

How Trump Ruined Christmas for Palestinian Christians

American support for Israel is helping drive Palestinian Christians out

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Christmas is a special time of the year in Palestine. From the beginning of December, Palestinian Christians and Muslims gather in town squares across the country to light Christmas trees and mark the advent of the holiday season.

Palestinian children look forward to the arrival of the traditional Arab Christmas cookie, maamoul, a small pastry stuffed with dates and nuts also served by Muslims in Ramadan.

A gloomy Christmas

This year, however, Christmas is a far more gloomy time than normal. In Bethlehem, the city of Jesus's birth, the lights have been [turned off](#) on the large Christmas tree in Manger Square.

In Nazareth, where Jesus's family hailed from, celebrations have been [cancelled](#).

In Beit Sahour, the village where the shepherds spotted the stars that portended Jesus's birth, the mood was [summarised](#) in the words of the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

Michel Sabbah:

"Our oppressors have decided to deprive us from the joy of Christmas."

Palestinian Christians have declared a Christmas blackout across the country in protest against US **President Donald Trump's** decision earlier this month to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel.

The move angered Palestinians of all backgrounds, but for Palestinian Christians it was an especially bitter blow given that Trump has professed [concern](#) for Middle East Christians and has made protecting them a repeated talking point.

US **Vice President Mike Pence** was meant to visit the region to meet with local Christian leaders ahead of Christmas, but every single one has now [refused](#) to see him.

Palestinians are angry because Jerusalem is a historically Palestinian-majority city, one that Israel occupied through military force in 1967 in a takeover that was never recognised by the international community.

In order to understand the depth of Palestinian Christians' rage, it's necessary to understand the history of Israel's occupation and the toll it has taken on Jerusalem's native people.

Driving Christians out

In 1948, when Israel was founded, 750,000 Palestinians were [driven](#) from their homes or were forced to flee – including nearly half of all Christian Palestinians, who [became](#) refugees overnight. When Israel occupied Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in 1967, 300,000 more Palestinians were [displaced](#).

This included an entire Christian neighbourhood of Jerusalem: the [Syriac Quarter](#), home to Christian refugees from massacres in Ottoman Turkey in the 1910s who were given refuge in Palestine. Hundreds of Palestinian Christians thus became refugees two and even three times over.

Since 1967, Israel has maintained a policy of isolating Jerusalem from its hinterland through a system of military checkpoints and permits that cut off access to the city for Palestinian Christians and Muslims alike.

While Israeli Jews in Jerusalem enjoy full rights as citizens of a democracy, their Palestinian neighbours face discrimination in every aspect of life, including what the State Department [terms](#) “insurmountable obstacles” in tasks as simple as getting a building permit for their home.

These restrictions aim to pressure Palestinians to leave: since 1967, Human Rights Watch has [documented](#) nearly 15,000 Palestinian residents of Jerusalem who have been expelled merely for living away from the city too long under what Israel calls its “[Centre of Life](#)” policy.

Trump and Pence have made protecting Middle Eastern Christians part of their foreign policy goals in the region.

But among the West Bank's 50,000 Christians, the Israeli occupation and its ensuing economic effects are regularly [cited](#) as the main reason for emigration. American support for Israel is [helping drive](#) Palestinian Christians out.

Since the beginning of the peace process in the early 1990s, Palestinians have sat down at the table with Israel over and over again to negotiate a lasting solution to the conflict. Despite Israel's rhetoric of peace, however, the reality on the ground has been far different.

While at the beginning of negotiations there were around 280,000 Israeli settlers living in [settlements](#) in the occupied Palestinian West Bank and East Jerusalem – considered illegal under international law – today there are [700,000](#), or more than 10 percent of Israel's population, according to Israel's housing minister.

These settlements have been constructed so as to surround every Palestinian town from all sides, with Israeli civilians used essentially as human shields around Israeli military bases and checkpoints.

End Israeli violations

The result is strangulation for the Palestinians caught between them. Bethlehem, for example, is [surrounded](#) on every single side by Israeli military installations.

This includes 22 different settlements and a military base built around [Rachel's Tomb](#), a sacred shrine where Muslims, Jews and Christians used to all worship but which has now been taken over and surrounded by a 20-foot [concrete wall](#) with access forbidden to non-Jews.



According to the UN, more than 85 percent of the land around Bethlehem is [off-limits](#) to Palestinians, leaving little room for economic growth.

The Israeli settlement of Har Homa towers over Bethlehem from a nearby hill - one that was once covered in olive groves where Palestinian Christians traditionally picnicked on saint days after visiting the nearby Saint Elias Monastery.

Today, the olive groves have been bulldozed. Israel's separation wall [blocks](#) Bethlehem's Palestinian residents from reaching the monastery, which was once the start of the city's Christmas parade. It is now cut off from the worshipers who once brought joy and laughter to its halls on Christian holidays.

If Pence wants to save Christmas and protect Middle Eastern Christians, it's imperative that Trump's decision to move the Israeli embassy to Jerusalem be stopped. Israel should be punished for its persecution of Palestinians - including Palestinian Christians - not rewarded.

To that end, it is imperative that US legislators end [military aid to Israel](#), which currently stands at nearly \$4bn a year, and ensure that the US has no role in supporting Israeli human rights violations.

The Israeli occupation is not happening in a vacuum - it is directly supported by the US government, Israel's closest ally. All Bethlehem wanted for Christmas and the new year is an end to Israeli human rights violations. It's up to Americans to make that happen.

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