

World  
Watch  
Research

Palestinian Territories:  
Full Country Dossier  
March 2023



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief

## Brief country details

Palestinian Territories: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
5,346,000	43,200	0.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Map of country



As described by [101 Visualizing Palestine](#): The 1995 [Oslo II Accord](#) divided the Palestinian West Bank into three administrative zones (not marked in the map above):

- **Area A** (18%), where the Palestinian Authority (PA) administers civil and security matters in the eight towns (with some surrounding villages) marked on the map.
- **Area B** (22%), where the PA administers only civil matters.
- **Area C** (60%) where Israel maintains full control. Area C includes all Israeli settlements and two thirds of the West Bank's fertile agricultural land.

While Area C is a continuous territory, Areas A and B are fragmented into 166 separate enclaves. In spite of the breakdown of the Oslo process, Areas A, B and C remain in force today.

Palestinian Territories: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	60	57
WWL 2022	59	57
WWL 2021	58	56
WWL 2020	60	51
WWL 2019	57	49

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Palestinian Territories: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Ethno-religious hostility	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Religious nationalism	Government officials, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Palestinian Christians find that the limitations imposed by the Israeli authorities cause many economic and social difficulties. For instance, all Christian communities have been struggling for years with the imposed travel restrictions. Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution from their families and it is difficult for them to connect to existing churches. The influence of radical Islamic ideology is growing but, at the same time, more and more young people can be found questioning (radical) Islam on social media. Historical churches have to be diplomatic in their approach towards Muslims. Harassment of church leaders and local Christians by radical Jews has been increasing recently. Christians not affiliated with the main historical churches sometimes face opposition from the latter concerning theological issues and the problem of 'sheep stealing'. However, these kind of problems also occur between non-traditional church groups.

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. The level of persecution in the two areas is different. In Gaza, where the hostility towards Christians is more intense, Islamic militants and conservative Islamic society play a more significant role than in the West Bank.

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **January 2022:** Two Christian Palestinian brothers, involved in a local peace project, were assaulted by a large group of masked men and sustained injuries ([Independent Catholic News, 29 January 2022](#)). Although the attack was primarily criminal in nature, their Christian faith probably made them additionally vulnerable. Both President Abbas and local authorities reached out to express their concern ([FOSNA, 10 February 2022](#)). However, none of the attackers were arrested.
- **April 2022:** Palestinian Christians were refused entry to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem during the Holy Fire ceremony. According to the Israeli authorities, the "safety measure" was needed to prevent stampedes ([Arab News, 24 April 2022](#)). However, other sources reported that foreign Christians were allowed to enter, while Palestinian Christians were refused entry ([Twitter, 23 April 2022](#)).
- **Converts from Islam to Christianity:** In both the West Bank and Gaza these Christians remain vulnerable to both family and state pressure, with the pressure being extreme in Gaza.

## Specific examples of positive developments

### External Links - Situation in brief

- Map of country: 101 Visualizing Palestine - <https://101.visualizingpalestine.org/resources/glossary/areas-a-b-c#:~:text=The%20Oslo%20Accords%20divided%20the,where%20Israel%20maintains%20full%20control>
- Map of country: Oslo II Accord - <https://101.visualizingpalestine.org/resources/glossary/oslo-accords>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Independent Catholic News, 29 January 2022 - <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/43957>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: FOSNA, 10 February 2022 - <https://www.fosna.org/the-fosna-blog/update-from-the-tent-of-nations>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Arab News, 24 April 2022 - <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2069146/middle-east>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Twitter, 23 April 2022 - <https://mobile.twitter.com/emadmoussa/status/1517856034924412928>



# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp. 290-293)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	28 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14630174">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14630174</a>	28 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries, PAL not included	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en?cb=00000">https://bti-project.org/en?cb=00000</a>	28 June 2022
CIA World Factbook, PAL not included	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/</a>	28 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries, PAL not included	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports</a>	
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.52)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	28 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	1 September 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, PAL not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022 (Also: <a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/gaza-strip/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/gaza-strip/freedom-world/2022</a> )	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/west-bank/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/west-bank/freedom-world/2022</a>	28 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries, PAL not included	Freedom on the Net 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/israel/palestine">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/israel/palestine</a>	1 September 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ps">https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ps</a>	28 June 2022
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC country report	<a href="https://www.meconcern.org/countries/palestine/">https://www.meconcern.org/countries/palestine/</a>	1 September 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/palestine">https://rsf.org/en/palestine</a>	28 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/palestine">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/palestine</a>	28 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/PSE">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/PSE</a>	28 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/</a>	28 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL, PAL not included	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscirf.gov/countries">https://www.uscirf.gov/countries</a>	
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/overview">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/overview</a>	28 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncontry=PSE">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncontry=PSE</a>	28 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp. 26-27)	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-mena.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-mena.pdf</a>	28 June 2022

## Recent history

The Palestinian Territories are characterized by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian tensions and the friction between the rival Palestinian groups in control: Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. While Hamas continues to reject any relationship with Israel, Fatah (and hence the Palestinian Authority) has chosen to cooperate with the Israelis, at least at the security level. This has resulted in the life of West Bank Palestinians being severely limited by Israeli security measures, while Gazans are almost fully isolated.

After Islamist Hamas won a decisive majority in the parliamentary elections of 2006, a national unity government was formed including members of both Hamas and Fatah. 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 ([MDPI, 18 November 2021](#)). Over the years, there were serious attempts at reconciliation with different mediators, but until now without success. Thus, the Palestinian Territories look set to remain under two governments with a growing degree of separation between the West Bank and Gaza.

Long overdue parliamentary and presidential elections were planned for May and July 2021. However, President Abbas cancelled the elections after two Fatah competitors received considerable public support, diminishing his own chances of re-election. Abbas used Israeli unclarity on balloting in East-Jerusalem as an excuse for the cancellation ([BBC News, 29 April 2021](#)). After cancelling the elections, President Abbas lost all credibility among most Palestinians

except for his core clientele. To make matters worse, Palestinian security officials beat activist and government critic Nizar Banat to death and violently dispersed the following protests ([BBC News, 3 July 2021](#)). Abbas' future as president currently seems to depend totally on Israeli support, as indicated by a daring (and desperate) personal visit to the home of Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz after years of deadlock in peace talks and sometimes open hostility ([Al-Monitor, 31 December 2021](#)).

In May 2021, Hamas attempted to take over moral leadership of the Palestinian cause by firing an unprecedented number of rockets into Israel in response to Israeli forces storming the al-Aqsa mosque compound after protests erupted over the Israeli plan to evict Palestinians in East Jerusalem from their homes. For the first time ever, many Israeli Arabs joined the protests, leading to communal violence between Israeli Jews and Arabs ([The Guardian, 14 May 2021](#)). At least 240 Palestinians (most of them in Gaza) and 12 Israelis lost their lives during the flare-up ([Washington Institute, 25 May 2021](#)).

In July 2022, US President Biden visited the country. Although being from the Democrat party, he made no apparent attempt to reverse ex-President Trump's policy of focusing on Israel and its improved relationships with several Arab countries following the Abraham Accords ([NPR, 9 July 2022](#)). The Abraham Accords essentially mean that for the Arab state signatories a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an independent Palestinian state are no longer required to normalize ties with Israel. Biden only had financial assistance to offer and to say that peace was still a long way off ([The Guardian, 15 July 2022](#)). Biden's stance was particularly difficult for Palestinian Christians because of the death of Palestinian Christian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed by an Israeli sniper ([NPR, 6 September 2022](#)). Abu Akleh was one of the most prominent Al-Jazeera journalists, having covered the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for more than two decades. Subsequently, her funeral procession was confronted violently by Israeli police, who probably feared it would result in a pro-Palestine march inside Jerusalem. This police action provoked widespread international condemnation ([Foreign Policy, 25 May 2022](#)).

Abu Akleh was killed while covering Israeli raids in Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority has diminishing control, while the influence of other groups, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is growing. In August 2022, the PIJ decided to respond by launching rockets into Israel, with 47 Palestinians, both civilians and PIJ fighters, being killed in the following Israeli air raids and by PIJ misfire. However, on this occasion Hamas decided not to participate in the fighting, probably fearing a repeat of the May 2021 escalation which took a heavy toll on Gaza ([Al-Monitor, 12 August 2022](#)).

The August 2022 escalation is the latest in a long series of violent action by groups in Gaza and Israel. For instance, in May 2019, nearly 700 rockets [were launched](#), followed by Israeli reprisal attacks, resulting in the death of 4 Israelis and 23 Palestinians (Haaretz, 6 May 2019). During 2020, Hamas and other groups launched rockets from Gaza into Israel on several occasions, with the Israeli armed forces responding accordingly. Previously, in May 2018, the USA had ended all hope of being an impartial peace-broker for ending the conflict by moving its embassy to Jerusalem ([BBC News, 15 May 2018](#)). The move coincided with the 70th commemoration of the Nakba on 15 May 2018 (Nakba means "disaster" in Arabic; this term is used to refer to the events which occurred during the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 when 700,000 Palestinians

lost their homes). The commemoration was used in Gaza to organize the "[Great Return March](#)", a weekly border protest that continued into 2019 and in which at least 250 protesters were killed by Israeli forces (BBC News, 30 March 2019). Since then, Israel's grip on Gaza has remained very tight.

In comparison to Gaza, the West Bank has stayed relatively calm due to better living conditions and to the security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, that calm is superficial. In addition to the regular killing of Palestinians by Israeli forces ([The Guardian, 28 May 2021](#), [Israel-Palestine Timeline](#), accessed 14 March 2023), many in the West Bank have also lost all hope of ever achieving a Palestinian State and a better future. Many no longer believe that the Israeli government actually wants peace and a two-state solution; a mistrust that has only increased following the rise to power of the most right-wing Israeli government in history, which includes two ultra-nationalist settler parties ([BBC News, 29 December 2022](#)). Their inclusion was followed by an increase in violent incidents against Christians in Jerusalem in the first months of 2023 ([Le Monde, 4 February 2023](#)), in addition to a general rise in settler violence ([Time, 3 March 2023](#)).

The crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic made life significantly more difficult in both Gaza and the West Bank. Unemployment increased, especially because tourism came to a complete standstill and fewer Palestinians were allowed to work inside Israel. Many Palestinian Christians were affected, particularly those who earn their living from (religious) tourism, which ceased completely. Thousands of Christian families became dependent on aid from local churches. Although tourism has restarted following the easing of Israeli restrictions in February 2022 ([BBC News, 21 February 2022](#)), the number of tourists visiting Bethlehem (where the highest number of Palestinian Christians reside), has remained very low.

## Political and legal landscape

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was created in 1994 following the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Since the granting of "[non-member observer State status](#)" by the United Nations under UN Resolution 67/19 in November 2012, the PA has referred to itself as the "State of Palestine" in its official publications.

President Mahmoud Abbas is both the president of the PA, as well as the chairman of the PLO. The PLO is led by an Executive Committee and represents the Palestinian people internationally, including those in the diaspora. The PA officially governs the Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza, although de facto only those in the West Bank since the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007. (Fatah is the dominant party in the PLO, while Hamas is currently not represented in the PLO at all.) The Palestinian National Council (PNC) functions as the legislative branch of the PLO, while the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) forms the legislative branch of the PA. The PLC has not been regularly convened since the 2007 split, with President Abbas increasingly ruling by presidential decree. Since 1996, the PNC only gathered in 2018 to elect a new Executive Committee; this was boycotted by Hamas and other factions since it seemed to them to be a move to boost support for the president while marginalizing his political rivals.

Following the Oslo Accords, the PA has full control of the so called "Area A" areas (comprising 18% of the West Bank) and only civil control in Area B (which comprises 22% of the West Bank).

Israel exercises military control in Area B and has full control over Area C (comprising the other 60% of the West Bank). Currently, around 500,000 Israeli's live in settlements within Area C, which are considered illegal under international law ([B'tselem, accessed 15 August 2022](#)).

The Basic Law functions as an interim constitution for both the West Bank and Gaza. According to MEC's country report:

- "The Basic Law establishes Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as the main source of legislation. It upholds the principle of non-discrimination, including on religious grounds. Freedom of belief and the performance of religious rites is protected, except where such practices are contrary to public order or morality. Recognised non-Muslim communities are given freedom to govern most personal status issues according to their own rites through a religious tribunal system. Evangelical churches are in dialogue with the Palestinian Authorities to gain legal status for issues such as marriage and property ownership. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion, and women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims. In 2014 the Palestinian Authority began omitting religious affiliation on newly issued identification documents, a move which has reduced some of the societal discrimination faced by Christians, in particular those from Muslim backgrounds."

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021) classifies the PA as authoritarian in its 2021 Democracy Index, scoring highest of all authoritarian ranked regimes and almost reaching the threshold for 'hybrid regime'. As it is almost impossible in many areas to assess the situation in the West Bank and in Israel separately (due to the ongoing influence of the Israeli State in all aspects of life in the Palestinian Territories), the Fragile State Index considers them together (FSI 2022). As a result, the political indicators show that 'state legitimacy' and 'human rights' are under pressure but slightly improving. However, the 'Group grievance' indicator scores maximum for four years in a row, indicating the severe tensions within society. In line with that, Amnesty International has officially accused Israel of committing "the crime of apartheid" in the Palestinian Territories ([Amnesty International, 1 February 2022](#)).

Both the PA and Hamas governments have been accused of being repressive. Amnesty International (AI country report 2021/2022) writes:

- "Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and the Hamas de facto administration in the Gaza Strip repressed dissent, resorting to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and use of excessive force against protesters. ... Widespread use of torture by Palestinian authorities continued. The ICHR received 104 complaints of torture and other ill-treatment against authorities in the West Bank and 104 against authorities in Gaza".

### **Gender perspective**

The PA unilaterally ratified the CEDAW in 2009, and unlike many national governments, entered no reservations. Despite this, laws in the Palestinian Territories remain discriminatory towards women and girls. Under Sharia law – applicable in the West Bank and Gaza Strip – women require the consent of a male guardian to enter marriage, and whereas a man has the right to unilaterally divorce his wife, a woman must file for a faults-based divorce through the courts

([OECD, 2019](#)). The repeal of discriminatory laws in 2018, such as the ‘marry-your-rapist’ clause (whereby rapists were not convicted on the condition they married the victim) have been welcomed as a positive step ([HRW, 10 May 2018](#)). Activists continue to fight for legislation to be tightened however, particularly in respect to domestic violence and sexual harassment ([Borgen Project, Women’s Rights in Palestine, 22 October 2020](#)). There is currently no comprehensive domestic violence law to prevent abuse and protect survivors (HRW 2022 country chapter).

## Religious landscape

Palestinian Territories: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	43,200	0.8
Muslim	4,296,000	80.4
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	700,000	13.1
Bahai	2,500	0.0
Atheist	4,700	0.1
Agnostic	299,000	5.6
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

The vast majority of Palestinians are adherents of Sunni Islam, with Christians only accounting for 0.8% of the population.

According to [World Atlas, accessed 15 August 2022](#):

- "Palestinian Muslims consider Jerusalem as an important part of their religion, with the al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem being regarded as the 3rd holiest site in the Muslim world. According to Islam, it is believed that Mohammed was taken from the sacred mosque in Mecca to the mosque of al-Aqsa in the night journey. Accessing the site poses challenges to Palestinians because it involves several formalities, with casual visits being prohibited. ... In the recent past, radicalization has taken root with the interpretation of religion replacing the more tolerant and informal understating of society and religion."

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country report):

- "Some of the challenges facing Christians in Palestine vary by area according to the governing authorities. In recent years, Christian communities in the West Bank have gener-

ally enjoyed good standing in society and a significantly greater degree of religious freedom than Christian communities in the Gaza Strip which has been governed by the more Islamist Hamas party. There is guaranteed representation of Christians in the Legislative Council (though the Council has not met since 2007), and the mayors of Bethlehem and Ramallah must by decree be Christians. Some restrictions apply to recognized Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism. There is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases they can face violent responses from family members."

The overall majority of Palestinian Christians live in the West Bank, with most Christians residing in the wider Bethlehem area. Smaller Christian communities can be found in the Ramallah area, while only a few Christian families live in the areas around Nablus (in the north) and Hebron (in the south). In November 2019, the Council of Local Evangelical churches gained official recognition from the Palestinian Authority. In general, the historical Christian communities are respected in the West Bank and to a lesser degree in Gaza. They enjoy freedom of religion, but are not allowed to proselytize. On the other hand, converts from Islam to Christianity face severe discrimination, both legally and socially. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not officially possible and marriages between female converts and Christian men are not recognized. Children born in such marriages are considered to be born out of wedlock.

Christians in Gaza number less than one thousand. There are three churches in Gaza, belonging to different denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Baptist. Almost all churches in both the West Bank and Gaza run private schools and provide medical facilities to all Palestinians, regardless of faith. A significant number of social welfare institutions have also been established by Christians, making the influence of the Palestinian Christian community much larger than their number would suggest. Despite the fact that leaving the Gaza Strip is almost impossible due to Israeli restrictions, over time the total number of Christians has been decreasing in both Gaza and the West Bank due to emigration and low birth rate.

## Economic landscape

Although the West Bank and Gaza are both part of the Palestinian Territories, their differences are considerable, especially since 2007, the year when two separate governments came into being. There are for example differences at the 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. Gazan daily life is heavily influenced by the Israeli/Egyptian economic blockade imposed since 2007 when Hamas took power.

According to the CIA Factbook and World Bank country profile:

- The World Bank puts the Palestinian economy in the lower middle income category
- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$5,400 (2020 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 24.9%, with youth unemployment being significantly higher at 39.6% (2021 est.)
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** "the poverty rate is estimated to have declined to 27.3% in 2021. Current poverty rates represent a poor population of approximately 1.5 million people."

As reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA):

- "1.3 million out of 2.1 million Palestinians in Gaza (62%) require food assistance", while "rolling power cuts averaged 11 hours per day." The unemployment rate increased to 46.6% in Gaza, with youth unemployment being 62.5%. ([Reliefweb, 29 June 2022](#)).
- In contrast, around 75,000 Palestinians (out of 2.6 million Palestinians) in the West Bank receive food assistance, while the unemployment rate is around 13% ([Reliefweb, 19 January 2022](#), [IMF, 2 May 2022](#)). Unemployment in the West Bank is highest in the Bethlehem area (around 30%), where 44% of all Palestinian Christians are living.

According to [World Bank's April 2022 Economic Update](#):

- **General situation:** "The Palestinian economy was stagnant and the socio-economic situation already difficult prior to the breakout of COVID-19. This is attributed to restrictions by Israel (on trade, movement and access), recurrent hostilities, internal divide, and falling aid inflows. During 2017-19, annual GDP growth averaged 1.3% — lower than the population growth rate resulting in decreasing per capita incomes and increasing poverty."
- **Economic growth:** "Under a baseline scenario that assumes a continuation of the Israeli restrictions, persistence of the internal divide between the West Bank and Gaza and stagnating aid levels, growth is expected to hover around 2.7-3.1% over the forecast period."
- **Outlook:** "The economic consequences of the war in Ukraine and associated sanctions may also affect the outlook through mounting inflationary pressure. The ongoing pandemic may also cause risks to the outlook, especially if no additional vaccines are secured beyond mid-2022. Further, if recent clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli forces in the West Bank and in Gaza escalate, there is little room left to absorb such shocks."

**The COVID-19 crisis:** Measures introduced to restrict the spread of COVID-19 worsened the existing economic difficulties significantly. Several lockdowns within the Palestinian Territories harmed the local economy, but more importantly lockdowns in Israel halted the employment of thousands of Palestinians in Israel, which is one of the pillars of the Palestinian economy ([Times of Israel, 9 December 2020](#)). The tourist industry totally collapsed, affecting many Christians dependent on tourism for their livelihood, especially in the Bethlehem area where most Christians live. Reportedly, 9 out of 10 employees within the tourism sector are Christian. Hence, increased poverty among Palestinian Christians has been reported ([Christianity Today, 13 March 2020](#)). Despite the easing of restrictions, the number of tourists has reportedly remained low.

### Gender perspective

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged compared to men, primarily due to social and cultural expectations which assign women to the domestic sphere. The labor force participation rate sits significantly below the global average, with just 17.7% of women in work compared to 69.5% of men (HDI profile). Making it additionally challenging to gain economic independence, women typically receive half the inheritance share of men under Sharia law and marital property is under the control of men. Wives owe full *ta'a* (obedience) to their husbands in exchange for *nafaqa* (financial support). This support can be lost if they disobey their husbands ([OECD, 2019](#)).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The main ethnicities are Arab and Jewish.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with Hebrew being spoken by Israeli settlers as well as many Palestinians. English is widely understood as well.
- **Population:** The West Bank has 3.0 million inhabitants and Gaza 2.0 million (2022 est.) Around 430.000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank, while another 225.000 live in East-Jerusalem.
- **Urban population:** In 2022, 77.3% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 2.85%.
- **Literacy rate:** 97.5% of the population can read and write; with a small difference between men (98.8%) and women (96.2%) (2020).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 56% of the population of the West Bank and 64% of Gaza , making it a country with a very young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 76.1 years on average; women (78.4 years), men (74.0 years) (2021 est.). There is a small difference between the West Bank and Gaza, with life expectancy being slightly lower in Gaza.
- **Education:** Palestinian citizens enjoy 13 years of schooling on average, with women enjoying 14 years of schooling on average and men 12 years (2020).
- **Refugees / IDPs:** There are 1,460,315 Palestinian refugees in Gaza and 858,758 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank (2020 est.). According to [UNRWA](#): (accessed 15 August 2022): "Palestine refugees are defined as 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.'"

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Palestine ranks #115 out 189 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.708.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.870, women are significantly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Palestinian culture is conservative and tribal, however Palestinians are on average highly educated. Especially urban centers like Ramallah and Bethlehem have a strong youth culture.

Fragile State Index social indicators (FSI 2022) show that group grievance is at the highest possible score, indicating that social tensions are constantly high and can easily lead to unrest.

There are more Palestinians living in exile than in the Palestinian Territories. Large numbers are still living in refugee camps set up in the wake of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. Today, 5-6 million Palestinian refugees can be found in semi-permanent camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and even in the Palestinian Territories themselves. Exact numbers, definitions of a refugee



and the reasons for their situation are strongly disputed; both Israeli and Arab political and military leaders are blamed for the situation. Socio-economic conditions 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 demographic danger to the Jewish state.

The situation in Gaza is generally perceived as being hopeless; there is the feeling that nobody in the world cares about the local population and the influence of politicized Islamic forces seems unavoidable. Gaza remains a fertile recruiting ground for violent militant groups and radicalization of the youth is a real threat. Islamic groups in Gaza implement Islamizing measures from time to time. A "virtue campaign" was launched in January 2013 to control women's clothing. At one point, the hijab was made mandatory in high schools and males were banned from working as hairdressers for females, but these measures were reversed after local resistance, international opposition and the influence of human rights activists bore fruit. Similar attempts at Islamization [were reported again in October 2018](#) (Al-Monitor, 31 October 2018). In recent years it has also been reported that Salafists make a point of removing any Christmas items from shops in Gaza.

Over the years, Christians have played a unique and major role in preserving and maintaining different aspects of Palestinian culture. This has been done, for instance, through the opening of a number of cultural centers like the Edward Said Musical Institute and the Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts & Culture, which focuses on preserving Palestinian embroidery, traditional folk dance (*dabke*) and certain handicrafts like the mother-of-pearl carving technique. In addition, several academic institutions, such as Bethlehem University and Bethlehem Bible College, have been established to look after the educational needs of both Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

### Gender perspective

Palestinian culture is also marked by patriarchal norms, with men assuming the position of head of the household. Gender-based violence and so-called 'honor' killings are ongoing issues of concern (AI country report 2021/2022) and reports indicate that domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 crisis ([UNFPA, June 2020](#)). There is broad societal acceptance for violence in the home, which is a threat to female converts from Islam if their faith is discovered, given the shame that their conversion will bring upon the family.

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 68.2% penetration (January 2022)
- **Facebook usage:** 68.2% penetration (January 2022)

According to World Bank (country profile):

- **Mobile phones:** 106.2 subscriptions per 100 people

60.2% of women use the Internet, slightly lower than the national average of 64.4% (HDI profile). This reflects a modest gender gap in relation to access to technology, also mirrored in statistics on social media usage ([Napoleon Cat, 2020](#) - no later update available).

[According to the Digital Development Dashboard \(accessed 15 August 2022\)](#) Internet access, via both landlines and mobile networks (3G), is fully available in the West Bank. Availability is less in Gaza, due to a lower level of technological development, Israeli restrictions on both 3G and 4G broadband as well as the problem of electricity short-falls on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the Internet has helped create economic opportunities and several hundred ICT start-ups are working from Gaza and the West Bank ([The Guardian, 5 July 2018](#), [Al-Monitor, 10 February 2022](#)).

The use of social media is restricted as both the authorities in the West Bank and Gaza and the Israeli government monitor Internet usage and have arrested social media users critical of their policies. For example, 7amleh, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media [reported](#) in January 2022 that 87% of Palestinian youth rarely speak out on social media out of fear of Israeli reprisals. Many were arrested on charges of "incitement" on social media; a policy that is ongoing. 7amleh also reported on the continued online repression by Palestinian authorities, including "that the Palestinian security services, especially the Preventive Security Service, waged a campaign of espionage and hacking into the accounts of about 800 political opponents, journalists, and activists. Furthermore, the security services used about 300 fake accounts on Facebook and primitive hacking methods for this purpose."

In addition, Reporters without Borders ranks Palestine #170 in its World Press Freedom Index 2022. RSF states:

- "In the West Bank, journalists are the victims of press freedom violations by both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli occupation forces. In the Gaza Strip, they are threatened by both Israeli military offensives and Hamas policies."
- "The Gaza Strip is a particularly inhospitable territory for press freedom. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad harass and obstruct journalists suspected of collaborating with Israel. In the West Bank, critical websites are shut down by the Palestinian Authority, while journalists are arrested and interrogated in order to put pressure on the political opposition."
- "The conflict with Israel has a big impact on Palestinian journalists, and covering protests is extremely dangerous. Journalists are subjected to arrests, violence, destruction of equipment, legal proceedings and denial of accreditation. They have sustained serious injuries when Israeli soldiers use live rounds to disperse protesters."
- "Conservative religious beliefs and practices restrict the work of journalists. These restrictions are particularly evident in the case of women journalists, who are victims of gender discrimination."

According to HRW 2022 country chapter:

- "Israeli authorities closely monitor online speech by Palestinians, in part relying on predictive algorithms to determine whom to target, and have detained Palestinians based on social media posts and other expressive activity."

- "The Palestinian Authority (PA) manages affairs in parts of the West Bank, where it systematically arrests arbitrarily and tortures dissidents."
- " Hamas authorities detained opponents and critics for their peaceful expression and tortured some in their custody."

Palestinians belonging to the historical Christian communities are relatively free to express their Christian faith in posts online, as long as they do not openly criticize Islam. However, although some converts from Islam to Christianity do post Christian content online in the West Bank, it can lead to arrest and detention. For converts in the Gaza Strip, this would be incredibly dangerous.

## Security situation

The situation in Gaza is highly volatile; it is one of the most populated places on earth, while being almost totally cut off from the rest of the world due to Israel's and Egypt's blockade. Hamas' and other groups' only response seems to be to direct all anger towards Israel. During the past few years Islamic militant groups more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza. These militants have even targeted Hamas officials [with alleged suicide attacks](#) (BBC News, 28 August 2019). Islamic militants are also present in the West Bank, with a growing presence in cities like Nablus and Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority wields less influence.

Radical Islamic groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad appeal especially to the youth, and also to those from a Hamas or even Fatah background. Despite the fact that these groups do not have significant power, their influence cannot be dismissed: They are capable of provoking escalation through being responsible for a large proportion of the rocket attacks being made from Gaza against Israel, operating even without Hamas' permission. From the other side, Israeli forces keep a watchful eye on the activities in Gaza and conduct (pre-emptive) strikes against targets under observation. These attacks cause multiple civilian casualties in the densely populated area.

In the West Bank, the security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government has proved successful, as no major bomb attacks against Israel have taken place in the recent past. However, in the deadliest attack in more than a decade, a Palestinian gunman killed seven people outside a synagogue in Jerusalem at the end of January 2023. The attack followed the deadliest raid in the West Bank by the Israeli army in Jenin in that same time period, killing nine Palestinians ([NPR, 28 January 2023](#)). That record did **not** stay long, as eleven Palestinians were killed during a raid in Nablus. The raids on Nablus and Jenin were part of Israel's Operation Breakwater, which was launched following a number of Palestinian attacks in the spring of 2022 ([The Guardian, 22 February 2023](#)).

Hence, the situation in the West Bank remains unstable as the total lack of any political progress towards finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian situation has created an atmosphere of hopelessness, particularly since the number and size of Israeli settlements in the West Bank continues to grow. Israeli plans for annexation of parts of the West Bank as well as the unilateral normalization of ties between several Arab countries and Israel have only added to this sense of

despair. In addition, Israeli forces continue to use live ammunition against protesters in the West Bank, regularly resulting in the death of (mostly) teenage boys.

Palestinian Christians have not been the target of serious attacks by radical Islamic groups since the murder of Rami Ayyad in Gaza in 2007. However, the presence of groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are ominous omens for the future.

## Trends analysis

### 1) An end to Israeli-Palestinian unrest is not in sight

Without any hope of a sustainable political solution to the situation with Israel materializing, outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian unrest are likely to continue in Gaza and in the West Bank over the next years. Nation-building and reform are hindered by (among other factors) divisions between Hamas and Fatah. Attempts at reconciliation between both parties have repeatedly failed. One of the most pressing concerns at the moment is the succession of incumbent President Abbas. He is ageing and reportedly has health problems, and there does not seem to be a clear roadmap for his succession after he cancelled the presidential elections in 2021. If he dies, the possible consequences are unpredictable and could easily lead to further internal conflict.

### 2) Palestinian Christians continue to emigrate

As the peace-process seems likely to stagnate, the chance of new outbreaks of violence remains high. In particular in Gaza, the socio-economic situation is very poor: Unemployment is high, youth unemployment even higher, there is only electricity for a few hours each day and the area is overcrowded. The tiny Christian minority has no real future perspective. In the West Bank, unemployment is also a major issue, which has significantly deteriorated because of the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. This has particularly affected the Christian community, as many of them work in the tourist industry. However, the biggest challenge for all inhabitants of the Palestinian Territories is the lack of hope for a lasting political solution in relation to Israel. The current situation could easily lead to an outbreak of violence. This insecurity affects the quality of life of all Palestinians negatively, including Christians, leading to a continuing emigration of the latter. According to some observers, if the current levels of emigration continue, there will be no Christians left within one generation.

### 3) The two-state solution seems unlikely to become reality

Many international observers and politicians, as well as many Israeli academics, still cling to the idea of the two-state solution ([Foreign Affairs, 24 August 2021](#)). Others, including most Palestinian academics and civil society leaders, are more realistic in stating that the two-state solution most likely never will become a reality ([Jewish Insider, 28 July 2022](#)). There is a clear lack of political will on both sides of the divide, with the Palestinian division between Fatah and Hamas complicating things even further. Although some commentators state that more than 80% of the approximately 500,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank live in the border region, which would suggest that a two-state solution is still possible, it is very unlikely that especially those living deep inside the West Bank will ever give up on what they call "Judea and Samaria".

This makes a viable Palestinian state very unlikely. In contrast, settlement expansion is likely to continue. If this situation continues, it will result in one state, which either grants equal rights to Palestinians and Israelis, or treats one part of the population differently than the other.

## External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: MDPI, 18 November 2021 - <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/10/11/437/pdf>
- Recent history: BBC News, 29 April 2021 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-56929547>
- Recent history: BBC News, 3 July 2021 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-57694104>
- Recent history: Al-Monitor, 31 December 2021 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/mahmoud-abbas-shakes-dormant-palestinian-israeli-relations>
- Recent history: The Guardian, 14 May 2021 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/14/what-is-the-current-israel-gaza-crisis-about-and-where-is-it-heading>
- Recent history: Washington Institute, 25 May 2021 - <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/military-assessment-israel-hamas-conflict>
- Recent history: NPR, 9 July 2022 - <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/09/1110109088/biden-is-building-on-the-Abraham-accords-part-of-trumps-legacy-in-the-middle-east?t=1660589655369>
- Recent history: The Guardian, 15 July 2022 - <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/15/joe-biden-greeted-by-protests-during-brief-visit-to-palestine>
- Recent history: NPR, 6 September 2022 - <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/06/1121201324/a-soldier-likely-killed-a-palestinian-american-journalist-israeli-army-says>
- Recent history: Foreign Policy, 25 May 2022 - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/25/shireen-abu-akleh-funeral-israeli-palestinian-conflict-journalist-killing/>
- Recent history: Al-Monitor, 12 August 2022 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/did-hamas-win-israel-islamic-jihad-war-gaza>
- Recent history: were launched - <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-and-hamas-cease-fire-4-israelis-23-gazans-dead-700-rockets-hundreds-of-israeli-strikes-1.7199036>
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## WWL 2023: Church information

### Christian origins

Since the very beginnings of the Christian Church in the 1st century AD there have always been Christians living in the region, from a wide variety of denominations and nationalities. In the 7th century, Arab armies invaded and from the 9th century onwards Christians became a minority, living 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.

After the Crusades, Franciscan monks stayed to maintain the churches and religious sites. Until the 19th century, most Christians belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church. During the 19th century, both Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic (Melkite) and Protestant (Lutheran/Anglican)

missionaries came to the Holy Land and started work mainly among Orthodox Christians. This changed the church landscape fundamentally. Although the Greek Orthodox Church remains the biggest denomination, the Roman Catholic Church with its connections to the West is more influential. Well-known Protestant theologians have emerged, like Naim Ateek (Anglican) and Mitri Raheb (Lutheran). Various non-traditional Evangelical churches have also been established during the last decades.

Converts from Islam to Christianity have been increasing in number over the years, but conversion remains a very sensitive topic, particularly because religion is linked to family identity. Leaving the family religion is therefore seen as betrayal of the most fundamental element in tribal Palestinian society, one's own family. Christians with a Muslim background are likely to get into trouble and be persecuted by their (extended) families.

## Church spectrum today

Palestinian Territories: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	16,200	37.5
Catholic	14,600	33.8
Protestant	6,900	16.0
Independent	4,400	10.2
Unaffiliated	1,100	2.5
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,200</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	4,800	11.1
Renewalist movement	8,800	20.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

**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:** Christians 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. **Evangelical movement:** 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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church are the main denominations within the West Bank and Gaza, followed by the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church. There are also Lutheran and Anglican churches present, as well as several (independent) evangelical churches. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are the main centers of Palestinian Christianity, while Ramallah also hosts a number of churches and religious institutions. There are also active churches in other areas, but the number of Christians in these areas is low. A specific example of a religious educa-

tional institution serving wider Middle East Protestants is Bethlehem Bible College, which in international Protestant circles is known (among other things) for its biennial "Christ at the Checkpoint" conferences.

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Both Ramallah and the Bethlehem area are known to be more open and less Islamically conservative than the Nablus area in the north and the Hebron area in the south of the West Bank. Converts from Islam to Christianity often relocate to the Ramallah and Bethlehem areas. Due to the tense situation and radicalization in the Gaza Strip, pressure on Christians is high - and even higher for converts from Islam to Christianity.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated in the Palestinian Territories and are hence not scored as a separate category in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** The two largest denominations in this category are the Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. They are officially registered and have several congregations in the West Bank and one each in Gaza. In Gaza, Christians from these churches are vulnerable to conversion to Islam: They feel trapped, cannot stand the threats and are sometimes 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. These churches have a significant influence in society. 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.

**Converts:** Depending on the family, converts from Islam to Christianity experience pressure from family members to give up their new belief. However, converts from a Muslim background definitely face the most severe persecution of all types of Christianity. 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 Baptist church in Gaza. Leaders of the historical Christian communities often see the presence of Evangelical churches as a threat. In November 2019, the Palestinian Authority [officially recognized](#) the Council of Local Evangelical Churches (Christian Today, 12 November 2019). Cross-denominational "church-changers" are also included in this category. When Christians change their church affiliation (e.g. from a historical to a non-traditional Protestant church) this regularly causes trouble with their families. Depending on the family, they experience pressure from family members to return to their former denomination.

## External Links - Church information

- Christian communities and how they are affected: officially recognized - <https://christiantoday.com/article/after-12-year-struggle-palestinian-authority-officially-recognises-evangelical-group/133601.htm>



# WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics

## Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

## Position on the World Watch List

Palestinian Territories: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	60	57
WWL 2022	59	57
WWL 2021	58	56
WWL 2020	60	51
WWL 2019	57	49

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The one-point increase in score in WWL 2023 was mainly the result of an increase in the *violence* score. The overall pressure on Christians remained at a very high level. Especially the situation for converts from Islam to Christianity and for all Christians in Gaza remains a matter of concern.

## Persecution engines

Palestinian Territories: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Medium
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Islamic oppression (Strong)

Generally speaking, Christians are affected by *Islamic oppression* throughout the Palestinian Territories, although there is noticeably more pressure in Gaza than in the West Bank, because

of the presence of radical Islamic movements there.

In addition, there is a continuing influence and enforcement of age-old norms and values. In the Palestinian Territories this 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 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 (Christianity in the Middle East, April 2014).

### **Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)**

*Dictatorial paranoia* is connected to plain greed and the safeguarding of the interests of a small group. Nepotism is widespread within the clan-based Palestinian society and people with connections to those in power are most of the time well-off. Christians have traditionally been involved with Fatah and the nationalist movement. Most Christians support the factions in their struggle against the Israeli authorities and face no major difficulties. Nevertheless, without elections being carried out for many years, the democratic legitimacy of the government is low.

Both Fatah and Hamas try to maintain power by all means necessary. Freedom of expression and therefore the freedom of religion is limited; if church leaders criticize the authorities or their Islamic rule, it can have negative consequences, especially in Gaza. Christians also face the pressure of Israeli government control; for example, church leaders in Jerusalem have to operate carefully in order not to lose privileges such as easy access to obtaining visas and permits.

### **Religious nationalism - Jewish (Medium) / Ethno-religious hostility (Medium)**

Palestinian Christians report that it is Israel's control of the West Bank and firm grip on Gaza, which causes most pressure in their lives. This pressure comes: i) from Israel's external control - i.e. of all borders (except for the Gaza border with Egypt), combined with a permit system for entering Israel and for travelling between Gaza and the West Bank, thus limiting the possibility of visiting holy places in Jerusalem, for example; and ii) from Israel's 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 a sense of 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 being allowed no space to live a dignified life in the West Bank.

### Clan oppression (Medium)

Palestinian society is conservative, with tribalism playing an important role as society is often clan-structured. This directly affects the possibilities for Muslims to turn to Christianity. Turning away from Islam is not only seen as a religious switching of loyalties, but also as a switch towards a new identity. Conversion is seen as turning one's back on one's own (extended) family and on the values one has been raised with. Conversion is thus an act of disrespect in a society in which family honor is a key element.

### Drivers of persecution

Palestinian Territories: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK			MEDIUM	
Government officials	Medium	Medium	Medium					Medium	
Ethnic group leaders	Medium			Medium					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium								
Religious leaders of other churches					Weak				
Violent religious groups	Medium								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium					
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Medium					

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** Members of a convert's (extended) family will put a lot of pressure on a convert to give up the Christian faith. Converts will be expelled and harassed by their families. The situation for converts in Gaza is even worse, as the Christian community is tiny and there are hardly any places to hide.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Both the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip enforce Islamic rule in their specific jurisdictions. Converts face the worst pressure, above all in the Gaza Strip. Other Christians, like the historical Christian communities, face less difficulties, especially in the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority tries to include the Christian community in their struggle against the Israeli government.

- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Family heads are likely to put pressure on family members to act against a convert family member.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Radical imams sometimes use hate-speech against Christians.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** Groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are active in the Gaza Strip and a source of danger for Christians, particularly for converts from Islam to Christianity.
- **Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs (Medium):** As the number of Palestinian Christians is very small (0.8% according to WCD 2022 estimates) compared to the Muslim majority, the biggest pressure is the subtle pressure from normal citizens. This can be seen, for instance, in the dress rules for women, which are enforced via disapproving looks or comments. Palestinian society is conservative, with more liberty in the cities of Bethlehem and Ramallah, compared to the rural areas and the cities of Nablus and Hebron. 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 Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** Palestinian government officials and other people connected to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas are at times a source of pressure. Criticizing the authorities or their Islamic rule can have negative consequences, especially in Gaza. Christians also face pressure from the Israeli government with church leaders in Jerusalem having to operate carefully in order not to lose visa and permit rights.

#### Drivers of Religious nationalism / Ethno-religious hostility - Jewish

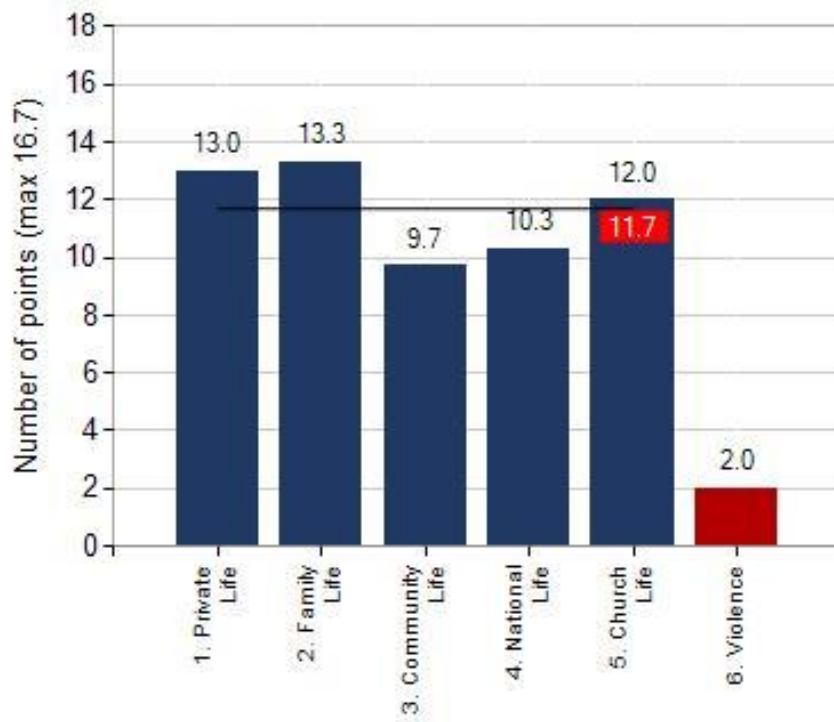
- **Government officials / Citizens (Medium):** Palestinian Christians mostly face pressure from Israeli government officials, above all the Israeli security forces, in their day-to-day life. Confrontations with Israeli inhabitants of the West Bank, the settlers, can also be intimidating. Both security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

#### Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Medium):** Family members persecute converts because they have violated tribal customs, e.g. the family honor.
- **Citizens (people from broader society), including mobs (Medium):** Tribalism is mostly driven by society in general, but it is also supported by the governing authorities when they give tribal customs and 'reconciliation meetings' priority over codified laws and the rule of law. In this system, minorities such as Christians are mostly at a [disadvantage](#) (Formal and informal justice in Palestine, in: Études rurales, 184/2009, 169-184).
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Family heads feel the need to protect the honor of the wider family. Hence, they are likely to put pressure on family members to act against a family member who converts.

## The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Palestinian Territories



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for the Palestinian Territories shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.7 points), staying at the same score as in WWL 2022. The reason for this very high score is the pressure experienced by converts, particularly in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life*.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Family, Private* and *Church spheres*. The pressure in the *Private* and *Family sphere* reflects the difficulties converts face if they want to have a Christian marriage or funeral, for example. The pressure in the *Church sphere* shows the limitations the churches experience when it comes to evangelizing and integrating converts.
- The score for violence increased from 0.9 in WWL 2022 to 2.0 in WWL 2023. The increase was caused by a higher number of reported incidents - see Section *Violence* below for details.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

**Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 points)**

In the West Bank, Christians - and even some converts from Islam to Christianity - share Christian messages on social media. In Gaza, Christians from the historical Christian communities will do the same, but for converts, discussing their new faith is impossible. However, all Christians have to be careful when touching upon issues related to Islamic beliefs. Comments on social media opposing Islam have in recent years led to mob violence, arrests and detention.

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)**

Both converts from Islam and cross-denominational “church-changers” experience pressure in this sphere of life. In the West Bank, converts from Islam can in some places more or less openly practice their faith, but the situation remains difficult overall. In Gaza the situation for Christians with a Muslim background is very serious. Giving any impression to those around them that they might be Christian can have serious consequences.

**Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.25 points)**

Converts from Islam to Christianity have to be careful when owning a Bible or other Christian materials. It might reveal their new faith to their family members or be interpreted as an attempt to proselytize. This is even more the case in Gaza. However, technical solutions like Bible apps and online Christian materials offer possibilities to avoid family pressure.

**Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.25 points)**

Family members often find it difficult to accept that a convert has left Islam, especially since this is closely related to concepts such as family honor. Family members might respond violently and converts are often banished or placed under pressure to recant their new faith. So even if their conversion is known, speaking about their faith with immediate family members remains risky. This is also the case, because it can be interpreted as proselytizing and the authorities will act against them (especially in Gaza).

### **Block 1 - Additional information**

*Christians belonging to the historical and non-traditional churches have freedom to practice their faith privately, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. The display of Christian symbols (e.g. crosses) is particularly dangerous for converts.*

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)**

Children of converts cannot be registered as "Christian", as converts cannot change their religious affiliation on their identity documents.

### **Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)**

Converts from Islam to Christianity struggle to have their Christian marriage officially recognized. Marriages between a Christian man from a historical church and a female convert are not recognized and their children are considered to be born out of wedlock. This can lead to the parents losing the custody over their children if a case arises.

### **Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.25 points)**

Baptisms of converts always have to take place in secret, especially in Gaza. A baptism is the ultimate sign of leaving Islam for Christianity; its discovery can easily lead to violence from family members and the local community. Hence, recognized churches are often very cautious about baptizing converts.

### **Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.25 points)**

While Christian children belonging to the historical and non-traditional communities have their own separate religious classes, even in Gaza, children from converts from Islam to Christianity have to follow Islamic religious education. International schools can be less strict in this regard, but the level of school fees is simply too high for many.

### **Block 2 - Additional information**

*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. The children of known convert parents are likely to be harassed or discriminated against, especially in Gaza. Children belonging to the historical Christian communities may also be discriminated against in schools in Gaza. Except for converts, most Christians are 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 law which does not treat Christians on an equal footing with Muslims.*

## Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

**Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.25 points)**

Christianity is often linked to the 'immoral' West and many Christian women feel under pressure to wear clothing with long sleeves, for instance, in order to avoid negative remarks or harassment, although they normally refuse to wear a headscarf. Christian women from a Muslim background are often forced or feel under pressure to wear the hijab within their communities. This kind of pressure is particularly high in Gaza and in rural areas.

**Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.25 points)**

This can happen to both converts from Islam to Christianity as well as to Christians who change from one church denomination to another (often from a historical denomination to a non-traditional one), although the pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity is usually significantly higher. Even if family members accept a conversion, they often ask the convert not to be public about his or her new faith to protect the family honor. Known converts will often be ostracized and lose their social networks in the local community.

**Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)**

Palestinian society is organized along tribal lines and finding employment is often dependent on family connections. Known converts often lose their social networks and hence their employment. Christian youth are low in number and due to the dire economical circumstances they often struggle to find appropriate employment. However, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank sometimes applies affirmative action offering government jobs to Christian youth, not least because they are often highly educated.

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (2.75 points)**

Converts from Islam often feel under pressure to take part in Islamic ceremonies, e.g. praying in the mosque or fasting during Ramadan, in order to keep their new faith secret or preserve the family honor.

### **Block 3 - Additional information**

*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.*



## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

### **Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)**

The Palestinian Basic Law – which functions as a temporary constitution – guarantees the "freedom of belief, worship and the performance of religious functions" under the condition that "public order or public morals are not violated". However, it also states that the official religion is Islam and Sharia is the main source of legislation. One of the consequences of this is the total lack of any official recognition of converts from Islam to Christianity.

### **Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.50 points)**

This remains one of the biggest issues for converts from Islam to Christianity. Because they cannot officially change their religious identity, their Christian marriages will not be recognized and Islamic education classes are obligatory for their children at school.

### **Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)**

Although not primarily faith-related, Christians experience great difficulties when travelling within the West Bank or to Israel (for further explanation, see above: *Persecution engines/Religious nationalism*). These kind of Israeli restrictions and limitations do not apply to Jewish residents of the West Bank.

### **Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.25 points)**

Criticizing the authorities is risky for all Palestinians in Gaza, but Christians in particular apply self-censorship in order to avoid problems. The situation in the West Bank is better than in Gaza, but openly criticizing the Palestinian Authority (from a Christian perspective) can lead to arrest. In addition, Christians have to be very careful if they want to criticize Islam or Sharia law. Like all other Palestinians, Christians who are openly critical of the Israeli government can easily lose permission to travel to Jerusalem or to work in Israel.

### **Block 4 - Additional information**

*Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. The authorities sometimes fail to uphold and protect the rights of individual Christians and in some cases Christians – mostly converts - have to flee to a safe place 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 do have positions within the government. During Ramadan, it is socially unacceptable to consume food in public during the day. As a religious minority (and one which is often identified with the 'Christian' West) embedded in a majority Muslim society, Christians have to be careful in expressing their opinions and are inclined to self-censor. Converts cannot openly interact with the authorities as Christians.*

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

### **Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.75 points)**

Converts with a Muslim background cannot officially gather as a congregation nor can they openly join existing churches in Gaza. There is more tolerance in the West Bank, with pressure mainly coming from the community and family members. Often, existing churches are very cautious about welcoming converts since they try to avoid doing anything which would disturb relations with their Muslim neighbors.

### **Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (3.50 points)**

This is especially true for Gaza, where the only Christian bookshop was closed after its manager was murdered in 2007. (It remains contested whether he was killed because of his Christian activities). Distributing Christian materials, whether for free or for payment, would likely be considered as proselytizing, which is severely opposed by Hamas and other radical groups in Gaza. Bibles and Christian materials can be distributed to the tiny Christian community in Gaza.

### **Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.50 points)**

Churches have to act carefully in their relationship with both the Palestinian and Israeli authorities. Criticizing them can have negative consequences.

### **Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.25 points)**

It is impossible for any community of converts to be officially recognized and build a church for themselves. In addition, it would probably be very difficult for any Christian community to build a new church in Gaza. However, on a positive note, the Council of Local Evangelical Churches received official recognition in November 2019. Non-traditional church groups are likely to have more intensive contact with converts than the historical churches.

### **Block 5 - Additional information**

*Importing materials (including Christian literature or Bibles) to the West Bank can be problematic at times, especially because of high taxes levied by Israel. It is difficult for Gaza, due to both Israeli control and bureaucracy and confiscation of materials by Islamist Hamas. Within the Palestinian Territories there are some areas of friction between the different Christian denominations. 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 non-traditional church groups who are the newcomers and who are received with suspicion by the historical churches. This is partly caused by differing theological views, in particular when it comes to the status of Israel, where the historical church communities see Evangelicals as being too 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

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.** Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:**

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

**3. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

**4. The use of symbolic numbers:** In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Palestinian Territories: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	2	0
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	5	2
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	5	1
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	2	2

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** There were reports of at least one incident in which converts from Islam to Christianity were being attacked by family members. In addition, two Christian Palestinian brothers were attacked, see: "*Specific examples*" above.
- **Christian properties attacked:** Several properties belonging to Christians have been attacked or damaged. The specific motives for such attacks often remain unclear, but it is clear that their faith adds to the vulnerability of Christians.
- **Christians forced to flee:** At least one convert from Islam to Christianity had to relocate because of pressure, while some Christians from Gaza relocated because of the difficult circumstances, with their Christian faith adding to their vulnerability.

## 5 Year trends

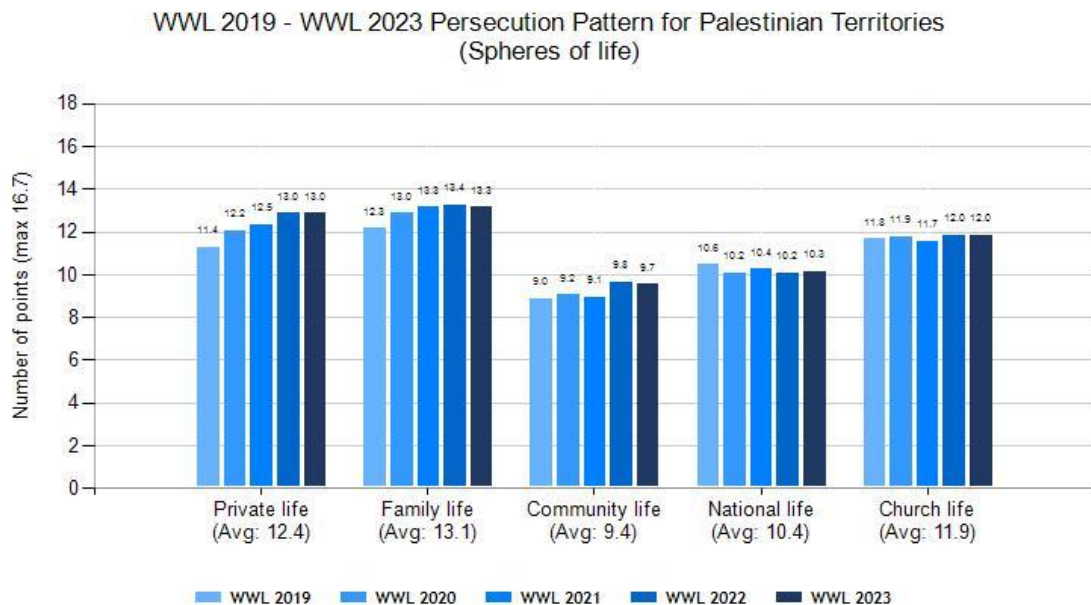
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Palestinian Territories: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	11.7
2022	11.7
2021	11.4
2020	11.3
2019	11.0

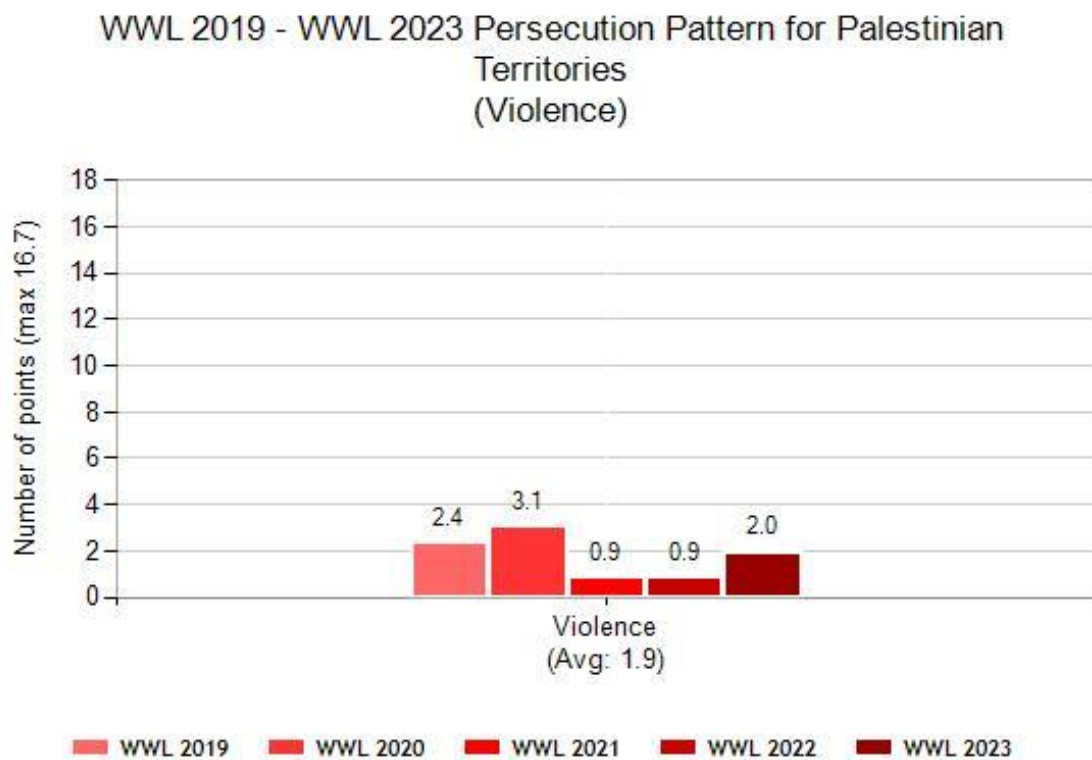
The table above depicts average pressure and shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has gradually risen, staying at a very high throughout the last years. It now appears to have stabilized at 11.7 points.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that the levels of pressure in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life* have increased since the WWL 2019 reporting period and seem to have stabilized in the last two reporting periods. In the *Community, National* and *Church spheres* pressure appears to remain more or less stable.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Despite some fluctuations, the level of violence in the Palestinian Territories has remained low on average (1.9 points). However, especially in the case of converts from Islam to Christianity, it is highly probable that violence is under-reported.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Enforced religious dress code; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

In the Palestinian Territories, male heads of household consider the choices and behavior of the women in their care to be deeply reflective of their leadership and personal honor. As such, women who stray beyond the culturally acceptable confines are at risk of retribution from their families. The Amnesty International country report (AI 2021/22) has once again highlighted the suspected use of so-called 'honor killings' - mainly by male relatives - revealing the precarious position of women in this patriarchal society. This threat can be used to put pressure on women

wishing to convert to Christianity. There is a strong sense of shame related to conversion from Islam; this has a significant practical impact on women and girls in particular because of their greater dependency within the family. Thus, they are more vulnerable to persecution from the family or close society, particularly in light of [insufficient legislation](#) addressing domestic violence and violence against women (UNFPA and UNDP, 2019, Gender Justice and the Law: Palestine).

Family members can almost always act without impunity against female converts. If a member of the younger generation converts to Christianity from Islam, families may turn to physical violence and forced confinement (house arrest) in order to persuade them to return. This is more often used for girls as the family cannot expel them like they can boys. A country expert summarizes: “Often, especially for girls, when it is known about their faith in Christ, they are placed in a house and deprived of communication with others or of meeting any of their friends.”

Christian girls and women are sometimes looked down upon by their Muslim neighbors (e.g. for not wearing a veil in public). Although not imposed by the government, there is a socially enforced dress code for Christian women, requiring them to cover themselves in public, except for their heads. They are also vulnerable to online harassment and abuse.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Palestinian men who convert to Christianity face a variety of forms of pressure and violence. Young male converts can be harassed, threatened and forced out of the family home. The Christian community struggles to accommodate these needy and often lonely individuals. It is also challenging for these men to marry a Christian, as both families will likely oppose the match. Such weddings would need to take place in secret and are rare.

As men are usually the main financial providers in Palestinian families, job discrimination against men serves to weaken the whole family. Some Christian men from a Muslim background have reportedly been exploited in the workplace and lost jobs on the basis of their faith (although there are no known incidents in the 2023 reporting period). As Palestinians operate in a context of Israeli dominance, this and the dire economic situation can make Christian men in general feel powerless. Many Christian men want to leave the Palestinian Territories to find a job abroad and escape life under occupation. Such emigration seriously weakens the Palestinian Christian community, since only the more capable men have the necessary qualifications and financial means for finding a job abroad.

Church leaders in Palestine (usually men) are also reported to face verbal abuse, including from ultra-orthodox Jews. Others have received threats and on rare occasions been killed.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

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 ([Al-Jazeera, 3 July 2017](#), [UN News, 3 June 2022](#)). There are also small communities of Shia and Ahmadi Muslims, but no issues involving infringements on their religious rights have been reported.

The small group of Jehovah's Witnesses are not officially recognized, but the Palestinian Authority recently established procedures to register their marriages and the birth of their children. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021, p.83): "Unrecognized religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses faced a continued PA ban on proselytizing but stated they were able to conduct most other functions unhindered. Palestinian authorities generally recognized on a case-by-case basis personal status documents issued by unrecognized churches. The PA, however, continued to refuse to recognize personal status legal documents (e.g., marriage certificates) issued by some of these unrecognized churches, which the groups said made it difficult for them to register newborn children under their fathers' names or as children of married couples." Hence, earlier reported problems concerning Jehovah's Witnesses seem not to have been fully resolved ([JW Newsroom, 2 March 2016](#)).

There are no other notable religious minorities in the Palestinian Territories that might face discrimination.

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### Islamic oppression

The relationship between the governing authorities and Christian communities is generally good as was seen by the fact that non-traditional Evangelical churches were officially recognized by the Palestinian Authority in November 2019. Nevertheless, society remains conservative and Islam is the norm. Converts from Islam to Christianity will no doubt keep facing the brunt of persecution. Official recognition of conversion is never likely to materialize, nor any acceptance of such a step by families and society. On the one hand, radicalism may decrease with radical groups such as Islamic State (IS) having less appeal following losses in nearby Syria and Iraq. And only 17% of the Palestinian youth indicates that religion is most important to their personal identity, down from 28% in the 2020 survey ([Arab Youth Survey 2021, p.45](#)). However, at the same, young men are likely to become more radical where they are desperate and have lost hope for a better future.

### Dictatorial paranoia

Both Hamas and Fatah are oppressing dissident voices. Christians and churches have to operate carefully in this regard, although most churches do not intend to criticize the authorities since they have ties to those in authority, even in Gaza. Several Christians are involved in the Fatah



movement or are working for the Palestinian Authority.

### **Religious nationalism - Jewish / Ethno-religious hostility**

Since the US embassy was moved to Jerusalem in 2018, followed by the normalization of ties between several Arab countries and Israel, hope for a solution to the conflict and an end to Israeli dominance are at a new low point. The fourth round of Israeli elections in two years in March 2021 brought about an unprecedented Israeli cabinet formation and included an Arab-Israeli party. However, the new Israeli government formed after a fifth round of elections in November 2022 is the most right-wing in Israel's history. It includes two ultranationalist parties, which make it likely that the Israeli government will continue to build settlements in the West Bank and keep pushing the growing Palestinian population even further back. It is thus unlikely that restrictions on traveling, for example, will be lifted. As long as the economic situation does not improve, Christians will keep emigrating to other countries, thus adding to the further marginalization of the shrinking Christian community.

### **Clan oppression**

The younger generation in the Palestinian Territories wants to honor their families and traditional customs, but they also want a modern (Western) lifestyle. In the long run, this might lead to a more open and liberal society, but for now, society remains conservative. Shaming the family honor by converting to Christianity will remain highly problematic.

## **External Links - Persecution Dynamics**

- Persecution engines description: alienated from their families - [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](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)
- Drivers of persecution description: disadvantage - <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/10550>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: insufficient legislation - <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Palestine%20Country%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Al-Jazeera, 3 July 2017 - <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/film-human-face-palestinian-bedouins- plight-170701133202312.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: UN News, 3 June 2022 - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1119692>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: JW Newsroom, 2 March 2016 - <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/palestinian-territories/personal-rights-jehovahs-witnesses/>
- Future outlook: Arab Youth Survey 2021, p.45 - <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/>

## **Further useful reports**

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website [opendoors.org](https://opendoors.org). As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Palestinian Territories>