



The Society of St. Yves

Catholic Center for Human Rights

***Protecting Freedom of Worship
in the Holy Land***



Society of St. Yves

The Society of St. Yves is a Catholic human rights organization working under the patronage of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. It was founded in 1991 by the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Michel Sabbah, to help "the poor and the oppressed" according to the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. The first case of St. Yves was a High Court of Israel Petition on the eve of the Second Gulf War in 1991. It aimed to compel the Israeli Ministry of Defense to expand the distribution of gas masks to the Arab Palestinian population of East Jerusalem.

Today, St. Yves is one amongst the leaders of Palestinian legal organizations in East Jerusalem and the Southern West Bank and the number of its beneficiaries is significantly increasing on yearly basis due to St. Yves' achievements and quality of service and follow up, and due to the increasing need of St. Yves work amongst its communities.

Mission The Society of St. Yves provides legal aid to the needy, oppressed and marginalized and tries to raise the awareness of human and civil rights in the society. The Society of St. Yves believes that every human being is created in the image of God and the dignity and rights of everybody are God given.

Vision: The Society of St. Yves strives for a social order that values the dignity of all people in the Holy Land. This is to be reached by resisting and combating the wrong impacts of the occupation through legal actions and to promote justice and fairness for everybody.

St. Yves provides gratis legal assistance, counsel and advocacy to members of the community. Through National and International Lobby and Advocacy, it is able to bring the situation of the poor and marginalized to the attention of communities around the world. The work of St. Yves is on behalf of individuals and reflective of the lawyer-client-relationship of personal professional service. Nevertheless, often similar issues arise in so many individual cases that an action on behalf of a class of people is necessary. St. Yves undertakes such class actions when they are demanded.

Although St. Yves' primary thrust is in legal advocacy before the courts, it also provides, through its legal and para-legal staff, community-based information and awareness raising lectures with the aim of empowering the local community to know how to demand its rights. Through national and international lobby and advocacy, St Yves brings the plight of the poor and marginalized to the attention of communities around the world in an effort to bring pressure for peace.



“It’s the duty of everyone to defend religious freedom and promote it for all people” Pope Francis

Jerusalem is rightly considered to be the cradle of monotheistic religions and the centerpiece for worship. Tragically, the right of movement to worship has been infringed and sometimes altogether prevented by Israeli authorities. The restrictions on the rights of Palestinians in the West Bank to enter Jerusalem for worshipping are arbitrary and widespread.

According to Article 18 of the International Covenant on the Civil and Political Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 19 December 1966 “Every person has the right to manifest his or her religion either in private or in public and either individually or in community with others. The manifestation of one’s religion or beliefs may cover such activities as worship, observance, practice and teaching.” Notwithstanding this Covenant, the Israeli authorities through the construction of the Separation Wall, checkpoints, and other barriers obstruct the entry by Palestinian not only for work but also to exercise their fundamental right of worshipping in their holy places, even in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Lenten seasons. The arbitrariness of closures forces the Palestinian faithful and even clergy to live in a state of constant uncertainty whether they will be granted entry. These measures are suffocating the right to worship freely.

The Separation Wall

Israel consistently affirms that the towering concrete Wall is built for security reasons, but the effect of the Wall is isolation of regions with large Palestinian residents outside Jerusalem, a Jewish-Israeli majority in Jerusalem, and the annexation of Palestinian land. The Wall was declared illegal by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The Wall now separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem for the first time in history, and Israeli authorities strictly limit the entry of Palestinians into Jerusalem. During religious holiday seasons and on Holy Days, the authorities may grant only a few entries permits to access religious sites. This further fragment and divides the Christian minority living in the Holy Land. Furthermore, Gaza has been under an Israeli restriction for more than 12 years, with Christians rarely allowed enter Jerusalem or Bethlehem to participate in religious services there.



The Jerusalem Closure Policy

This Israeli Policy involves the granting of **military permits**. Palestinians from the West Bank must acquire a valid permit and a magnetic card issued by the Israeli military to enter Jerusalem through the designated checkpoints. Those permits are required whether one desires to travel for healthcare, education, work, family, or worship – restricting fundamental human rights.

Permanent checkpoints are the mainstay of the Israeli physical control of movement. Checkpoints have existed since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. This system of control expanded, especially during the second Intifada, and now restricts and obstructs the movement of Palestinians from and to many Palestinian towns and villages. Unpredictable closures disrupt *commerce, impede work routes, and endanger lives in cases of medical emergency, as well as freedom of movement for worship*. As a result, the quality of life is severely degraded.

Through the arbitrary infringement by Israeli military authorities of the internationally recognized right to freedom of movement, the policies and actions adopted, amount to a suppression of one's right to have and practice their religious beliefs.



The Israeli closure policies have not only prevented Palestinians from reaching their places of worship, especially during *religious Holy Days and seasons such as* Christmas, Easter, and Ramadan, foreign pilgrims coming to the Holy Land during these times *may also experience difficulties accessing the religious sites. The Society of St. Yves defends the rights of Palestinians and others seeking to worship freely in the Holy Land.*

Abu Bashar, one of the beneficiaries of our services. attests: “I don’t believe that any Jewish person is prevented or banned from reaching or entering his or her religious places. This unfair policy of banning people from reaching their holy sites *is only directed to our people (Muslims and Christians) who are under occupation*”.

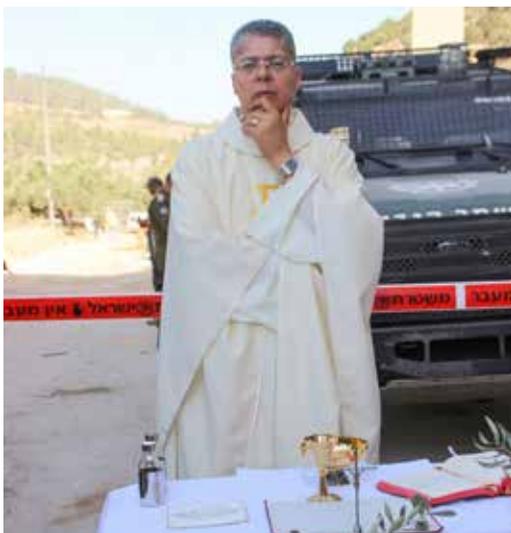
Another beneficiary shares his experience: “We see people crying, beaten, and denied entry to churches to pray. We also see a larger number of Israeli Police than numbers of pilgrims, this kills the Holy Days or holiday spirit. What is left for us from these days, whether it’s Good Friday or the Holy Fire or Christmas is no longer a holiday, and all of this is under the pretext of security.” St. Yves successfully obtained an entry permit for him.

These policies, barriers, and regimes have even impeded the movement of the movement of clergy between Jerusalem and West Bank churches and monasteries.



Father Jamal Khader of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem who lives in Ramallah explains: “During the past 20 years I have been crossing checkpoints to get to Jerusalem, luckily, I was able to get an entry permit to be in Jerusalem. However, the crossing experience is always a humiliation; this is something that I can never get used to. The idea of being under full control of a foreign soldier who cannot even speak my language, and who has the power to allow or deny my entry is unimaginable.”

There have been other incidents that infringe religious liberties in a different way. One incident that attracted international attention and condemnation was the assault on Christian clergy peacefully protesting the decision by the Israeli authorities to prevent the renovation inside the *holy site of St. Michael's Church*, which is part of the historic Deir al-Sultan monastery on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The incident resulted in the detention of one Coptic monk. Israeli municipality workers forbade the continuation of the renovation.



The future prosperity of Palestinians of all denominations, and especially the diminishing Palestinian Christians depends on the freedom of movement for religious worship; for work to sustain their livelihoods; and ultimately for their continued existence in the Holy Land. Restoration of the right freedom of movement will safeguard the culture, religious practices, economic prosperity, and social solidarity of all Palestinians. The perpetuation and indeed the expansion of the restrictions through Israeli policies pose a great peril to a continued presence of Christians in the Holy Land. Without a rescission of these illegal policies, Christian Churches may eventually become museums rather than places of worship.

It is the mission of the Society of St. Yves through free legal assistance to ensure that these rights are vigorously protected.



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We are grateful to the Western Lieutenancy of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem to help us promote the importance and availability of our services throughout the Holy Land and beyond.

