

Occupation: On Christmas, Israel Denies Palestinian Christians Their Rights

It is concerning that religious organisations who claim to care about Christianity worldwide remain silent about the present and future of Christianity in Palestine

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I was born into a [Palestinian](#) Muslim family where celebrating [Christmas](#) was always a natural practice for us.

From an early age, I was often told "Jesus is Palestinian, just like you" - a fact that would give me tremendous pride.

This ecumenical outlook was something my Palestinian refugee parents had instilled in me. Before the [Nakba](#), they were living in Jerusalem and its surrounding towns.

According to the Christian tradition, that is also the place where the resurrection took place.

Not far from their home was the Church of Holy Sepulchre, [Al-Aqsa Mosque](#), and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. To this day, as a faithful Muslim, I have passed on what I learned from my family to my children.

It is impossible to understand Palestinian national identity without recognising its integral Christian component that exists side by side with the Muslim component.

Palestinians suffer equally

Palestinian Christians have not just been an integral part of our nation but also our [liberation movement](#). [Israel](#) knows that well: under Israeli colonial-settlement policies, racist legislation and daily attacks, Palestinians of all faiths are subjected to the same human rights violations.

This goes for the land and the people. On one end, Israel continues its racist policy of [preventing](#) Palestinian family reunification while making it almost impossible for thousands of Palestinians and foreign passport holders to even [visit Palestine](#), let alone invest, study, teach, or volunteer.

On the other, it has pushed for the expansion of its colonial-settlement projects including in [East Jerusalem](#) in an attempt to change its Palestinian identity.

Additionally, settlement projects such as the construction of "[Giv'at Hamatos](#)" around Mar Elias Monastery between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the transformation of church property in Jaffa Gate into new colonial settlements, as well as the [attempts](#) at turning the Mount of Olives into an Israeli national park, among others.

Such acts of aggression are part of an ongoing process of annexation that, in light of the Jewish supremacist ideology of some of those leading Israel, will not stop until their "Greater Israel" is consolidated, with full [annexation over the occupied West Bank](#).

Under this perspective, there will be continued attempts to change the status quo of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a move that is rejected by Palestinians, [Arabs](#) and the international community.

Such attempts have been understood by the [Heads of Churches in Jerusalem](#) as an attack against the concept of the status quo that has provided some of the most important Christian and Muslim religious sites in Palestine with clear regulations for centuries – way before the State of Israel was even established.

Despite violations committed against our people, we shall not surrender or give up on the message of hope delivered from a humble grotto in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. We also cannot be blind to the realities of the ongoing violations of Palestinians' rights since the Nakba 75 years ago.

Keeping hope alive

Changing course is possible. However, it would need a significant change in how things have been dealt with up to this point.

The Israeli government must halt all unilateral actions and recognise and implement its obligations under signed agreements and international law.

The [European](#) countries, the [US](#) and others that believe in the importance of protecting the two-state solution must immediately recognise the State of Palestine on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital and accept its full membership in the United Nations.

It is worrying to see how certain parties that claim to care about Christianity worldwide have chosen to remain silent on the steps that Israel is taking on the ground; steps which are directly affecting the present and future of Christianity in Palestine, particularly in and around occupied Jerusalem.

Those same "friends of Israel" that celebrate their "pilgrimages" should think a bit about the millions of Palestinians, including hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Christians that are

banned by the occupying power, Israel, from celebrating Christmas at their holy sites.

We will continue to celebrate Christmas in Palestine, the birthplace of Christianity. It is part of our identity and our responsibility to preserve our traditions that certainly include celebrating Christmas, which I love to consider a Palestinian gift to the world.

Part of our resilience is to keep our cultural heritage alive, to feel proud of our traditions, and to make sure, no matter the years of exile, oppression and occupation, that our people protect their right to live in freedom and independence, peace and prosperity, like all peoples worldwide.

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