre condemned the attack in a statement that said, “Terrorist attacks by radical Israeli groups targeting churches, cemeteries, and Christian properties, in addition to physical and verbal abuse against Christian clergy, have become almost a daily occurrence that evidently increases in intensity during Christian holidays.”

The Times of Israel reported that on January 5, police arrested two teenagers from central Israel suspected of desecrating approximately 30 graves in Jerusalem’s Anglican Mount Zion Cemetery on January 2. Security footage circulated on social media showing two individuals wearing yarmulkas and *tzitzit* vandalizing at least 28 graves by knocking over crosses, breaking tombstones, and throwing debris over the graves. Media reported the suspects were eventually released to house arrest. The Israeli MFA condemned the attack. Police issued a statement saying Jerusalem District Police Commander Doron Turgeman met with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, to update him on the investigation and said, “Every attack on religious sites or institutions is serious and harms the unique and fragile fabric of life that exists in the city for members of all faiths and sects.”

The Times of Israel reported that on February 2, Israeli police arrested a U.S. tourist who vandalized a statue at the Church of the Flagellation in Jerusalem’s Old City. In a social media video accompanying the article that showed a security guard subduing the man, the man could be heard repeatedly saying, “Exodus Chapter 20,” an apparent reference to the biblical prohibition against graven images. According to Israeli media, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land identified the suspect as “an American religious Jew” and said the incident was a “hate crime” that “joins a series of attacks all directed against the Christian public in Israel,” noting it was the fifth incident of violence against the Christian community in recent weeks. Police issued a statement saying, “We take a very serious view of damage to religious institutions and sites. The police will continue to act against acts of violence and vandalism in the holy places of all religions.”

Media outlets reported that on October 5, police arrested a tourist whom they identified as an American Jew for destroying two Roman-era statues in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Police said initial questioning suggested he smashed the statues because he considered them “to be idolatrous and contrary to the Torah.” The suspect’s attorney denied that he acted out of religious fanaticism and said he was suffering from a mental disorder. Authorities ordered the defendant to undergo a psychiatric evaluation.

On July 21, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate issued a statement after a video circulated on social media platforms showing individuals whom the Patriarch identified as “Israeli radicals” lying on a couch inside property belonging to the Church at Mount Zion in Jerusalem and refusing to leave the site. The patriarchate said a large number of Orthodox sites were “at risk from attacks by radicals who write slogans offensive to Christianity, Christ, and Christians, and throw paint on their walls as part of the disgraceful acts, attacks, and behavior they practice against Christian sanctities and property in general, and Orthodox property in general, and the Orthodox in particular.”

Eviction lawsuits filed by the “settler organization” Ateret Cohanim against Palestinian protected tenants that manage the New Imperial Hotel and Petra Hotel near the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem’s Old City remained pending as of year’s end. In 2022, the Israeli Supreme Court rejected the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate’s appeal against Ateret Cohanim regarding ownership of the hotels and a third property in the Christian Quarter, exhausting all recourse and efforts for the Greek Orthodox Church to fight a 2004 sale of the leases. Although the ownership was determined, the settlers still needed to win the eviction lawsuits.

The Times of Israel reported that on July 19, an employee from the ultra-Orthodox Western Wall Heritage Foundation asked Roman Catholic abbot Nikodemus Schnabel from the Dormition Abbey of the Old City to hide his cross while accompanying Germany’s education minister to the Western Wall because it was “really big and it’s inappropriate for this place.” Abbot

Schnabel refused, and the employee allowed him access to the site. A reporter for *Der Spiegel* posted video of the incident online. The Western Wall Heritage Foundation issued a statement apologizing “for the distress that was caused,” defending the employee’s actions while also saying the site was open to all and there were no rules “on this issue” at the Western Wall.

The Times of Israel reported that on June 22, Jewish activists from the organizations Lehava, which opposes interfaith relationships, and Yad l’Achim, which tries to counter Christian proselytization in Israel, tried to disrupt a gathering of Messianic Jews at the Clal Center in Jerusalem. Police dispersed the protesters and arrested one individual for allegedly attacking police.

Al-Quds reported that on September 17, Jewish settlers performed “Talmudic rituals” near the eastern gate of the Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs. Hajj Nidal al-Jaabari, director general of the Hebron Waqf, denounced these acts, which he described as a dangerous precedent and a clear and blatant challenge to the feelings of Muslims.

According to media outlets, multiple incidents took place during the year involving ultra-Orthodox individuals protesting the sale of “non-kosher” mobile phones at stores within their communities. “Kosher” mobile phones were configured only for calls and text messages, with no Internet access or apps, and were affiliated only with one provider. Media reported kosher mobile phones also allowed rabbis to monitor and control the flow of information into their communities. In January, police clashed with approximately 400 ultra-Orthodox protesters in the Geula neighborhood in Jerusalem, some of whom attempted to damage a mobile phone store, and some who sprayed pepper spray and threw eggs at the officers. Police arrested an individual. A similar incident involving more than 300 ultra-Orthodox demonstrators took place on March 16 and another on March 26.

Throughout the year, representatives of the Christian community reported an increasing atmosphere of harassment from ultra-Orthodox Jews, apathy

from authorities, and a fear of further deterioration. Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of Jewish Israelis in Jerusalem harassing or spitting on them. According to reports in the *Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*, on October 3, Israeli settler Elisha Yered, suspected of involvement in the August killing of Palestinian teen Qosai Mi'tan, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that spitting at Christians was “an ancient Jewish custom.” According to the *Post*, the comment came amid several incidents of Jews spitting on or near Christian worshippers in Jerusalem’s Old City, which were filmed on October 1 and 2.

Church leaders in the Old City of Jerusalem reported Israeli police did not intervene when their processions faced verbal harassment from Israelis and that they observed minimal consequences resulting from any police arrests on incidents of verbal or physical assault, complaining authorities often released suspects without charges or convictions. In August, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that “so far in 2023, there have been dozens of attacks by extremist Jews on Christians or Christian sites, ranging from merely unpleasant to vandalism and assault.” Christian leaders quoted by NBC news said most incidents of harassment or vandalism were never thoroughly investigated by authorities. Church officials and Christian leaders blamed a minority of violent Jewish extremists for the attacks, saying the government had fostered a culture of impunity for attacks on non-Jews. In a statement, the Greek Orthodox church said, “Terrorist attacks by radical Israeli groups targeting churches, cemeteries, and Christian properties... have become almost a daily occurrence that evidently increases in intensity during Christian holidays.” A representative of the Franciscans (Order of the Friars Minor), which administer sites in Jerusalem for the Catholic Church, said, “The police try to paint each attack as something isolated, and try to paint the attackers as mentally unstable...In doing so, the police remove themselves from all responsibility.” Another Franciscan said, “Because of the government situation, some extremists ... feel like they have a protector.”

Churches for Middle East Peace, a coalition of 30 U.S. communities and organizations, said lack of protections for Christian practice or Christians

themselves was forcing the remaining minority to consider fleeing the land. On July 9 at a state memorial ceremony for Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, Israeli President Isaac Herzog condemned growing attacks against Christians in Israel, particularly in Jerusalem, calling them “a true disgrace.” Herzog said, “I utterly condemn violence, in all its forms, directed by a small and extreme group, toward the holy places of the Christian faith, and against Christian clergy in Israel... This includes spitting, and the desecration of graves and churches,” a phenomenon that he noted had been on the rise “in the last weeks and months especially.” On June 6, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Amar, spoke out in an English-language letter against the harassment of Christians in Jerusalem, stating, “We were sorry to hear from non-Jewish clerics that a number of young Jews and some who pretend to be G-d-fearing, persecute them with curses, blasphemies and more, as they walk the streets of the city ... such behavior is strictly forbidden.”

In June, Israeli academics and activists organized a public conference on attacks against Christians in Jerusalem titled “Why Do (Some) Jews Spit on Gentiles.” *Haaretz* reported aids to Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Leon threatened to fire the Tower of David Museum director if the conference took place at the museum, and organizers later relocated the conference to an Armenian Patriarchate hall. Mayor Leon’s aides denied anyone issued such threats. Conference organizers invited Israeli foreign ministry and municipal officials to participate but they refused, according to *Haaretz*. Jerusalem’s Chief Sephardic Rabbi Amar issued a letter denouncing the conference as “arranged by those seeking to eradicate religion ... and trying to confuse and convert innocent Jews.” Jerusalem Deputy Mayor King called the conference “antisemitic.”

On October 3, the Times of Israel reported Orthodox Jews were filmed spitting on Christian pilgrims carrying a cross out of the Church of the Flagellation in the Old City of Jerusalem during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Police arrested five individuals suspected of spitting on the pilgrims, but National Security Minister Ben Gvir (who oversees the Israeli National Police) said he did not think spitting was a criminal case and suggested it did

not justify arrest. Prime Minister Netanyahu posted on social media, “Israel is totally committed to safeguard the sacred right of worship and pilgrimage to the holy sites of all faiths ... Derogatory conduct toward worshipers is sacrilege and is simply unacceptable.” Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi David Lau said, “Such phenomena are unwarranted and certainly should not be attributed to Jewish law.” Religion Minister Michael Malkieli also condemned the incident, saying “this is not the way of the Torah, and there is no rabbi that supports or gives legitimacy to this reprehensible behavior.”

According to members of unrecognized faith communities in the West Bank, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, established Christian groups continued to oppose their efforts to obtain official PA recognition, despite their decades-long presence in the territory.

Jehovah’s Witnesses stated the community continued to face difficulties related to the burial of its members, since most cemeteries were owned by particular churches. The group said the problem was greatest in Bethlehem, where Catholic and Orthodox churches controlled most graveyards and refused access to them.

According to Palestinian sources, some Christian and Muslim families in the West Bank and Gaza 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.

Despite Israeli labor law mandating that workers were entitled to take a weekly day off for worship, some foreign domestic workers in Jerusalem stated some employers did not allow them to do so.

As in prior years, ultra-Orthodox groups, including Peleg Yerushalmi and Eda Haredit, held protests in Jerusalem throughout the year against drafting ultra-Orthodox Jews into the military and against the proposed path of a Jerusalem light rail line through an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On October 9, the U.S. government, joined by France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, issued a statement condemning Hamas for the October 7 terror attack.

In October 18 remarks during a visit to Israel, the President said, “October 7th ... a sacred Jewish holiday, became the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. It has brought to the surface painful memories and scars left by a millennia of antisemitism and the genocide of the Jewish people. The world watched then, it knew, and the world did nothing. We will not stand by and do nothing again. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.”

In remarks to the American people on October 20, President Biden said, “The terrorist group Hamas unleashed pure, unadulterated evil in the world. But sadly, the Jewish people know, perhaps better than anyone, that there is no limit to the depravity of people when they want to inflict pain on others.” He continued, “We must, without equivocation, denounce antisemitism. We must also, without equivocation, denounce Islamophobia.”

On November 24, following the release of some Israeli and foreign hostages, the President said during press briefing that the United States would continue to work with regional partners toward “a future where all children in the region – every child – Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Israeli, Palestinian, Arab – grow up knowing only peace.”

Senior White House, State Department, and other U.S. officials in meetings with PA representatives raised concerns about PA officials’ statements or social media that promoted antisemitism or encouraged or glorified

violence. U.S. government officials repeatedly and publicly pointed out that Palestinian officials and party leaders did not consistently condemn individual terrorist attacks nor speak out publicly against members of their institutions who advocated violence. U.S. officials repeatedly underscored to the Israeli government the need to hold accountable extremist settlers who committed violent attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank. On December 5, the U.S. imposed visa restrictions on “individuals believed to have been involved in undermining peace, security, or stability in the West Bank.”

U.S. government representatives 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 intolerance, access to religious sites, respect for clergy, attacks on religious sites and houses of worship, and local Christian leaders’ concerns about ongoing Christian emigration from Israel and the Palestinian territories. U.S. government representatives hosted meetings between religious minorities and Israeli government officials to encourage cooperation on protecting religious minorities in Jerusalem from violent religious extremism.

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, leaders of evangelical Christian groups, Samaritan leaders, and Muslim community leaders.

In February following the arrest of two teenagers for vandalizing the Mount Zion Cemetery, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism posted to social media, “Desecration of any and all holy sites is unacceptable, and the sanctity of burial must be respected. Families have

the right to peacefully lay to rest loved ones. We must work together to call out all forms of hate whenever and wherever they occur.”

On April 16, following his meeting with Rabbi of the Wall Shmuel Rabinowitz, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom posted to social media, “I reiterated U.S. support for implementation of the 2016 Western Wall agreement to expand the egalitarian space at the Wall.”

In September, U.S. officials, including the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, and Ambassador to the United Nations, condemned President Abbas’s August 24 statements about the Holocaust, calling them historic distortions that were “hateful and antisemitic.”

Senior U.S. officials including the Secretary of State spoke publicly and with Israeli and Waqf officials about the importance of maintaining the historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The embassy reiterated U.S. government statements about the need to de-escalate tensions around the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, especially when Jewish and Muslim holidays coincided, which occurred during the year with Passover and Ramadan.

Throughout the year, the State Department used various social media platforms to express U.S. support for tolerance and the importance of openness to members of other religious groups. U.S. government-supported initiatives focused on combatting antisemitism and promoting interreligious dialogue and community development and advocated constructive relationships among Palestinian and Israeli populations. U.S. government officials advocated the right of persons from all faiths to practice their religion peacefully while also respecting the beliefs and customs of their neighbors.