

Palestinian Christians

Palestinian Christians are the descendants of the original indigenous Christians who first believed in [Jesus Christ](#). They are the descendants of the disciples of Jesus Christ & the descendants of other [Jews](#), [Philistines](#), [Arabs](#), [Aramaean](#)s/Eremites, [Canaanites](#), [Greeks](#), [Romans](#), [Persians](#) & [Samaritans](#)... who accepted the Messiah when He was with them in the flesh. Today, they live in [Nazareth](#), [Bethlehem](#), [Gaza](#), [Nablus](#), [Ramallah](#), [Jerusalem](#), [Jaffa](#), [Haifa](#), [Jenin](#), [Taybeh](#), [Birzeit](#), [Jifna](#), [al-Bireh](#), [Zababdeh](#), [Tel Aviv](#), [Tubas](#), [Azzun](#), [Aboud](#), [Tiberias](#), [Sakhnin](#), [Shefa-'Amr](#), [Galilee](#), [Jish](#), [Amman](#), & other places in the Biblical [Palestine](#) & [Jordan](#), in addition to the exile. They are [Arab Christian Believers](#) of [Oriental Orthodox](#), [Eastern Orthodox](#), [Catholic](#) (eastern & western rites), [Protestant](#), [Evangelical](#) & other denominations, who have ethnic or family origins in [Palestine](#). In both the local dialect of [Palestinian Arabic](#) and in classical or modern standard [Arabic](#), Christians are called *Nasrani* (a derivative of the Arabic word for [Nazareth](#), *al-Nasira*) or *Masihi* (a derivative of Arabic word *Masih*, meaning "Messiah"). Christians comprise less than 4% of Palestinian Arabs living within the borders of former [Mandate Palestine](#) today (around 4% in the [West Bank](#), a negligible percentage in Gaza, and nearly 10% of Israeli Arabs). According to official British Mandate estimates, Mandate Palestine's Christian population varied between 9.5% (1922) and 7.9% (1946) of the total population.

Demographics and Denominations

Today, the majority of Palestinian Christians live abroad. In 2005, it was estimated that the Christian population of the [Palestinian territories](#) was between 40,000 and 90,000 people, or 2.1 to 3.4% of the population. Most are in the [West Bank](#), though there is a community of 5,000 (though shrinking) in the [Gaza Strip](#). Palestinian Christians in Israel number between 144,000 and 196,000, or 2.1 to 2.8% of the total population, and about 9.8% of the non-Jewish Arab population.

According to the [CIA world factbook](#), as of 2009, the following statistics are available on Palestinian Christians.

Around 50% of Palestinian Christians belong to the [Orthodox Church of Jerusalem](#), one of the 16 churches of [Eastern Orthodoxy](#). This community has also been known as the [Arab Orthodox](#) Christians since the 1890s. There are also [Maronites](#), [Melkite Greek Catholics](#), [Jacobites](#), [Chaldeans](#), [Roman Catholics](#), [Syriac Catholics](#), [Copts](#), [Armenians](#), [Anglicans](#)/Episcopals, [Lutherans](#), [Evangelicals](#), [Born Again](#), [Baptists](#), [Jehovah Witnesses](#), and other [Protestants](#) among them.

The [Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem](#), [Theófilos III](#), is the leader of the Palestinian and Jordanian [Orthodox Church of Jerusalem](#), but Israel and some church members have refused to recognize his appointment. If confirmed, he would replace [Patriarch Irenaios](#), whose status within the church became disputed after a term surrounded by controversy and scandal given that he sold Palestinian property to Israeli [Orthodox Jews](#). Archbishop [Theodosios \(Hanna\) of Sebastia](#) is the highest ranking Palestinian clergyman in the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The [Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem](#), [Fouad Twal](#), is the leader of the Palestinian [Roman Catholics](#). The [Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem](#) is [Suheil Dawani](#), who recently replaced Bishop [Riah Abou Al Assal](#). The Bishop of the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem and Jordan](#) is Dr. [Munib Younan](#). [Elias Chacour](#) of the [Melkite Eastern Catholic Church](#) is Archbishop of [Galilee](#).

History

Background and early history

Estimates of the number of [Arab Christians](#) in the [Arab world](#) vary. Christians today make up 9.2% of the population of the [Near East](#). In Lebanon they now number around 39% of the population, in Syria about 10 to 15%, in Jordan around 5%. The number of Christians in the West Bank and Gaza are now 3.8%. Palestinian Christians in Israel constitute 2.1% (or roughly 10% of the population of [Arab citizens of Israel](#)). In Egypt, they constitute between 9-16% of the population (the government claims 6%). Around two-thirds of North and South American and Australian Arabs are Christian, particularly from Israel, West Bank and Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Most Palestinian Christians see themselves as Arab Christians, although some, echoing similar narratives in the [Lebanese Maronite](#) community, reject this label and claim to be descended from [Levantine](#) people who were present before the coming of the Arabs, and claim to have lived in what they call Palestine, for thousands of years. In addition, they may also descend from a mixture of [Armenians](#), Jews who converted to Christianity in the first three centuries AD, [Byzantine](#), pre-Islamic Arabs ([Ghassanids](#)), and [Crusaders](#). The region called Palestine or Israel is considered the [Holy Land](#) by Christians, and major Christian holy cities like [Bethlehem](#), [Nazareth](#), and Jerusalem are located in the Palestinian Autonomy and Israel, respectively.



Interior of the house of a Christian family in Jerusalem. By [W. H. Bartlett](#), ca 1850

During the Ottoman period, the number of Christians approached 40%. Emigration to the predominantly Christian-populated areas of neighboring Lebanon, as well as South America drastically reduced the number of Christians by the beginning of the 20th century. The Palestinian Authority's first lady, Suha Arafat, was a Christian. The current Palestinian ambassador to the United States, [Afif Saffieh](#), is a Christian, as is the ambassador of the Palestinian Authority in France, Hind Khoury. The Palestinian Authority's women's soccer team, which has a majority of Muslim girls also happens to have a Christian captain, Honey Thaljieh, a Christian from Bethlehem. However, the Christians were also often found in the more affluent segments of Palestinian society that fled or were expelled from the country during the [1948 Arab-Israeli War](#); in West [Jerusalem](#), over 51% of Christian Palestinians lost their homes to the advancing Israeli army, according to the historian [Sami Hadawi](#).

Today, Chile houses the largest Palestinian Christian community in the world, and the second largest Palestinian community outside of Palestine after Jordan. Reports show that around 600,000 Palestinian Christians reside in Chile, most of whom from Beit Jala, Bethlehem, and Beit Sahur. El Salvador, Honduras, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries also have significant Palestinian Christian communities, some of whom that have immigrated almost a century ago during the time of [Ottoman Palestine](#), while most of Christians were expelled from their homes in 1948 by Israel. During the 2008 Gaza war, Palestinian Christians in Chile demonstrated to voice their frustration of the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, they were hoping to direct the government's attention to review their relations with Israel. Latin America is said to have a population of about 3 million Palestinian Christians, or almost 40% of the Palestinian Christians population worldwide.

Recent history



Palestinian Christians celebrating the Eve of the [Epiphany](#) (Paramony) at [Bethabara](#), on the Western bank of the [Jordan River](#) ([West Bank](#), near [Jericho](#)), in [Eastern Orthodox](#) tradition.

The proportions of Christians in the Palestinian territories is such that they only constitute around one in seventy-five residents. In May, [Reuters](#) reported that 50,000 - 90,000 Christians remained in the West Bank, with around 17,000 following the Roman Catholic tradition and most of the rest following the Orthodox church, and a significant number of Protestants and Evangelicals. Both Bethlehem and [Nazareth](#), which were once overwhelmingly Christian, now have Muslim majorities. Today about three-quarters of all Bethlehem Christians live abroad, and more Jerusalem Christians live in [Sydney](#), [Australia](#) than in Jerusalem. Indeed, Christians now comprise just 2.5 percent of the population Jerusalem, they comprised around 51% in 1947, those remaining include a few born in the Old City when Christians there constituted a majority.

In a 2007 letter from Congressman [Henry Hyde](#) to President [George W. Bush](#), Hyde stated that "the Christian community is being crushed in the mill of the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict" and that expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were "irreversibly damaging the dwindling Christian community".

Most Christians in Gaza blame the Israeli occupation pre-2005, the current siege on the city and the war on Gaza 2009 to be the reason for their exodus from Gaza. During the recent war on Gaza, three churches, Baptist, Orthodox & Catholic, were damaged by Israeli shelling, and many Christians including 15-year-old Christine Turk, lost their lives during the Gaza offensive. There have been some minor attacks on Palestinian Christians in Gaza from small Muslim extremist groups reported through 2007, most notably Ramy Ayyad. Gaza Pastor [Manuel Musallam](#) has voiced doubts that those attacks were religiously motivated. However, The Palestinian President, Prime Minister, Hamas and many other political and religious leaders condemned such attacks.

After [Pope Benedict XVI's comments on Islam](#) in September 2006, five churches, among them an [Anglican](#) and an [Orthodox](#) church - not affiliated with either Catholicism or the Pope - were firebombed and shot at in the West Bank and Gaza. A group called "Lions of Monotheism" claimed responsibility. Former Palestinian Prime Minister and current [Hamas](#) leader [Ismail Haniya](#) condemned the attacks and police presence was elevated in [Bethlehem](#), which has a sizable Christian community.

Armenians in Jerusalem, identified as Palestinian Christians, have also been attacked and received threats from Israeli and Jewish extremists. In September, two Armenian Christian clergy were expelled after protesting against Jewish extremists for spitting on holy Christian objects.

In February 2009, a group of Christian community activists within the [West Bank](#) wrote an [open letter](#) asking [Pope Benedict XVI](#) to postpone his scheduled trip to Israel unless the government changes its treatment. They highlighted improved access to places of worship and ending the taxation of church properties as key concerns.. [MSNBC.com](#). Published February 22, 2009. The Pope began his five-day visit to Israel & the Palestinian Territories on Sunday May 10, planning to express support for the region's Christians. In response to Palestinian public statements, Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor criticized the political polarization of the papal visit, remarking that "[i]t will serve the cause of peace much better if this visit is taken for what it is, a pilgrimage, a visit for the cause of peace and unity".

In November 2009, Berlanty Azzam, a Palestinian Christian student from Gaza, was expelled from Bethlehem and was not allowed to continue her studying, after there was only two months left for her degree. Berlanty Azzam said the Israeli military handcuffed her, blindfolded her, and left her waiting for hours at a checkpoint on her way back from a job interview in Ramallah. She describes the incident as "frightening" and claims to have been treated like a criminal, and denied her education by Israel, only because she is a Palestinian Christian from Gaza.

Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center - Sabeel

The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, founded in 1989, is a Christian non-governmental organization based in Jerusalem. According to its web site, "Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, to promote unity among them toward social action. Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on love, justice, peace, nonviolence, liberation and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word "Sabeel" is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water."

Kairos Palestine

In December 2009, prominent Palestinian Christian leaders released a historical document, the Kairos Palestine Document, a moment of truth. The document call echoes a similar summons issued by South African churches in the mid-1980s at the height of repression under the apartheid regime. That call served to galvanize churches and the wider public in a concerted effort that eventually brought the end of apartheid.

The document declares the Israeli occupation of Palestine a "sin against God" and against humanity. It calls on churches and Christians all over the world to consider it and adopt it and to call for the boycott of Israel. The Palestinian Christian document claims that leading Israel into isolation is the only way there can be a peaceful solution in the Holy Land. It states that isolation of Israel will cause pressure on Israel to abolish all of what it labels as "[apartheid laws](#)" that discriminate against Palestinians and non-Jews.

Position of Christians in Gaza

Gaza's Christian community mostly lives within the city, especially in areas neighboring the three main churches; St. Porphyry Orthodox Church, dates back to the 16th Century, The Holy Family Catholic Church in Zeitoun St., and the Gaza Baptist Church, the city's only Evangelical Church that lies close to the Legislative Council [parliamentary building] and the Unknown Soldier square in the central Gaza; which offer living room prayer groups, interfaith outreach, several schools, and humanitarian/medical Christian charities staffed by both locals and internationals. Christians in Gaza freely practice their religion. Likewise, they observe all the religious holidays in accordance with the Christian calendars followed by their churches.

Those among them working as civil servants in the government and in the private sector are given an official holiday during the week, which some devote to communal prayer in churches. Christians among Palestinian citizens are granted the right to obtain any job, in addition to having their full rights and duties as their Muslim counterparts in accordance with the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, the regime, and all the systems prevailing over the territories. Moreover, seats have been allocated to Christian citizens in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in accordance with a quota system in the constituencies with a large Christian presence.

A recent census has revealed that 40 percent of the Christian community works in the medical,

educational, engineering and law sectors. Additionally, the churches in Gaza are renowned for the relief and educational services that they offer, and Muslim citizens take part in them without any hesitation. Palestinian citizens as a whole benefit from these services such as those offered at the Latin Patriarchate School which offers relief, medication, social and educational services. The school is considered the center of Catholicism in Palestine and Jordan and has been offering services for nearly 150 years.

In 1974, the idea of establishing a new school was proposed by Father Jalil Awad, a former parish priest in Gaza who recognized the need to expand the Latin Patriarchate School and build a new complex. Moreover; today, the Holy family school has 1,250 students and the Roman Catholic primary school, which is an extension of the Latin Patriarchate School, continues to enroll a rising number of young students. The primary school was established approximately 20 years ago. Aside from education, other services are offered to Muslims and Christians alike with no discrimination and they include women's, students' and youth groups, such as those offered at the Baptist Church on weekdays.

According to the Israeli newspaper [Haaretz](#), since Hamas forcefully seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, [Islamization trends](#) have put increasing pressure on the Gazan Christian minority. Catrin Ormestad, November 1, 2007, Haaretz. According to Ynetnews, an Israeli news source after the takeover, Sheik [Abu Saqer](#), leader of [Jihadia Salafiya](#), a rival group to Hamas,, Mindy Belz, worldmag.com, 2010-05-08. said "I expect our Christian neighbors to understand the new Hamas rule means real changes. They must be ready for Islamic rule if they want to live in peace in Gaza.". According to an article in the New York Sun, Sheik Saqer has supposedly asserted that there is "no need" for Christians in Gaza to maintain Christian institutions and demanded that Hamas "must work to impose an Islamic rule or it will lose the authority it has and the will of the people." Aaron Klein, October 11, 2007, New York Sun.

In October 2007, Rami Khader Ayyad, the owner of [Gaza's only Christian bookstore](#), was abducted, tortured and murdered, after his store was firebombed by a Muslim vice squad that was attacking targets associated with Western influence. According to Ayyad's family and neighbors, he had regularly received anonymous death threats from people angered by his missionary work. Sheikh Abu Saqer, leader of Gaza's Jihadia Salafiya Islamic program, asserted that his group did not carry out the murder but Christians engaging in missionary activity in Gaza would be dealt with harshly. However, the reporting on Palestinian Christians by non-Palestinian news sources is problematic, and these news reports are popularly viewed by most Palestinians as propaganda meant to divide Palestinians along religious lines.

Christian exodus



A pre-1948 celebration of the Feast of [St. Elias](#), on [Mount Carmel](#), on July 20

Christians began to emigrate from Palestine in the mid-19th to early-20th centuries to escape both poverty and the [religious persecution of Christians](#) by the [Ottoman Empire](#). Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the majority of Palestinian Christians were forced to emigrate, mainly to [Australia](#), [North America](#): the United States and Canada; and a larger number to [Latin America](#) with the most

settled in [Chile](#) and [Argentina](#). The Palestinian Authority is unable to keep exact tallies. As well, Muslim Palestinians have higher birth rates than the Christians, which strongly affects the demographics.. [United States State Department](#). Accessed May 10, 2009.

The causes of this Christian exodus are hotly debated, with various possibilities put forth. The vast majority of Palestinian Christians blame the exodus on Israel. [Reuters](#) has reported that the emigrants left for better living standards rather than any other reason. The [BBC](#) has also blamed the economic decline in the Palestinian Territories as well as pressure from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the exodus. A report on Bethlehem residents stated both Christians and Muslims wished to leave but the Christians possessed better contacts with people abroad and higher levels of education. The Vatican & the Catholic church blamed the Israeli occupation and the conflict in the Holy Land for the Christian exodus from the Holy Land and the Middle East as well.

An opposing view holds that some Muslim extremists groups pressure against Christians has played a role.. The [Foundation for the Defense of Democracies](#) issued a report in May 2005 blaming Islamic pressure for the exodus, stating that "Christian cemeteries have been destroyed, monasteries have seen their phone lines cut, and convents have been broken into".

[The Jerusalem Post](#) (An right-wing Israeli newspaper) has stated that the "shrinking of the Palestinian Christian community in the Holy Land came as a direct result of its middle-class standards" and that Muslim pressure has not played a major role according to Christian residents themselves. It reported that the Christians have a public image of elitism and of class privilege as well as of non-violence and of open personalities, which leaves them more vulnerable to criminals than Muslims. Hanna Siniora, a prominent Christian Palestinian human rights activist, has attributed harassment against Christians to "little groups" of "hoodlums" rather than to the Hamas and Fatah governments.

In a 2006 poll of Christians in Bethlehem by the Palestinian Centre for Research and Cultural Dialogue, 90% reported having Muslim friends, 73.3% agreed that the Palestinian Authority treats Christian heritage in the city with respect, and 78% attributed the ongoing exodus of Christians from Bethlehem to the Israeli occupation and travel restrictions on the area. Daniel Rossing, the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs' chief liaison to Christians in the 1970s and 1980s, has stated that the situations for them in Gaza became much worse after the election of Hamas. He also stated that the Palestinian Authority, which counts on Christian Westerners for financial support, treats the minority fairly. He blamed the [West Bank barrier wall](#) as the primary problem for the Christians.

The [United States State Department](#)'s 2006 report on [religious freedom](#) criticized both Israel for its restrictions on travel to Christian holy sites and the Palestinian Authority for its failure to stamp out anti-Christian crime. It also reported that the former gives preferential treatment in basic civic services to Jews and the latter does so to Muslims. The report stated that, generally, the ordinary Muslim and Christian citizens enjoy good relations in contrast to the "strained" Jewish and non-Jewish relations. A 2005 [BBC](#) report described Muslim and Christian relations as "peaceful" as well.

The Arab Human Rights Association, an Arab [NGO](#) in Israel, has stated that Israeli authorities have denied Palestinian Christians in Israel access to holy places, prevented repairs needed to preserve historic holy sites, and carried out physical attacks on religious leaders.

Important Christian Palestinian figures

Saints

- [Category:Palestinian Roman Catholic saints](#)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Palestinian_Roman_Catholic_saints

Clergymen

- [Archbishop Theodosios \(Hanna\) of Sebastia](#) Bishop of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem

- [Michel Sabbah](#) former [Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem](#) (Roman Catholic)
- [Naim Ateek](#) founder of [Sabeel](#) (Anglican/Episcopal)
- [Mitri Raheb](#) pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem
- [Suheil Salman Ibrahim Dawani](#) the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem
- [Elias Chacour](#) the Archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and Galilee of the Melkite Eastern Greek-Catholic Church.
- [Riah Hanna Abu El-Assal](#) the former Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem
- [Anis Shorrosh](#) is a Palestinian Evangelical Christian pastor
- [Benny Hinn](#) televangelist
- [Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem](#)
- Blessed [Marie-Alphonsine Danil Ghattas](#) found the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters, the only Arab religious order in the Holy Land to date.
- [Boutros Mouallem](#) is the retired Melkite Greek Catholic archbishop of Acre, Haifa and the Galilee
- [Samir Kafity](#) was a prominent Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem

Palestinian Roman Catholics

- [Category:Palestinian Roman Catholics](#)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Palestinian_Roman_Catholics

Politicians

- [Antonio Saca](#): President of El Salvador from 2004-2009.
- [Azmi Bishara](#): [Arab-Israeli](#) politician
- [Emil Habibi](#): [Arab-Israeli](#) politician born in British-mandate Palestine
- [George Habash](#): Politician, founder of the [PFLP](#) and the [Arab Nationalist Movement](#)
- [Nayif Hawatmeh](#): Palestinian politician, founder and General Secretary of the [DFLP](#)
- Dr [Hanan Ashrawi](#): Politician, legislator, activist, and scholar. Currently, she is a leader of the [Third Way](#) party. She was previously notable as a spokesperson for [Arafat](#).
- [Afif Safieh](#): Diplomat, currently Palestinian ambassador to the Russian Federation
- [Jawad Bolous](#): An Israeli-Arab political lawyer.
- [Ghazi Hanania](#): member of the Palestinian Legislative Council & Fatah.

Cultural figures

- [Edward Said](#): Palestinian literary theorist, cultural critic, political activist. Born into a Christian family, he later became an [agnostic](#).
- [George Antonius](#): Founder of modern Arab nationalist history
- [Khalil Beidas](#): Scholar, educator, translator and novelist during the [Al-Nahda](#) cultural renaissance
- [Khalil al-Sakakini](#): Educator, scholar, poet, and Arab nationalist during the [Al-Nahda](#) cultural renaissance
- [Tawfiq Canaan](#): Physician, researcher of Palestinian popular heritage
- [May Ziade](#): Poet, essayist and translator during the [Al-Nahda](#) cultural renaissance
- [Anton Shammās](#): Writer and translator
- [Elia Suleiman](#): Palestinian film maker
- [Hany Abu-Assad](#): Palestinian film maker, director of [Paradise Now](#)
- [Raja Shehadeh](#): Lawyer and writer
- [Rifat Odeh Kassis](#): Human Rights Activist
- Makram Khoury: Actor

Other

- [Yousef Beidas](#): Founder of [Intra Bank](#)
- [Hind Khoury](#): Palestinian Delegate-General to France
- [Sirhan Sirhan](#): Assassin of United States Senator Robert F. Kennedy
- [Daniel Saba George](#): Palestinian Christian Freedom Fighter of the Al-Aqsa Brigades, was murdered by the Israelis on Easter Sunday by shooting him on his head.
- Chris Bandak: Jailed Palestinian Christian Freedom Fighter of the Al-Aqsa Brigades

See also

[Arab Christians and Arabic-speaking Christians](#)