

Table of Contents

- ***An airstrike damaging a Greek Orthodox church in Gaza: Investigation***
 - ***Netanyahu assures no law against Christians after missionary bill outrage***
 - ***Christians will face jail in Israel for proselytising under proposed bill***
-

An airstrike damaging a Greek Orthodox church in Gaza: Investigation

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights without Frontiers

HRWF (25.10.2023) – On 20 October, amid the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas, the annex of the Greek Orthodox Saint Porphyrius Church, the oldest church still in use in Gaza (12th century), which was said to be sheltering hundreds of people, was damaged in a fatal Israeli airstrike on Gaza City.

Palestinian health officials claimed that at least 16 Palestinian Christians were among the 18 people killed in the blast, reported [The Washington Post](#). At least 20 others were injured.

On 7 October, the attack of Hamas on Israeli communities near the border with Gaza killed at least 1,400 civilians, including over 30 Americans. Moreover, Hamas took over 200 Israeli and foreign hostages to Gaza that it is using as a human shield and a bargaining chip.

The atrocities perpetrated by Hamas were filmed by its own fighters themselves and uploaded on internet. A few days ago, the Israeli authorities screened *in camera* a 42-minute movie including Hamas videos and other sources for foreign press correspondents. The images were so intolerable that some of them left the screening room.

An increasing number of Middle East experts consider that Hamas has been islamized and is now using the same cruel fighting methods as the terrorist group 'Islamic State' (ISIS) applied to the Yezidi and Christian minorities under its rule.

Israel's position: collateral damage, not intentional

The IDF (Israel Defense Forces) confirmed that a portion of the church had been damaged during an airstrike intended to destroy Hamas military compounds but maintained that the church itself was not the intended target.

"As a result of the IDF strike, a wall of a church in the area was damaged. We are aware of reports on casualties. The incident is under review," the Israeli military said, adding that they "can unequivocally state that the Church was not the target of the strike."

Orthodox Times: Excerpt

"Witnesses told AFP that a place nearby appeared to be the target of the strike, where many Gaza civilians had fled as the war raged in the Palestinian enclave.

The Israeli army admitted that it carried out an airstrike in the area yesterday.

"Earlier today (Thursday) Israeli military fighter jets attacked the command and control center of a Hamas terrorist who was involved in firing rockets and shells at Israel," an army spokesman said.

This center "served to launch attacks against Israel and there was a terrorist infrastructure of the terrorist organization Hamas," the spokesperson said.

It is noteworthy that the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip has decreased in recent years. It is estimated that there are less than a thousand left (most of whom are Orthodox), while before Hamas took power in Gaza (2007), there were more than seven thousand Christians. (Source: [Orthodox Times](#))

The Christian Post: Excerpt

"As a result of the IDF strike, a wall of a church in the area was damaged. We are aware of reports on casualties. The incident is under review," the Israeli military said, adding that they "can unequivocally state that the Church was not the target of the strike."

Archbishop Alexios of Tiberias, who was at the site, said the strike "hit the offices and the entrance of the monastery," according to [The Orthodox Times](#).

"They were bombarded with a missile and the whole building collapsed. There were Christians inside, many of whom have been injured. They have to bring bulldozers, so we can see how many people are under the rubble," the archbishop added. (Source: [The Christian Post](#))

Statement of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem

On 23 October, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem expressed its strongest condemnation of ***the Israeli airstrike that have struck its church compound in the city of Gaza.***

The Patriarchate emphasized that targeting churches and their institutions, along with the shelters they provide to protect innocent citizens, especially children and women who have lost their homes due to Israeli airstrikes on residential areas, constitutes a war crime that cannot be ignored.

The Patriarchate added that despite the evident targeting of the facilities and shelters of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and other churches – including the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem Hospital, other schools, and social institutions – the Patriarchate, along with the other churches, remain committed to fulfilling its religious and moral duty in providing assistance, support, and refuge to those in need, amidst continuous Israeli demands to evacuate these institutions of civilians and the pressures exerted on the churches in this regard.

Finally, the Patriarchate stresses that it will not abandon its religious and humanitarian duty, rooted in its Christian values, to provide all that is necessary in times of war and peace alike. (Source: [Orthodox Times](#))

Hamas, a terrorist organization in Israel, the US and the EU

Hamas is listed as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the US and the EU.

The United States designated Hamas as a terrorist organisation in 1995, as did Canada in November 2002 and the United Kingdom in November 2021.

The European Union designated Hamas' military wing a terrorist group in 2001 and Hamas itself in 2003. Hamas challenged this decision, which was upheld by the [European Court of Justice](#) in 2021. Japan and New Zealand have designated the military wing of Hamas as a terrorist organization. The organization is banned in Jordan.

Hamas is not regarded as a terrorist organization by Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Russia, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, China, Egypt, Syria, and Brazil.

Netanyahu assures no law against Christians after missionary bill outrage

Evangelical Christian groups have supported the Zionist cause in various capacities for decades, and have close relationships with Israeli institutions.

By [MAYA ZANGER-NADIS](#), [MICHAEL STARR](#)

[Jerusalem Post](#) (24.03.2023) - After a bill punishing [Christian missionaries](#) with prison time for any type of proselytization caused furor among pro-Israel Evangelicals on Sunday, [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) publicly assured that the State of Israel would not pass legislation targeting Christians.

"We will not advance any law against the Christian community," Netanyahu wrote on Twitter in both English and Hebrew on Wednesday.

[United Torah Judaism leader Moshe Gafni](#) also released a statement on Wednesday, noting that the bill would not be advanced at this stage. The bill, which is identical to other bills on this matter promoted by Gafni, was placed procedurally on the Knesset table four months ago.

US Christian response to Netanyahu's assurances

US Christian leaders and political actors welcomed Netanyahu's response to their concerns.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu is an amazing leader of courage," said Sam Brownback, ex-Kansas governor and former US ambassador for International Religious Freedom. "I applaud his quick and decisive addressing of what could have been a major issue."

Evangelist Pastor Greg Laurie said on Wednesday that Gafni and Netanyahu's comments were "great news."

Penny Nance, head of Christian Evangelical nonprofit Concerned Women for America, also thanked Netanyahu on Thursday for "standing up for Christians," after she had warned of the repercussions of the bill if it passed.

"If this became law. Evangelicals on tour from the US if led by the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel with their tour guide would risk imprisonment," Nance said on Wednesday.

Pastor Jack Graham joined the chorus of those expressing disconcertion about the bill, saying "I [love Israel](#) and we need to be praying for Israel and its leaders."

The outrage over the bill began after a Sunday report by Christian Evangelical outlet All Israel News. Editor-in-Chief Joel C. Rosenberg credited the outlet for raising awareness of the issue.

"I am deeply grateful to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for his strong, unequivocal statement," said Rosenberg on Wednesday. "The Evangelical community worldwide greatly appreciates your friendship. Bless you."

The bill would amend preexisting proselytization provisions in the 1977 Penal Code, which hold that forbids missionary action through material enticement, persuading minors to convert, or holding conversion ceremonies without the consent of parents. Visitors to Israel may also be denied entry into the country if they were traveling for missionary purposes.

The amendment would change the crime to apply to all conversion attempts "directly, digitally, by direct mail, or online. The maximum prison sentence would be a year for conversion attempts of an adult, whereas the previous six-month sentence for those proselytizing against minors would be increased to two years.

The explanatory notes of the bill contend that there have recently been increased attempts by mostly [Christian missionary](#) groups. These proselytization attempts didn't violate the law because they didn't involve material enticement.

Negative consequences such as "mental damage" and concern that missionaries targeted vulnerable segments of society required legislators to act, the bill said. Indeed, there have been notable cases of late of Israeli Jewish Orthodox community members being revealed as Christian missionaries.

In April 2021, a French Hill family from New Jersey was revealed to be Christian missionaries. The father posed as a rabbi, mohel and sofer. The mother claimed to be the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor. A Seattle man who made Aliya and lived in Jerusalem was accused of posing as a Jew and being a missionary in May 2021.

In December, The Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles, which is connected to a messianic South Korean cult, was accused of distributing flyers to youth in Jerusalem inviting them to an event.

In 2022, the Central Bureau of Statistics said that 182,000 Christians lived in Israel, making up about 1.9% of its population.

Peggy Cidor, Sam Halpern and Jeremy Sharon contributed to this report.

Christians will face jail in Israel for proselytising under proposed bill

[Middle East Monitor](#) (22.03.2023) - Christians could face one year prison sentence for encouraging conversion to their faith, according to a new controversial legislation being introduced in Israel. The legislation which is being proposed by ultra-Orthodox members

of Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition would also proscribe Christians from engaging in religious discussion with Jews.

Titled Proposed Penal Law: Amendment – Prohibition of Solicitation for Religious Conversion – 2023, the legislation is introduced by United Torah Judaism's Moshe Gafni and Yaakov Asher. The law would apply to anyone who would attempt to persuade someone to change their religious beliefs, however the legislation specifically mentions the Christian faith, saying that "recently, the attempts of missionary groups, mainly Christians, to solicit conversion of religion have increased."

"Solicitation", according to the text of the legislation, refers to anyone "who solicits a person, directly, digitally, by mail, or online in order to convert his religion" and the punishment for such solicitation is "one year imprisonment; and if the person was a minor, the punishment – two years imprisonment."

According to All Israel News, the bill "appears to be making it illegal for followers of Jesus ("Yeshua" in Hebrew) to explain why they believe that Jesus is both Messiah and God with the hope that Israelis might consider following Him." The Jerusalem based news agency explained that under the new legislation "producing and publishing online videos explaining the Gospel to Jewish or Muslim people in Israel – and to those of any other religious faiths – would suddenly become illegal."

Publishing books, other printed literature, online articles, podcasts, or other forms of media that explain the life and ministry of Jesus and His message found in the New Testament would also become illegal.

The proposal has created friction with America's evangelical community who are strong supporters of Israel. Leading evangelical Christians are publicly urging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to scuttle legislation, according to Haaretz. Apparently, Netanyahu and his allies have publicly and privately stressed the importance of evangelical support as US Jews have grown increasingly critical of Israel's rightward shift.

It is expected that the bill will be sharply criticised in Washington by both Democrats and Republicans alike.

Photo: Israeli forces intervene with water cannon to Ultra-Orthodox Jews as they protest against mandatory military service in Jerusalem. [Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency]
