

# Darkness in Bethlehem as Christmas 2023 Is Cancelled. Palestinian Christians Under Attack

By [Steven Sahiounie](#)

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*This Christmas, the rooms of all the hotels in Bethlehem are empty, and local businesses are suffering because no Christian pilgrims wanted to travel to what is increasingly looking like a war-zone.*

Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, has [cancelled Christmas](#) this year. For the first time since modern celebrations began, the birthplace of Jesus will not decorate the Manger Square tree.

In the original first Christmas story, Joseph and Mary were turned away from the inns, as all the rooms were full. This Christmas, the rooms of all the hotels in Bethlehem are empty, and local businesses are suffering because no Christian pilgrims, usually from America and Europe, wanted to travel to what is increasingly looking like a war-zone, as Israel Defense Forces (IDF) constantly raid the Occupied West Bank territory like Jenin.

“In our homes we can celebrate, but in our hearts we are suffering,” said [Ibrahim Dabbour](#), a Greek Orthodox priest. “How can we decorate a Christmas tree?”

The Israeli government has a plan to transform Christian sites at the Mount of Olives into a national park. The future of ancient churches and Biblical sites is uncertain because Israel wants to ultimately turn them all into tourist attractions for profit after they have gotten rid of the Christians.

## The War in Gaza and West Bank Raids

The IDF raids and attacks in the Occupied West Bank, with subsequent arrests, have been going on well before, but have intensified after the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas which killed over 1,000 Israelis.

Heads of various churches in Jerusalem, the Occupied West Bank, and Jordan have made a collective decision to make this Christmas a somber one, in solidarity with the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza, and the death toll now above 17,000 and rising daily in the Israeli war on Gaza.

Christmas is a public holiday in the Muslim-majority Jordan, with many city squares and shopping malls feted with seasonal decorations. But congregations throughout the country will now forgo the traditional festivities of public tree lighting, Christmas markets, scout parades, and distribution of gifts to children.

## **American Evangelical Zionists**

“We have a role to speak to our friends in the West,” said [David Rihani](#), president and general superintendent of the Assemblies of God Church of Jordan. “Jesus did not teach us to blindly side with anyone against another.”

He referred to a viral video of Tennessee-based pastor [Greg Locke](#) calling on Israel to turn Gaza into a “parking lot” and to blow up the Dome of the Rock to make room for the Third Temple and usher in the return of Jesus. Local evangelicals of the Holy Lands, Rihani said, refuse to be associated with such Christian Zionism.

John Munayer, a Jerusalemite Palestinian who belongs to the small Palestinian Evangelical Church, said that the harassment of Christians, which has increased especially over the past six months, has international ramifications.

“In the international Christian world there are those who passionately support Israel, those who identify with the Palestinian struggle against the occupation, and a great many who are somewhere in between,” Munayer said. “I go around international conferences and communities. The violent events move the needle and make many people question what the right attitude is toward Israel, and toward Jews.”

## **Palestinian Christians Under Attack by Israelis**

From April 2 to May 10, 2002, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the West Bank was besieged by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). On April 7, 2002 Vatican City warned Israel to respect religious sites in line with its international obligations. On April 20, 2002 the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem called upon Christians worldwide to make the upcoming Sunday a “solidarity day” for the people in the church and the church itself, and called for immediate intervention to stop what it referred to as the “inhuman measures against the people and the stone of the church”.

Ahead of Christmas 2018, [Israel banned the Christian minority](#) who live in the Gaza Strip from visiting Christian holy sites and churches in the West Bank and Jerusalem to celebrate Christmas.

Around 5,000 Christians, most of whom are Greek Orthodox, lived in the Gaza Strip before Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization signed Oslo peace accords in 1994. However, their number dramatically declined because of the continuing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Christians in the Gaza Strip, home to 2 million Palestinians, used to travel every year to the

West Bank city of Bethlehem and Jerusalem to join Palestinian Christians there to celebrate Christmas and the New Year.

Ahead of Easter 2017, Christian Palestinians looking to enter Jerusalem [required the approval of the Defense Ministry's](#) Coordinator of the Government's Activities in the Territories.

On January 26, 2023, [Miran Krikorian](#), the Armenian owner of Taboon and Wine Bar in the Old City of Jerusalem, received a call that a mob of Israeli settlers was attacking his bar in the Christian Quarter and shouting "Death to Arabs ... Death to Christians."

When he went to the police, the officer scolded him for bothering to report the crime.

A few days later, Armenians leaving a memorial service in the Armenian Quarter were attacked by Israeli settlers carrying sticks. An Armenian was pepper-sprayed as settlers scaled the walls of the Armenian convent, trying to take down its flag, which had a cross on it. When Armenians chased them away, the settlers began shouting: "Terrorist attack," prompting the police to draw their guns on the Armenians, beating and arresting one of victims.

Hostility by Jews towards Jerusalem's Christian community is persistent and covers all denominations. Since 2005, Christian celebrations around Holy Week, particularly Holy Fire Saturday, have brought military barricades and harsh treatment from soldiers and Jewish settlers alike, with the number of worshippers allowed inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre drastically limited, from as many as 11,000 historically during the Holy Fire ceremony to just 1,800 since last year.

Since Israel's current Jewish extremist government came to power, incidents against Christians in Jerusalem have reportedly become more violent and common. At the beginning of the year, 30 Christian graves at the Protestant Mount Zion Cemetery were desecrated.

At the Church of the Flagellation, a Jewish settler attacked a statue of Jesus with a hammer, and an Israeli came to the Church of Gethsemane during Sunday religious services and tried to attack the priest with an iron bar. Being spat upon and shouted at by Israelis has become, for Christians, "a daily occurrence". Victims of these incidents report little is done by police to catch or punish attackers.

"My fear is that these perpetrators are known, but they enjoy impunity," said Munib Younan, bishop emeritus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. "That's the reason they are doing this."

The Franciscans have set up cameras in all corners of their holy sites, which are becoming more closed off from the public due to the persistent attacks.

Ideologically, the primary source for this targeting of Christians and their holy sites comes from extremist Jewish groups, according to community and church leaders.

"Their mind is obsessed with the 'Messianic syndrome'. They want to take over the whole land," said [Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III](#) of Jerusalem.

Jews know they are above the law, and they can harass Christians, even with guns and get away with it. They call Christians "pagans" and "idol worshippers".

“The minister of national security is a lawyer who used to defend extremist Jews attacking Christian and other sites,” said one Armenian youth who was attacked in January, referring to **Itamar Ben-Gvir**. “What do you expect when the highest-ranking official in the equation is the most extremist?”

## The Jews Are Spitting on Christians

On October 5, Israel’s minister in charge of crime and policing, [Itamar Ben-Gvir, said it’s not a crime for Israeli Jews to spit on Christians](#). Spitting on people of a minority religion would be considered a hate crime in most countries, but for the Israeli government it is simply ‘an old Jewish tradition’.

In July 2023, during the Catholic Pentecost ceremony, about 20 ultra-Orthodox Jews blew trumpets and cursed loudly to sabotage the ceremony. “We are very concerned about the religious freedom of Christians in Jerusalem,” said a representative of the U.S. State Department who was present at the ceremony.

The Upper Room, in which the Last Supper was said to have taken place, was the scene of a mass in June, but Jews blasted noise outside speakers to mar the event, and two weeks later a Jewish man smashed the windows of the Upper Room.

Since the beginning of 2023, a large number of cases of vandalism have been recorded in Jerusalem’s Old City including 20 hate crimes against Christians, such as the graffiti that reads “Jesus son of Mary the whore”.

In June, a conference under the title “Why are Jews spitting on non-Jews?” was held in the Old City, but was boycotted by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[Robby Berman, an Israeli Jewish tour guide](#), said he was witness to two incidents of spitting, and that he is disturbed by the lack of enforcement in cases of harassment against Christians. After witnessing two boys spitting at Greek Orthodox priests at Jaffa Gate one Saturday morning, he flagged two Israeli police officers standing by them, but they refused to take action.

Berman was himself the victim of a spitting attack while chatting with a Palestinian security guard on the Via Dolorosa. As they were speaking, Berman said, “a modern ultra-Orthodox family walked passed — a father, a mother, a young couple, and many children. The young man spat at my legs,” as he was mistaken for a non-Jew.

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**Steven Sahiounie** is a two-time award-winning journalist. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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