



23/10/2023

## Bombardment of the Houses of Worship by the Israeli Occupation An Extension to Attacking These Places by the Terrorism and Extremism Forces

**Ramallah: Human Rights and Democracy Media Center- SHAMS, affirms** that targeting the churches and mosques, by the Israeli occupation, in the Gaza Strip and Jenin Refugee Camp indicates that there is no difference between the occupation and the terrorist and extremism forces, which also target the churches and mosques killing believers and monotheists of God. These forces usually destroy and damage mosques and churches. The Center stresses that the mosques, churches, sanctuaries, and shrines for divine or non-divine religions, are holy places that should be protected and should never be attacked and the beliefs of their adherents should be respected. The religious places represent religious and spiritual symbols for the adherents of the various religions. Attacking these places is an attack against the holy doctrine of the adherents of the religions as well as attacking the dignity of the believers and provoking their feelings.

The reasonable question that arises here is about the connection and relation between the behavior of the terrorist and extremism forces (ISIS and Jabhet Al- Nussra and others in Syria and Iraq) on one hand, and the occupation's behavior on the other. The mentioned forces used to attack mosques and churches and demolish them and kill believers (including children and old people) in these places alongside displacing citizens and captivity of women. There were other savage acts that contradicted human, legal, and religious values. The practices of the occupation and the acts accompanying the aggression on the Gaza Strip do not differ from the previously mentioned crimes of the terrorism and extremism forces. The Israeli army is targeting the worship places to be demolished over the heads of those inside them, alongside killing civilians, in a clear violation of the International Law and the International Humanitarian Law.

There has been a consensus on the universal level about the necessity to protect religious places and ensure that they are not subject to attacks, stealing, or any form of aggression. In addition to that, there is a common consensus among human beings to prohibit attacking worship houses based on religious and doctrinal beliefs. Such principles were enhanced by the national legal sets of the various countries, which granted the religious sites special protection and a special status to ensure that they would not be attacked or harmed.

The systematic targeting of the worship houses is committed by the Israeli occupation as part of the tendency to demolish the spiritual and religious symbols of Palestinians as part of attacking the Palestinian national identity. The Israeli occupation is attacking these places despite their value among religious persons and believers. These places serve as a major component of the



Palestinians' national identity (both Christians and Muslims). The Occupation state is trying, through all available means, to abolish the national identity of Palestinians. The Israeli occupation has been practicing such a policy since the 1948 Nakba, where tens of mosques and churches were demolished or confiscated to be transferred into restaurants, hotels, and nightclubs. The practices of the Israeli occupation were an extension of the Crusaders' Campaigns who occupied Jerusalem in the Middle Ages and transferred Al-Aqsa Mosque into a stable for horses. Moreover, the Israeli occupation is recalling the Spanish Investigation Courts System (Audiencia Nacional), which was interested in pursuing and demolishing any Islamic or Arabic Features in Andalusia and transferring the mosques into museums, cinemas, and stables for horses.

In its aggression against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation targets civil life by demolishing various civic establishments, including schools, universities, residential buildings, streets, public gardens, hospitals, medical centers, and so on. Additionally, the worship houses (mosques and churches) were also targeted by the Israeli shelling. Worship houses serve as part of the religious, cultural, and spiritual heritage of any nation. Targeting such places is considered part of targeting the civic life of citizens as they are considered civil establishments. The Israeli practices reveal clearly that the occupation is targeting civilians and civil establishments within its process of demolishing Palestinians' lives. On a related level, targeting civil establishments represents the criminal face of the occupation and the savage behavior of the current Israeli government that denies all the International Conventions and Treaties, which urge for neutralizing civilians and civil establishments (mainly worship places) during the armed conflicts. The International Humanitarian Law affirmed special protection of the religious sites and the worship houses. The "Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land-1907", is an example of the special protection that should be given to the religious sites. Article 27 of the given Convention states: ". In sieges and bombardments, all necessary steps must be taken to spare, as far as possible, buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals, and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not being used at the time for military purposes. It is the duty of the besieged to indicate the presence of such buildings or places by distinctive and visible signs, which shall be notified to the enemy beforehand." Additionally, Article 56 of the given Convention states: "The property of municipalities, that of institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, even when State property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of, destruction or wilful damage done to institutions of this character, historic monuments, works of art and science, is forbidden, and should be made the subject of legal proceedings."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land- 1907"



Despite the special protection granted to the worship places by the International Humanitarian Law, yet, the Israeli forces are proceeding in attaching the mosques and churches in the Gaza Strip. According to International Law, targeting the worship places is considered a war crime as affirmed in Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The given Article states: "Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives" are considered war crimes<sup>2</sup>. Taking into consideration the spiritual privacy of the religious sites, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the importance of protecting the religious and historical sites. In this regard, the Resolution number 36/147, dated 16/12/1981, (item 6) states that attacking the religious and historical sites is a war crime<sup>3</sup>.

During the ongoing Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, the Israeli forces are intentionally targeting the churches and mosques with no respect for their religious and spiritual value. The Israeli army demolished the Church of Saint Porphyrius, which was built 1600 years ago and is the most ancient church in the Gaza Strip, where it was built on the tomb of Saint Porphyrius. The targeted church is considered one of the most significant religious sites for Christian Palestinians in general and for the Christians in the Gaza Strip, in particular. It is a significant symbol of the Christian Palestinians presence in the Gaza Strip and it is one of the most important places for Christian Palestinians to pray and perform religious rituals. The crimes of the Israeli occupation reveal clearly that the Israeli government promotes religious superiority for Judaism on the preference of both Christianity and Islam as restrictions are imposed on the adherents of these two religions. The behaviour of the Israeli occupation reflects the religious extremist thought of the occupation's government. The Israeli government is based on the Talmudic Thought, which rejects any other religious thought and considers non-Jews to be not human beings in a form of an arrogant racist mindset<sup>4</sup>.

The Israeli occupation demolished entirely or partially several churches and mosques. The Ministry of Waqf in the Gaza Strip announced, on Saturday 21/10/2023, that the Israeli army demolished 26 mosques (entirely) since October 7/10/2023<sup>5</sup>.

Targeting the religious sites and worship houses is within the crime of demolishing the "Cultural Heritage", as the churches and mosques are part of the cultural heritage of Palestinians. These sites should be protected according to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural

<sup>2</sup> Rome Statute of the ICC- 17/7/1998

<sup>3</sup> General Assembly Resolution number 36/147, dated 16/12/1981

<sup>4</sup> <https://tr.agency/news-178357>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.elbalad.news/5969063>



Property in the Event of Armed Conflict- 1954. The Convention (Article 4) states that: "The High Contracting Parties undertake to respect cultural property situated within their own territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties by refraining from any use of the property and its immediate surroundings or of the appliances in use for its protection for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the event of armed conflict; and by refraining from any act of hostility directed against such property."<sup>6</sup>

Based on that, the related international institutions, mainly the International Council of Churches, The Apostolic See, The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and UNESCO, should initiate immediately to press on the occupation state to stop its crimes against the worship houses in the Gaza Strip. The practices of the Israeli occupation are crimes against the international spiritual and religious heritage, but not against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip only, through the ongoing crimes against churches and mosques.

<sup>6</sup> Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict