

World Watch Research

Palestinian Territories: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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research@od.org

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



As described by [101 Visualizing Palestine](#): The 1995 [Oslo II Accord](#) divided the Palestinian West Bank into three administrative zones (not depicted in the map above):

- Area A (18%), where the Palestinian Authority (PA) administers civil and security matters in the eight cities (with some surrounding villages) marked on the map.
- Area B (22%), where the PA administers only civil matters.
- Area C (60%) where Israel maintains full control. Area C includes all Israeli settlements and two thirds of the West Bank's fertile agricultural land.

While Area C is a continuous territory, Areas A and B are fragmented into 166 separate enclaves. In spite of the breakdown of the Oslo process, Areas A, B and C remain in force today.

Palestinian Territories: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
5,495,000	42,600	0.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

The Israel-Hamas war

No other recent event has had a more significant impact on Gaza and the West Bank than the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the following Israeli invasion of Gaza. During the 7th of October attack, Gazan militants linked to Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group controlling Gaza, killed around 1200 Israelis, mostly civilians, while taking 250 Israelis hostage. In response, Israel invaded Gaza. Estimates in October 2024 indicate that more than 40,000 residents in Gaza have been killed and over 90% of Gaza's roughly two million population have been displaced. Recent reports state that over 65% of Gaza's buildings have been destroyed or damaged, while two third of all agricultural land has been affected ([Unitar 30 September 2024](#)). Large parts of critical infrastructure have been destroyed and many hospitals are not functioning, causing a dire health care crisis ([CNN, 9 September 2024](#)). Similarly, Israeli restrictions on food entering the Gaza Strip, in combination with a complete loss of security inside Gaza, have increased the risk of famine and malnutrition, especially in the north ([Refugees International, 12 September 2024](#)).

The Israel-Hamas war has not only impacted Gaza. Palestinians in the West Bank were heavily affected too, as Israeli raids and settler violence increased. At least 650 West Bank Palestinians have been killed since 7 October 2023 and thousands were arrested for alleged support of Hamas. In addition, more than 150,000 Palestinians lost their jobs inside Israel and the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, while additional travel restrictions were imposed making it difficult to travel between cities and villages or to leave the West Bank ([Arab Center DC, 26 January 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, international efforts to halt the war have so far failed to bring a lasting solution. Even the USA, Israel's staunchest supporter, began to put pressure on Israel, for example by not using its veto in the UN Security Council against a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in March 2024 ([Al-Monitor, 25 March 2024](#)). The US government wants Israel to allow more aid into Gaza and also strongly objected against an Israeli offensive in Rafah, the most southern city in Gaza where most Gazans have sought refuge. Earlier on, South Africa brought a case against Israel before the International Court of Justice, with the court stating in an interim ruling that it was "plausible" that Israel has committed acts of genocide against the Gazans and should prevent any other genocidal acts from happening ([BBC News, 26 January 2024](#)). Despite the US government's opposition, Israel invaded Rafah in May 2024, destroying large parts of the city and forcing the Gazan refugees to seek shelter in hastily assembled camps outside the major cities ([AP News, 7 July 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, a deal to reach a ceasefire remains out of sight, especially after Israel assassinated Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh in July 2024 ([Al-Jazeera, 31 July 2024](#)). Further complicating any ceasefire deal is Israel's recent increase in fighting with Hezbollah in Lebanon, killing its head Hassan Nasrallah and most of Hezbollah's leadership in September 2024 ([CNN, 25 September 2024](#)). Israel launched a ground offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon at the beginning of October 2024.

The tensions between Hamas and Fatah

Despite the war, the division between Hamas and Fatah remains unresolved. Historically, Hamas has rejected any relationship with Israel, while Fatah (and hence the Palestinian Authority - PA) has chosen to cooperate with the Israelis, at least at the security level. Although the PA did not condemn the

attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, neither did it approve them. Meanwhile, talks regarding the political future of Gaza are ongoing; especially concerning whether Hamas should be part of any future government in control of Gaza. As during previous talks in the past decade, the gap between Hamas and Fatah seems to remain too big to bridge. In March 2024, PA President Abbas unilaterally appointed a new prime minister. In response to strong Hamas rejection of the move, the PA even accused Hamas of bringing Gaza under Israeli control again ([Asharq Al-Awsat, 16 March 2024](#)).

The distrust between Hamas and Fatah goes deep. After Islamist Hamas won a decisive majority in the parliamentary elections of 2006, a national unity government was formed including members of both 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 ([MDPI, 18 November 2021](#)). Over the years, there have been serious attempts at reconciliation with different mediators - even during the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict - but until now these attempts have been without success.

Long overdue parliamentary and presidential elections were planned for May and July 2021. However, President Abbas cancelled the elections after two rival Fatah competitors received considerable public support, diminishing his own chances of re-election. Abbas used Israeli unclarity on balloting in East-Jerusalem as an excuse for the cancellation ([BBC News, 29 April 2021](#)). After cancelling the elections, President Abbas lost all credibility among most Palestinians except for his core clientele. To make matters worse, Palestinian security officials beat activist and government critic Nizar Banat to death and violently dispersed the following protests ([BBC News, 3 July 2021](#)). Abbas' future as president currently seems to depend totally on Israeli support, as indicated by a daring (and desperate) personal visit to the home of Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz after years of deadlock in peace talks and sometimes open hostility ([Al-Monitor, 31 December 2021](#)).

In May 2021, Hamas attempted to take over moral leadership of the Palestinian cause by firing an, at that time, unprecedented number of rockets into Israel in response to Israeli forces storming the al-Aqsa mosque compound after protests erupted over the Israeli plan to evict Palestinians in East Jerusalem from their homes. For the first time ever, many Israeli Arabs joined the protests, leading to communal violence between Israeli Jews and Arabs ([The Guardian, 14 May 2021](#)). At least 240 Palestinians (most of them in Gaza) and 12 Israelis lost their lives during the flare-up ([Washington Institute, 25 May 2021](#)).

In July 2022, US President Biden visited the country. Although being from the Democrat party, he made no apparent attempt to reverse ex-President Trump's policy of focusing on Israel and its improved relationships with several Arab countries following the Abraham Accords ([NPR, 9 July 2022](#)). The Abraham Accords essentially mean that for the Arab state signatories a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an independent Palestinian state are no longer required before normalizing ties with Israel. Biden only had financial assistance to offer and to say that peace was still a long way off ([The Guardian, 15 July 2022](#)). Biden's stance was particularly difficult for Palestinian Christians because of the death of Palestinian Christian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed by an Israeli sniper ([NPR, 6 September 2022](#)). Abu Akleh was one of the most prominent Al-Jazeera journalists, having covered the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for more than two decades. Subsequently, her funeral

procession was confronted violently by Israeli police, who probably feared it would result in a pro-Palestine march inside Jerusalem. This police action provoked widespread international condemnation ([Foreign Policy, 25 May 2022](#)).

Abu Akleh was killed while covering Israeli raids in Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority has diminishing control, while the influence of other groups, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is growing. In August 2022, the PIJ decided to respond by launching rockets into Israel; 47 Palestinians, both civilians and PIJ fighters, were killed in the following Israeli air raids and by PIJ misfire. However, on this occasion Hamas decided not to participate in the fighting, probably fearing a repeat of the May 2021 escalation which took a heavy toll on Gaza ([Al-Monitor, 12 August 2022](#)).

Albeit by far the most significant in terms of impact, the attack on 7 October 2023 is the latest escalation in a long series of violent action by groups in Gaza and Israel. For instance, in May 2019, nearly 700 rockets [were launched](#), followed by Israeli reprisal attacks, resulting in the death of 4 Israelis and 23 Palestinians (Haaretz, 6 May 2019). During 2020, Hamas and other groups launched rockets from Gaza into Israel on several occasions, with the Israeli armed forces responding accordingly. Previously, in May 2018, the USA had ended all hope of being an impartial peace-broker for ending the conflict by moving its embassy to Jerusalem ([BBC News, 15 May 2018](#)). The move coincided with 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). The commemoration was used in Gaza to organize the "[Great Return March](#)", a weekly border protest that continued into 2019 and in which at least 250 protesters were killed by Israeli forces (BBC News, 30 March 2019).

In comparison to Gaza, the West Bank has stayed relatively calm due to better living conditions and to the security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. However, that calm is superficial. In addition to the regular killing of Palestinians by Israeli forces (e.g., as reported by [The Guardian, 28 May 2021](#), [Israel-Palestine Timeline](#), accessed 2 October 2024), many in the West Bank have also lost all hope of ever achieving a Palestinian State and a better future. Many no longer believe that the Israeli government actually wants peace and a two-state solution; a mistrust that has only increased following the rise to power of the most right-wing Israeli government in history, which includes two ultra-nationalist settler parties ([BBC News, 29 December 2022](#)). Their inclusion was followed by an increase in violent incidents against Christians in Jerusalem ([Le Monde, 4 February 2023](#)), in addition to a general rise in settler violence ([International Crisis Group, 6 September 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, the Christian community has been particularly affected by the current Israel-Hamas war because many earn their living from (religious) tourism, which has ceased completely. Previously, their livelihood had already been heavily affected by the measures introduced during the COVID-19 crisis. At that time, thousands of Christian families became dependent on aid from local churches and their situation has not improved. Since October 2023, several hundred Christian families have left the West Bank, in particular the Bethlehem area, while many others are looking for possibilities to leave as well. This endangers the vitality of the Christian communities in the West Bank.

Political and legal landscape

The Palestinian Authority (PA) was created in 1994 following the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Since the granting of “[non-member observer State status](#)” by the United Nations under UN Resolution 67/19 in November 2012, the PA has referred to itself as the "State of Palestine" in its official publications.

President Mahmoud Abbas is both the president of the PA, as well as the chairman of the PLO. The PLO is led by an Executive Committee and represents the Palestinian people internationally, including those in the diaspora. The PA officially governs the Palestinians inside the West Bank and Gaza, although de facto only those in the West Bank since the split between Hamas and Fatah in 2007. (Fatah is the dominant party in the PLO, while Hamas is currently not represented in the PLO at all.) The Palestinian National Council (PNC) functions as the legislative branch of the PLO, while the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) forms the legislative branch of the PA. The PLC has not been regularly convened since the 2007 split, with President Abbas increasingly ruling by presidential decree. Since 1996, the PNC only gathered in 2018 to elect a new Executive Committee; this was boycotted by Hamas and other factions since it seemed to them to be a move to boost support for the president while marginalizing his political rivals.

Following the Oslo Accords, the PA has full control of the so called "Area A" areas (comprising 18% of the West Bank) and only civil control in Area B (which comprises 22% of the West Bank). Israel exercises military control in Area B and has full control over Area C (comprising the other 60% of the West Bank). Currently, around 500,000 Israeli's live in settlements within Area C, which are considered illegal under international law ([B'tselem, updated 16 January 2019, Times of Israel, 12 February 2024](#)).

The Basic Law functions as an interim constitution for both the West Bank and Gaza. According to MEC's country report:

- "The Basic Law establishes Islam as the State religion and Islamic law as the main source of legislation. It upholds the principle of non-discrimination, including on religious grounds. Freedom of belief and the performance of religious rites is protected, except where such practices are contrary to public order or morality. Recognised non-Muslim communities are given freedom to govern most personal status issues according to their own rites through a religious tribunal system. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion, and women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims. In 2014 the Palestinian Authority began omitting religious affiliation on newly issued identification documents, a move which has reduced some of the societal discrimination faced by Christians, in particular those from Muslim backgrounds."

The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2023 Palestine](#)) classifies the PA as authoritarian in its 2023 Democracy Index. As it is almost impossible in many areas to assess the situation in the West Bank and in Israel separately (due to the ongoing influence of the Israeli State in all aspects of life in the Palestinian Territories), the Fragile State Index considers them together ([FSI 2024 Palestine](#)). As a result, the political indicators show that 'state legitimacy' and 'human rights' are under pressure but slightly improving. However, the 'Group grievance' indicator scores maximum for four years in a row, indicating the severe tensions within society. In line with that, Amnesty International has officially

accused Israel of committing "the crime of apartheid" in the Palestinian Territories ([Amnesty International, 1 February 2022](#)).

Both the PA and Hamas governments have been accused of being repressive. Amnesty International ([AI country report 2023/2024](#)) writes:

- "During the year [2023], Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip repressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Torture and other ill-treatment were reported in Palestinian detention centres. Members of Palestinian armed groups summarily killed several suspected "collaborators". In Gaza, death sentences were passed and executions were carried out."

Gender perspective

The PA unilaterally ratified the CEDAW in 2009, and unlike many national governments, entered no reservations. Despite this, laws in the Palestinian Territories remain discriminatory towards women and girls. Under Sharia law – applicable in the West Bank and Gaza Strip – women require the consent of a male guardian to enter marriage, and whereas a man has the right to unilaterally divorce his wife, a woman must file for a faults-based divorce through the courts. The repeal of discriminatory laws in 2018, such as the 'marry-your-rapist' clause (whereby rapists were not convicted on the condition they married the victim) have been welcomed as a positive step ([HRW, 10 May 2018](#)). Activists continue to fight for legislation to be tightened however, particularly in respect to domestic violence and sexual harassment ([Borgen Project, Women's Rights in Palestine, 22 October 2020](#)). There is still no comprehensive domestic violence law to prevent abuse and protect survivors ([HRW 2024 Israel and Palestine country chapter](#)).

Religious landscape

Palestinian Territories: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	42,600	0.8
Muslim	4,431,000	80.6
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	726,000	13.2
Bahai	2,800	0.1

(table continues on next page)

Atheist	5,000	0.1
Agnostic	287,000	5.2
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The vast majority of Palestinians are adherents of Sunni Islam, with Christians only accounting for 0.8% of the population.

According to [World Atlas, accessed 19 July 2024](#):

- "Palestinian Muslims consider Jerusalem as an important part of their religion, with the al-Aqsa mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem being regarded as the 3rd holiest site in the Muslim world. According to Islam, it is believed that Mohammed was taken from the sacred mosque in Mecca to the mosque of al-Aqsa in a night journey. Accessing the site poses challenges to Palestinians because it involves several formalities, with casual visits being prohibited. ... In the recent past, radicalization has taken root with the interpretation of religion replacing the more tolerant and informal understating of society and religion."

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC country report Palestine](#)):

- "Some of the challenges facing Christians in Palestine vary by area according to the governing authorities. In recent years, Christian communities in the West Bank have generally enjoyed good standing in society and a significantly greater degree of religious freedom than Christian communities in the Gaza Strip which has been governed by the more Islamist Hamas party. There is guaranteed representation of Christians in the Legislative Council (though the Council has not met since 2007), and the mayors of Bethlehem and Ramallah must by decree be Christians. Some restrictions apply to recognised Christian communities, especially to activities that could be construed as proselytism There is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam, and in extreme cases they can face violent responses from family members. Various pressures arising from the political situation with Israel, lack of employment opportunities and mounting insecurities following the October 7 attack are encouraging Palestinian youth to consider emigrating. The impact of emigration on the future of the Christian community in Palestine is a cause for concern."

The overall majority of Palestinian Christians live in the West Bank, with most Christians residing in the wider Bethlehem area. Smaller Christian communities can be found in the Ramallah area, while only a few Christian families live in the areas around Nablus (in the north) and Hebron (in the south). In November 2019, the Council of Local Evangelical churches gained official recognition from the Palestinian Authority. In general, the historical Christian communities are respected in the West Bank and to a lesser degree in Gaza. They enjoy freedom of religion, but are not allowed to proselytize. On the other hand, converts from Islam to Christianity face severe discrimination, both legally and socially. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is not officially possible and marriages between female converts

and Christian men are not recognized. Children born in such marriages are considered to be born out of wedlock.

Even before the Israel-Hamas war, Christians in Gaza numbered less than one thousand (from more than 5,000 before the 2007 Hamas takeover). There are three churches in Gaza, belonging to different denominations: Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Baptist, which have all been damaged during the war. Both the Greek-Orthodox and Roman Catholic church compounds currently function as places of refuge for Gazan Christians, as many have lost their homes due to Israeli bombardments. However, even at the church compounds they have not been safe: On 20 October 2023, at least sixteen Christians were killed after a church compound wall collapsed following an Israeli bombing ([Catholic Herald, 20 October 2023](#)). In another incident, a mother and daughter were shot and killed by an Israeli sniper inside a church compound ([Times of Israel, 17 December 2023](#)). Several other Christians have died or have been wounded in other incidents, while the lack of food and medicine continues to have a devastating effect on the tiny Christian community.

All churches in both the West Bank and Gaza run private schools and provide medical facilities to all Palestinians, regardless of faith, although community support has become extremely difficult in Gaza due to the fighting. A significant number of social welfare institutions have also been established by Christians, making the influence of the Palestinian Christian community much larger than their number would suggest. Over time the total number of Christians has been decreasing in both Gaza and the West Bank due to emigration and low birth rates. It is feared that the Gazan Christian community will not survive the Israel-Hamas war, as many Gazan Christians see no future for them in Gaza.

Economic landscape

Although the West Bank and Gaza are both part of the Palestinian Territories, their differences are considerable, especially since 2007, the year when two separate governments came into being. There are for example differences at the 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. Due to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, even before the Israel-Hamas war, 80% of the population was dependent on external aid while the unemployment rate (45%) was one of the highest in the world ([The Guardian, 25 October 2023](#)). In contrast, because Israel allowed vetted West Bank Palestinians to work in Israel and the Israeli settlements as a cheap source of labor, economic circumstances were much better, although Israeli restrictions still caused much economic loss ([UNCTAD, 22 December 2021](#)). After 7 October 2023, Israel withdrew over 100,000 work permits, causing severe economic loss inside the West Bank, with many West Bank Palestinians now facing economic hardship ([AP News, 12 February 2024](#)).

According to the [World Factbook West Bank](#) and [World Bank West Bank and Gaza data](#) (accessed 30 September 2024):

- The World Bank puts the Palestinian economy in the lower middle income category
- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$5,700 (2022 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 24.4%, with youth unemployment being significantly higher at 39.6% (2021 est.)
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** "the poverty rate is estimated to have declined to 27.3% in 2021. Current poverty rates represent a poor population of approximately 1.5 million people." (Note: Pre-October 2023 data).

As reported by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA):

- Even before the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, "1.3 million out of 2.1 million Palestinians in Gaza (62%) required food assistance", while "rolling power cuts averaged 11 hours per day." The unemployment rate increased to 46.6% in Gaza, with youth unemployment being 62.5%. ([Reliefweb, 29 June 2022](#)). Meanwhile, almost all services have been disrupted, resulting in drink water scarcity, widespread food insecurity as well dangerous sanitation conditions due to sewage spillage ([OCHA update, 19 July 2024](#)).
- In contrast, around 75.000 Palestinians (out of 2.6 million Palestinians) in the West Bank receive food assistance, while the unemployment rate is around 13% ([Reliefweb, 19 January 2022](#), [IMF, 2 May 2022](#)). Unemployment in the West Bank is highest in the Bethlehem area (around 30%), where 44% of all Palestinian Christians are living.

According to [World Bank's February 2024 Economic Update](#):

- **General situation:** "Since the start of the conflict, the Palestinian economy experienced one of largest shocks recorded in recent economic history. In Gaza, GDP plummeted by more than 80 percent in Q4-2023—from approximately US\$670m in Q3 to roughly US\$90m in Q4.
- **Poverty in Gaza:** "The combination of preexisting high levels of poverty, widespread internal displacement, the destruction of homes, fixed assets, and productive capacity, coupled with a massive economic downturn, realistically means that nearly every resident of Gaza will live in poverty, at least in the short term."
- **Economic losses:** "The private sector in the West Bank and Gaza is estimated to have suffered losses of around US\$1.5 billion in production during the first two months of the conflict, equivalent to US\$ 25 million in losses per day."
- **Economic outlook:** "[T]he outlook hinges largely on the conflict's intensity and the level of restrictions. The economic contraction could be a lot more pronounced if the current level of conflict extends beyond early 2024, if Israel further tightens restrictions on the movement and access of Palestinians in the West Bank, and if clearance revenues continue to be largely absent. This in turn, may prompt the PA to resort to extreme—and potentially disorderly—fiscal consolidation measures, including further reductions in employee salaries, thus intensifying the decline in public consumption and household incomes. The timing, extent and pace of reconstruction remain highly uncertain, both hinging on a cessation of the hostilities and the materialization of significantly larger external aid flows."

The COVID-19 crisis

Measures introduced to restrict the spread of COVID-19 worsened the existing economic difficulties significantly. Several lockdowns within the Palestinian Territories harmed the local economy, but more importantly lockdowns in Israel halted the employment of thousands of Palestinians in Israel, which is one of the pillars of the Palestinian economy ([Times of Israel, 9 December 2020](#)). The tourist industry totally collapsed, affecting many Christians dependent on tourism for their livelihood, especially in the Bethlehem area where most Christians live. Reportedly, 9 out of 10 employees within the tourism sector are Christian. Hence, increased poverty among Palestinian Christians was reported ([Christianity Today, 13 March 2020](#)). Tourism never fully recovered after the easing of restrictions and has come to

a complete stop after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. As a result, among other causes, many Palestinian Christian families have left the West Bank since October 2023.

Gender perspective

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged compared to men, primarily due to social and cultural expectations which assign women to the domestic sphere. The labor force participation rate sits significantly below the global average, with just 17.7% of women in work compared to 69.5% of men ([UNDP Human Development Report Palestine](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). Making it additionally challenging to gain economic independence, women typically receive half the inheritance share of men under Sharia law and marital property is under the control of men. Wives owe full *ta'a* (obedience) to their husbands in exchange for *nafaqa* (financial support). This support can be lost if they disobey their husbands.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook West Bank](#) (accessed 30 September 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The main ethnicities are Arab and Jewish.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with Hebrew being spoken by Israeli settlers as well as many Palestinians. English is widely understood as well.
- **Population:** The West Bank has 3.2 million inhabitants and Gaza 2.1 million (2024 est.) Around 470.000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank, while another 235.000 live in East-Jerusalem.
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 77.6% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 2.85%.
- **Literacy rate:** 97.5% of the population can read and write; with a small difference between men (98.8%) and women (96.2%) (2020).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 56% of the population of the West Bank and 64% of Gaza, making it a country with a very young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** In the West Bank, 76.5 years on average; women (78.8 years), men (74.4 years) (2024 est.). In Gaza, 75.5 years on average; women (77.4 years), men (73.7 years) (2024 est.). There is a small difference between the West Bank and Gaza, with life expectancy being slightly lower in Gaza.
- **Education:** Palestinian citizens enjoy 13 years of schooling on average, with women enjoying 14 years of schooling on average and men 12 years (2020).
- **Refugees / IDPs:** There are 1,460,315 Palestinian refugees in Gaza and 858,758 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank (2020 est.). According to [UNRWA](#): (accessed 22 July 2024): "Palestine refugees are defined as 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.'" In the course of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, at least 75% of Gazan population have become internally displaced persons.

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Palestine](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Palestine ranks #111 out 193 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.716.

However, on account of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, a major setback is to be expected, with Gaza losing an estimated 20 years of progress, while the West Bank is forecast to lose 13-16 years in progress ([UNDP, April 2024](#)).

- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.880, women are significantly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Palestinian culture is conservative and tribal, however Palestinians are on average highly educated. Especially urban centers like Ramallah and Bethlehem have a strong youth culture.

Fragile State Index social indicators ([FSI 2024 Palestine](#)) show that group grievance is at the highest possible score, indicating that social tensions are constantly high and can easily lead to unrest.

There are more Palestinians living in exile than in the Palestinian Territories. Large numbers are also still living in semi-permanent refugee camps set up in the wake of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. Roughly 2.5 million Palestinian refugees can be found in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. While Jordan provided most of the two million refugees with Jordanian citizenship, Palestinians in Syria have suffered greatly because of the civil war, while refugees in Lebanon have limited rights, including no official right to work. The West Bank officially hosts 775,000 refugees, with several large camps present in major cities ([Amnesty International, accessed 26 March 2024](#); [Minority Rights, accessed 26 March 2024](#)). In Gaza, more than 1.7 million Palestinians have been displaced due to the current conflict, with most of them having a refugee background. Hence, their displacement has been called a "new Nakba" ([Reuters, 9 November 2023](#)).

Exact numbers, definitions of a refugee and the reasons for their situation are strongly disputed; both Israeli and Arab political and military leaders are blamed for the situation. Socio-economic conditions 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. Except for Jordan, 'Guest countries' are not prepared to assimilate them, while Israel claims their return would constitute a demographic danger to the Jewish state.

Even before the current war, the situation in Gaza was generally perceived as being hopeless. Gaza remains a fertile recruiting ground for violent militant groups and radicalization of the youth is a real threat. Islamic groups in Gaza implemented Islamizing measures from time to time. A "virtue campaign" was launched in January 2013 to control women's clothing. At one point, the hijab was made mandatory in high schools and males were banned from working as hairdressers for females, but these measures were reversed after local resistance, international opposition and the influence of human rights activists bore fruit. Similar attempts at Islamization [were reported again in October 2018](#) (Al-Monitor, 31 October 2018). In recent years, it has also been reported that Salafists make a point of removing any Christmas items from shops in Gaza.

Over the years, Christians have played a unique and major role in preserving and maintaining different aspects of Palestinian culture. This has been done, for instance, through the opening of a number of cultural centers like the Edward Said Musical Institute and the Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts & Culture, which focuses on preserving Palestinian embroidery, traditional folk dance (*dabke*) and certain handicrafts like the mother-of-pearl carving technique. In addition, several academic

institutions, such as Bethlehem University and Bethlehem Bible College, have been established to look after the educational needs of both Palestinian Christians and Muslims.

Gender perspective

Palestinian culture is also marked by patriarchal norms, with men assuming the position of head of the household. Gender-based violence is an ongoing issue of concern ([Amnesty International country report 2023/2024](#)) and reports indicate that domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 crisis ([UNFPA, June 2020](#)). There is broad societal acceptance for violence in the home, which is a threat to female converts from Islam if their faith is discovered, given the shame that their conversion will bring upon the family.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Palestine](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 88.6% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 40.5% of the total population. As of January 2024, 45.8% of social media users were female, and 54.2% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 82.2% of the total population

[According to the Digital Development Dashboard \(accessed 22 July 2024\)](#) Internet access, via both landlines and mobile networks (3G), is fully available in the West Bank. Availability was less in Gaza, due to a lower level of technological development, Israeli restrictions on both 3G and 4G broadband as well as the problem of electricity short-falls on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the Internet helped create economic opportunities and several hundred ICT start-ups were working from Gaza and the West Bank ([The Guardian, 5 July 2018](#), [Al-Monitor, 10 February 2022](#)). It is assumed that most technological advancement has been lost due to the current war.

The use of social media is restricted as both the authorities in the West Bank and Gaza and the Israeli government monitor Internet usage and have arrested social media users critical of their policies. 7amleh, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media [reported](#) in January 2024 that many have been arrested on charges of "incitement" on social media; a policy that severely increased following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. In addition, the report mentions that several social media platforms, especially Meta, have taken actions that could be construed as stifling the freedom of speech for Palestinians. After October 2023, Israel adopted a zero-tolerance policy arresting thousands of Palestinians, both in Israel and the West Bank, who allegedly supported Hamas ([Times of Israel, 22 February 2024](#)).

Earlier on, 7amleh also reported on the continued online repression by Palestinian authorities, including "that the Palestinian security services, especially the Preventive Security Service, waged a campaign of espionage and hacking into the accounts of about 800 political opponents, journalists, and activists. Furthermore, the security services used about 300 fake accounts on Facebook and primitive hacking methods for this purpose." ([7amleh, January 2022](#)).

In addition, Reporters without Borders ranks Palestine #157 in its [World Press Freedom Index 2024](#). RSF states:

- "With arrests, violence, destruction of equipment, legal proceedings and denial of accreditation, practicing journalism was already difficult before 7 October 2023. But with more than 100 reporters killed by the IDF in Gaza in the first six months of war, including at least 22 in the line of duty, during the first six months of war, and dozens more detained in Israeli prisons, Palestine has become the most dangerous country in the world for journalists in 2024. Trapped in the enclave, journalists in Gaza have no shelter and lack everything, including food and water. In the West Bank, journalists are routinely harassed and attacked by both settlers and Israeli forces, but repression reached new heights with a wave of arrests after 7 October. Impunity for crimes committed against journalists is the rule."
- "The Gaza Strip has always been a particularly dangerous territory for press freedom. Journalists suspected of collaborating with Israel are hampered in their work by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, while also enduring the violence of the Israeli blockade on the territory. Since 7 October 2023, the blockade has intensified, as has the violence, and the journalists who had resisted pressure from Hamas in Gaza were then confronted with Israeli propaganda accusing them of working for Hamas. Journalists are often the target of smear campaigns and threats, and several Israeli politicians have called for Gaza's journalists to be punished."
- "Religion, and especially certain conservative religious movements, weigh heavily on journalism. The work of women journalists, who are the victims of gender discrimination, may be obstructed."

Palestinians belonging to the historical Christian communities are relatively free to express their Christian faith in posts online, as long as they do not openly criticize Islam. However, although some converts from Islam to Christianity do post Christian content online in the West Bank, it can lead to arrest and detention. For converts in the Gaza Strip, this would be incredibly dangerous.

Security situation

Gaza

The current situation in Gaza is highly volatile, without clear indications how the current Israel-Hamas war is going to end. The Israeli government has vowed to destroy Hamas, but has not specified how it is going to do so. Meanwhile, analysts agree that this goal is probably unattainable due to Hamas' widespread network in Gaza, both politically and socially. Although most Gazans are dissatisfied with Hamas' governance and corruption, they view the armed struggle as the only remaining option after the Oslo Accords failed them. At the same time, their distrust of the PA and Fatah, and the lack of a viable third party, hardly leaves them any other option. Hence, although Israel will be able to cripple Hamas' military capabilities, it is most likely that it will not be able to eliminate Hamas entirely ([Security in Context, 7 January 2024](#)).

At the time of writing (September 2024), despite the destruction and territorial loss of most of the Gaza strip, Hamas is still able to conduct attacks ([Times of Israel, 20 July 2024](#)). It is also unlikely that the Israeli military will be able to completely overwhelm Hamas and other groups active in Gaza. Nonetheless, the Israeli capture of the border region between Gaza and Egypt, including the destruction of most cross-border tunnels, will probably hinder Hamas to reorganize; with the Israeli

refusal to withdraw from the corridor reportedly being one of the major obstacles for reaching a cease fire deal ([Washington Institute, 12 September 2024](#), [The Guardian, 3 September 2024](#)). Secondly, the decline in the number of attacks in mid-2024 suggests that Hamas has been significantly weakened ([ISW, 19 September 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, finding a political solution seems complex. First, because of the internal division between Hamas and Fatah - see also Recent history above. Secondly, PA President Abbas is hugely unpopular, but organizing elections would most probably result in a win for Hamas or another leader or party not willing to accept the current status quo. Such an outcome would be unacceptable for Israel. Another solution might be to revitalize the PLO and to seek the involvement of the Palestinian diaspora; but this would be a highly complicated matter too ([Carnegie Endowment, 9 February 2024](#)). Meanwhile, current Israeli politics are shaped by (ultra) right wing parties which rather believe in arming civilians and establishing paramilitary protection units than in seeking a political solution with the Palestinians ([Carnegie Endowment, 1 February 2024](#)). On top of that, there are a host of international actors who all want their say in any outcome. Iran and the forces allied to it, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, are interested in breaking the US-Israel hegemony in the region, although it does not seem to be willing to pay a high price to reach such a goal. The Arab countries, including Saudi-Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, want regional calm and even increased ties with Israel, but not without a durable solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further, although the US government is putting pressure on Israel to come up with a solution, President Biden is unlikely to risk any damage to relations with long-term ally Israel due to the US presidential elections approaching in November 2024 ([Carnegie Endowment, 26 February 2024](#)).

In conclusion: It currently seems that the war will continue for at least some further months. Although different scenarios could play out, it is likely that the Gazan population will continue to suffer for the foreseeable future; even if the Israelis withdraw, it will take years to rebuild Gaza.

Radical groups

During the past years Islamic militant groups more radical than Hamas have been active in Gaza. These militants have even targeted Hamas officials [with alleged suicide attacks](#) (BBC News, 28 August 2019). Islamic militants are also present in the West Bank, with a growing presence in cities like Nablus and Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority wields less influence. Radical Islamic groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad appeal especially to the youth, and also to those from a Hamas or even Fatah background. Despite the fact that these groups do not have significant power, their influence cannot be dismissed: They are capable of provoking escalation through attacks on Israeli targets. Israel's heavy-handed invasion of Gaza is all but likely to increase support for these kinds of groups.

In the West Bank, the security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government proved successful in the past, with no major bomb attacks against Israel taking place. However, a Palestinian gunman did kill seven people outside a synagogue in Jerusalem at the end of January 2023, which was the deadliest attack in more than a decade. The attack followed a deadly raid in the West Bank by the Israeli army in Jenin in that same time period, killing nine Palestinians ([NPR, 28 January 2023](#)); eleven Palestinians were later killed during a raid in Nablus. The raids on Nablus and Jenin were part of Israel's Operation Breakwater, which was launched following a number of Palestinian attacks in 2022 ([The Guardian, 22 February 2023](#)). Further raids (including the largest since

the Second Intifada in 2000 - 2005) in Jenin and other Palestinian cities took place during 2024, killing dozens of Palestinians ([Al-Jazeera, 3 September 2024](#)). In October 2024, another deadly attack killed 7 people in the mixed Arab-Israeli town of Jaffa ([The Guardian, 2 October 2024](#)).

The Israel-Hamas war has also led to a strong increase in settler violence, with Israeli settlers in the West Bank feeling entitled and less scrutinized to act against the Palestinians ([The New Yorker, 26 February 2024](#)). The Israeli armed forces, who usually protect the settlers, do not seem able or willing to stop the violence from happening. They continue to use live ammunition against protesters in the West Bank, regularly resulting in the death of (mostly) teenage boys. In addition to the total lack of any political progress towards finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, the already existing atmosphere of hopelessness might now darken further, especially in the light of Israel's military activities in neighboring Lebanon in September and ground offensive in October 2024.

Palestinian Christians have not been the target of serious attacks by radical Islamic groups since the murder of Rami Ayyad in Gaza in 2007. However, the presence of groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir and Palestinian Islamic Jihad look ominous for the future.

Christian origins

Since the very beginnings of the Christian Church in the 1st century AD there have always been Christians living in the region, from a wide variety of denominations and nationalities. In the 7th century, 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-traditional Evangelical churches have also 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.

Church spectrum today

Palestinian Territories: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	16,300	38.3
Catholic	14,900	35.0
Protestant	6,700	15.7
Independent	4,300	10.1
Unaffiliated	460	1.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	42,660	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	4,800	11.3
Pentecostal-Charismatic	8,700	20.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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:** Christians 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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Greek Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church are the main denominations within the West Bank and Gaza, followed by the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church. There are also Lutheran and Anglican churches present, as well as several (independent) evangelical churches. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are the main centers of Palestinian Christianity, while Ramallah also hosts a number of churches and religious institutions. There are also active churches in other areas, but the number of Christians in these areas is low. A specific example of a religious educational institution serving wider Middle East Protestants is Bethlehem Bible College, which in international Protestant circles is known (among other things) for its biennial "[Christ at the Checkpoint](#)" conferences.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Palestinian Territories>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Map of country: 101 Visualizing Palestine - <https://101.visualizingpalestine.org/resources/glossary/areas-a-b-c>
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