

Access to worship in Jerusalem! - A report

Jerusalem Inter-church Center

By Yusef Daher - April 2013

This is a report to introduce only one challenge pertaining to Israeli Unilateral policies in Jerusalem: "Access to holy Sites and freedom of Worship". There are more areas of restrictions, limitations showing discriminatory policies .

Introduction

Jerusalem, the spiritual city for the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is also the center of Palestinian identity and the source of its cultural, historical, economic and social life.

Due to its commercial vitality, historical significance, and geographic centrality in connecting the northern and southern parts of Palestine, its separation from the West Bank makes it a suffocated isolated city, especially its East Occupied side.

From the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, more so after the Oslo agreements, a policy of separation and fragmentation has been carried out, in order to "encourage" Palestinians to leave their land and to prevent the realization of the State of Palestine on the ground.

In addition to colonizing the land with Settlements in the Palestinian Territories and in Occupied East Jerusalem, Israel, the occupying Power, has also implemented a series of changes undermining the social fabric and physical reality of occupied East Jerusalem, in an attempt to turn the city into an exclusively Jewish city. This includes systematic policies of forced displacement, residency rights' revocation, home demolition and eviction, as well as so-called "excavation works" which damage the rich cultural and religious heritage of Jerusalem, particularly the Old City.

Restrictions on freedom of worship

At the same time, it includes severe restrictions on freedom of worship for Palestinian Christians and Muslims alike,^{1[1]} while, during Jewish Holidays, the West bank is closed and thus All Jerusalem is open without barriers for the Jewish community to access their holy sites!

For the past decade Israeli policies have been mounting severely on access to Jerusalem, and both Muslims and Christians feel unsafe and unsecure every time they approach the Old city for worship especially on Holidays. While West Bank and Gaza Palestinians cannot access the city almost all year except on certain few holidays and with limited numbers and ages, Jerusalem Palestinian residents find it very difficult to access their city and their Holy places on their Holiest days.

You need a military permit to pray!!

PERMIT SYSTEM:

West bank and Gaza Christians get few thousands **permits** every year on their Holidays. These permits are often given to parts of the same family. This makes the whole family unable to celebrate holidays together. Many are refused permits. Others are told they have been issued permits that they never get physically because they are lost somewhere. For example , this Easter the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center has consulted a number of priests and parishes throughout Palestine in the past few days, who have informed us of their particular situations this year.

- Our Christian communities in Jenin and Zababdeh reported that they have been collecting and saving money to pay for a bus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Having barely made the money in time, they were forced to cancel the trip as not enough people had received permits.
- In Zababdeh, only 40% of Christians who applied for permits received them. Moreover, permits were deliberately allocated so that most families received only one permit per household, forcing them to make the difficult decision of whether to go to Jerusalem alone or relinquish the permit in favor of staying and celebrating the holy occasion with their family. This situation was echoed by priests in Aboud (30% received permits), Ramallah (50% received permits) and Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour received between 33 -40% and most of them for parts of the family and not the whole family members).
- The scouts of Beit Sahour have been practicing their performance for months. News came two days prior to Western Palm Sunday that only 60 out of 200 scouts, young boys and girls, would receive permits. The parish priest conveyed the severe disappointment of the boys and girls, who have been “talking about nothing else for weeks”. In fact, this community of 10, 000 Christians is unable to fill more than two buses to celebrate Palm Sunday in Jerusalem.

During Moslem Holidays , there is no permits system . Instead the Israeli Authorities allow certain ages to past through the check point during holidays - usually people under the age of 14 and over 35 at the best.

During Jewish Holidays, Jews are freely accessing Jerusalem while roads are blocked and check points closed and the permit system on Palestinians is under freez .

LATEST

During this Holy Fire Saturday, one hour before the first Light from the Holy Tomb at the Sepulcher Church, half of the participating local community were still blocked at New Gate together

with diplomats from the International consulates in Jerusalem in addition to others.² As the hour was about to turn 2 PM when the light usually is out, the crowd could not have it any more and then the clash was imminent. They had to find their way into the Old City. The Police forces at the gate did not allow anyone for the past hour! Everyone became nervous and voices were raised then arms clashes over the iron barriers. Many were injured by the Israeli armed police.³ At other streets and gates something happened. Videos and photos showed one Coptic priest pushed and humiliated foreigners and locals alike. ⁴



Holy Fire Saturday is one of the most important Christian celebrations in Jerusalem and Palestine, the nine hundred years old tradition where the locals access the roof of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to give way for the visiting pilgrims to access the plaza of the Holy Sepulcher on this Holy day, has been interrupted during the past ten years. The US State Department International Religious Freedom Report found: “...*Preferential treatment to Jews celebrating Passover and to international visitors making pilgrimages when the authorities enacted restrictions that impeded the activities of local Christians celebrating Easter. Jerusalem Christians had to pass through four police checkpoints before reaching the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; according to Christian advocates, pepper spray was used indiscriminately at the various checkpoints...*”⁵⁶

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=qnd7-yjQtRY

³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10152773335310104&set=vb.622190103&type=2&theater>

⁴

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151391365747601&set=a.10151009243087601.416484.553952600&type=1&theater>

⁵ US State Department International Religious Freedom Report



During Moslem Holidays , there is no permits system . Instead the Israeli Authorities allow certain ages to past through the check point during holidays. Usually ages under 14 and over 35 at the best. Inside Jerusalem this March, Israeli Police have restricted access to Haram El Sharif (The Aqsa Mosque compound) for men over 50 of age. The Mufti of Jerusalem , Sheikh Mohammad Hussein said that for the past three weeks only elderly men and women were allowed into the mosque.

At the end of this March 2013 , The Mufti of Palestine claimed that for the past three weeks no Muslim under age of 50 was able to access Al Haram Al Shareef and Al Aqsa Mosque for **Friday Prayers**.

During Last **Good Friday** and as described here like many other Good Fridays for the past few years this are just getting worse: *“Every Good Friday for the past ten years it has been the same; Road blocks , barriers , thousands of Police and the Local Christian Community struggles its way through to the procession of the Way of the Cross. Every year for the past 5 years the police barriers mount and at the very small entrance to the Holy Sepulcher courtyard, the procession of the local Christians gets interrupted, stopped without a cause and every year this leads to a fight since the procession itself should not be separated. Every year one or two of our youth gets arrested. This year, tamer Tams (20 years)”*⁷ .

A feeling of exclusive access to Jews and all kinds of restrictions against the others is mounting every year. This is leading the city to be a ticking bomb when these policies are coupled with other policies that are discriminatory in nature and against all human rights in general.

TESTIMONIES:

In a cry from the local Palestinian Christian Community right after this Good Friday according to the Western Christian Churches , a group called Palestinian Christians on face book issued the following message to Church Leaders in Jerusalem:

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151652551693086&set=vb.571971722830278&type=2&theater>

⁷ Report by Jerusalem Inter-Church Center

To our Venerable Heads of Churches

After having lived a hard experience in trying to attend the celebration of Easter, this year, in the Holy Sepulchre, we feel compelled to address you this “angry” but sincere letter.

You keep telling us that we are the descendants of the Apostles, and of the first Christian community, the first who believed in Jesus Christ, the first who proclaimed His Gospel to the world.

You tell us: that we have suffered so many persecutions, under various governments and military occupations along centuries. We are proud of you because you are still here perseverant in the land where Jesus Christ was born, taught, suffered, died and resurrected.

You tell us, come and pray as Jesus prayed.

You tell us all that, and on the day of Easter, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the holiest of our Churches, we were forbidden to pray. And you know that. On the day of our Easter, we have lived a religious and human tragedy.

The celebrations of Easter, according to the Gregorian calendar, this year, was the worst that happened. Christians from Gaza were forbidden to reach Jerusalem. All Christians from all occupied Palestine were forced to ask for military permits in order to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem, and only 6 thousand permits were given. Then, all occupied Palestine was closed, and those who had permits could not use them.

Military barriers were put in the Old city of Jerusalem, Christian Palestinians, from the Christian Quarter could not reach the Holy Sepulchre Church.

All the routes going to the Holy Sepulchre were closed.

All entrances to the Holy Sepulchre were closed

The place before the Basilica was closed

Inside the Church were also military barriers, even around the “Stone of Anointment” and the “Sepulchre”.

Christians were forbidden to reach freely to the Church. The soldiers agressed them.

Whose intention is it to forbid us to pray in the Holy Sepulchre?

The Church was full with Israeli soldiers with their weapons, guns, hats, eating sandwiches, joking, speaking with their mobile phones, hearing songs, laughing loudly, crying on the faithful...

This church is the place of our prayer and not a military caserne. The word of Jesus apply on our situation: “My house is a place of prayer and you converted it to a military camp” (Cf Lc 19,45 sq).

We ask all our Heads, the three Patriarachs, the Franciscan Custos, and all the Churches to ask the police and the army not to close the entrances of the Church neither to be in the Church with their guns and impolite manners. Please take the necessary measures. Say a word of truth to the Israeli Authorities. Let Christians reach freely their Church on the day of their feast.

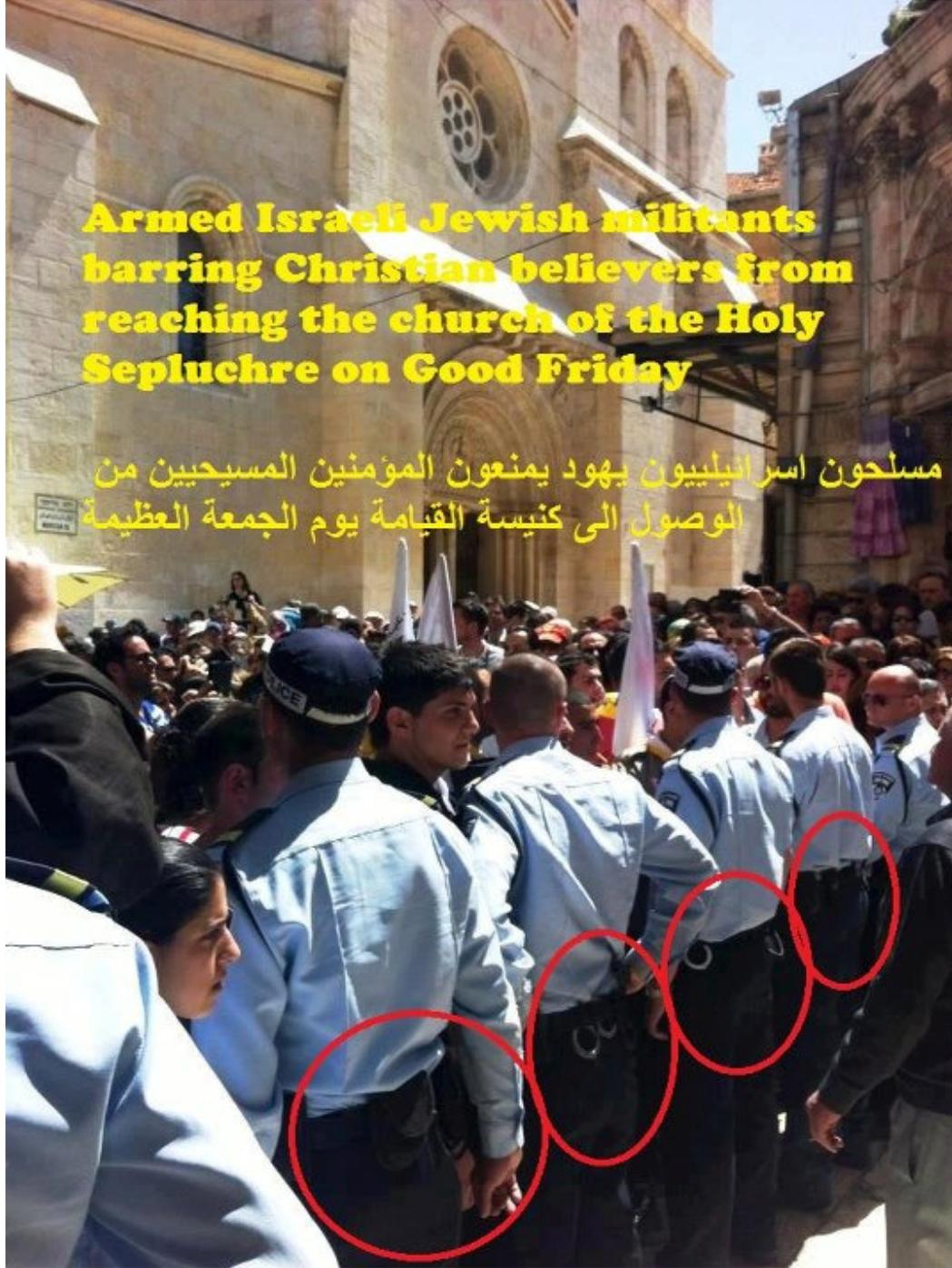
Order cannot be used as pretext for all this tragedy and violation of the sacredness of our Holy Places and our Feasts.

We prayed hundreds of years in the Holy Sepulchre without all this heavy military and insolent presence. Tens of thousands celebrate Christmas in Bethlehem without such military presence. In Ramallah more Christians than in Jerusalem celebrate the Holy Fire and have no need to all this military “order”.

Our dear and venerable Heads of Churches, your silence kill us. Do you not see the soldiers and their guns, and their attitudes? Please say a word of truth. And let us pray on the day of our Easter in our Churches.

By [Palestinian Christians † المسيحيين الفلسطينيين \(Notes\)](#) on Wednesday, April 3, 2013 at 11:12am

لام المسيح (Also see below pictures from the situation)



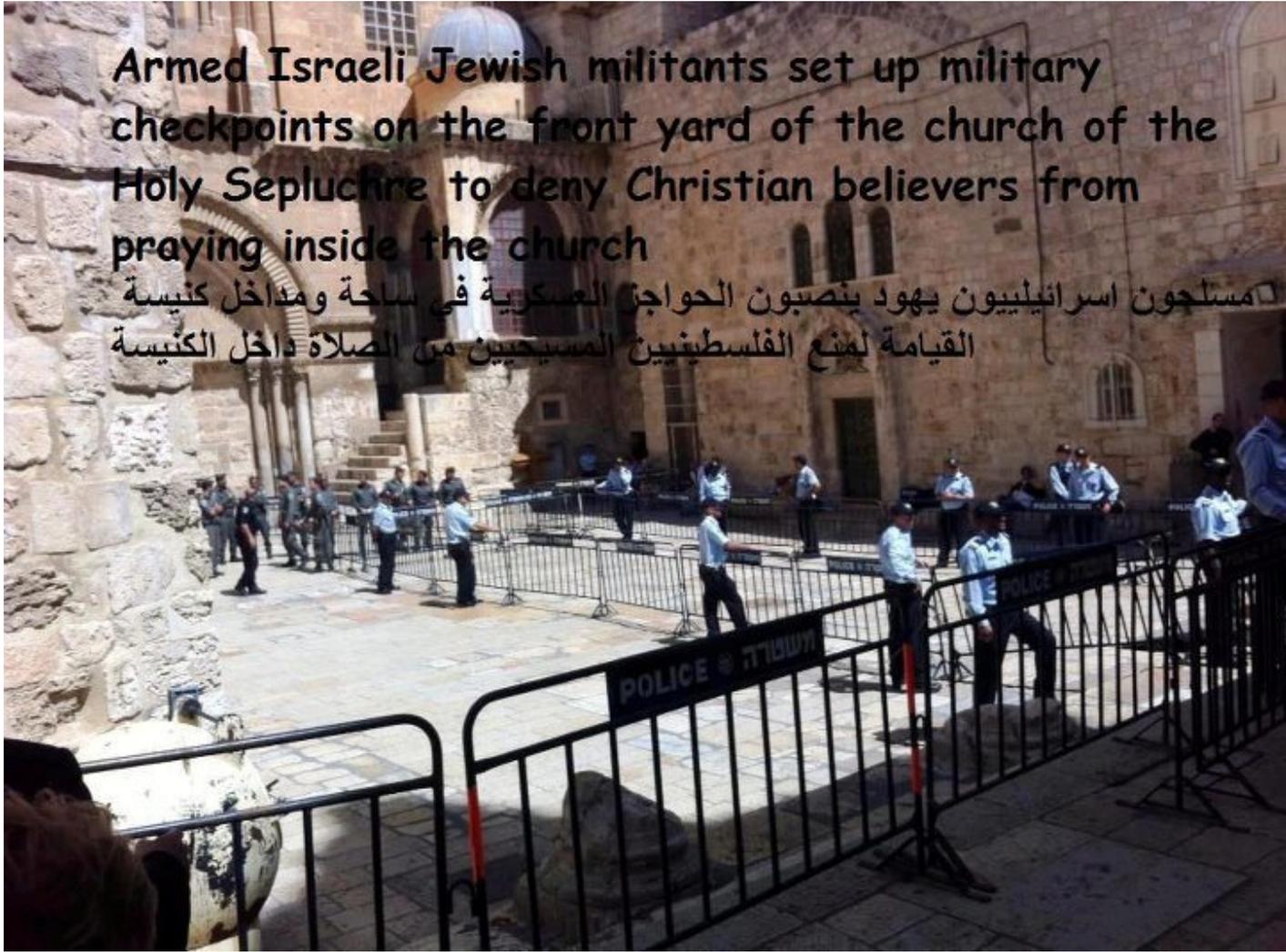
Armed Israeli Jewish militants set up military checkpoints & barring Christian believers from reaching the church of the Holy Sepulchre on Good Friday

مسلحون اسرئيليون يهود ينصبون الحواجز العسكرية ويمنعون المؤمنين المسيحيين من الوصول الى كنيسة القيامة يوم الجمعة العظيمة



Armed Israeli Jewish militants set up military checkpoints on the front yard of the church of the Holy Sepulchre to deny Christian believers from praying inside the church

مسلحون اسرانيليون يهود ينصبون الحواجز العسكرية في ساحة ومداخل كنيسة القيامة لمنع الفلسطينيين المسيحيين من الصلاة داخل الكنيسة



Armed Israeli Jewish militants wearing guns & military hats inside the church of the Holy Sepulchre
مسلحون يهود يلبسون القبعات ويطلقون النكات البذيئة ويضحكون بسخرية داخل كنيسة القيامة

