

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

#### Contents

Introduction.....	3
Copyright Notice .....	3
Introduction.....	3
WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Palestinian Territories .....	4
Introduction.....	4
Link for general background information .....	4
Recent country history .....	4
The religious landscape .....	5
The political landscape .....	5
The socio-economic landscape .....	6
Concluding remarks.....	6
External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Palestinian Territories .....	6
WWL 2019: Church History and Facts.....	8
How many Christians?.....	8
How did Christians get there?.....	8
What church networks exist today? .....	8
Religious context .....	9
Notes on the current situation.....	9
WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile .....	10
Introduction.....	10
What type of persecution dominates? .....	10
Who is driving persecution?.....	10
What it results in .....	10
Violence .....	11
Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period .....	11
WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics .....	12
Introduction.....	12

Position on World Watch List (WWL)..... 12

Persecution engines ..... 12

Drivers of persecution ..... 13

Context ..... 15

Christian communities and how they are affected ..... 15

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence ..... 16

5 Year trends ..... 18

Gender specific persecution..... 19

Persecution of other religious minorities ..... 20

Future outlook..... 20

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics ..... 21

Additional Reports and Articles ..... 22

    WWR in-depth reports ..... 22

    Open Doors article(s) from the region ..... 22

    World Watch Monitor news articles ..... 22

    Recent country developments ..... 22

## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Palestinian Territories	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	57	49
WWL 2018	60	36
WWL 2017	64	23
WWL 2016	62	24
WWL 2015	58	26

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

# WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Palestinian Territories

## Introduction

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14630174>

### Recent country history

After Islamist Hamas won a decisive majority in the parliamentary elections of 2006, a national unity government was formed including both members of Hamas and Fatah. Tensions over control of the Palestinian security forces led to a civil war in Gaza, in which Hamas took power by force in 2007. Since then, there have been two rival administrations within the Palestinian Authority. The relationship between both political parties is characterized by mutual distrust, revealing the influence of tribalism and clan rivalries within the Palestinian Arab community. Adherents of the one have been imprisoned and abused by the other. Rapprochement efforts between Fatah and Hamas resulted in the formation of a Palestinian Unity Government in June 2014. This move was meant to pave the way for parliamentary elections, however these have not been held as the Unity Government resigned in June 2015. In April 2017, President Abbas [imposed](#) sanctions on the Gaza strip after Hamas established its own administrative committee, deducting 30-50% from the salaries of PA staff in Gaza. A reconciliation agreement was reached in October 2017, with Hamas agreeing to hand over the control of the border check points to the Palestinian Authority. However, no real steps towards reconciliation have been made since and Hamas has still full control in Gaza.

In July 2017, Israel erected safety measures around the Al-Aqsa mosque after two Israeli police men had been killed. This ignited violent protests, causing the death of at least six people. Both Fatah and Hamas condemned the Israeli measures, calling on Palestinians to protect the mosque. After two weeks of protest, Israel removed all safety measures. The 70th commemoration of the Nakba on 15 May 2018 (Nakba means "disaster" in Arabic; this term is used to refer to the events which occurred during the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 when 700,000 Palestinians lost their homes) was used in Gaza to organize a "Great Return March". In the six weeks before the actual commemoration day, every Friday thousands of Gazans walked to the border displaying their desire to return to the land where their ancestors had lived. While the Palestinians claim to have been demonstrating peacefully, the Israeli authorities said the protests were violent. Thousands of Palestinians were wounded and hundreds were killed by Israeli forces. The West Bank remained calm during this period.

At the same time, the USA [moved its embassy to Jerusalem](#), with President Trump stating that Jerusalem "is the eternal capital of Israel". A move that shocked many Palestinians and destroyed the last bit of hope that the USA could be an impartial peace-broker to end the conflict.

During the following months, hundreds of burning kites [were released](#) from Gaza into Israel, while the (weekly) protests continued. During the summer of 2018, Hamas and other groups started shooting rockets and mortars into Israel again, provoking [retaliation from the air](#) by Israeli forces.

In December 2018, unrest broke out in the West Bank, after a [hit and run attack](#) on a settlement near Ramallah, probably conducted by supporters of Hamas. The city of Ramallah has been locked down by the Israeli army since the attack, in order to catch the perpetrators and prevent further unrest.

However, this could not prevent another attack in the area in which two Israeli soldiers were killed, [after the Israeli army killed four alleged Palestinian attackers](#).

This unrest in the West Bank comes at a critical point for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, after he [took over](#) the post of Secretary of Defense in November 2018 following sudden instability in the Israeli government. In 2019, there will be elections in Israel in which Netanyahu wants to appear as the one safeguarding Israel. If violence also starts to erupt in the West Bank, [his defense policy has failed](#). Netanyahu has always counted on the West Bank staying calm due to security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority and better living conditions (compared to Gaza). During the Great Return March demonstrations, things did stay calm in the West Bank. However, that calm could be superficial. Many in the West Bank have also lost all hope of ever achieving a Palestinian state and a better future: First, because of the US embassy moving to Jerusalem; and secondly, because many do not believe anymore that the Israeli government actually wants peace and a two-state solution. This was underlined by Israel's [adoption of the Nation State Law](#) in July 2018, which is interpreted as another sign that Jewish interests come first and Palestinian interests second.

## The religious landscape

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict causes many challenges for indigenous Christians - their ethnicity results in many restrictions from the Israeli side, and their religion puts them in a minority position within the Muslim-majority Palestinian community. The Palestinian Territories are ruled or impacted by three different governments: The West Bank's ruling Fatah party is formally based on secular (i.e. "non-Islamist") principles and Christians enjoy several rights, even being active in the highest levels of government.

In Gaza, although Christians are largely tolerated by Islamist Hamas, the rights of Christians are neither upheld nor protected. In past years, Christians in the Gaza strip have faced threats from radical Islamic vigilante groups, but there were no incidents reported in the WWL 2019 reporting period. Israeli military law is valid in parts of the West Bank, restricting greatly the movement of all Palestinians, including Christians. Christians in Gaza number less than one thousand; leaving the Gaza strip is almost impossible due to Israeli restrictions. The total number of Christians has been decreasing in both areas over time due to emigration and lower birth rates. A ray of hope is the small but growing number of converts from Islam to Christianity.

## The political landscape

During the past few years Islamic militants more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza and the West Bank. They appeal especially to the youth, and also to those from a Hamas or even Fatah background. Despite the fact that these Salafist groups do not have major power, their influence cannot be dismissed. Responsible for a large part of the rocket attacks from Gaza on Israel, they are capable of provoking escalation. Partly as a result of their influence, Hamas takes Islamizing measures from time to time. A "virtue campaign" was launched in January 2013 to control womens' clothing; the hijab was made mandatory in high schools and males were banned from working as hairdressers for females. These last two measures were reversed after resistance from the local population, the West and human rights activists. However, similar Islamizing actions [are still happening](#). Gaza remains a fertile recruiting ground for militant groups which makes violent radicalism a real threat: Its situation is generally perceived as being hopeless; there is the feeling that nobody cares about it anyway and the influence of politicized Islamic forces seems unavoidable. The Arab Spring uprisings only added to this.

## The socio-economic landscape

Although the West Bank and Gaza are both part of the Palestinian Territories, their differences are considerable. 38% of the Gazans are living in poverty, while this is 22% for West Bankers (World Bank [2014 estimate](#)). Reportedly, unemployment in the West Bank is highest in the Bethlehem area (around 30%), where 44% of all Palestinian Christians are living.

Gazan daily life is heavily influenced by the Israeli/Egyptian economic blockade imposed since 2007 when Hamas took power. The unemployment rate is 42% in Gaza and 18% in the West Bank (World Bank [2016 estimate](#)). There are even differences on a legislative level: The legal code in Gaza follows Egyptian law, while in the West Bank it follows Jordanian law - in spite of laws passed to unify both codes. Since 2007, the two areas have been governed by different governments: Gaza is ruled by Islamist Hamas and the West Bank is governed by the more moderate Fatah. At least 60% of the West Bank is under full Israeli control. Also, the level of persecution in these two areas is different. In Gaza, where persecution is worse, Islamic militants and the conservative Islamic society play a more significant role than in the West Bank.

There are more Palestinians living in exile than in the Palestinian Territories. Large numbers are still living in refugee camps set up in the wake of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. Today, 5-6 million Palestinian refugees can be found in semi-permanent camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and even in the Palestinian Territories themselves. Exact numbers, definitions of a refugee and the responsibility for their exodus are strongly disputed; both Israeli and Arab political and military leaders are blamed for the situation. Socio-economic circumstances in the camps are generally poor, with high population density and insufficient basic infrastructure. The fate of these refugees is also a very controversial issue. 'Guest countries' are not prepared to assimilate them and for Israel their return would constitute a danger to the Jewish state.

## Concluding remarks

The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) expects outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian unrest to continue in Gaza and the West Bank for the next few years to come. Nation-building and reform are hindered by (among other factors) divisions between Hamas and Fatah. The peace process is expected to continue to stagnate and the chance of new outbreaks of violence is high. In its risk assessment, [BMI research](#) points out that such outbreaks could "lead to a conflict between Israel and Hamas, or to a full-scale armed insurrection similar to the first and second intifadas". This will further affect the quality of life for all Palestinians negatively, including Christians, leading to a continuing emigration of the latter.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Palestinian Territories

- Recent country history: imposed  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/hamdallah-says-aid-to-gaza-must-pass-through-ramallah-first.html>
- Recent country history: moved its embassy to Jerusalem  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44120428>
- Recent country history: were released  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-kites/gazans-send-fire-starting-kites-into-israel-minister-threatens-lethal-response-idUSKCN1J127C>

- Recent country history: retaliation from the air  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-air-strikes-latest-updates-israel-rockets-palestinians-killed-a8447726.html>
- Recent country history: hit and run attack  
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/two-wounded-one-seriously-in-shooting-near-west-bank-settlement-1.6727271>
- Recent country history: after the Israeli army killed four alleged Palestinian attackers  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/west-banks-israel-palestinians-dead-killed-shooting-ramallah-abbas-ofra-a8682336.html>
- Recent country history: took over  
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/naming-himself-defense-chief-netanyahu-says-no-room-for-politics-in-security/>
- Recent country history: his defense policy has failed  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/israel-west-bank-palestinians-amas-benjamin-netanyahu-idf.html>
- Recent country history: adoption of the Nation State Law  
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-contentious-nation-state-law-everything-you-need-to-know-1.6292733>
- The political landscape: are still happening  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/palestine-gaza-amas-campaign-women-hijab.html>
- The socio-economic landscape: 2014 estimate  
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/817271468143394694/Seeing-is-believing-poverty-in-the-palestinian-territories>
- The socio-economic landscape: 2016 estimate  
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/overview>
- Concluding remarks: Economist Intelligence Unit  
<http://country.eiu.com/Palestine>
- Concluding remarks: BMI research  
<http://store.bmiresearch.com/israel-country-risk-report.html>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
5,053,000	46,600	0.9

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

In the West Bank and in Gaza the general trend is that Christians are leaving, or at least they want to leave (especially in Gaza). Estimating the number of Christians is a sensitive topic: The WCD 2017 estimate was 67,700 Christians, but several sources indicated that this number was too high and it has been adjusted this year by WCD in line with sources indicating a number below 50,000.

### How did Christians get there?

Since the very beginnings of the Christian Church in the 1st century AD there have been Christians living in the region. Although the Church did not always play a positive role in the area – i.e. during the Crusades – there has always been a presence of Christians from all kinds of denominations and nationalities. In the 7th century, Muslim Arab armies invaded and from the 9th century onwards Christians became a minority, living under Islamic authority. As long as they paid the *jizya*, a tax for conquered non-Muslims (*dhimmi*s) and were not evangelizing Muslims, they were allowed to practice their religion.

After the Crusades, Franciscan monks stayed to maintain the churches and religious sites. Until the 19th century, most Christians belonged to the Greek-Orthodox church. During the 19th century, both Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic (Melkite) and Protestant (Lutheran/Anglican) missionaries came to the Holy Land and started work mainly among Orthodox Christians. This changed the church landscape fundamentally. Although the Greek Orthodox Church remains the biggest denomination, the Roman Catholic Church with its connections to the West is more influential. Well-known Protestant theologians have emerged, like Naim Ateek (Anglican) and Mitri Raheb (Lutheran). Various non-denominational Evangelical churches have been established during the last decades.

Converts from Islam to Christianity have been increasing in number over the years, but conversion remains a very sensitive topic, particularly because religion is linked to family identity. Leaving the family religion is therefore seen as betrayal of the most fundamental element in tribal Palestinian society, one's own family. Christians with a Muslim background are likely to get into trouble and be persecuted by their (extended) families.

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Palestinian Territories	Christians	%
Orthodox	17,400	37.3
Catholic	15,600	33.5
Protestant	5,800	12.4
Independent	5,600	12.0
Unaffiliated	2,200	4.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>46,600</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		

Evangelical movement	4,900	10.5
Renewalist movement	9,500	20.4

*Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.*

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Most Palestinian Christians are Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic and there are also several Protestant denominations. Christians are decreasing in number but are found especially in the cities of Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Bethlehem. There are also smaller Christian communities in other locations, including congregations of Messianic Jews. There is also a small but growing number of Christians with a Muslim background, who face the most severe persecution. Integration into the historical or Evangelical churches is not always easy and many of these converts therefore come together in separate congregations, most of the time in secret.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Palestinian Territories	Numbers	%
Christians	46,600	0.9
Muslim	4,136,000	81.9
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	578,000	11.4
Bahai	2,300	0.0
Atheist	4,600	0.1
Agnostic	286,000	5.7
Other	0	0.0

*OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

## Notes on the current situation

Christians are caught in the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Their ethnicity causes many restrictions from the Israeli side and their religion puts them in a minority position within the Muslim-majority Palestinian community. Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. Though largely tolerated by Hamas, Christians are discriminated against and threatened by radical Muslim vigilante groups in Gaza.

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 57 points, the Palestinian Territories ranked 49 in WWL 2019.

### What type of persecution dominates?

- **Religious nationalism:** Israel's dominance in the West Bank and its firm grip on Gaza causes most suffering for Palestinian Christians and is a major factor encouraging emigration.
- **Islamic oppression:** Islamic militants more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza, and are also present in the West Bank, causing Christians to fear being attacked.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Fatah and Hamas try to maintain power at all costs. Criticizing them in their respective territory can be dangerous.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Palestinian society is conservative, with tribalism playing an important role in society. This is a major factor in hindering Muslims from converting to Christianity.

### Who is driving persecution?

Palestinian society is conservative and conversion from Islam to Christianity or changing from one church denomination to another is unacceptable or socially undesirable, because of the close links between family and religion. Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. Palestinian Christians suffer daily from the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Their ethnicity results in many restrictions from the Israeli side. Like other Palestinians, Christians experience these limitations on a daily basis and they are an important incentive for emigration. Their religion also puts them in a minority position within the Muslim-majority Palestinian community.

### What it results in

All Christian groups struggle with the travel and other limitations imposed by the Israeli authorities. Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution and it is difficult for them to connect to existing churches. The influence of radical Islamic ideology is growing and historical churches have to be diplomatic in their approach towards Muslims. Harassment of church leaders by radical Jews also occurs. Christians not affiliated with the main historical churches sometimes face opposition from larger churches concerning theological issues and the problem of "sheep-stealing". However, these kind of issues also occur even among non-denominational churches.

## Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Palestinian Territories	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	6	0	1	2
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	2	0	1	0

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Proselytizing Muslims is not forbidden by law, but remains difficult due to pressure from society. Some Christians are afraid of endangering their ties with their Muslim neighbors if they are too actively involved in proselytizing.
- During the WWL 2019 reporting period, at least one female convert has been confined to the family home for some time. Several forced marriages of female converts to Muslim men were reported and a number of converts had to relocate within the country, due to pressure from family and society.
- According to the US State Department reporting on Israel and the Palestinian Territories in 2017, p. 39: "A combination of factors continued to provide the impetus for increased Christian emigration from Jerusalem and the West Bank, including political instability; the limited ability of Christian communities in the Jerusalem area to expand due to building restrictions maintained by the municipality in Jerusalem or Israeli authorities in Area C; the difficulties Christian clergy experienced in obtaining Israeli visas and residency permits; Israeli government family reunification restrictions; loss of confidence in the peace process; and economic hardships created by the establishment of the security barrier and the imposition of travel restrictions."

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 57 points, the Palestinian Territories ranked 49 in WWL 2019. The score dropped three points compared to WWL 2018. This drop is mainly the result of less pressure in certain spheres of life being reported.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Palestinian Territories	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Medium
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Medium
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).*

#### Islamic oppression (Strong):

Generally speaking, Christians are affected by *Islamic oppression* throughout the Palestinian Territories, although there is noticeably more pressure in Gaza than in the West Bank, because of the presence of active radical Islamic movements. Islamic militants more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza, and are also present in the West Bank. These include Islamic State group (IS) cells - either active or "sleeping". Despite the fact that these groups do not have any major power yet, their influence cannot be dismissed.

In addition, there is a continuing influence and enforcement of age-old norms and values. In the Palestinian Territories it is very much mixed with Islam and especially affects converts from Islam. As in the rest of the Middle East, religion is connected to family identity. Therefore, leaving Islam is interpreted as betraying one's family. In general, families put strong social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. In many cases, converts are [alienated from their families](#) as a result of their faith.

#### Dictatorial Paranoia (Strong):

*Dictatorial Paranoia* is connected to plain greed and the safeguarding of the interests of a small group. Nepotism is widespread within the clan-based society and people with connections to those in power are most of the time well-off. Christians have traditionally been involved with Fatah and the nationalist movement. Most Christians support the factions in their struggle against the Israeli authorities and face no difficulties. Nevertheless, without elections for many years, the democratic legitimacy of the government is low. Both parties within the Palestinian Authority, Fatah and Hamas, try to maintain power with all means necessary. Freedom of expression and therefore the freedom of religion is limited; if church leaders criticize the Palestinian Authorities or their Islamic rule, it can have negative

consequences, especially in Gaza. Christians also face the pressure of Israeli government control; for example, church leaders in Jerusalem have to operate carefully in order not to lose privileges such as easy access to obtaining visas and permits.

**Religious nationalism (Medium):**

Palestinian Christians report that it is Israel's control of the West Bank and firm grip on Gaza, which causes most pressure in their lives. This pressure comes: i) from Israel's external control - i.e. of all borders (except for the Gaza border with Egypt), combined with a permit system for entering Israel and for travelling between Gaza and the West Bank, thus limiting the possibility of visiting holy places in Jerusalem, for example; and ii) from Israel's internal control of approximately 60% of the West Bank (territories belonging to Area C under the Oslo accords) - an area which separates all the regions controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Internal checkpoints within the West Bank are used to control the area and to protect the Israeli settlements within the West Bank. This control creates insecurity, limits economical development and limits the freedom of movement, thus isolating the Christian communities within the West Bank.

Without hope for a political solution, many Christians do not see a future for themselves in the Palestinian Territories and emigrate to other parts of the world. The Israeli control of the West Bank is linked to the view that sees the West Bank as part of the biblical Israel belonging to Jews only. The general feeling among non-Jews (including Palestinian Christians) is that they are being allowed no space to live a dignified life in the West Bank.

**Ethnic antagonism (Medium):**

The Palestinian society is conservative, with tribalism playing an important role in society. This directly affects the possibilities for Muslims to turn to Christianity. Turning away from Islam is not only seen as a religious switch, but also a switch towards a new identity. Thus conversion is seen as turning one's back on one's own (extended) family and on the values one has been raised with. Conversion is thus an act of disrespect in a society in which family honor are key elements of society.

**Drivers of persecution**

<b>Drivers of Persecution: Palestinian Territories</b>	<b>IO</b>	<b>RN</b>	<b>EA</b>	<b>DPR</b>	<b>CPCO</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>DPA</b>	<b>OCC</b>
	STRONG	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	-	STRONG	WEAK
Government officials	Medium	Medium	Weak	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Weak	Weak	Weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	Weak	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-

Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).

### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

As the number of Palestinian Christians is very small (0.9% according to WCD 2018 statistics) compared to the Muslim majority, the biggest pressure is the subtle pressure from *normal citizens*. This can be viewed in the dress rules for women, which are enforced via disapproving looks or comments. Palestinian society is conservative, with more liberty in the cities compared to the rural areas. Most Christians are part of the historical Christian communities. They have to operate carefully, as they are regarded by Muslim society as being "different". One country researcher stated: "The majority eats the minority here. The Christians isolate themselves, out of fear of upsetting society in one way or another".

Members of a convert's (extended) family will put a lot of pressure on a convert to give up the Christian faith. They see converts as bringing shame to the honor of the family. Especially converts from Islam to Christianity will be expelled and harassed by their families. The situation for converts is in Gaza even worse, as the Christian community is tiny and there are hardly any places to hide.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

Palestinian *Government officials* and other people connected to one of the two *political parties* within the Palestinian Authority are at times a source of pressure. Criticizing the Palestinian Authorities or their Islamic rule can have negative consequences, especially in Gaza. Christians also face pressure from the Israeli government with church leaders in Jerusalem having to operate carefully in order not to lose visa and permit rights.

### Drivers of Religious nationalism:

Palestinian Christians mostly face pressure from Israeli government officials, above all the Israeli security forces, in their day-to-day life. Confrontations with Israeli inhabitants of the West Bank, the settlers, can also be intimidating. Both security forces and settlers are well-armed, but the latter are known to be more zealous than the ordinary Israeli soldier.

### Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

Tribalism is mostly driven by society in general, but it is also supported by the governing authorities when they give tribal customs and 'reconciliation meetings' priority over codified laws and the rule of law. In this system, minorities such as Christians are mostly at a [disadvantage](#). (Extended) family members persecute converts because they have violated tribal customs, e.g. the family honor.

## Context

The Palestinian Territories are ruled or impacted by three different governments:

- The West Bank's ruling Fatah party is formally based on secular principles – meaning non-Islamist, although the Basic Law states that the principles of Islamic *Sharia* law shall be the main source of legislation. Christians enjoy several rights, even being active in the highest levels of government.
- Islamist Hamas are the de facto rulers in Gaza. They base their governance on Islam and *Sharia* law. Christians are largely tolerated as their numbers are small.
- Israeli military law is valid in most parts of the West Bank, leading to great restrictions of movement of all Palestinians, including Christians.

Since 2007, there have been two rival administrations within the Palestinian Authority. The relationship between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank is characterized by mutual distrust, revealing the influence of tribalism and clan rivalries within the Palestinian Arab community. In October 2017, both parties reached an agreement, in which the administrative authorities in Gaza were signed over to the Palestinian Authority. The control of the borders was also [handed over](#) to the Palestinian Authority. Hamas keeps its military wing, however, and is effectively [still controlling](#) the Gaza strip. The total number of Christians has been decreasing in both parts of the Territories due to emigration and low birth rates.

In May 2018 demonstrations took place at the Gaza border in which thousands of Palestinians were wounded and hundreds killed by Israeli security forces. During the summer of 2018, Hamas and other groups resumed their mortar attacks on Israel, with Israeli forces [retaliating from the air](#) in response. (For further details, see "Recent country history" in the "Keys to understanding" section above.)

## Christian communities and how they are affected

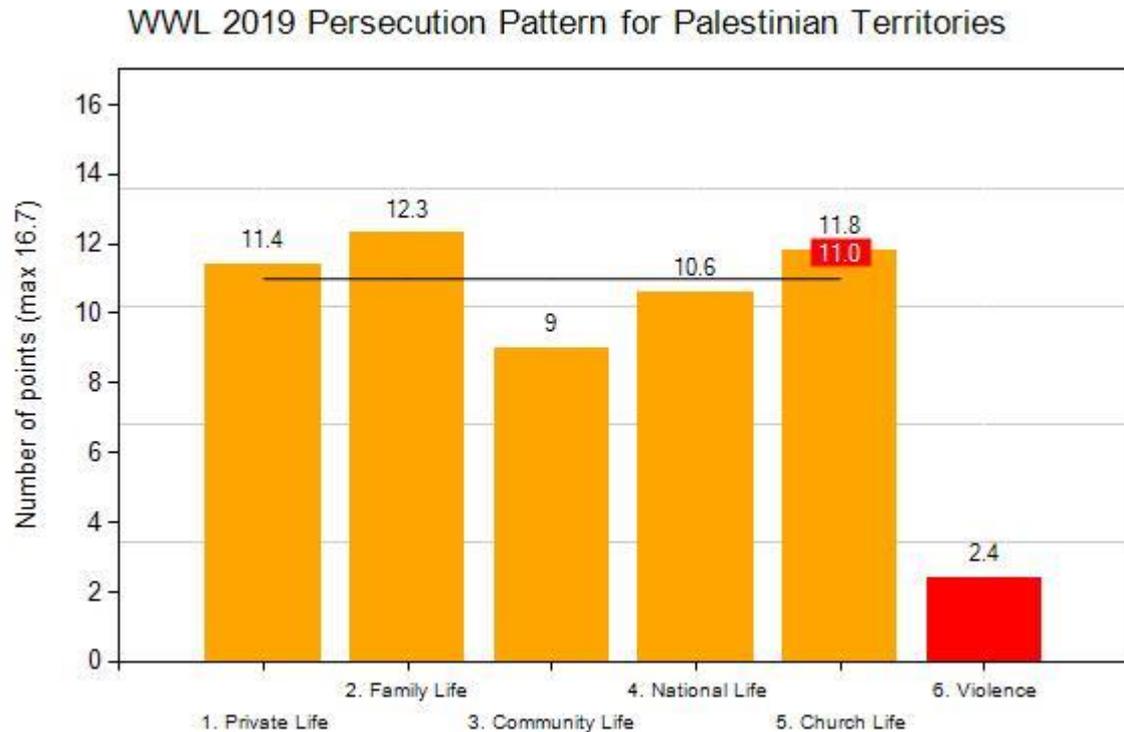
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians are not involuntarily isolated in the Palestinian Territories and are hence not scored as a separate category in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** The two largest denominations in this category are Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic. They are officially registered and have several congregations in the West Bank and one each in Gaza. In Gaza, Christians from these churches are vulnerable to conversion to Islam: They feel trapped, cannot stand the threats and are sometimes offered allurements such as housing, wives, jobs or diplomas. In the West Bank, they have the freedom to worship, as long as they do not proselytize Muslims. These churches have a significant influence in society. Both the Roman Catholics as well as the Greek Orthodox run private schools, which are also attended by many Muslims. However, religious education classes are held separately.

**Converts:** Converts are mainly from a Muslim background, but cross-denominational "church-changers" are also included in this category. Depending on the families, both groups experience pressure from family members to give up their new belief. When Christians change church e.g. from a historical to a non-traditional Protestant church this often causes trouble with their families. However, converts from a Muslim background definitely face the most severe persecution of all types of Christianity. In the West Bank they are threatened and put under great pressure, in Gaza their situation is so dangerous that they live their Christian faith in utmost secrecy. Nevertheless, the number of converts from Islam is growing slowly.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** There are several Evangelical churches in the West Bank and one Baptist church in Gaza. Leaders of the historical Christian communities often see the presence of Evangelical churches as a threat.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for the Palestinian Territories shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.0), but went down from 11.7 in WWL 2018. The reason for this decrease is the lower pressure experienced by converts, particularly in the *Community sphere of life*.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Family* and *Church spheres*. The pressure in the *Family sphere* reflects the difficulties converts face if they want to have a Christian marriage or funeral, for example. The pressure in the *Church sphere* shows the limitations the churches experience when it comes to evangelizing and integrating converts.
- The score for violence went up from 1.1 in WWL 2018 to 2.4 in WWL 2019.

### Private sphere:

Both converts from Islam and cross-denominational “church-changers” experience pressure in this sphere of life. In Gaza the situation for Christians with a Muslim background is very serious. Also in the West Bank, converts from Islam cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any impression to those around them that they might be Christian can have serious consequences. All other types of Christianity have more freedom to practice their faith privately, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. In Gaza, the display of Christian symbols (e.g. crosses) is dangerous for converts.

**Family sphere:**

If their faith is discovered, converts are put under pressure by their families, especially in Gaza but also – to a lesser extent - in the West Bank. The children of known convert parents are likely to be harassed or discriminated against, especially in Gaza. Children of the historical Christian communities may also be discriminated against in schools in Gaza. Except for converts, most Christians are generally free to live their Christian convictions within the circle of the family. However, if a Christian husband and father converts to Islam and divorces his Christian wife, their children (if under 18 years of age) would automatically become Muslims. Also, if a Christian married to a Muslim is divorced, he or she would be excluded from having custody of the children. This is explained by the fact that a large part of family law is handled by *Sharia* which does not treat Christians on an equal footing with Muslims.

**Community sphere:**

In Gaza – and in majority Muslim communities in the West Bank – there is pressure on the entire local Christian community. Adding to this is the general context of political unrest and the growing influence of radical Islam in the Middle East, especially in Gaza. Christian women might feel the pressure to cover up when they go out – e.g. wearing long sleeves in public. If they do not, they risk being the target of harassment. The number of Christians is diminishing and the influence of radical Islam is growing. For safety reasons, most of the converts need to hide their new faith from their community.

**National sphere:**

Laws in the West Bank generally protect religious freedom, whereas those in Gaza are restrictive. The Palestinian Basic Law – which functions as a temporary constitution – states that the official religion is Islam and *Sharia* (Islamic legislation) is the main source of legislation. The authorities sometimes fail to uphold and protect the rights of individual Christians and in some cases Christians – mostly converts - have to flee to safe places somewhere else in the area. In engaging with the authorities, subtle discrimination is present in the entire Palestinian Territories, especially in Gaza, but this is less prevalent in areas with a large Christian population (as in the Bethlehem area). Nevertheless, Christians do have positions within the government. During Ramadan, it is socially unacceptable to consume food in public during the day. As a religious minority in a majority Muslim society – and one which is often identified with the (Christian) West - Christians have to be careful in expressing their opinions and are inclined to self-censor. Converts cannot openly interact with the authorities as Christians.

**Church sphere:**

Converts with a Muslim background cannot officially gather as a congregation nor can they openly join existing churches in both Gaza and the West Bank. For non-registered Protestant churches, it is hard to get permission to build a church in the West Bank. In Gaza, this is practically impossible for all types of Christianity. Importing materials (including Christian literature or Bibles) to the West Bank can be problematic and is difficult for Gaza, due to Israeli control and bureaucracy.

Within the Palestinian Territories there are some areas of friction between the different Christian denominations. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the main disputes were between the ‘old’ Greek-Orthodox and the ‘new’ Roman Catholic Church. Nowadays, it is the Evangelicals who are the newcomers and who are received with suspicion by the traditional churches. This is partly caused by different theological views, in particular when it comes to the status of Israel, where the traditional churches see Evangelicals as Western or Zionist and more in favor of Israel. Leaders of all church denominations are trying to protect their own flock. Hence, cross-denominational “church-changers” sometimes experience pressure from their (extended) family or community.

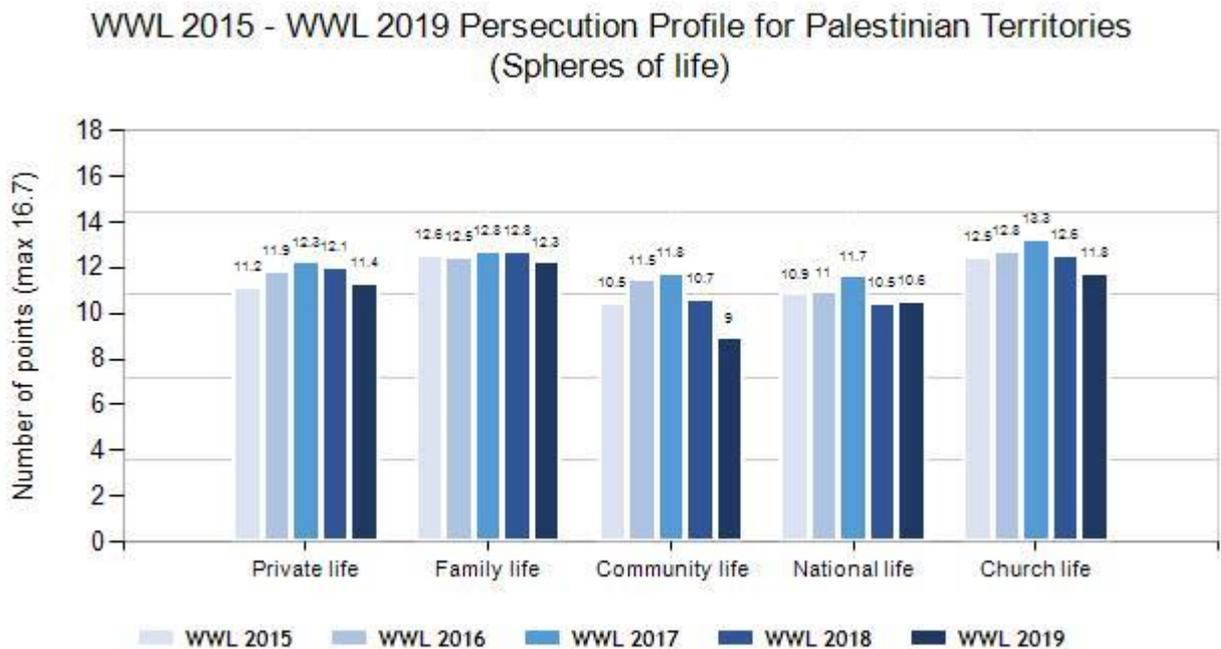
**Violence:**

The level of violence against Christians is generally speaking low. There are radical Islamic elements present but their main focus is on combatting Israeli forces. If there is violence against Christians, it happens in the family sphere and the perpetrators of this violence are family members. More converts than before have contributed information during the WWL 2019 reporting process, which has led to a greater number of violent incidents being recorded and thus a higher score.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

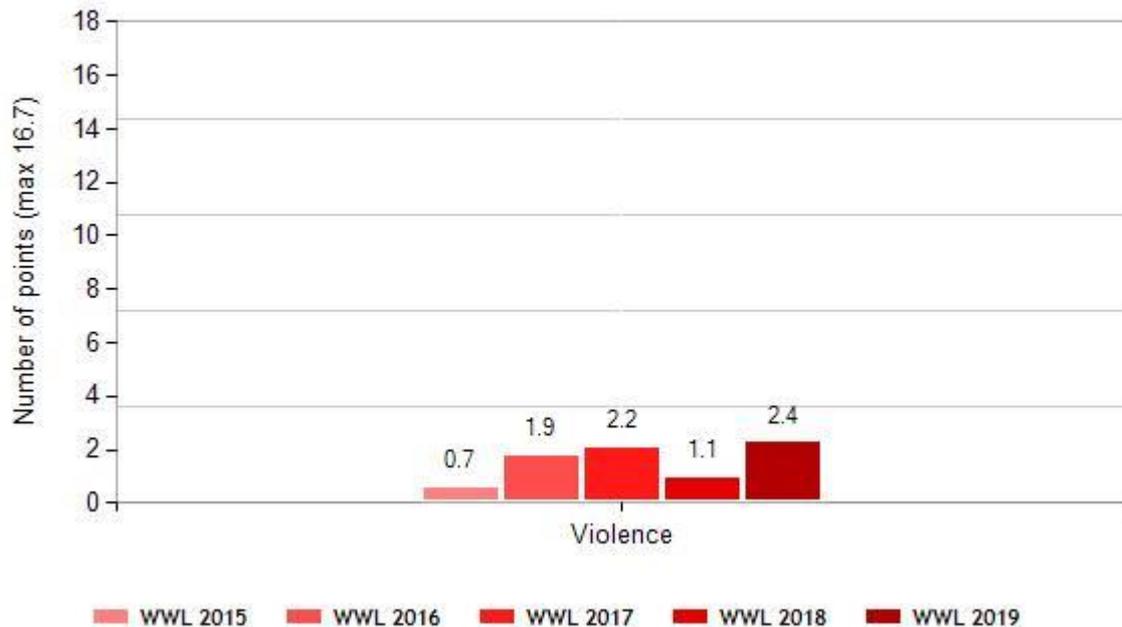
**5 Year trends**

Chart 1 shows that, despite a visible peak in the WWL 2017 reporting period, the levels of pressure in nearly all *spheres of life* have been more or less stable over the last five years. One exception to this is the notable drop in pressure in the *Community sphere*. The second chart, showing average pressure, shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has remained very high throughout, but is currently at the lowest score of all five years. In contrast, the scores for violence (Chart 3) increased every reporting period (except WWL 2018). Although still at a low level, WWL 2019 has the highest score for violence of all five years. It is likely that this has come about due to more information becoming available.



<b>WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Palestinian Territories</b>	<b>Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life</b>
2019	11.0
2018	11.7
2017	12.4
2016	11.9
2015	11.5

## WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Palestinian Territories (Violence)



## Gender specific persecution

### Female:

Sometimes, Christian girls and women are looked down upon by their Muslim neighbors, because they are not obviously Muslims (e.g. they do not wear a veil). Although not forced upon them by the government, there is socially enforced dress code for Christian women, requiring them to cover themselves in public, except for their heads.

There is a strong sense of shame related to conversion from Islam and this applies to women and girls in particular because of their greater dependency within the family. Thus they are more vulnerable to persecution from the family or close society. Family members can almost always act without impunity against female converts. There are also known cases of effective house arrest by the family. When a female convert is married, she can be divorced by her husband and lose the custody over her children. There is also the issue of honor killings, an accepted practice that leaves girls and women vulnerable, although known cases are rare.

### Male:

Job discrimination especially affects men - and their families - as they are usually the main family breadwinners. Israeli dominance and the dire economic situation make Palestinian men feel powerless. One country researcher writes: "The constant humiliation of the occupation, checking at the checkpoints, touches people in their dignity. Men (boys) feel ashamed and are not able to react. This might fire back on the family at home, especially the women." An increasing number of men remain single, because they do not earn enough to pay for a marriage or to provide for a family. Many Christian men want to leave the Palestinian Territories to find a job abroad. Such emigration seriously weakens the Palestinian Christian community, since only the more capable men have the necessary qualifications and financial means for finding a job abroad.

Young male converts are usually forced to leave their families, but then often experience problems integrating in existing churches. The Christian community struggles to accommodate these needy and often lonely individuals.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Minorities like the Bedouins and the Samaritans in Nablus are not persecuted in particular, although the living conditions of the former are difficult. Especially the [Bedouins living in Area C](#) of the West Bank face many problems with the Israeli military and civil authorities.

There are no other notable minorities in the Palestinian Territories that might face discrimination.

## Future outlook

**The political outlook:** Without any hope of a sustainable political solution to the conflict with Israel materializing, outbreaks of Israeli-Palestinian unrest are likely to continue happening in Gaza and West Bank over the next few years. Nation-building and reform are hindered by (among other factors) divisions between Hamas and Fatah. Reconciliation attempts between both parties have repeatedly failed and there are no guarantees that the most recent agreement in October 2017 will overcome the impasse. One of the most pressing concerns at the moment is the succession of incumbent President Abbas. He is ageing and reportedly has health problems, and there does not seem to be a clear roadmap for his succession. If he dies, the possible consequences are unpredictable and could easily lead to further internal conflict.

### The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- *Islamic oppression:* The relationship between the governing authorities and Christian communities is generally good. Reportedly, the Evangelical churches are also making steps towards being officially recognized by the Palestinian Authority. Nevertheless, society remains conservative and Islam is the norm. Converts from Islam to Christianity will no doubt keep facing the brunt of persecution. Neither is official recognition of conversion ever likely to materialize, nor any acceptance of such a step by families and society. On the one hand, radicalism may decrease with groups such as Islamic State losing power in nearby Syria and Iraq. However, at the same, young men are likely to become more radical where they are desperate and have lost hope for a better future.
- *Religious nationalism:* Since the US embassy was moved to Jerusalem, hope for a solution to the conflict and an end to Israeli dominance are at a new low point. It is unlikely that the Israeli elections in 2019 will deliver a government that will effectively improve daily life in the Palestinian Territories. It is more likely that a new right wing government will be voted in which will continue to build Israeli settlements in the West Bank and keep pushing the growing Palestinian population even further back. It is thus unlikely that restrictions on traveling, for example, will be lifted. As long as the economic situation does not improve, Christians will keep emigrating to other countries, thus adding to the further marginalization of the shrinking Christian community.
- *Ethnic antagonism:* The new generation in the Palestinian Territories wants to honor their families and traditional customs, but they also want a modern (Western) life. In the long run, this might lead to a more open and liberal society, but for now society remains conservative. Shaming the family honor by converting to Christianity will remain a big issue.

- *Dictatorial paranoia:* Both Hamas and Fatah are oppressing dissident voices. Christians and churches have to operate carefully in this regard, although most churches do not intend to criticize the authorities since they have ties to those in authority, even in Gaza. Some Christians are involved in the Fatah movement or are working for the Palestinian Authority.

**Conclusion:** As the peace-process seems likely to stagnate, the chance of new outbreaks of violence remains high. In particular in Gaza, the socio-economic situation is bad: Unemployment is high, youth unemployment even higher, there is only electricity for a few hours each day and the area is overcrowded. The tiny Christian minority has almost no future perspectives. The socio-economic situation in the West Bank is improving, but unemployment is a major issue there as well. However, the biggest challenge for all inhabitants of the Palestinian Territories is the lack of hope for a political solution to the conflict. Thus the current situation could easily lead to an outbreak of violence. This insecurity affects the quality of life of all Palestinians negatively, including Christians, leading to a continuing emigration of the latter. According to some Palestinian Christians, if the current situation continues, there will be no Christians left within one generation.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: alienated from their families  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281034882\\_FREEDOM\\_OF\\_RELIGION\\_IN\\_ISRAEL-PALESTINE\\_MAY\\_MUSLIMS\\_BECOME\\_CHRISTIANS\\_AND\\_DO\\_CHRISTIANS\\_HAVE\\_THE\\_FREE\\_DOM\\_TO\\_WELCOME\\_SUCH\\_CONVERTS](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281034882_FREEDOM_OF_RELIGION_IN_ISRAEL-PALESTINE_MAY_MUSLIMS_BECOME_CHRISTIANS_AND_DO_CHRISTIANS_HAVE_THE_FREE_DOM_TO_WELCOME_SUCH_CONVERTS)
- Drivers of persecution: disadvantage  
<https://journals.openedition.org/etudesrurales/10550>
- Context: handed over  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/01/hamas-hand-over-control-of-crossings-to-palestinian-authority>
- Context: still controlling  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-41591450>
- Context: retaliating from the air  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-air-strikes-latest-updates-israel-rockets-palestinians-killed-a8447726.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Bedouins living in Area C  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/film-human-face-palestinian-bedouins-plight-170701133202312.html>

## Additional Reports and Articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

### Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).