



PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES: Country Dossier

June 2018



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Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64				
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55		51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57				
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55		50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54		48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	60	36
WWL 2017	64	23
WWL 2016	62	24
WWL 2015	58	26
WWL 2014	53	34

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Christians with a Muslim background face pressure and persecution in the Palestinian Territories. However, Christians from both Historical church and Evangelical church backgrounds in the West Bank have emphasized that Israel's (military) control of the West Bank is the main restricting factor for their freedom of movement, including the visiting of holy places in Israel. These restrictions are not specifically focused on Christians but affect all Palestinians and are therefore not understood to be part of the direct persecution of Christians in the WWL scoring.

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding the PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14630174>

Recent country history

After Islamist Hamas won a decisive majority in the parliamentary elections of 2006, a national unity government was formed in which both Hamas and Fatah took part. Tensions over control of the Palestinian security forces led to a civil war in Gaza, in which Hamas took power by force in 2007. Since then, there have been two rival administrations within the Palestinian Authority. The relationship between both political parties is characterized by mutual distrust, revealing the influence of tribalism and clan rivalries within the Palestinian Arab community. Adherents of the one have been imprisoned and abused by the other. Meanwhile Hamas is gaining in popularity both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Rapprochement efforts between Fatah and Hamas resulted in the formation of a Palestinian unity government in June 2014. This move was meant to pave the way for parliamentary elections, however these have not been held as the unity government resigned in June 2015. Members of Hamas also attended the Fatah conference in November 2016, though divisions between both continue.

In July 2017, Israeli safety measures around the Al-Aqsa mosque, put in place after the killing of two Israeli police men, ignited violent protests, causing the death of at least six people. Both Fatah and Hamas condemned the measures, calling on to the Palestinians to protect the mosque. After two weeks of protest, Israel removed all safety measures.

The religious landscape

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict causes many challenges for indigenous Christians - their ethnicity results in many restrictions from the Israeli side, and their religion puts them in a minority position within the Muslim-majority Palestinian community. The territories are ruled or impacted by three different governments: The West Bank's ruling Fatah party is formally based on secular (i.e. "non-Islamist") principles and Christians enjoy several rights, even being active in the highest levels of government.

In Gaza, although Christians are largely tolerated by Islamist Hamas, the rights of Christians are neither upheld nor protected. In past years Christians in the Gaza strip have faced threats from radical Islamic vigilante groups; in 2016 there were no incidents reported. Israeli military law is valid in parts of the West Bank, restricting greatly the movement of all Palestinians, including Christians. The total number of Christians has been decreasing in both areas over time due to emigration and lower birth rates. A ray of hope is the small but growing number of converts from Islam to Christianity.

The political landscape

During the past few years Islamic militants more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza and the West Bank. They appeal especially to the youth, and also to those from a Hamas or even Fatah background. Despite the fact that these Salafist groups do not have major power, their influence cannot be dismissed. Responsible for a large part of the rocket attacks from Gaza on Israel, they are capable of provoking escalation. Partly as a result of their influence, Hamas takes Islamizing measures from time to time. A virtue campaign was launched in January 2013 checking females' clothing, the hijab was made mandatory in high schools and males were banned from working as hairdressers for females. These last two measures were reversed after resistance from the local population, the West and human rights activists. Gaza remains a fertile recruiting ground which makes violent radicalism a real threat: Its situation is generally perceived as being hopeless, there is the feeling that nobody cares about it anyway and the influence of politicized Islamic forces seems unavoidable. The Arab Spring uprisings only added to this, and Salafists from Gaza are fighting in Syria and becoming more radicalized.

The socio-economic landscape

Although the West Bank and Gaza are both part of the Palestinian Territories, their differences are considerable. 38% of the Gazans are living in poverty, while this is 22% for West Bankers (2014 estimate).⁴

Gazan daily life is heavily influenced by the Israeli/Egyptian economic blockade imposed since 2007 when Hamas took power. The unemployment rate is 42% in Gaza and 18% (2016 estimate) in the West Bank.⁵ There are even differences on a legislative level: The legal code in Gaza follows Egyptian law, while in the West Bank it follows Jordanian law - in spite of laws passed to unify both codes. Since 2007, the two areas have been governed by different governments: Gaza is ruled by Islamist Hamas and the West Bank is governed by the more moderate Fatah. At least 60% of the West Bank is under full Israeli control. Also, the level of persecution in these two areas is different. In Gaza, where persecution is worse, Islamic militants and the conservative Islamic society play a more significant role than in the West Bank.

There are more Palestinians living in exile than in the Palestinian Territories. Most are living in refugee camps. The Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967 created large streams of refugees.

⁴ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/817271468143394694/Seeing-is-believing-poverty-in-the-palestinian-territories>, p. 19. Last accessed on 27 July 2017.

⁵ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/overview>, last accessed on 27 July 2017.

Starting in 1948 with around 500,000-700,000 persons, their number has since grown to about 5-6 million refugees. Many still live in refugee camps that were established in 1948 or later, just like Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and even in the Palestinian Territories themselves. Exact numbers, definitions of a refugee and the responsibility for their exodus are strongly disputed; Israel and Arab political and military leaders both receive blame for the situation. Socio-economic circumstances in the camps are generally poor, with high population density and insufficient basic infrastructure. The fate of these refugees is also a very controversial issue. ‘Guest countries’ are not prepared to assimilate them and for Israel their return would constitute a danger to the Jewish state.

Concluding remarks

The Economist Intelligence Unit expects outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian unrest to continue to happen in Gaza and West Bank for the next few years.⁶ Nation-building and reform are hindered by (among other factors) divisions between Hamas and Fatah. The peace process is expected to continue to stagnate and the chance of new outbursts of violence is high. In its risk assessment, BMI research points out that such outbreaks could reoccur and “lead to a conflict between Israel and Hamas, or to a full-scale armed insurrection similar to the first and second intifadas”.⁷ This will further affect the quality of life for all Palestinians negatively, including Christians, leading to a continuing emigration of the latter.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
4,928,000	67,700	1.4

Source: WCD, May 2017

On the West Bank and in Gaza the general trend is that Christians are leaving, or at least they want to leave (especially in Gaza). The number of Christians is a delicate topic in terms of their vulnerability and the area’s politics

How did Christians get there?

Since the beginning of the Christian era there have been Christians living in the region. At first these were mostly Jews who believed in Jesus and later Christians from other nations came to ‘the Holy Land’ to a visit or live there permanently. Although the Church did not always play a positive role in the area – i.e. during the Crusades – there has always been a presence of believers from all kinds of denominations and nationalities. In the 7th century, Muslim Arab

⁶ <http://country.eiu.com/Palestine>, last accessed 27 July 2017.

⁷ <http://store.bmiresearch.com/israel-country-risk-report.html>, last accessed 20 December 2016.

armies invaded and from the 9th century on, Christians have been a minority, living in the land under Islamic authority. As long as they paid the *jizya*, a tax for conquered non-Muslims (*dhimmis*), and were not evangelizing Muslims, they were allowed to practice their religion. As foreign missionaries started working in the Middle East, Evangelical churches were established and their approach differed from the more historical churches, i.e. viewing the Gospel as news for everyone, also for Muslims. Today this causes more than just tension. Christians with a Muslim background are likely to get into trouble and be persecuted.

What church networks exist today? ⁸

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
32,700	15,900	10,000	5,600	3,500	-	5,400	10,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

Most ethnic Christians are Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic and there are also several Protestant denominations. Christians are decreasing in number but are found especially in the cities of Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Bethlehem. There are also smaller Christian communities in other locations, including Messianic Jews. There is also a small but growing community of Christians with a Muslim background, who face the most severe persecution. Integration into the historical or Evangelical churches is not always easy and many of these converts therefore come together in separate congregations, most of the time in secret.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁹
67,700	4,003,000	-	-	-	569,000	2,300	285,800

Source: WCD, May 2017

Notes on the current situation

Christians are squeezed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their ethnicity causing many restrictions from the Israeli side and their religion putting them in a minority position within the Palestinian community. Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. Though largely tolerated by Hamas, Christians are discriminated against and threatened by radical Muslim vigilante groups in Gaza.

⁸ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

⁹ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

The total number of Christians has been decreasing over time, due to emigration and lower birth rates. Important motives for emigration are pressure caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the economic decline in the Palestinian Territories. Also, the Christians' higher level of education and contacts with the West play a role in encouraging emigration.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 60 / Position: 36

WWL 2017 Points: 64 / Position: 23

WWL 2016 Points: 62 / Position: 24

Where persecution comes from

Palestinian Christians suffer daily from the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Their ethnicity results in many restrictions from the Israeli side. Like other Palestinians, Christians experience these limitations on a daily basis and they are an important incentive for emigration. Their religion also puts them in a minority position within the Muslim-majority Palestinian community.

Although the Palestinian Territories are considered as a union, there are de facto two different areas: Gaza (ruled by Hamas) and the West Bank (where the Fatah party has the upper hand). Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. Governments in both areas are not actively persecuting Christians; in the West Bank, Christians even have positions within the (local) government. Nevertheless, the Palestinian society is conservative and leaving one's religion is difficult. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is in particular unacceptable and changing from one church denomination to another is also controversial.

How Christians are suffering

There are three main groups of Christians in the Palestinian Territories, each facing their own problems:

- i) The historical or traditional churches are the biggest group. They have good connections with the ruling Palestinian Authority, but they have to be diplomatic in their approach towards Muslims in general. This is especially the case now that the influence of radical Islamic ideology is growing since the appearance of the Islamic State group and other radical Islamic groups. The biggest daily problems for Christians belonging to these churches consist of struggles with the Israeli government, such as travel and visa issues, which make it complicated for church leaders to travel to areas under their pastoral authority - especially if these are outside the West Bank or Jerusalem, like Jordan. Besides that, there were incidents reported of harassment of church leaders by Jewish extremists.

- ii) The so-called Evangelicals (i.e. Christians not affiliated with the traditional churches) constitute a second group. Their number is small, but they have quite some influence through organizing conferences, providing theological education and doing outreach. They struggle with the limitations from the Israeli side too, but they also have to cope with denominational resistance from the traditional churches. This is partly caused by different theological views, in particular when it comes to the status of Israel, where the traditional churches see the Evangelicals as Western or Zionist and more in favor of Israel. Leaders of all church denominations are trying to protect their own flock. Hence, cross-denominational “church-changers” - mostly from traditional churches to the new Evangelical churches - sometimes experience pressure from their (extended) family or community.
- iii) A third group consists of converts from Islam to Christianity. They bear the brunt of persecution, as their conversion will not normally be accepted by their communities and families. It is difficult for them to connect to the existing churches, as the latter are afraid of repercussions from the Muslim population.

Due to the Israeli restrictions (with the resulting poor economic situation), combined with the fear of growing Islamic radicalism, many Christians have emigrated and the number of Christians remaining in the Palestinian Territories is shrinking rapidly.

Examples

- During the WWL 2018 reporting period it was reported that a convert in Gaza had been physically assaulted by his family. He remains hidden in a safer place to live.
- Proselytizing Muslims is not forbidden by law, but remains difficult due to pressure from society. Some Christians are afraid of endangering their ties with their Muslim neighbors if they are too actively involved in proselytizing.
- According to the US State Department reporting on Israel and the Palestinian Territories in 2016: A “combination of factors continued to provide the impetus for increased Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank, including the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions maintained by the municipality in Jerusalem or Israeli authorities in Area C; the difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; Israeli government family reunification restrictions; taxation problems; and economic hardship created by Israeli-imposed travel restrictions.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Israel 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, p. 47.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 60 / Position: 36

WWL 2017 Points: 64 / Position: 23

WWL 2016 Points: 62 / Position: 24

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The score for the Palestinian Territories went down four points from 64 in WWL 2017 to 60 in WWL 2018. Less violence has been reported, causing some decrease in points. However, a refinement was also made for registering the situation of converts from Islam to Christianity within the Palestinian Territories and this caused a further decrease.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in the Palestinian Territories ¹¹	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Strong
Religious nationalism	Strong
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Weak

¹¹ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Religious nationalism (Strong):

Palestinian Christians indicate that the Israeli control of the West Bank and their firm grip on Gaza causes the biggest part of their suffering. This consists of external control of all the borders¹², combined with a permit system to enter Israel and to travel between Gaza and the West Bank, thus limiting the possibility of visiting holy places in Jerusalem for example.

Besides this, Israel has full internal control of approximately 60% of the West Bank (territories belonging to Area C under the Oslo accords) - an area which separates all the regions controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Internal checkpoints within the West Bank are used to control the area and to protect the Israeli settlements within the West Bank. This control creates insecurity, limits economical development and limits the freedom of movement, thus isolating the Christian communities within the West Bank.

Without hope for a political solution, many Christians do not see a future for themselves in the Palestinian Territories and emigrate to other parts of the world. The Israeli control of the West Bank is linked to the view that sees the West Bank as part of the biblical Israel belonging to Jews only. The general feeling among non-Jews (including Palestinian Christians) is that they are allowed no space to live a dignified life in the West Bank.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

Generally speaking, Christians are affected by *Islamic oppression* throughout the territories, although there is noticeably more pressure in Gaza than in the West Bank, because of the presence of active radical Islamic movements. Islamic militants more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza and are also present in the West Bank. These include Islamic State group (IS) cells - either active or “sleeping”. Despite the fact that these groups do not have any major power yet, their influence cannot be dismissed.

Dictatorial Paranoia (Strong):

Dictatorial Paranoia is connected to plain greed and the safeguarding of the interests of a small group. Both parties within the Palestinian Authority, Fatah and Hamas, try to maintain power with all means necessary. Criticizing them in their respective territory can be dangerous. Nepotism is widespread within the clan-based society and people with connections to those in power are most of the time well-off. Without elections for many years, the democratic legitimacy of the government is low. Overall, Hamas seems to be more popular within the territories than Fatah, which forms the internationally recognized part of the Palestinian Authority. Politically active Christians are mostly involved with Fatah, which claims to be secular in principle.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

This persecution engine describes the continuing influence and enforcement of age-old norms and values. In the Palestinian Territories it is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects converts from Islam. As in the rest of the Middle East, religion is connected to family identity. Therefore, leaving Islam is interpreted as betraying one’s family. In general, families put strong

¹² Except for the Gaza border with Egypt.

social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families as a result of their faith.¹³

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in the Palestinian Territories	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Very weak
Violent religious groups	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Not at all
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

Drivers of Religious nationalism:

Palestinian Christians mostly face pressure from Israeli government officials, above all the Israeli security forces, in their day-to-day life. Confrontations with Israeli inhabitants of the West Bank, the settlers, can also be intimidating. Both security forces and settlers are well armed, but the latter are known to be more zealous than the common Israeli soldier.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

As the number of Palestinian Christians is very small (1.4% according to WCD statistics) compared to the Muslim majority, the biggest pressure is the subtle pressure from *normal citizens*. This can be viewed in the dress rules for women, which are enforced via disapproving looks or comments. Palestinian society is conservative, with more liberty in the cities compared to the rural areas. Most Christians are part of the historical Christian communities. They have to operate carefully, as they are regarded by Muslim society as being “different”. One country researcher stated: “The majority eats the minority here. The Christians isolate themselves, out of fear of upsetting society in one way or another”.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

Members of a convert’s (extended) family will put a lot of pressure on a convert to give up the Christian faith. They see converts as bringing shame to the honor of the family. Especially converts from Islam to Christianity will be expelled and harassed by their families. The

¹³ See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281034882_FREEDOM_OF_RELIGION_IN_ISRAEL-PALESTINE_MAY_MUSLIMS_BECOME_CHRISTIANS_AND_DO_CHRISTIANS_HAVE_THE_FREEDOM_TO_WELCOME_SUCH_CONVERTS, last accessed 14 September 2017.

situation for converts in Gaza is even worse, as the Christian community is tiny and there are hardly any places to hide.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

Palestinian *Government officials* and other people connected to one of the two *political parties* within the Palestinian Authority are another source of pressure, although Christians traditionally have been involved with Fatah and the nationalist movement. Most Christians support the factions in their struggle against the Israeli authorities and face no difficulties. Nevertheless, the freedom of expression and therefore the freedom of religion is limited, as criticizing the Palestinian Authorities or their Islamic rule can have negative consequences, especially in Gaza. Christians also face the pressure of Israeli government control.

Context

The Palestinian Territories are ruled or impacted by three different governments:

1. The West Bank's ruling Fatah party is formally based on secular principles – meaning non-Islamist, although the Basic Law states that the principles of Islamic *Sharia* law shall be the main source of legislation. Christians enjoy several rights, even being active in the highest levels of government.
2. Islamist Hamas de facto rules Gaza. They base their governance on Islam and *Sharia* law. Christians are largely tolerated, as their numbers are very small.
3. Israeli military law is valid in most parts of the West Bank, leading to great restrictions of movement of all Palestinians, including Christians. The total number of Christians has been decreasing in both parts of the Territories over time due to emigration and lower birth rates. A ray of hope is the small but growing number of converts from Islam to Christianity.

After Islamist Hamas won a decisive majority in the parliamentary elections of 2006, a national unity government was formed in which both Hamas and Fatah took part. Tensions over control of the Palestinian security forces led to a civil war in Gaza, in which Hamas took power by force in 2007. Since then, there have been two rival administrations within the Palestinian Authority. The relationship between both political parties is characterized by mutual distrust, revealing the influence of tribalism and clan rivalries within the Palestinian Arab community. Adherents of the one have been imprisoned and abused by the other. Meanwhile Hamas is gaining in popularity both in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Rapprochement efforts between Fatah and Hamas resulted in the formation of a Palestinian unity government in June 2014. This move was meant to pave the way for parliamentary elections, however these have not been held as the unity government resigned in June 2015. Members of Hamas also attended the Fatah conference in November 2016, though divisions between both continued. In October 2017, both parties reached an agreement, in which the administrative authorities in Gaza were signed over to the Palestinian Authority. The control of the borders was also handed over to the Palestinian Authority.¹⁴ Hamas keeps its military wing, however, and is effectively still

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/01/hamas-hand-over-control-of-crossings-to-palestinian-authority>, last accessed on 27 November 2017.

controlling the Gaza strip.¹⁵ In November 2017, it was announced that general elections will be held by the end of 2018.¹⁶

Other minorities

Other minorities like the Bedouins and the Samaritans in Nablus are not persecuted in particular, although the living conditions of the former are difficult. Especially the Bedouins living in Area C of the West Bank face many problems with the Israeli military and civil authorities.¹⁷

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

This category does not exist for WWL analysis since expatriate Christians in the Palestinian Territories are not involuntarily isolated from other Christians.

Historical Christian communities:

The biggest churches within the historical Christian communities are the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. They are, among other churches, registered and there are several congregations in the West Bank and two (Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic) in Gaza. In Gaza, some members of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are vulnerable to conversion to Islam. They feel trapped, cannot stand the threats or are offered allurements such as housing, wives, jobs or diplomas. In the West Bank, they have the freedom to worship, as long as they do not proselytize Muslims. The churches have a far greater influence in society than one would expect on the basis of their number. Both the Roman Catholics as well as the Greek Orthodox run private schools, which are also attended by many Muslims. However, religious education classes are held separately.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

Converts are mainly from a Muslim background, but also cross-denominational “church-changers” are included in this category. Depending on the families, both groups experience pressure from family members to give up their new belief. When Christians change church e.g. from a historical to a non-traditional Protestant church this often causes trouble with their families. Converts from a Muslim background definitely face the most severe persecution of all types of Christianity though. In the West Bank they are threatened and put under great pressure, in Gaza their situation is so dangerous that they live their Christian faith in utmost secrecy. Nevertheless, the number of converts from Islam is growing slowly.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

There are several Evangelical churches in the West Bank and one in Gaza. Leaders of the historical Christian communities often see the Evangelical churches as a threat to their flock.

¹⁵ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41591450>, last accessed 18 October 2017.

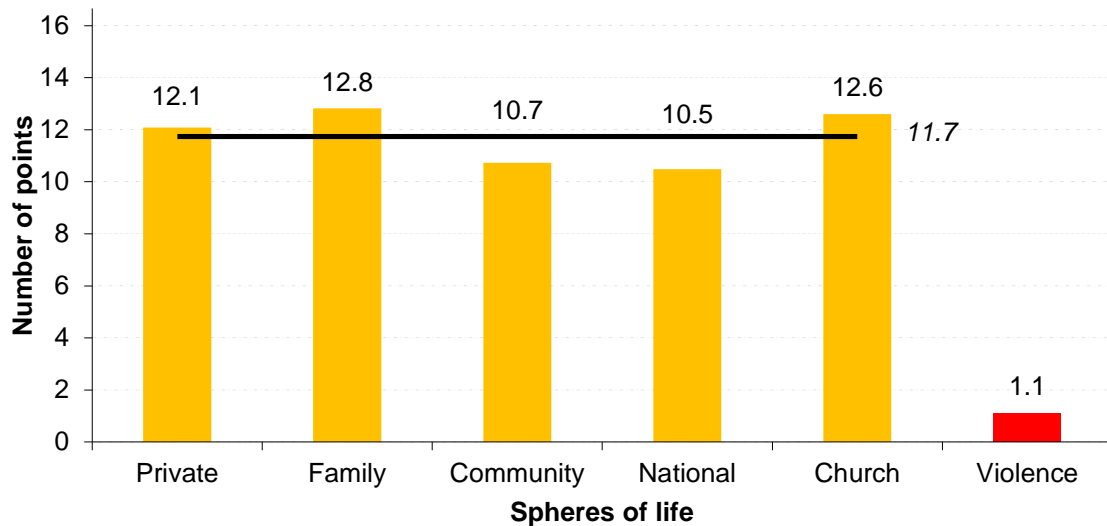
¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-talks/palestinian-factions-agree-to-hold-general-election-by-end-2018>, last accessed on 27 November 2017.

¹⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/film-human-face-palestinian-bedouins- plight-170701133202312.html>, last accessed on 27 November 2017.

Non-traditional Protestant churches are known to put emphasis on outreach and evangelization – this can lead to pressure from society.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Palestinian Territories



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for the Palestinian Territories shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in the Palestinian Territories decreased from 12.4 in WWL 2017 to 11.7. This decrease was caused partly by in a refinement in the WWL analysis for recording the situation of converts from Islam to Christianity.
- Converts experience pressure particularly in the *Private* and *Family sphere*. Pressure is strongest in the *Family sphere*. Religious values (like the Islamic prohibition of apostasy) and cultural values (like family honor) are blended, creating a mix in which it is very difficult for people to leave Islam.
- The score for violence went down from 2.2 in WWL 2017 to 1.1. There has not been a significant change in circumstances, but less violence has been reported.

Private sphere:

Both converts from Islam and cross-denominational “church-changers” experience pressure in this sphere of life. In Gaza the situation for Christians with a Muslim background is very serious. Also in the West Bank, converts from Islam cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any impression to those around them that they might be Christian can have serious consequences. All other types of Christianity have more freedom to practice their faith privately, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. In Gaza, the display of Christian symbols (e.g. crosses) is dangerous for converts.

Family sphere:

If their faith is discovered, converts are put under pressure by their families, especially in Gaza but also – to a lesser extent - in the West Bank. If it is known of converts' children that their parents are Christians, they are likely to be harassed or discriminated against, especially in Gaza. Children of the historical Christian communities may also be discriminated against in schools in Gaza. Except for converts, most Christians are generally free to live their Christian convictions within the circle of the family. However, if a Christian husband and father converts to Islam and divorces his Christian wife, their children (if under 18 years of age) would automatically become Muslims. Also, if a Christian married to a Muslim is divorced, he or she would be excluded from having custody of the children. This is explained by the fact that a large part of family law is handled by *Sharia* which does not treat Christians on an equal footing with Muslims.

Community sphere:

In Gaza – and in majority Muslim communities in the West Bank – there is pressure on the entire local Christian community. Adding to this is the general context of political unrest and the growing influence of radical Islam in the Middle East, especially in Gaza. Christian women might feel the pressure to cover up when they go out – e.g. wearing long sleeves in public. If they do not, they risk being the target of harassment. The number of Christians is diminishing and the influence of radical Islam is growing. For safety reasons, most of the converts need to hide their new faith from their community.

National sphere:

Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. The Palestinian Basic Law – which functions as a temporary constitution – states that the official religion is Islam and *Sharia* (Islamic legislation) is the main source of legislation. The authorities sometimes fail to uphold and protect the rights of individual Christians and in some cases Christians – mostly converts - have to flee to safe places somewhere else in the area. In engaging with the authorities, subtle discrimination is present in the entire Palestinian Territories, especially in Gaza, but this is less prevalent in areas with a large Christian population (as in the Bethlehem area). Nevertheless, Christians are involved within the government. During Ramadan, it is socially unacceptable to consume food in public during the day. As a religious minority in a majority Muslim society – and one which is often identified with the (Christian) West - Christians have to be careful in expressing their opinions and are inclined to self-censor. Converts cannot openly interact with the authorities as Christians.

Church sphere:

Converts with a Muslim background cannot officially gather as a congregation nor can they openly join existing churches in both Gaza and the West Bank. For non-registered Protestant churches, it is hard to get permission to build a church in the West Bank. In Gaza, this is practically impossible for all types of Christianity. Importing materials (including Christian literature or Bibles) to the West Bank can be problematic and is difficult for Gaza, due to Israeli control and bureaucracy.

Within the Palestinian Territories there are some areas of friction between the different churches. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the main disputes were between the ‘old’ Greek-Orthodox and the ‘new’ Roman Catholic Church. Nowadays, it is the Evangelicals who are the newcomers and who are received with suspicion by the traditional churches. This is partly caused by different theological views, in particular when it comes to the status of Israel, where the traditional churches see Evangelicals as Western or Zionist and more in favor of Israel. Leaders of all church denominations are trying to protect their own flock. Hence, cross-denominational “church-changers” sometimes experience pressure from their (extended) family or community.

Violence:

The score for violence is at a very low level. No Christian has been arrested for his faith during the WWL 2018 reporting period and (reportedly) less church properties were damaged. However, a Christian with a Muslim background in Gaza was physically assaulted by his family and had to go into hiding. A female convert was reported to be under family house arrest. However, it must be remembered that not all violence is reported, especially if it is happening within families.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

Sometimes, Christian girls and women are looked down upon by their Muslim neighbors, because they are not obviously Muslims (e.g. they do not wear a veil). There is also the issue of honor killings, an accepted practice that leaves girls and women vulnerable. A Muslim girl who wants to come to Christ would refrain from doing so, because of her knowledge that one of her family members might kill her.

Male:

Job discrimination especially affects men – and their families, as they are usually the main family breadwinners.

Future outlook

Without any hope of a sustainable political solution to the conflict with Israel materializing, outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian unrest are likely to continue happening in Gaza and West Bank over the next few years. Nation-building and reform are hindered by (among other factors) divisions between Hamas and Fatah. Until now, reconciliation attempts between both parties have failed and there are no guarantees that the most recent agreement of October 2017 will overcome the impasse. It has been announced that general elections will take place by the end 2018. If they do take place they will be the first for more than a decade and could cause a major shift in Palestinian politics. The outcome and possible consequences of such elections are unpredictable and they could easily lead to further internal conflict as well as to another uprising against the Israelis. But these elections were announced in November 2017 and they might just die a silent death over the next months as earlier election attempts have done.

As the peace process seems likely to stagnate, the chance of new outbursts of violence remains high. The Palestinian president is ageing and reportedly has health issues, and there does not seem to be a clear roadmap for his succession.

In particular in Gaza, the socio-economic situation is bad. Unemployment is high, youth unemployed even higher, there is only electricity for a couple of hours each day and the strip is overcrowded. The tiny Christian minority has almost no perspective for the future. The socio-economic situation in the West Bank is better, but unemployment is a big issue as well. It is the lack of hope for a political solution to the conflict in the near future though, which forms the biggest threat for all inhabitants of the Palestinian Territories. The current situation can easily lead to an outbreak of violence. This is further affecting the quality of life of all Palestinians negatively, including Christians, leading to a continuing emigration of the latter. According to some Palestinian Christians, if the current situation continues, there will be no Christians left within one generation.

Policy considerations

Open Doors suggests the following recommendations:

- Above all, the international community, the Palestinian leadership and the Israeli leadership should strive for a sustainable political solution to the conflict based upon the UN resolutions. This should help to stop the ongoing emigration of Christians.
- The Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority should respect basic human rights for all Palestinians, including Christians in the West Bank.
- The influence of radical Islamic organizations in the Palestinian Territories is growing. The international community should urge the political leaders of the Palestinian Territories and of Israel to address the threats posed by these organizations and protect the Christian population. It is crucial that the sense of hopelessness and despair, which leads to radicalism is recognized and dealt with at all political levels.
- Palestinian Basic Law should be amended or fully implemented to provide full protection for religious minorities and to provide in law and practice for Freedom of Religion or Belief and conversion.
- The Palestinian and Israeli authorities should ensure all citizens of any religion enjoy equal rights in the workplace, ensuring company policies end discrimination in appointments, salary and promotions.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports covering the Palestinian Territories available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on the Palestinian Territories available at:

<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/palestinian-territories/>

- [Christians in Gaza fear the arrival of Islamic State](#)
11 April 2018
Reports that militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State have entered the Gaza Strip through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula have created fear among local Christians.
- [Palestinian father who lost daughter: ‘Don’t be pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel, be pro-justice’](#)
5 April 2018
Saadeh studied aerospace engineering in the US and could have stayed there. His decision to return turned out to be costly. In March 2003, during another Palestinian uprising, the Second Intifada, Israeli soldiers opened fire on their car as they travelled to the supermarket.
- [A Middle Eastern Christian’s view of Pence’s agenda](#)
22 January 2018
A Jordanian Christian trauma counsellor has urged US Vice President Mike Pence to recognise Palestinian statehood to make good his pledge to help Christians in the Middle East.
- [Pence’s plans to help Middle East Christians overshadowed by political storm](#)
19 January 2018
US Vice President Mike Pence’s postponed trip to the Middle East goes ahead this weekend amid myriad tensions after protests erupted at US-President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
- [Trump’s Jerusalem move rejected by Arab Christian leaders, who fear backlash](#)
11 December 2017
A group of 13 Jerusalem-based leaders of Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches wrote an open letter (dated 6 December 2017) to Trump, warning of “hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land” if the US moved away from recognising the current international status of the city.

Recent country developments

All articles available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=palestinian+territories> (password: freedom).

- [Palestinian Territories: Cocktail of events in May](#)
30 May 2018
Churches in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories have spoken out against the relocation of the US embassy and the subsequent violence erupting at the Gaza border last week.
- [Palestinian Territories: Easter celebrations overshadowed](#)
19 April 2018
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was temporarily closed due to a church property tax dispute. In a joint-statement by the leaders of the Jerusalem churches it was declared that the proposed Israeli tax “both undermines the sacred character of Jerusalem, and jeopardizes the Church’s ability to conduct its ministry in this land on behalf of its communities and the world-wide church.”
- [Israel/Palestinian Territories: Peace-process jeopardized?](#)
22 February 2018
US-Vice President Mike Pence was planning a trip to the Middle East before US-President Donald Trump made the official announcement that the USA will recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, after the announcement many church leaders in the region felt offended and some meetings planned with the vice president in January were canceled as a result.
- [Palestinian Territories: New cybercrime law unlikely to threaten Christians](#)
5 September 2017
Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has approved a new law to battle cybercrime. However, a member of the Union of Palestinian Journalists’ General Secretariat warned that the law is a “retrograde step”, especially because of its vague wording.
- [Israel/Palestinian Territories: Christians show understanding for al-Aqsa protests](#)
21 August 2017
Thirteen church leaders from Jerusalem signed a declaration asking the Israeli authorities to respect “the prevailing Status Quo”, after metal detectors had been installed at the entrance to the Temple Mount following the shooting of two police officers on 14 July.

- [Palestinian Territories: Is Hamas becoming more moderate?](#)

16 May 2017

Recently, Hamas seems to have taken two important steps towards becoming more moderate.

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