

About TIP

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Press Kit: Pope Benedict XVI's Visit to Israel May 11-15, 2009

Pope Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit Israel and the West Bank **May 11-15**. He is to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders as well as Jewish and Muslim religious officials. In addition, the Pope is expected to travel to the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem as well as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. He will also give a mass in Nazareth.¹

Diplomatic relations were established between Israel and the Holy See on June 15, 1994, and in 1997 an agreement was reached on the legal status of the Catholic Church within Israel. In 2000, Pope John Paul II made the first official papal visit to Israel. On Oct. 6, 2008, Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen became the first rabbi to address a plenary session of the Synod of Bishops. Cohen said his invitation was a sign of hope and a message of love, co-existence, and peace.²

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¹ Lemberg, Izzy, "Pope to skip Holocaust museum on trip to Israel, envoy says," CNN, March 10, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/03/10/pope.visit/>; Castelfranco, Sabina, "Vatican Announces Papal Visit to Holy Land," VOAnews.com, March 26, 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/english/2009-03-26-voa54.cfm>

² Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between Israel and the Holy See," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 15, 1994. <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/MFA+Spokesman/1994/PRESS%20BRIEFING-%20ESTABLISHMENT%20OF%20DIPLOMATIC%20RELATI>; "Rabbi Cohen's talk at the Synod - the full text," Hebrew Speaking Catholic Vicariate in Israel, Oct. 13, 2008, http://www.catholic.co.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=170%3Aarabbi-cohens-talk-at-the-synod-the-full-text&catid=10%3Adocuments&Itemid=16&lang=en; "Israel welcomes visit by Pope John Paul II - March 2000," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Feb. 21, 2000, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern+History/Historic+Events/Israel+welcomes+visit+by+Pope+John+Paul+II+-+March.htm>

The Christian Community in Israel

In 2008, nearly two million Christian tourists came to Israel for sight-seeing and personal pilgrimages.³ Along with all other minority groups, Christians have enjoyed religious freedom in Israel since its founding in 1948. This religious freedom is guaranteed in Israel's Declaration of Independence which states that, "*The State of Israel... will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel... it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.*" The Israeli Declaration of Independence also gives Christians full freedom of worship and access to all their holy sites, including: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Via Dolorosa, the Room of the Last Supper in Jerusalem, The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth.⁴

By contrast, when Jordan controlled the holy sites between 1949 and 1967, all Israelis - Jewish and Christian - were forbidden from entering East Jerusalem, including the Old City. The Old City is home to the Temple Mount and Western Wall, the most sacred site in Judaism; the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Christians believe Jesus was buried; and the al-Aqsa mosque, one of the holiest places for Muslims.

Under Jordanian rule, holy sites and Jewish cemeteries within East Jerusalem were desecrated. Upon gaining control of all of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel immediately opened the area to people of all faiths so that they would be free to worship at their respective holy sites without threat of violence or persecution. Israel made this clear in its first radio announcement after capturing East Jerusalem.⁵

Christians are represented in the Israeli Government via the ministry's Department for Christian Communities. The Department of Christian Communities is responsible for addressing the needs and concerns of the Christian communities to the Israeli Government.⁶

The Israel Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, established in 2004, seeks to improve the relationship between Christians and Jews. This body works to open formal and direct communication between the Jewish people and Christian leaders worldwide. The Christian Allies Caucus provides assistance in obtaining visas for the Christian community, educates Israelis about Christianity, promotes Christian tourism to Israel, and seeks to strengthen the status of women worldwide on the basis of Judeo-Christian values.⁷

³Leichman, Aaron J., "Israel Ministry of Tourism Reports 40 Percent Increase in U.S. Christian Visitors," *The Christian Post*, April 4, 2009. <http://www.christianpost.com/Life/travel/2009/04/israel-ministry-of-tourism-reports-40-percent-increase-in-u-s-christian-visitors-03/index.html>

⁴Eldar, Yishai. "The Christian Communities of Israel," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts%20about%20israel/people/focus%20on%20israel%20-%20the%20christian%20communities%20of%20isr>. Accessed on April 23, 2009

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Jerusalem in the Twentieth Century* (Pilmico 1996), p254; Bolen, Todd, "Church of the Holy Sepulcher," BiblePlaces.com, <http://www.bibleplaces.com/holysepulcher.htm>, accessed Feb. 25, 2008

⁶Eldar, Yishai. "The Christian Communities of Israel," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts%20about%20israel/people/focus%20on%20israel%20-%20the%20christian%20communities%20of%20isr>. Accessed on April 23, 2009

⁷ "The Knesset Christian Allies Caucus," <http://www.cac.org.il/initiatives.htm> Accessed April 29, 2009

A number of Christian politicians have served as Members of Knesset (MK). Nadia Hilou, a Labor Party MK from 2006 - 2009, was the first female Arab Christian MK.⁸ She served as chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child; took active part in strengthening laws against cyber sex with minors; and also initiated legislation on compensating the relatives of murder victims.⁹

Israel is also home to many co-existence organizations. One such organization is the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, which serves “*to harness the teachings and values of the three Abrahamic faiths and transform religion's role from a force of division and extremism into a source of reconciliation, coexistence, and understanding.*” The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews is another important Christian/Jewish Organization in Israel, and has helped rebuild and renovate more than 2,443 shelters following the 2006 Lebanon War.¹⁰

Christians are also an active component in Israeli cultural life. Mira Awad, an Israeli Arab Christian singer and actor is representing Israel in this year's Eurovision contest along with Israeli counterpart Ahinoam (Noa) Nini.¹¹ Mira is also famous for her starring role in “The Bubble,” an Israeli film directed by Eytan Fox.¹² Another famous Israeli Christian Arab is actor Makram Khoury, who has starred in multiple Israeli and international films and TV shows such as “Munich” (2006) directed by Steven Spielberg and the American TV show “West Wing.”¹³ Israel's High Jump representative in the 2008 Olympics, Nikita Pali is also an Israeli Christian, having received citizenship in 2005 after immigrating to Israel from Moldova in 1995.¹⁴

As of 2005, there are 148,000 Christians living in Israel, constituting 2.1% of the total population. The Christian communities of Israel can be split into four main groups: Orthodox, Non-Chalcedonian (Monophysite), Catholic (Latin and Uniate) and Protestant.¹⁵ The vast majority (more than 98 percent) of Christians in Israel live in urban areas. Nazareth has the largest Christian population, at 19,000 and Jerusalem is second with 15,600. Israel also welcomes hundreds of thousands of Christian tourists and pilgrims every year.

⁸ FRENKEL, SHEERA CLAIRE , “Meet the new MK: Nadia Hilou,” *The Jerusalem Post*, April 28, 2006, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1145961242026>

⁹ Sinai, Ruth, “New law to deal tougher with cyber sex with minors,” *Haaretz*, Jan. 1, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/811341.html>

¹⁰ “About ICCI,” The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, http://english.icci.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=52. Accessed April 26, 2009; “About IFMJ,” International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, <http://www.ifcj.org/site/PageNavigator/eng/about/>. Accessed April 26, 2009

¹¹ Barak, Itamar, “Jewish and Arab together on stage,” *Estcotoday*, January 11, 2009, <http://www.esctoday.com/news/read/12891?rss>.

¹² “Mira Awad,” Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0043384/>. Accessed on April 23, 2009

¹³ “Makram Khoury,” Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0451902/>. Accessed on April 23, 2009

¹⁴ “Nikki Palli,” Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Palli.html>. Accessed April 23, 2009

¹⁵ Eldar, Yishai. “The Christian Communities of Israel,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts%20about%20israel/people/focus%20on%20israel%20-%20the%20christian%20communities%20of%20isr>. Accessed on April 23, 2009; Bassok, Moti, “Israel's Christian population numbers 148,000 as of Christmas Eve,” *Haaretz*, Dec. 25, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/805277.html>

The Catholic Community in Israel

Israel is the only country in the Middle East in which the Christian and Catholic population has grown since 1948, having increased by more than 400 percent. In 2006, the Christian population of Israel numbered 148,000, which is 2.1 percent of the population.¹⁶

Of these, approximately 80,000 are Catholics, divided among several denominations: the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem; the Maronite Church; the Greek Melkite Catholic Church; the Syrian Catholic Church; the Armenian Catholic Church; the Coptic Catholic Church; and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Most of these communities are very small, except for the Latin Patriarchate, the Maronite Church, and the Melkite Catholic Church. Of these the biggest is the Melkite community which has approximately 50,000 members, the majority of whom live in the Galilee. The second largest is the community that follows the Latin Patriarchate which comprises 20,000 people, spread amongst East Jerusalem, Nazareth, the West Bank and Gaza. There are also approximately 7,000 Maronite Christians, an Eastern Church of Syrian origin in formal communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Most Maronites living in Israel reside in the Galilee.¹⁷

The Catholic Church has established many educational institutions throughout Israel, including Bethlehem University, 44 elementary and secondary schools and a number of biblical and archaeological schools. Although many of the 24,000 students who attend Catholic schools in Israel are Muslim, more than 500 hours of class time have been devoted to teaching pupils about the Vatican, the history of the Catholic Church, and the Pope in preparation for his visit to Israel in May.¹⁸

The Catholic presence in Israel dates back to the Crusades, when the first Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem was established in 1099 in the Crusader state of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.¹⁹ Until then, all Christians in the Holy Land had been under the care of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. Following the destruction of the Kingdom of Jerusalem by the Mamluks in 1291, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem survived only in name. It was re-established in 1847 under

¹⁶ Weiner, Justus Reid, "Palestinian Crimes against Christian Arabs and Their Manipulation against Israel," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Sept. 1, 2008, http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=3&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=253&PID=0&IID=2406&TTL=Palestinian_Crimes_against_Christian_Arabs_and_Their_Manipulation_against_Israel; Bassok, Moti, "Israel's Christian population numbers 148,000 as of Christmas Eve," *Haaretz*, Dec. 25, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/805277.html>

¹⁷ "Catholic schools in Israel prepare for papal visit," *Catholic News Agency*, March 4, 2009, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=15267>; "Histories and Activities of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem," Latin Patriarchate, http://www.lpj.org/newsite2006/patriarch/history_patriarchate.html. Accessed on April 23, 2009; "Christian Themes - Communities in Israel - Part II," Israel Ministry of Tourism, http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Christian+Themes/Communities+in+Israel+-+Part+II.htm. Accessed April 26, 2009

¹⁸ Catholic schools in Israel prepare for papal visit. March 4, 2009. <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=15267>

¹⁹ "Christian Themes - "Communities in Israel - Part II," Israel Ministry of Tourism, http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Christian+Themes/Communities+in+Israel+-+Part+II.htm. Accessed April 26, 2009

Patriarch Joseph Valerga, and has since had an uninterrupted succession of 15 different patriarchs.

The current Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem is Fouad Twal, who took over from Patriarch Michel Sabbah in June 2008.²⁰ Twal is assisted by four Patriarchal vicars, who are based in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Amman and Cyprus.²¹

There is also a community in Israel known as the Hebrew Catholics, a group of Christians of Jewish descent who are members of the Catholic Church. The community has established the Hebrew Speaking Catholic Vicariate in Israel, a Catholic association dedicated to developing the Hebrew Catholic community in Israel. The Vicariate also seeks to “serve as a bridge” for better understanding between Christians and Jews. Today, there are active Hebrew Catholic communities in four major Israeli cities: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Haifa and Beer Sheba.²²

²⁰ “Histories and Activities of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem,” Latin Patriarchate, http://www.lpj.org/newsite2006/patriarch/history_patriarchate.html. Accessed on April 23, 2009

²¹ Histories and Activities of Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, http://www.lpj.org/newsite2006/patriarch/history_patriarchate.html

²² “Who We Are,” Hebrew Speaking Catholic Vicariate in Israel, http://www.catholic.co.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=1&Itemid=2&lang=en. Accessed April 23, 2009

Christian Holy Sites in Israel

Cana of Galilee

Cana (modern name: Kfar Kanna) is a town in the northern Israeli region of the Galilee, five miles north-east of Nazareth. According to the Gospel of St. John it was here that Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine at a wedding. A church was built in Cana by the Roman Empress Helena (mother of Constantine) in the 4th century CE but fell into disrepair in subsequent centuries. In 1883, Franciscans who had become established in the town completed a church at the traditional site of the miracle.²³

Capernaum

Approximately two miles north of Tiberias are the ruins of the ancient town of Capernaum where Jesus lived and preached for part of his life. It is the site of numerous events related in the New Testament such as the healing of a Roman centurion's servant.²⁴

The town was founded at the beginning of the Hasmonean dynasty in Judea in the 2nd century BCE. It contains a Byzantine synagogue beneath which lies another structure believed to be an earlier synagogue dating from the 1st century CE and it is possible that Jesus visited it during his time in Capernaum. Another place of interest in the area is a complex known as the House of Peter, which seems to have been a Christian place of worship from the 2nd century CE. Christian tradition holds that this was the home of St. Peter and that Jesus stayed there during his time in Capernaum. A Byzantine church was erected over the site in the 5th century.²⁵

The Church of the Nativity

Christian tradition holds that Jesus was born where the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem now stands. The church was originally built in 333 CE by the Roman Emperor Constantine I but was destroyed in 529 CE and subsequently rebuilt. In the following centuries, new sections were added onto the existing structure. The entire complex of the church covers 12,000 square meters and includes Latin, Greek Orthodox and Armenian convents in addition to the Basilica. The

²³ "Cana," Israel Ministry of Tourism, http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Christian+Themes/Details/Cana+++chr.htm; Accessed April 21, 2009

²⁴ "Capernaum," Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/capernaum.htm>. Accessed April 20, 2009

²⁵ "Capernaum," Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/capernaum.htm>. Accessed April 20, 2009; "Capernaum - The site," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 7, 2000, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFArchive/2000_2009/2000/3/Capernaum; "House of Peter at Capernaum," All About Archaeology, <http://www.allaboutarchaeology.org/house-of-peter-at-capernaum-faq.htm>. Accessed April 20, 2009; "Capernaum - City of Jesus and its Jewish Synagogue," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nov. 26, 2003, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Early%20History%20-%20Archaeology/Capernaum%20-%20City%20of%20Jesus%20and%20its%20Jewish%20Synagogue>

Church is a central place of pilgrimage for Christians from around the world. In 2008 a record 1.3 million tourists visited Bethlehem.²⁶

Church of the Holy Sepulcher

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is located in the northwest corner of the old city of Jerusalem, at the end of the Via Dolorosa, the Pathway of Sorrow. Christians believe that Jesus walked along this route before he was crucified.

The church was built by Roman Emperor Constantine I in 335 C.E., nine years after his mother, Queen Helena, determined the location to be the spot where Jesus was resurrected and where she discovered the True Cross. Today, Christians believe that the church stands on the place where Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected.²⁷

Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu

The Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu is a Catholic church in Jerusalem built in 1931 in commemoration of the events relayed in the New Testament in which Peter rejected Jesus three times and then cried in remorse. In the 5th century CE, a Byzantine shrine was erected on this spot but was destroyed in 1010. It was rebuilt by the Crusaders in 1102 but fell into disrepair after Jerusalem fell to Muslim forces led by Saladin in 1187. The church is located on Mount Zion, just outside Jerusalem's old city and attracts many pilgrims and visitors.²⁸

Garden of Gethsemane

The Garden of Gethsemane is the place where the New Testament states that Jesus was arrested before his trial and crucifixion. The garden is located at the foot of the Mount of Olives on the eastern side of Jerusalem's old city and contains an ancient olive grove. There are a number of important holy sites around the garden including the Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene and the Church of All Nations consecrated in 1924 and built with donations from numerous countries.²⁹

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a city with extreme significance in Christianity and contains numerous Christian holy sites, places of worship and pilgrimage. These include the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Chapel of Ascension, the Church of Pater Noster, the Church of All Nations, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Church of John the Baptist, Mary's Tomb and many others. In 2008, two

²⁶ "Church with a turbulent history," *BBC*, April 4, 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1910843.stm; IDF's Civil Administration in Judea and Samaria Communique, March 9, 2009

²⁷ "The Church of the Holy Sepulchre: Christian Holy Site," Web site of History.com, http://www.history.com/classroom/unesco/jerusalem/about_sepulchre.html. Accessed March 18, 2009

²⁸ "St. Peter in Gallicantu," BibleWalks.com, <http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/Gallicantu.html>. Accessed April 21, 2009; "Saint Peter in Gallicantu," Israel Ministry of Tourism, http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Christian+Themes/Details/Saint+Peter+in+Gallicantu++chr.htm. Accessed April 21, 2009

²⁹ "Mount of Olives," BiblePlaces.com, <http://www.bibleplaces.com/mtolives.htm>. Accessed April 21, 2009

million Christian tourists visited Israel, many of whom visited Jerusalem and its numerous places of pilgrimage.³⁰

The Mount of Beatitudes

The Mount of Beatitudes is a small hill located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. It is here that the New Testament says Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount and the site has been a destination for pilgrims since the 4th century CE. The ruins of a Byzantine church were found near the bottom of the hill and a Franciscan chapel was built at the top in 1938.³¹

Nazareth

Nazareth, located in northern Israel, is the place where Christian tradition holds that Jesus was born and spent the first 20 years of his life. There are a number of Christian holy sites in Nazareth including the Basilica of the Annunciation, the Church of St. Gabriel and Mary's Well.³²

Basilica of the Annunciation

The Basilica of the Annunciation, located in Nazareth, is said to be the place where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, saying she would give birth to Jesus. By 570 CE, a church had been erected over the spot and it has been a destination for pilgrims ever since. The church was built and rebuilt separately by the Byzantines, Crusaders and Franciscans but these structures no longer exist. The current basilica was built over the old Byzantine and Crusader churches, was consecrated in 1969 and is the biggest Christian place of worship in the Middle East.³³

Stella Maris

The 19th-century Carmelite church and monastery of Stella Maris is perched at the western edge of Mount Carmel, atop the bayside city of Haifa, overlooking the Mediterranean. Its name, which

³⁰“Christian Sites in Jerusalem,” Holy Land Voyager, http://www.tourstotheholyland.com/Christian_Travel_Guide/Christian_Sites_in_Jerusalem.htm. Accessed April 21, 2009 ; Israel Ministry of Tourism communiqué, Jan. 21, 2009; Rosenblum, Irit, “New Israeli tourism initiative calls on Christian pilgrims to pedal the Nazareth - Jerusalem route,” Haaretz, Jan. 22, 2009 <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1057380.html>

³¹ “Mount of Beatitudes, Galilee,” Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/tabgha-mount-of-beatitudes.htm>. Accessed April 20, 2009

³² “Sacred Sites in Israel and the West Bank,” Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/sacred-sites.htm>. Accessed April 21, 2009

³³ “Nazareth,” Web site of Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/nazareth.htm>. Accessed April 7, 2009; “Nazareth History,” Web site of inIsrael.com, <http://www.inisrael.com/tour/nazareth/history.htm>. Accessed March 18, 2009 “Nazareth: The Basilica of the Annunciation,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 2000, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2000/3/Nazareth-%20The%20Basilica%20of%20the%20Annunciation; “Basilica of the Annunciation, Nazareth,” Sacred Destinations, <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/nazareth-basilica-of-annunciation.htm>. Accessed April 21, 2009

means “star of the sea,” comes not from the beautiful view, but from an ancient epithet for Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Carmelites, a Roman Catholic religious order, have lived in the area since medieval times. The church has a distinctively painted dome and a magnificent altar over a cave the Prophet Elijah is said to have inhabited.³⁴

³⁴ “Stella Maris,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Christian+Themes/Details/Stella+Maris.htm. Accessed April 21, 2009

Oppression of the Christian Population in the West Bank and Gaza

The following is a summary of an interview with international human rights lawyer Justus Reid Weiner on the oppression of Christians in the West Bank and Gaza, published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Sept. 1, 2008. For the full interview, please visit [http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=3&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=11&FID=253&PID=0&IID=2406&TTL=Palestinian Crimes against Christian Arabs and Their Manipulation against Israel](http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=3&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=11&FID=253&PID=0&IID=2406&TTL=Palestinian%20Crimes%20against%20Christian%20Arabs%20and%20their%20Manipulation%20against%20Israel)

Christian communities in the Middle East are dwindling rapidly. Christians across the Middle East experience intimidation, beatings and kidnappings. They are forced out of jobs, off of land, sexually harassed, tortured and forced into marriage.

This is a particularly acute problem within the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza, prompting tens of thousands of Palestinian Christians to leave their homes. According to the latest research on the Christian community, there are just 1,500-3,000 Christians in Gaza and it is estimated that less than 50,000 Palestinian Christians remain in all of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza together.

Israel's Palestinian Christian population is concentrated in Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bethlehem. Greek Catholic or Greek Melkite is the largest Christian community living in the West Bank and Gaza as well as numerous smaller denominations. Today the only all-Christian village left in the Palestinian territories is Taybeh, situated in the West Bank. Because of persistent oppression from their Muslim neighbors however, many residents of Taybeh have left the village and only 1,300 people remain there.

Harassment and intimidation of Christians has forced many residents of Bethlehem to abandon their homes as well. Bethlehem, in the West Bank, just south of Jerusalem was a majority Christian town for hundreds of years. Due to coercion and fear, however, it is estimated that approximately 1,000 Christians have left Bethlehem every year for the past seven years. While in 1950, Christians accounted for 80 percent of the population of Bethlehem by 1990 this figure had dropped to only 60 percent. By 2000, just 40 percent of Bethlehem's population was Christian.

The policies of former Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat were one of the primary reasons behind this demographic shift. Among the policies Arafat enacted was the re-drawing of municipal districts to ensure a Muslim majority in elections; regions which were heavily populated by Muslims were annexed onto Bethlehem to dilute the voting power of the Christian population. In a highly symbolic move, Arafat also converted the Greek Orthodox monastery next to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem into his private residence, sending a clear signal to the Christians of the city that demographics were shifting.

Hamas and Islamist parties are largely responsible for the oppression and intimidation of Christians in Gaza and the West Bank. One such practice is the renewal of the jizya tax - a tax mandated in Islamic law imposed on non-Muslim citizens of Islamic lands. Hassan al-Masalmeh, the leader of the Hamas faction in Bethlehem, stated, "*We in Hamas intend to implement this tax*

someday. We say it openly and we welcome everyone to Palestine, but only if they agree to live under our rules.”

Since 2006, when Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections, and following the movement’s takeover of Gaza in June 2007, Hamas also has ratified policies that advance the implementation of Islamic law into the Palestinian Authority, increasing religious pressure on Christians.

Due to this mounting anti-Christian sentiment, a series of anti-Christian violent incidents has occurred in recent years. For example, in February 2006, an explosion was set off just outside the Bible Society in Gaza. After the explosion, attackers opened fire at a nearby Greek Orthodox Church. And in 2006, armed militants protesting Pope Benedict XVI’s remarks about the Prophet Muhammad attacked seven churches in the West Bank and Gaza, including a church in the Zeitoun neighborhood near Gaza City and an Anglican church in the West Bank city of Nablus.

Other instances of anti-Christian violent acts perpetrated by Muslims occurred on Feb. 15, 2008 when Muslim militants bombed the Gaza City YMCA library, and on May 16, when a bomb was set off in a Christian school, also in Gaza.

Despite these events, Israel’s Christian leaders have said Christian emigration has nothing to do with the Muslim population, and that Christians in Gaza enjoy the same rights as their Muslim neighbors.

Justus Reid Weiner, an international human rights lawyer, has said that those who are aware of the human rights crimes choose to remain silent about them for personal benefit or due to fear. He wrote, *“The Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic, and other leaders in the Palestinian areas will all sing the tune of the Palestinian Authority - at least publicly. Others can talk about the real situation only in private because they live it.”*

Israel’s is the only Christian population in the Middle East that has grown in recent years. Palestinian Christians enlist Israel’s aid to protect them from Muslim hate crimes. Despite this, Palestinian Christian leaders continue to blame Israel for these problems, often for personal benefit or due to intimidation by the Palestinian Authority or Islamic terrorist organizations.³⁵

³⁵ Weiner, Justus Reid, “Palestinian Crimes against Christian Arabs and Their Manipulation against Israel,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Sept. 1, 2008, http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=3&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=253&PID=0&IID=2406&TTL=Palestinian_Crimes_against_Christian_Arabs_and_Their_Manipulation_against_Israel

Recent Attacks on Christians in the West Bank and Gaza

- **May 31, 2008:** Gunmen attack the security guards at the Al Manara School, steal a vehicle belonging to the Baptist Holy Book Society which operates the school and threaten the society's director.³⁶
- **May 16, 2008:** A bomb explodes in the Rahabat al-Wardia school run by nuns in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood of Gaza City. The previous year, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, the school was subjected to thefts and an arson attack.³⁷
- **April 3, 2008:** A monument in Gaza's foreign nationals' cemetery is blown up.³⁸
- **Feb. 21, 2008:** Armed militants force their way into the Lighthouse Baptist School in Gaza City, assault a guard and vandalize classrooms.³⁹
- **Feb. 15, 2008:** Three gunmen from the “Army of Islam in the Land of Ribat,” a network headed by the Dughmush clan in Gaza, break into the YMCA library in Gaza City and set off a bomb that causes extensive damage.⁴⁰
- **Jan. 10, 2008:** A group called the “Army of the Believers - The Al-Qaeda Organization in Palestine,” stages two attacks on the International School in Beit Lahiya in northern Gaza, burning vehicles and stealing equipment. According to a statement issued two days later, the school was accused of “spreading polytheism and hatred for Islam.” The attacks were timed to coincide with U.S. President George W. Bush’s visit to Israel.⁴¹
- **Dec. 31, 2007:** The “Friends of the Sunnah Bayt al-Maqdis,” issue a manifesto on the Pal-Today Web site, affiliated with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, threatening to attack anyone who participates in New Year's Eve celebrations.⁴²
- **June 19, 2007:** During the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, Hamas gunmen attack and vandalize a monastery and church.⁴³
- **April 15, 2007:** A group calling itself “The Swords of Truth in the Land of Ribat” sets off bombs in two Internet cafes and a store selling Christian books in Gaza, causing damage.⁴⁴

³⁶ Spyer, Jonathan, “Analysis: Cruelty and silence in Gaza,” *The Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 11, 2008,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1228728163698&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

³⁷ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

³⁸ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

³⁹ “2008 Human Rights Report: Israel and the occupied territories,” U.S. Department of State, Feb. 25, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119117.htm>

⁴⁰ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

⁴¹ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

⁴² “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

⁴³ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

- **Oct. 6, 2007:** An employee of the Bible Society in the Gaza Strip, Rami Khader Ayad, is abducted and killed by unknown men on his way home from work. According to Palestinian sources, Ayad had received three death threats and owned a bookstore previously targeted by the Army of Islam. A relative of Ayad told the press on Oct. 8, 2007 that Ayad was being pressured to convert to Islam and that the Holy Bible Association offices were attacked with an explosive device several months before.⁴⁵
- **April 2006:** The YMCA branch in the Palestinian town of Qalqilya in the West Bank is firebombed by Palestinians from the area and subsequently closes. It later reopens.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm

⁴⁵ “An increase in attacks on Christian and institutions,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 2, 2008, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/gaza_020608e.htm; “Palestinian Crimes against Christian Arabs and Their Manipulation against Israel - Interview with Justus Reid Weiner,” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs,

<http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=381&PID=470&IID=2406>. Accessed April 26, 2009

⁴⁶ “International Religious Freedom Report 2008 - Israel and the occupied territories,” US State Department 2008, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108484.htm>. Accessed March 15, 2009

Timeline of Israeli-Holy See Relations

- **January 2009:** Israeli Minister for Religious Affairs Yitzhak Cohen threatens to suspend relations with the Vatican after Bishop Richard Williamson, who was excommunicated for his views denying the Holocaust, is reinstated.⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI later issues a letter to his bishops, admitting that the case of Bishop Williamson was mishandled. The Pope also meets with a delegation from Israel's Chief Rabbinate to remedy the matter.⁴⁸
- **October 2008:** As the beatification of Pope Pius XII nears completion, a process that began in 1967, tensions rise between the Vatican and Israel, causing Pope Benedict XVI to halt the process. Additionally, the Pope demands that a plaque criticizing Pius be removed from Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum.⁴⁹
- **May 2007:** Pope Benedict XVI denounces rocket attacks on Israeli border towns near the Gaza Strip by Palestinian terrorists. "*The clashes among Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip and the rocket attacks against inhabitants of the nearby Israeli cities, which prompted armed intervention, are provoking a bloody deterioration of the situation,*" the Pope said.⁵⁰
- **October 2005:** Speaking at a synagogue in his native Germany, Pope Benedict XVI celebrates the fortieth anniversary of the *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican's Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions in which the Holy See also renounced the traditional belief that the Jewish people are collectively guilty of killing God. The Pope assures his commitment to good Catholic-Jewish relations worldwide saying, "*The Jewish-Christian dialogue must continue to enrich and deepen the bonds of friendship which have developed.*"⁵¹
- **August 2005:** The Vatican condemns terrorist attacks in Egypt, Turkey, Britain and Iraq, but fails to denounce attacks against Israel, which causes bilateral tensions.⁵²
- **April 2005:** Joining hundreds of other international dignitaries, Israeli President Moshe Katsav attends the funeral of Pope John Paul II.⁵³
- **January 2004:** The Knesset (Israeli Parliament) Christian Allies Caucus (CAC) is established, the first of its kind in Israel's history. The CAC serves as a bridge between the Knesset and Israel's Christian communities and those in the Diaspora by improving communication and

⁴⁷ Deutsche Presse Agentur, "Israel's relations to Vatican strained over Holocaust-denying bishop," Deutsche Welle, Jan. 31, 2009, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3993013,00.html>

⁴⁸ "Pope admits he mishandled Williamson affair," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 19, 2009, http://www.cjnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16500&Itemid=86

⁴⁹ Donadio, Rachel, "Vatican-Israel tensions rise over Pius," *The New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/20/world/europe/20popo.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=vatican%20israel%20relations%20&st=cse

⁵⁰ "Pope denounces attacks on Israeli border towns: Benedict XVI appeals in god's name for Jerusalem to use moderation and for Palestinian authorities to 'neutralize' violent forces," *The Associated Press*, May 20, 2007, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3402374,00.html>

⁵¹ Reuters, "Pope: Committed to relations with Jews," *YnetNews*, Oct. 27, 2005, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3160481,00.html>

⁵² Gruber, Ruth Ellen, "Vatican terrorism stance strains Israel relations," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Aug. 5, 2005, <http://www.jewishaz.com/issues/story.mv?050805+vatican>

⁵³ Button, James, "John Paul's last miracle: enemies unite at funeral; Fueding leaders shake hands," *The Sun Herald* (Sydney, Australia), April 10, 2005, accessed via Lexis Nexis

coordination among all sides. In Israel, the CAC educates the Israeli population of long-standing Christian support for the State of Israel and in the Diaspora the CAC communicates Israel's commitment to Christianity in Israel.⁵⁴

- **March 21, 2000:** Pope John Paul II makes the first papal visit to Israel since 1964, amid diplomatic tensions over the status of Jerusalem.⁵⁵ The Pope makes a five-day pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Christian sites in the Galilee.⁵⁶
- **November 1997:** Concluding the provisions of the 1994 agreement, Israel and the Vatican officially regularize the status and legal 'personality' of the Roman Catholic Church and its institutions under Israeli law. Called the "Legal Personality Agreement," this accord marks the first recognition of the Roman Catholic Church by any Israeli government.⁵⁷
- **June 1994:** Israel and the Vatican establish full diplomatic relations, fulfilling the commitment required by the December 1993 accord.⁵⁸
- **Dec. 30, 1993:** Israel and the Vatican sign an official accord establishing diplomatic relations. The accord stipulates that the two sides will exchange ambassadors, combat anti-Semitism, promote peace and freedom of worship and encourage Christian pilgrimages to Israel and the Palestinian territories.⁵⁹
- **July 29, 1992:** Israeli and Vatican delegations meet in Rome to discuss establishing diplomatic relations. Foreign Ministry Director-General Yosef Hadass leads the Israeli delegation and Deputy Foreign Minister Claudio Maria Celli represents the Vatican delegation. The two ministers agree to form a "bilateral permanent working commission," that is to meet periodically.⁶⁰
- **Jan. 15, 1973:** Prime Minister Golda Meir meets with Pope John Paul VI to discuss issues pertaining to Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem and peace.⁶¹
- **October 1969:** Pope John Paul VI receives Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Abba Eban at the Vatican.⁶²

⁵⁴ Ofek, Amir, Ed., "Milestones in Israel-Holy Sea Relations 1965-2005," Israel Consulate General in New York, <http://singapore.mfa.gov.il/mfm/Data/80794.pdf>. Accessed April 17, 2009

⁵⁵ Stanley, Alessandra, "Pope arrives in Israel and gets taste of Mideast politics," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2000

⁵⁶ "Israel welcomes visit by Pope John Paul II - March 2000," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Feb. 21, 2000, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/history/modern%20history/historic%20events/israel%20welcomes%20visit%20by%20pope%20john%20paul%20ii%20-%20march>

⁵⁷ "Milestones in Israel-Holy See Relations 1965-2005: Commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*," Consulate General of Israel in New York, 2005, pp.10-13.

⁵⁸ Haberman, Clyde, "Full relations for Israelis and Vatican," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1994, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DE3D8163DF935A25755C0A962958260&scp=7&sq=vatican%20israel%20relations%20&st=cse>

⁵⁹ Hepburn, Bob, "Vatican, Israel pen landmark accord," *Toronto Star*, News, Dec. 31, 1993, pg. A1

⁶⁰ Palmieri-Billig, Lisa, "Israel, Vatican open official talks on diplomatic relations Foreign Ministry hails 'milestone' towards normal ties," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 30, 1992

⁶¹ "Israel's Relations with the Vatican," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan. 24, 1973, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/22+Israel-s+Relations+with+the+Vatican.htm>

- **October 1965:** Under Pope Paul VI's lead, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church issues *Nostra Aetate*, a historic proclamation, renouncing the traditional belief that the Jewish People are collectively – as a nation – guilty of killing God. Instead, the *Nostra Aetate* declaration reaffirms Christianity's Jewish roots, stating that a "bond" exists between Christianity and the Jewish People that "spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock." This proclamation sets the stage for the eventual establishment of formal relations with Israel.⁶³
- **January 1964:** Israeli President Zalman Shazar receives Pope John Paul VI in Israel. During his stay, the Pope visits holy sites in Israel and the West Bank.⁶⁴

⁶² "Israel's Relations with the Vatican," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan. 24, 1973, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/22+Israel-s+Relations+with+the+Vatican.htm>

⁶³ "Milestones in Israel-Holy See Relations 1965-2005: Commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*," Consulate General of Israel in New York, 2005, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴ "Israel's Relations with the Vatican," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jan. 24, 1973, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/22+Israel-s+Relations+with+the+Vatican.htm>

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