News



Christian worshippers light candles on the day of Easter Sunday Mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, on April 20, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Ronen Zvulun)



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Hani was walking, as he did every year, with his wife and children toward the Holy Fire celebration at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But this year, it was different.

As they neared the Old City in east Jerusalem, they noticed immediately that Israeli forces were everywhere. More than ever before.

Police checkpoints and permit systems now control access to key Christian sites. Attacks on the community increased in 2024 from 2023, the year of the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, and Israel's subsequent Gaza offensive, which several international bodies have labeled genocide.

Palestinian Christians, like many others in the West Bank, must navigate a complex system of Israeli-imposed movement restrictions to access holy sites and basic services. This system includes nearly 800 permanent checkpoints and barriers in the West Bank, along with thousands of temporary "flying" checkpoints, all enforced under the justification of Israeli security concerns.

After parking near the New Gate, Hani (who preferred not to disclose his last name due to personal reasons) and his family began walking toward the entrance — until he was stopped. Tension hung heavy in the air.

"You can't get in," said a policeman.

"I'm with my wife and kids," Hani replied. "They're already inside."

His 8-year-old daughter burst into tears, reaching for him. It was only her second time attending with the Orthodox scout group, and she wanted her father beside her. His wife stepped forward.

"He's my husband. We're all inside — he's the only one out."

They stood in the sun for half an hour, pleading. Eventually, the police let him through. He was lucky — at least he made it to Jerusalem. Others from the West Bank never got past the checkpoints, left standing outside the Old City behind barriers, watching.

Hani continued toward the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate but was stopped again — trapped between two checkpoints, unable to move forward or back.

The sun was relentless. The children were exhausted. Then things escalated.



The altar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, traditionally believed to be the tomb of Jesus Christ, is pictured in Jerusalem's Old City. (Francesca Maria Lorenzini)

A border police officer approached the children, shouting and demanding the spot they were sitting in. Hani stepped in, but the officer kept yelling and pushing him. Surrounded by Israeli border police, with his wife beside him and his daughter behind him crying, the situation grew tense.

And then — chaos.

Hani heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked. He turned to see the officer had drawn his weapon — aimed at Hani's head.

"I was terrified. I moved closer, tried to push his hand up so he couldn't fire."

Others rushed in, pulling the officer back and holding him. Then, quietly, several officers began removing their name tags. They scanned the crowd. People were filming.

Hani moved toward a shaded area. That's when the camera went off — and things got worse. Police, border police, soldiers — it was hard to tell who was who. One officer began hitting him, swinging like a boxer.

It was the members of the Orthodox scout group who intervened, forming a barrier between Hani and the police.

Again, he walked away — searching for someone, anyone, in charge. He found an officer who barely spoke English. Still, the man followed him.

"What happened?" he asked.

Before Hani could respond, another soldier cut in: "It's OK. Never mind. Go away."

Hani asked for the name of the officer who pointed the gun.

"Here's my name," the soldier replied mockingly. "Sue me. Take a picture."

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But Hani couldn't. Other soldiers stood behind him, smirking. As if to say: "We can do anything. You can't stop us."

Hani's ordeal was documented on video and the individual, a reservist serving in an operational role, was removed from his assignment following the incident, the Israeli border police told the National Catholic Reporter in a written statement.

But this is not an isolated case. It reflects a larger crisis confronting Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem — a shrinking space for faith in a city that once celebrated its multi-religious identity.

The 1995 Oslo II peace accord divided the West Bank into three areas: Area A, controlled by the Palestinian Authority; Area C, which is fully controlled by Israel; and Area B, jointly managed by both. But Israel retains overarching military control across all regions, resulting in fragmented Palestinian communities and the need for permits to travel between them.

Bethlehem-based human rights lawyer Dalia Qumsieh says these restrictions particularly undermine the right to worship for Palestinians during their religious event, Christians and Muslims alike.



A sculpture of St. Anne with a young Virgin Mary is pictured at the Church of St. Anne in Jerusalem. St. Anne is believed to have been born at the site of the church. (Francesca Maria Lorenzini)

Jerusalem is also divided into two parts. West Jerusalem has been under Israeli control since 1948, while east Jerusalem — home to most Christian and Muslim holy sites — is considered occupied territory under international law following Israel's 1967 annexation. East Jerusalem mainly consists of Palestinian neighborhoods and the Old City's religious quarters, where Palestinians face movement restrictions and limited rights.

Palestinians from the West Bank have been required to pass through the heavily fortified Checkpoint 300 to enter the city, where they often face long waits and frequent harassment.

"The capital city for millions of Palestinians, be it Muslim, Christians, or even the remaining Palestinian Jews, is suddenly closed," Qumsieh said. "The general rule is the prohibition of access, and the exception is when they give a permit [that] allows us to go for a very limited time to Jerusalem."

Since the second intifada and Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza, movement restrictions have become increasingly institutionalized through digital surveillance and stricter permit regimes. While Israel cites security, human rights groups raised concerns about violations of international law, including allegations of apartheid.

4,000 process in Jerusalem for Palm Sunday amid Israeli bombardment of Gaza

Permits for religious reasons are issued by the Israeli military through an often arbitrary process. Previously, churches submitted congregant lists, but since last year, Christians must apply individually through the military-run app "Al Munasiq," or "The Coordinator" in Arabic, to cross certain checkpoints.

Qumsieh notes that many are hesitant to use the app due to privacy concerns and reports of surveillance, as it grants Israeli authorities broad access to users' phones. Even when permits are approved, there's no guarantee family members will receive them, and each person must pass through a designated checkpoint — like Checkpoint 300 for those from Bethlehem.

"For the first time since the birth of Christianity, it was Israel that really separated both cities [Jerusalem and Bethlehem]," she said. "You're separating the city that represents our Resurrection and Nativity, the pillars of the Christian faith."

Even after passing the checkpoint, worshippers encounter more challenges. Israeli police have repeatedly disrupted and harassed Christian celebrations in Jerusalem, with the past two years proving especially difficult.

On the day of the Holy Fire celebration, Hani Boullata, chairman of the Arab Orthodox Union Club of Jerusalem, approached a checkpoint while reaching the Cathedral of St. James in the Armenian Quarter, only to find worshipers seeking holy Communion being blocked by Israeli Border Police.

An altercation ensued during which Boullata and his 17-year-old son — who attempted to defend him — were both beaten. Later, at another checkpoint, they discovered that the church choir had been denied entry to the area.

Boullata said this year, Easter's joy was lost. What once drew thousands in celebration now feels like a military lockdown.

Attendance at the Holy Fire ceremony was limited to 1,800 inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, including about 200 police officers, down from about 10,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a written statement, the Israeli border police told the National Catholic Reporter that the measures were necessary "to maintain public safety and order," and called claims of excessive restrictions on the Holy Fire ceremony "misleading."

"I've never heard of people not even being able to reach before. This year we were surprised because the heads of churches were given promises by the police that they will ease things," said Yusuf Daher, coordinator of the Jerusalem Liaison Office of the World Council of Churches, a global Christian organization founded in 1948 to promote ecumenism. His work focuses on providing reliable information about Palestinian-Israeli issues, particularly those affecting Palestinian Christians.

The sharp rise in repression of Palestinians is widely attributed to the current Israeli government, formed in December 2022 and considered the most religiously conservative and right-wing in the country's history. The ruling coalition includes ultranationalist and religious parties which hold powerful posts, including control over the Ministry of National Security, which oversees the police.

This shift is part of a broader rise in Jewish ultranationalism, reinforced by the 2018 Nation-State Law, which defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This appears to contradict Israel's foundational promise — outlined in its Declaration of Independence — to uphold religious freedom and equality.

"A pseudo-biblical language [is being used] to justify what has been going on in these years; it is theologically wrong and one of the central themes in our reflections is equality," said Fr. David Neuhaus, a Jesuit at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem.

In 2024, the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue — a Jerusalem-based, interreligious peacebuilding organization — documented 111 anti-Christian attacks in Jerusalem, perpetrated primarily by members of ultra-Orthodox and ultranationalist Jewish groups.* Incidents included spitting, pepper-spraying and physical assaults, often targeting clergy in areas like the Armenian Quarter and

Mount Zion.

"They want a Jerusalem that is exclusive for the Jewish people while denying any rights for the others; Jerusalem has a multi-faithful, multicultural identity that is being damaged and lost during this time," Daher said. "I guess their aim by doing this is to drive people out."

In 1922, Christians made up roughly 25% of Jerusalem's population. Today, they are less than 1% — mostly Indigenous Palestinians and Armenians, along with about 3,500 foreign church representatives. And a 2024 survey by the Rossing Center found that 36% of Christians in Israel and east Jerusalem are considering emigration, mainly due to sociopolitical pressures.

"We're sending an alarming message: Christians in the Holy Land are in danger," Boullata said.

A community that faces a particular threat is the Armenian one, due to a controversial 98-year lease signed in 2021 between the Armenian Patriarchate and Israeli company Xana Gardens Ltd., covering about a quarter of the Armenian Quarter.



Save the ArQ set up an encampment in the Armenian Quarter to protest a controversial plan to turn much of the area into a luxury hotel. (Francesca Maria Lorenzini)

The lease, tied to potential luxury hotel development, violates church bylaws requiring approval for leases over 45 years, and was made without consulting the Holy Synod or General Assembly, the governing bodies within the Armenian Patriarchate that oversee major decisions, especially those affecting church property and community matters.

Amid widespread opposition and legal challenges, the patriarchate intends to cancel the contract, but the dispute underscores fears over the community's future in the city.

Kegham Balian, communications director of Save the ArQ movement, has been camping out in the area with fellow members for over 500 days to stop the deal.

"One or two generations in the future, there won't be an Armenian presence if we lose this plot of land," he said.

Armenians have had a continuous presence in Jerusalem since Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in 301 A.D. The Armenian nation is a global ethnic community existing for more than 3,000 years, while the Armenian state refers to modern political entities like the current Republic of Armenia (since 1991).

The Armenian Patriarchate is a key custodian of important Christian sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and also holds a significant role at the tomb of the Virgin Mary.

"We've had many dynasties, many empires ruling over Jerusalem and the Armenian presence has been the only continuous and uninterrupted presence in Jerusalem; if the Armenian community disappeared, it would be a historical and cultural erasure," Balian said.

> 'We are Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is us. We are the living stones.'

George Sahhar, Orthodox community member whose family has lived in Jerusalem for over 250 years

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George Sahhar, a member of the Orthodox community whose family has lived in Jerusalem for over 250 years, was told about a time** when Palestinians from the West Bank moved more freely, and Christians from Syria, Lebanon and Egypt would drive into the city — their license plates lining the streets near Damascus Gate.

"Jerusalem can divide us, Jerusalem can unite us; we want Jerusalem to be a city where Jews, Christians and Muslims exercise their rights to worship freely," he said.

Sahhar emphasized that the Christian community is the heart of Jerusalem; its significance comes not from buildings, but from the people who sustain its presence and purpose. Without them, churches hold no real meaning.

"We are Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is us. We are the living stones," he said.

**This sentence has been updated for clarity.*
***This sentence has been updated for accuracy.*