

## Jerusalem row rekindles tensions over Christian holy sites

The Arab Weekly staff

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The dispute between Palestinian and Israeli officials over the future status of Jerusalem rekindled tensions between the Jewish state and the city's Christian community.

Officials of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a site that many consider among the holiest in Christianity, made the rare decision to shut the church's door to tourists and pilgrims for three days to protest an Israeli effort to tax church properties. The church was reopened after Israel suspended the decision.

The church is in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians see as the capital of their future state. Israelis view the entire city as their undivided capital. The church is built where Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected. Custody of it is shared by the Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Roman Catholic denominations.

An Israeli committee led by cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi is expected to negotiate with church representatives to resolve the tax dispute.

"After the constructive intervention of the prime minister, the churches look forward to engage with Minister Hanegbi and with all those who love Jerusalem to ensure that our holy city, where our Christian presence continues to face challenges, remains a place where the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) may live and thrive together," church leaders said in a statement.

Israel suspended legislation in parliament that would allow authorities to expropriate land in Jerusalem that churches sold to private real estate firms. Churches are major landowners in Jerusalem and church officials say such a law would make it harder for them to find buyers for their land, sales that help to cover operating costs.

The Israeli moves were viewed by Christians in Jerusalem, who are overwhelmingly Palestinian, as politically motivated.

In a speech to foreign ambassadors in Ramallah, Palestine Liberation Organisation Secretary-General Saeb Erekat accused the United States of ignoring Israel's actions against Christian institutions.

Referring to US Vice-President Mike Pence's January visit to the re-



**Cross to bear.** A man carries wooden crosses near the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, on February 28.

(Reuters)

gion, Erekat said it was "ironic" that "he said he was here to consolidate and strengthen Christian presence in the Middle East."

In September, the leading churches in Jerusalem issued a rare joint statement condemning what they called "systematic" Israeli attempts to "weaken the Christian presence" in the city.

The churches condemned an Israeli court decision allowing a pro-settlement group to take control of church land in a mainly Palestinian area in Jerusalem, as well as a bill in the Israeli parliament relating to church land.

"We see in these actions a systematic attempt to undermine the integrity of the Holy City of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and to weaken the Christian presence," the statement said.

The Greek Orthodox church called the Israeli ruling "politically motivated."

The September statement said the two measures – the court ruling and the bill – threatened a decades-old agreement between religions about the governing of sites in Jerusalem.

"We cannot stress strongly enough the very serious situation that this recent systematic assault on the status quo has had on the integrity of Jerusalem and on the well-being of the Christian communities of the Holy Land," it said.

Separately, Israel barred Palestinian Education Minister Sabri Saidam from visiting a school in the Old City of Jerusalem.

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"The minister entered Jerusalem but was prevented from entering the school. Israeli security banned him at the door of the school," ministry spokesman Sadiq al-Khadour told Agence France-Presse, saying it was the third such incident.

"This ban comes in the context of escalation against Palestinian education in Jerusalem."

Palestinian official media said Tourism Minister Rula Maaya had been scheduled to visit the private school with Saidam.

Israeli Interior Minister Gilad Erdan confirmed the ban, saying it was his right "to prohibit any official political activity of the Palestinian Authority in the territories under the sovereignty of the state of Israel."

"The struggle for our sovereignty in Jerusalem is not over. The Palestinian Authority and other elements are trying to weaken it," he added. Israel seized control of predomi-

nantly Palestinian East Jerusalem in the 1967 Middle East war, in a move never recognised by the international community.

Many schools in East Jerusalem refuse to adopt the Israeli curriculum and consider themselves Palestinian.

Israel controls access to and from Jerusalem and can prevent Palestinian ministers from entering the city.

Tensions escalated between Palestinians and Israelis following an announcement by the Trump administration in December to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

In a move that is likely to further sour Palestinian-American relations, the United States recently said it would open its embassy to Israel in Jerusalem in May to coincide with Israel's 70th anniversary.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

## Viewpoint



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## Israel's PR disaster in dealing with the Tamimi teens

There is something spectacularly surreal about the way Israeli authorities are dealing with the Palestinian Tamimi family in the occupied West Bank village of Nabi Saleh. Morality issues aside, it has become a never-ending public relations disaster for Israel.

Israel arrested Ahed Tamimi, then 16, on December 19 for slapping and kicking armed Israeli soldiers in the driveway of her home, while calling on them to leave four days earlier.

The Israeli soldiers, seeing that the angry young girl did not pose a threat to them, ignored her. That was a wise move.

However, video of the incident, taken and shared on social media by Ahed's family, sparked anger among members of Israel's right-wing, leading for calls on the government to punish Ahed like a terrorist for humiliating the military.

With apparent political, not security, motivations in mind, Israel arrested Ahed on several charges, including one that dates to 2016, and denied her bail. If found guilty by the military court trying

her, she could face 14 years in jail. Ahed's detention brought Israel unwanted international attention and criticism from human rights groups. It renewed focus on how Palestinian minors were often mistreated by the Israeli authorities.

"Yet again, the Israeli authorities have responded to acts of defiance by a Palestinian child with measures that are entirely disproportionate to the incident in question," Magdalena Mughrabi, Amnesty International's Middle East and Africa deputy director, said in a statement.

To quell further international interest, the judge handling Ahed's case ordered the courtroom emptied, ruling the hearing would no longer be open to the public. His decision came after journalists, European diplomats and NGO representatives had packed the courtroom. Kicking them out could only cause further damage to Israel's reputation.

Ahed's arrest brought international media attention to another, more disturbing incident. In addition to the daily humiliation of living under occupation, Ahed said she was particularly enraged on the day of the alleged assault

after learning that her 15-year-old cousin, Mohammed Tamimi, had been shot in the head with a rubber-coated Israeli bullet. Part of the boy's skull had to be removed.

Israeli authorities did not stop there. The Israeli military raided the home of Mohammed at 3 o'clock one morning and took the disfigured child for interrogation.

"The mystery as to why Israel would inflict such an obvious blow to its own image, by arresting a boy with severe head trauma, was resolved... in a Facebook post from Major-General Yoav Mordechai, the senior Israeli official who oversees the military rule of Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank," wrote Robert Mackey on the Intercept website.

"Mordechai revealed that during Mohammed's interrogation by the military... without the presence of a parent or lawyer, the boy had 'confessed' that 'he was injured while he was riding his bicycle and fell off it'."

Mohammed, who is to undergo more surgery soon, was released but his confession, predictably, brought about more public outrage. He said that he lied in his confession statement out of fear

he would be jailed.

"When the detainees are minors, their jailers have a greater ability – with the help of a few slaps, painful positions during questioning and psychological pressure – to extract false incriminations," Israeli columnist Amira Hass wrote in Haaretz. "It is easy to manipulate and break them."

Indeed, when the soldiers who shot away a part of your skull have you alone under their grip and ask you about your injury, it is highly unlikely that you – a 15-year-old – are going to look them in the eye and say: "Actually, it was you."

Mohammed's family, as well as Israeli rights activists, produced medical records to show that his injury was caused by a bullet, as initially reported and backed by witnesses, and hadn't been challenged by the Israeli authorities until then.

Mordechai's statement, which was welcomed by many right-wing Israelis, literally added insult to injury for the Palestinians.

Internationally, it doesn't look good for Israeli authorities to use the "fell off the bike" story. After so many years of exploitation and abuse, such excuses ring hollow.

**There is something spectacularly surreal about the way Israeli authorities are dealing with the Palestinian Tamimi family.**