



## Briefing: Travel Permits for Christians in Gaza

### Overview

Approximately 1,300<sup>1</sup> Christians currently live in Gaza, many regularly seeking to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem for the religious holidays. Currently, Christians wishing to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem during Easter or Christmas must apply for a travel permit from the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the Defense Ministry body responsible for issuing permits to Palestinian Christians in Gaza. The process involves first applying for a magnetised card, costing \$45, then submitting an application to the Israeli military at least two weeks in advance for security clearance.

Travel permits are notoriously difficult to obtain, especially for Christians in Gaza where the number of approved permits is always very few. Restrictions on travel permits have been steadily increasing in recent years. In 2017, 700 permits were awarded for both Easter and Christmas combined, without an age limitation.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, 500 travel permits were approved,<sup>3</sup> and the requirement applicants be 55 years old or over was temporarily implemented,<sup>4</sup> stifling the ability of young families, including children, to attend holiday services that year. In 2019, permits were reduced to just 200.<sup>5</sup> In 2022, almost a third of applications were denied for unclear “security reasons”,<sup>6</sup> and this year, 739 permits granted to Palestinian Christians in Gaza for Easter were suddenly revoked, with no reason given for the cancellation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>United States Department of State. Office of International Religious Freedom, ‘West Bank and Gaza 2022 International Religious Freedom Report’, (2023) pg. 6. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-WEST-BANK-AND-GAZA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

<sup>2</sup>Henriette Chacar, ‘Israel bars hundreds of Palestinian Christians from travelling on Easter’, *+972 Magazine* (2019). Available at: <https://www.972mag.com/easter-gaza-permits-blockade/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ap *et al.* ‘Gaza Christians dismayed as Israel restricts entries over Easter’, *The Times of Israel*. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-christians-dismayed-as-israel-restricts-entries-over-easter/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

<sup>5</sup>Adam Ragson, ‘Official: Israel to grant Gaza Christians permits to visit Jerusalem for Easter’, *The Times of Israel* (2019). Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/official-israel-to-grant-gaza-christians-permits-to-visit-jerusalem-for-easter/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

<sup>6</sup>Adam Khalil, ‘Israel denies Gaza Christians permits to celebrate Christmas with families’ *Middle East Eye* (2022). Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-gaza-christians-christmas-celebration-permits-denied> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

<sup>7</sup>Holly Johnston, ‘Israel cancels permits for Gaza Christians ahead of Orthodox Easter’, *The National* (2023). Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/04/11/israel-cancels-permits-for-gaza-christians-ahead-of-orthodox-easter/> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).



In the past, Israeli authorities have quoted “safety concerns” as the reason for restrictions on the number of applications granted.<sup>8</sup> According to Archbishop Munib Younan, a former leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, another reason given by Israeli authorities is that the churches cannot hold thousands of people despite centuries of precedent in safely conducting these services.<sup>9</sup> However, according to Gisha, an Israeli rights group that focuses on freedom of movement in and out of Gaza, restrictions form part of a wider effort to implement Israel’s “separation policy” which seeks to widen the gap between Gaza and the West Bank.<sup>10</sup>

## **Barriers**

### *Restrictions - Age, Marital Status & Relatives*

The criteria to be granted the travel permit is still unclear, with the vast majority of rejected applicants not told why the permit was not approved. According to Kamel Ayad, director of public relations at the Greek Orthodox Church in Gaza, “*In most cases the issuance of permits is random*”.

However, reports from regular applicants in Gaza state that those unlikely to be granted a permit include: single men; Palestinians in Gaza with family members who had “overstayed” their travel authorization; or applicants with any family members on Israel’s security list.<sup>11</sup>

### *Delays in Permit Approvals*

Another barrier to Christians in Gaza visiting Jerusalem or Bethlehem for religious holidays is the last-minute nature of permits approvals. Every year hundreds of applicants are left in the dark about the status of their permit application, often finding out just days before the celebrations, often after international pressure. In addition to making it difficult to make arrangements ahead of time, this also leaves rejected applicants with no means of challenging the decision.

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<sup>8</sup> MEE et. al, ‘Israeli police block pilgrims from accessing holy sepulchre church on easter’ *Middle East Eye* (2023). Available at:

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-police-block-pilgrims-holy-sepulchre-church-easter> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Aniket Dixit, ‘Christians in Palestine desperately wish for a tranquil and happy Easter’, *News Track* (2023). Available at:

<https://english.newstracklive.com/news/christians-in-palestine-desperately-wish-for-a-tranquil-and-happy-easter-sc57-nu355-ta355-1272909-1.html> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Reuters, ‘Israel bars Gaza’s Christians from visiting Bethlehem and Jerusalem at Christmas’ *Reuters* (2019).

Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-palestinians-gaza-christmas-idINKBN1YG2E7> (Accessed: 21 July 2023).

<sup>11</sup> WCC, ‘I could hardly believe I was in Jerusalem’ *World Council of Churches* (2023). Available at:

<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/i-could-hardly-believe-i-was-in-jerusalem> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).



### *Split Family*

The permit system often causes family separation. At holidays, some members of the same family are given permission to travel while others are not. It is reported by the Guardian that frequently children will be granted permission, while their parents will be denied, or the other way around.<sup>12</sup> In many cases, this means family members who were awarded a permit, but whose family members were refused, either choose not to travel altogether, stating that the spirit of the religious holidays is for all family members to gather in one place. For instances where young children are involved, such separation bars families from travelling all together.

### **Response**

Each year, Churches in Jerusalem strongly advocate for Christians to receive permits so they can worship, as a family, with their Christian brothers and sisters in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The Churches call on the authorities to allow families to travel together and to provide clear and timely reasoning for the applications rejected.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Macintyre, 'Gaza Christians wait for permits to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem at Easter' *The Guardian* (2019). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/20/gaza-christians-wait-easter-travel-permits-jerusalem> (Accessed: 24 July 2023).



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