

Israel's Gaza War, West Bank Raids Stole Bethlehem's Christmas

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Israel's Gaza war and West Bank raids have stolen Bethlehem's Christmas celebrations this year. The little hill town where Jesus was born in a stable 2,000 years ago has grown dark this season. The Bethlehem municipality and the Jordan Council of Churches announced the decision to mark the season solely with religious services.

There are no coloured lights decorating tall pine tree on the edge of Manger Square and few decorations in shops. There will be no marching Palestinian Boy Scout bands on Christmas eve ahead of the religious service in Saint Catherine's Catholic church. In spite of the crisis in Palestine, the church can be expected to fill with devout pilgrims for the midnight mass. Boy scouts will walk silently across Bethlehem, in mourning for the nearly 20,000 Palestinians who have died from Israeli bombing, shelling, and shooting during its ground offensive.

Visitors to the Evangelical Lutheran Church will find a nativity scene depicting the infant Jesus wrapped in a traditional Palestinian keffiyeh lying on a pile of rubble beneath an olive tree, the symbol of Palestinian determination to remain in their century-long occupied country.

The prelates of the Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian and Protestant churches in Jerusalem, which has joined Bethlehem in the boycott of celebrations, called upon their "congregations to, stand strong with those facing such affiliations by this year foregoing any unnecessary festiveactivities".

The Gaza war is costing Palestinian tourism \$2.5 million a day. This will amount to \$200 million by the end of the year, according to the Palestinian Tourism Ministry. Seventy hotels in Bethlehem have closed duringthe normally heavily booked holiday season, leaving 6,000 employees without work.

Bethlehem Mayor Hana Haniyeh told the Associated Press,

“The economy is crashing. But if we compare it with what’s happening to our people and Gaza, it’s nothing.”

Bethlehem depends on tourists and pilgrimages for 70 per cent of income.

Haniyeh said,

“Bethlehem is an essential part of the Palestinian community. So at midnight mass this year, we will pray for peace, the message of peace that was founded in Bethlehem when Jesus Christ was born.”

Since Hamas fighters attacked southern Israel on October 7, Israel has multiplied checkpoints prolonging journeys to Bethlehem and other West Bank cities, towns and villages.

At the end of November, a Bethlehem delegation of church elders flew to Washington to deliver a letter to US President Joe Biden demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and arguing that there can be no peace in this region without justice, equal rights and dignity for all. The letter was handed to his advisers as Biden did not meet the envoys. Instead, Biden met with relatives of Israelis captured by Israel, cast the sole veto against a ceasefire resolution in the UN Security Council and voted against a similar General Assembly resolution. As these resolutions were supported by the Arabs, Biden’s rejection amounted to an insult to the Arab region and its people.

As Israel ramped up its Gaza campaign, Biden compounded the damage his anti-ceasefire stance has done by using an emergency measure to avoid Congressional oversight in to provide to the Israeli military 14,000 rounds of tank ammunition worth more than \$100 million. The Biden administration has also supplied white phosphorus incendiary shells which Israel has used to target urban areas in Gaza and Lebanon in violation of international law which specifies that that these munitions can only be used in open battlegrounds. White phosphorus causes severe burns deep into human skin tissue. Israel fired these shells into Gaza during the 2008-2009 war which then ruined Christmas for Palestinians.

After a three-year COVID-19 suspension of Christmas festivities, Bethlehem resumed celebrations in 2022. Lights on the towering Christmas tree were switched on early late in November. Bethlehem’s 5,000 hotels were fully booked. Some 120,000 local and foreign visitors returned. This figure nearly reached the 150,000 high in 2019, before COVID struck. Like Israel’s Gaza war, the pandemic wrecked the Bethlehem economy. COVID closed hotels, restaurants, workshops and souvenir shops. The latter alone suffered losses of \$200 million.

Palestinian Christians are among world’s oldest Christian communities, although their number is shrinking. Decades ago Christians were 20 per cent of the population of Palestine, today they are 2 per cent of the total. As many Christians had formed connections with relatives who had emigrated, there have been many additions to the global Palestinian diaspora. Palestinian Christians live largely in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jerusalem.

Since Israel besieged and blockaded Gaza after Hamas took control in 2007, around 2,000 Christians left due to Israeli attacks in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2021 and 2023. Gaza’s Christians now number between 800-1,000 and account for less than 1 per cent of the

population of the bombed and starved coastal strip but have been targeted by Israeli bombs and drones while they have sheltered in their churches, including in Gaza's oldest built in 1150, the church of St Porphyrius where 16 Christians died and many were wounded during a bombing in October.

Last Saturday, December 16, an Israeli sniper killed two Palestinian women, a mother and daughter, and wounded seven others sheltering in the Catholic church of the Holy Family. At the time of the shooting the women were in the courtyard of the church making their way from the convent attached to the church. There were no armed men or weapons in the church although it has been repeatedly targeted by snipers, shells, and white phosphorus. Responding to this incident Pope Francis said, "It is war. It is terrorism."

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Featured image: A priest walks at the Church of the Nativity, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, Saturday, Dec. 16, 2023. World-famous Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem have been put on hold due to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean)

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