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## **The Persecution of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories**

***By Fr. John-Francis Friendship***

*Fr John-Francis Friendship, a well-known spiritual writer and liturgist, reflects back on his many visits to the Holy Land, and his growing awareness of the injustices arising from the way in which the Zionist project has been executed over the years*

Throughout the 1990s, I visited the Holy Land most years, either for pilgrimage or study. I went there believing the Israelis to be the “good guys” and the Palestinians to be ruthless bombers. Over that decade, however, my views underwent a complete change. I found immense kindness and hospitality from Palestinians – especially my fellow Christians – to the extent that on one occasion when I arrived late and somewhat penniless in the Old City of Jerusalem and was sitting in the doorway of the Franciscan Convent, a passing father and his three sons, without asking, invited me to spend the night with them – in the end, I spent two.

During that period, I became increasingly saddened by the way Palestinians were being treated as second-class citizens, in a country where for centuries Jews, Christians and Muslims had learned to live side-by-side in relative harmony. Now, Palestinians were at the mercy of the Occupying Power (i.e. Israel); water was cut off unexpectedly, roads were closed, and life became very hard – yet behind it all that smiling trust in God and, whether Muslim or Christian, “Insh’allah”, Thy will be done. (Could I say that in such circumstances without it being mere fatalism?)

Over the years of my visits, the situation worsened: extremists attacked Christian properties and churches, including some of the Holy Places, and increased taxes were levied on church property. I witnessed vast Israeli housing estates being illegally built in the Occupied Territories, often on hilltops (because residents could more easily attack the remaining Palestinian lands below), once covered by now-destroyed Palestinian olive groves. And then the wall: That vast, snaking wall cutting off the Palestinian West Bank from Israel, often dividing Arab communities and making it increasingly difficult for them to access other areas. And all the time Israel seemed to get richer as Palestinians became poorer, and I saw T-shirts in the New City of Jerusalem emblazoned with “Don’t worry America, Israel is behind you”. What was worse was to discover that many American evangelical churches were supportive

of Zionism to the extent that I wondered if they knew what it meant to proclaim oneself a Christian.

My last visit (and, perhaps it will prove to be my last) was in 2019, when the Lutheran Guest House in the Old City where I was staying was subject to ongoing attempts by Jewish extremists to take over the property. I had to endure loud music most nights aimed at us from a neighbouring *yeshiva*, an attempt – I was told – to discourage pilgrims from returning. This year, reports coming out of the West Bank reveal how this inhumanity has developed – the Easter celebrations were disturbed, and religious leaders harassed, by government forces and illegal settlers; now a report by the Higher Presidential Committee of Church Affairs in Palestine points to “*an unprecedented assault on the churches of the Holy Land, led by a direct attack on the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem.*” ([https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250816-palestine-sounds-alarm-about-unprecedented-israeli-assault-on-churches/?sfnsn=scwspmo&fbclid=IwY2xjawMRXeFleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHr3WCbfgkeADp2BMVciTQ6hmBp7mRYO1c7SLnigObg74qNWxDhwMvE7ImKLC\\_aem\\_r1e7O1A7Vvl8NaiHMBHTpw](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250816-palestine-sounds-alarm-about-unprecedented-israeli-assault-on-churches/?sfnsn=scwspmo&fbclid=IwY2xjawMRXeFleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHr3WCbfgkeADp2BMVciTQ6hmBp7mRYO1c7SLnigObg74qNWxDhwMvE7ImKLC_aem_r1e7O1A7Vvl8NaiHMBHTpw))

Suffice to say, I no longer consider the Palestinians to be the “*bad guys.*” There are many good Israelis of vision and compassion, but the West – in particular Western governments and the Churches – need to wake up fast to the persecution being perpetrated by Israel on those who, as one Christian reminded me concerning her family, have been there for 2,000 years. When will the UK stop supporting a repressive, inhumane regime and remember that we bear an awful responsibility in creating this evil situation?

*Fr. John-Francis Friendship*  
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