Religious Minorities

The situation of Christians in Israel and Gaza

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Introduction

The Christian presence in Israel, where Christianity was born and first spread, holds deep historical, spiritual, and cultural significance. All prophets and the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ, lived and walked in the land of Israel. Yet today, the Christian communities in Israel, including Judea, Samaria, and Gaza face vastly different realities shaped by decades of political turmoil, demographic shifts, and religious dynamics.

This briefing paper examines the evolving situation of Christians in the region since the establishment of the British Mandate in 1918. It aims to provide a clear and evidence-based overview of the legal, social, and political conditions impacting Christian communities in Israel and in the areas governed by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. By tracing key developments over the past seven decades, this paper seeks to offer insight into the factors influencing changing Christian life in the region.

Christians in the Middle East

In 1910, Christians comprised **13.6%** of the Middle Eastern population; by 2010 this had dropped to **4.2%**, and projections estimate it will fall further to **3.6%** by 2030. This decline stands in stark contrast to centuries of relative demographic stability prior to the 20th century. The primary causes for this decline are wars, political upheavals, religious persecutions, and emigration. The Arab Spring, civil wars, and increasing social hostilities have exacerbated the exodus, with many Christians seeking refuge in the West or in more tolerant environments. [1]

Christians in the British Mandate of Palestine

During the British Mandate, religion had great importance in forming individual and national identity due to the Christian character of the British empire. Therefore, this period saw an "enhancement of religion as a marker of developing a national identity" in the Mandate area for several reasons. Firstly, there was a lack of Ottoman cultural investment in non-Islamic minorities. Arab Christians, as a result, were often targeted as the main recipients of European cultural diplomacy. Secondly, the growth of Western school systems, linked to missionaries, were geared, at least initially, to Christian communities. Thirdly, the tendency to focus on urban, rather than rural, societies meant that Christians were well placed to engage in cultural and religious activities. Finally, within the context of British policy during the Mandate, Jews and Muslims were directly addressed in British policy, while Christians had to invest in their community's development, somewhat more autonomously. [2] This meant that **Christian communities enjoyed a relatively great freedom of cultural development and religious freedom** during the British Mandate, causing communities to thrive and low immigration rates.

[1] https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/JMEPP-JohnsonaandZurlo.pdf
[2] Sanchez Summerer, K. & Zananiry, S. (eds.), European Cultural Diplomacy and Arab Christians in Palestine, 1918–1948: Between Contention and Connection, p. 7.

The available data about Christian presence in the region at that time confirm these observations. In 1922, Census of Palestine recorded 73.000 Christians in the Mandate area, making up for almost 10% of the total population. [3] In 1931 Census registered a rise of the population to almost 100.000, making up for 8.6% of the total population. [4] An official UN research shows that in 1946 approximately 150.000 Christians lived in the area, making up for 8% of the population. [5] Even though their relative share in the total population decreased over time, **we can see that the Christian population doubled during the Mandate period**.

Christians in the State of Israel

Before examining the development of Christian communities, the 150.000 Christians in the British Mandate were living in nowadays Israel, Judea, Samaria, Gaza and Jordan. Around 75.000 Christians lived in nowadays Israel, including Judea, Samaria and Gaza. [6] This means that the other half lived in current day Jordan. During the War of Independence (1948-1949) Christian communities were also displaced and many found refuge in Western and neighboring countries, but also in Israel. [7]

Christian population in Israel since 1948

Since the founding of the State of Israel the **Christian population has grown with almost 500%**. [8] In 1949 the newly established Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) in Israel found that approximately 34.000 Christians lived in Israel. [9] This is lower than the aforementioned 75.000 due to the Jordanian occupation of Judea, Samaria and eastern Jerusalem, and the Egyptian occupation of Gaza. Regardless, **the Christian population in Israel has been on the rise ever since without exception.** [10]

The Israeli CBS found that in December 2024, more than 180.000 Christians lived in Israel. [11] The Christian community is growing relatively slow compared to the Muslim and Jewish communities in Israel, but a lower birthrate is related to higher living standards, showing that Christians in Israel are economically thriving.

Position of Christians in Israeli society

Statistics show that the Christian community in Israel, for more than 85% consisting of Christian Arabs, is the most successful ethnoreligious group in Israeli society in terms of education.

[3]https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/1087
[4]https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/1091
[5]https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-210930/
[6]https://jcpa.org/article/demographics-dont-lie-the-christian-population-in-pa-and-hamas-controlled-areas-is-declining/
[7]https://www.hcc.ps/archives/52123
[8]https://www.camera.org/article/grudging-ap-clarification-on-israel-s-christians-falls-short/
[9]https://www.haaretz.com/2005-12-23/ty-article/central-bureau-of-statistics-146-000-christians-reside-in-israel/0000017f-dc62-df9c-a17f-fe7a51410000
[10]https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/mediarelease/doclib/2022/415/11_22_415t13.pdf
[11]https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/Pages/2024/Christmas-2024-Christians-in-Israel.aspx

Almost 60% of the Christian Arabs in Israel obtained a Masters degree, while the majority of that number are women. [12] These results are also visible on the labor market. Christians have the lowest amount of people per capita benefitting from social welfare and more than half of the households have two incomes. [13] The latest annual report by the Israel Democracy Institute also shows that **more than 70% of Israeli Arab Christians wish to stay living in Israel** among their Jewish brothers and sisters. [14] This high percentage underlines their good position in Israeli society.

There are also occurrences of damaging Christian sites and harassment of Christians. Even though these are very rare, the Israeli government and Chief Rabbis have condemned these incidents in the strongest terms and believe them to violate the essence of Judaism and the democratic character of Israel. [15]

Christians in Judea and Samaria

Between 1948 and 1967 Judea and Samaria were occupied by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In 1949, the number of Christians living there was 51,053. That number declined to 45,855, according to a Jordanian population census conducted in 1961. When Israel took control of Judea and Samaria in 1967, the Christian population had further declined, numbering 42,719 people, only 6% of the population. [16]

The Palestinian Authority's (PA) first population census in 1997 recorded 40,055 Palestinian Christians in Judea and Samaria, constituting 1.5% of the total Palestinian population. [17] The second census in 2007 indicated a slight increase in size, which numbered 42,565, but their percentage in the general population had declined to only 1.2%. [18] In the third PA census conducted in 2017, the number of Christians had grown to 46,850, yet **they accounted for only 1% of the population.** [19]

Position of Christians in Judea and Samaria

Many Christians have reported discrimination in social and institutional settings. The Arab Barometer (2020) found that **20-25% of Christians reported verbal harassment, such as curses or accusations of blasphemy. Roughly one in five said they had faced discrimination** when seeking PA services or employment. [20]

[12]https://www.algemeiner.com/2024/01/15/israels-christian-community-booming-data-show/
[13]https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/mediarelease/DocLib/2022/415/11_22_415e.pdf
[14]https://en.idi.org.il/media/27509/israel-democracy-index-2024-e_for_web_17-2-2025.pdf
[15]https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/
[16]https://jcpa.org/article/demographics-dont-lie-the-christian-population-in-pa-and-hamas-controlled-areas-is-declining/
[17]https://ghdx.healthdata.org/record/palestine-population-housing-and-establishment-census-1997-ipums
[18]https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/1017
[19]https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/PCBS-Metadata-en-v5.2/index.php/catalog/663
[20]https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/migration-of-palestinian-christians-drivers-and-means-of-combating-it/

Around 30% of Christian respondents felt socially unwelcome, and 70% (!) had heard Muslims claim that Christians would go to hell. [21] Echoing these findings, Christians in Bethlehem indicated that **79% of Christians viewed PA-related bias in land and service access**, as a clear example of discrimination towards their communities. [22] As a result of all of this, the Christian population in Bethlehem has decreased by around 80%. **In 1948, Christians made up around 85% of Bethlehem's inhabitants. That amount has decreased to between 5% and 10% in 2025.** [23] Earlier scholarship documented similar patterns, noting that Christians lacked informal networks ("personal and clan connections") enjoyed by Muslims. This strongly affects access to education, jobs, medical aid, and government assistance. [24] Christians also reported that donations were stolen by the PA, leading to further economic marginalization. [25] Additionally, in the village of Jifna, **a 2015 incident involved a Fatah-affiliated gunman dictating jizya tax [26] from Christian residents**. [27]

Violent interactions on the ground

Over the years, Christians in Judea and Samaria have at times faced hostility and violence from Islamist factions and local mobs. In 2002, a mob in Ramallah attacked Christian-owned property following local tensions between communities. [28] In the same year terrorists occupied the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem to fight the Israeli army. After 39 days of battle, the church was heavily damaged. [29] In 2005, in the majority-Christian village of Taybeh, dozens of homes were torched by a Muslim crowd after a local Muslim woman was said to have had a relationship with a Christian man. [30] In 2006, churches in Gaza and Nablus were firebombed, and a group calling itself the "Lions of Monotheism" claimed responsibility. [31] In Gaza, after the Hamas takeover in 2007, Christian institutions such as the Bible Society's library were repeatedly destroyed. [32]

[21]https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/migration-of-palestinian-christians-drivers-and-means-of-combating-it/
[22]https://jcpa.org/article/demographics-dont-lie-the-christian-population-in-pa-and-hamas-controlled-areas-is-declining/
[23]https://www.ncronline.org/bethlehems-declining-christian-population-casts-shadow-over-christmas
[24]https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2018/en/56759
[25]https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/migration-of-palestinian-christians-drivers-and-means-of-combating-it/
[26]The jizya is a historical poll tax levied on non-Muslims (dhimmis) in Islamic states in exchange for protection and exemption from military service. Although abolished in modern legal systems, it is sometimes invoked by extremist groups as a form of intimidation against religious minorities.
[27]https://www.catholic.org/news/international/middle_east/story.php?id=83179
[28]https://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2002/me_palestinians_03_06.html
[29]https://jcpa.org/article/the-vatican-and-the-standoff-at-the-church-of-the-nativity/
[30]https://www.abc.net.au/news/2005-09-05/homes-razed-to-avenge-muslim-womans-dishonour/2096720
[31]https://religion.fandom.com/wiki/Regensburg_lecture/Protests,_attacks_and_threats
[32]https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2008/108484.htm

Christians in Gaza

The Christian community in Gaza has a long and continuous presence, dating back to the early centuries of Christianity. **During the British Mandate period (1917–1948), Christians were a small but vibrant minority in Gaza,** comprising several hundred individuals who were primarily Greek Orthodox, with smaller Catholic and Protestant communities. They were active in commerce, education, and civic life, operating schools and charitable institutions. [33]

By 1948, following the Arab-Israeli war and the influx of Palestinian refugees, the Christian population in Gaza grew to approximately 2,500–3,000 people. [34] **Under Egyptian administration (1948–1967) and subsequently Israeli control (1967–2005), the community remained stable in number**, continuing to operate churches and schools, though always as a tiny minority in a predominantly Muslim society. [35]

The most significant shift occurred after the Israeli withdrawal in 2005 and the violent Hamas takeover in 2007, resulting in a radical Islamist regime. **Since then, Gaza's Christian population has declined dramatically from around 3,000 in 2007 to fewer than 1,000 today, due to emigration, religious pressure, and deteriorating living conditions.** [36] While Christians are officially tolerated under Hamas and allowed to worship, incidents of harassment, targeted violence, and social intimidation have created a climate of fear. [37]

Notably, the 2007 murder of Rami Ayyad, a Baptist bookstore owner, and attacks on Christian institutions such as schools and convents, sent shockwaves through the community. [38] Today, Gaza's Christians maintain a visible but highly vulnerable presence, with three functioning churches and several schools, yet face immense pressure from both the huge amount of corruption and rising Islamization of public life. [39] **The population decline is not merely demographic, it signals the slow erosion of one of the oldest Christian communities in the Holy Land.**

Christian Holy Places during the war in Gaza

During the ongoing Gaza war, Christian churches have been impacted by military operations. On July 17, 2025, the Holy Family Catholic Church in Deir al-Balah was struck by shrapnel of stray tank fire, killing three people and causing damage to the compound. [40] In addition, the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius was hit by Israeli airstrikes in October 2023. [41]

[33]https://eap.bl.uk/collection/EAP1544-1-4/search
[34]https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=114c#IRFDEMOG
[35]https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2093
[36]https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/christians-in-gaza-a-community-discriminated-against/
[37]https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2008
[38]https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/377396
[39]The previous paragraph explains the situation before October 7th, 2023, and the eruption of the war.
[40]https://www.ncronline.org/news/two-dead-holy-family-gaza-pastor-injured-after-mid-morning-israeli-attack
[41]https://greekreporter.com/2024/10/14/saint-porphyrius-christianity-gaza/

The Israeli authorities directly stated that the churches are never the intentional target of military operations, and deeply regret the damages done and lives lost. [42]

Conclusion

For legislators who are committed to defend religious freedom and minority rights, the situation of Christians in Israel, Judea and Samaria, and Gaza presents a sobering reality. **This briefing paper has shown that under Israeli governance, the Christian community has not only survived but thrived**. Israeli Christians are experiencing consistent population growth, excelling in education, and achieving strong economic and social integration. **Israel remains the only country in the Middle East where the Christian population is growing and where Christian Israeli citizens enjoy full civil rights.**

In stark contrast, **in territories governed by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, Christian communities are in steep decline.** Reports of systemic discrimination, social exclusion, religious intimidation, and even violent persecution are well-documented. In Bethlehem, once a Christian-majority city, the Christian population has even decreased by 80%. In Gaza, fewer than 1,000 Christians remain, living under constant pressure from the radical Islamist regime of Hamas. These facts matter, especially when shaping foreign policy, development aid, and human rights advocacy. European funding and political support must not ignore the documented abuses facing Christians under PA and Hamas rule. Aid conditionality, diplomatic accountability, and increased support for civil society actors defending religious freedom are necessary steps forward. Legislators must recognize that where pluralism, democracy, and the rule of law prevail, as in Israel, Christian communities can flourish. Where authoritarianism and religious extremism dominate, these same communities are being erased. Policy must reflect this distinction.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Condition** EU and Member State funding on religious freedom guarantees. European financial support to the Palestinian Authority and to projects in Gaza should be strictly conditional on measurable commitments to protect religious minorities, including Christians;
2. **Call** for independent audits of EU aid to Palestinian institutions to prevent the diversion of international funds that contribute to the marginalization of Christians;
3. **Strengthen** strategic partnerships with Israel on religious freedom and minority rights, recognizing Israel as a regional model for religious freedom and minority integration;

[42]https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/17/netanyahu-apology-israel-church-strike-00461021