

MIDDLE EAST FEATURES

Palestinian Christians live in fear amid escalating Israeli assaults in occupied East Jerusalem

These practices represent 'a clear violation of freedom of worship,' Palestinian Christian Shadi Awad told Anadolu

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RAMALLAH, Palestine

- 'Israeli policies aim to pressure Palestinians and push them to leave their land,' says George Zeina, another Christian

Palestinian Christians expressed fear over escalating Israeli assaults and incitement against their community and holy sites in occupied East Jerusalem.

Residents say these attacks come within a broader context of restrictions targeting the Christian presence in the occupied city, alongside limitations on movement and access to religious sites.

"The situation in East Jerusalem is very difficult and unacceptable, and it provokes Christians around the world," Mazen Ghandoor, a Palestinian Christian from Ramallah, told Anadolu.

"What we are witnessing is discrimination and racism, where anyone who is not Jewish, whether Muslim or Christian, is targeted," he added.

He called for changing the Israeli policies and stopping attacks against Christians in the city. Mahfouz Hasri, another Christian, is also concerned.

"The situation in Jerusalem has become worrying, and residents are subjected to continuous harassment and provocations," he told Anadolu in his shop in Ramallah.

"Access to East Jerusalem has become complicated, even for those with permits, due to checkpoints and military measures," he said, noting that he is no longer able to visit the city as before.

"People fear being attacked, in the absence of the ability to protect themselves or respond," he said.

Hundreds of clergy and nuns from around the world serve in churches and religious institutions in occupied East Jerusalem.

Official incitement

Odette Said, a Christian from Ramallah, said Israel has escalated its restrictions against the Christian community in East Jerusalem.

"Christians suffer from continuous restrictions, whether through military checkpoints or occupier attacks," she said.

"We feel afraid of repeated assaults, and we have been prevented from reaching churches during holidays, which constitutes a violation of freedom of worship," she added.

In Bethlehem, Shadi Awad said Palestinian Christians "deal with the situation with caution and fear, amid rising official incitement."

He added that statements by Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir "contribute to justifying attacks, when practices such as spitting on Christians are described as part of tradition."

"The attacks are not limited to individuals, but include preventing access to holy sites, denying permits to enter Jerusalem, and even closing churches during religious occasions," he explained.

Last week, an Israeli occupier assaulted a nun in occupied East Jerusalem and was taken to a hospital for treatment.

A video published by the Jerusalem Governorate also showed an Israeli occupier spitting at the entrance of an Armenian church in Jerusalem's Old City.

The footage showed the occupier spitting at St. James Cathedral in the Armenian Quarter and making obscene gestures in front of a surveillance camera.

The documentation of this incident comes after Ben-Gvir said in October 2023 that spitting on Christians is an ancient Jewish custom and should not be considered a criminal offense requiring arrest.

"Preventing Christians from praying and participating in traditional religious processions represents a clear violation of freedom of worship," Awad said.

"Attacks have targeted Christian lands and properties, with their owners prevented from accessing them, under the protection of the army for occupiers."

Hatred

George Zeina said Israeli attacks do not distinguish between Muslims and Christians in the occupied city.

"We continue to witness attacks on clergy and churches, alongside attempts to justify such behavior as customs, which is unacceptable," he added.

"The recent attack on a nun in Jerusalem reflects a dangerous level of hatred, as she was pushed and violently assaulted," he continued.

"These incidents are recurring in the absence of real accountability, which encourages their continuation," he added.

"Israeli policies aim to pressure Palestinians and push them to leave their land," Zeina said.

Observers say these assaults come amid rising tensions in occupied East Jerusalem, where attacks on religious sites and clergy are repeatedly reported, amid criticism of weak international responses.

The West Bank, including East Jerusalem, has seen escalation since the outbreak of the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023, including military operations, arrests and movement restrictions.

Palestinians believe that the continuation of these policies threatens the Christian presence in East Jerusalem and undermines the religious and historical character of the city, which is sacred to the three monotheistic religions.

Palestinians consider the occupied East Jerusalem the capital of their future state, based on international resolutions that do not recognize Israel's occupation of the city in 1967 or its annexation in 1980.

*Writing by Lina Altawell in Istanbul

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