

# Bethlehem: When Will the Peace of Christmas Come Home?

By [Hanna Hanania](#)

Global Research, December 25, 2023

[The Jordan Times](#) 24 December 2022

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the Translate Website button below the author's name.

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

\*\*\*

First published by Global Research on December 27, 2022

*As mayor of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem, I have the privilege of lighting the Christmas tree in Manger Square and attending Midnight Mass at one of the world's oldest churches, built in the fourth century by the Byzantine Empress Helena.*

*But my most important duty is to help give people faith and encouragement. When I lit the Christmas tree on December 3, I expressed my hope that the light would radiate to the world our desire for peace, and we prayed together that Christmas would fulfill its promise and bring people together.*

Bringing people together has two meanings for Palestinians living under occupation. It can mean the togetherness of time shared with friends and relatives. But as the mayor of the city where it all began for Christians 2,000 years ago, I must think of the larger Palestinian family.

The fact that we have been living for decades under occupation means that we cannot enjoy the sense of togetherness that all people want during their great holidays, particularly the religious ones. Our people in Gaza cannot come freely to Bethlehem, and our brothers and sisters in Jordan and other countries cannot easily obtain visas from an occupying power that applies exaggerated entry restrictions. Citizens of other Middle East countries, like Lebanon and Syria, which have no peace agreement with Israel, have no chance at all.

The fact that a Palestinian Christian like me, or a Christian living in a nearby Arab country, cannot simply come to Bethlehem for Christmas should be unacceptable to everyone — as should the eight-metre-high wall that still encircles our city, despite being declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004. This wall is a constant reminder of separation rather than togetherness.

This year marks 150 years since the municipality of Bethlehem was established. Under Palestinian Authority law, a Christian Arab serves as mayor here and in similar Palestinian cities. But the challenge of keeping Christian Arabs in Palestine has become more difficult because of the occupation. While many Palestinians suffer under foreign military rule and wish that they could leave, Palestinian Christians are leaving in larger numbers simply because they have connections with the wider world through churches and the tourism business.

Bethlehem's population has grown over the years, and so has the number of hotel rooms — something unavailable to Mary and Joseph 2,000 years ago. But the growth of our population and tourist accommodations has been restricted by the wall Israel built on our land, and by the occupiers' refusal to allow us to pursue normal urban planning, partly because of Israeli settlement activity. These settlements, too, have long been considered illegal by the United Nations Security Council, yet Israel continues to build and confiscate land in violation of international law, which forbids occupiers from benefiting from their military conquests.

Christmas is celebrated three times in Bethlehem, reflecting the rites of the three main churches that have been here for centuries. Catholics and those following the Gregorian calendar hold midnight mass on December 25, while Orthodox Christians, who follow the eastern calendar, begin their Christmas celebrations on January 6. Armenians hold the ritual on January 18. As we do every year, we will observe all the formalities dictated by the Ottoman Status Quo. This centuries-old system of unwritten rules requires a very strict protocol governing where local leaders meet the head of the respective church and who is allowed to accompany the patriarchs and bishops at various entrance points.

Ten years ago, UNESCO declared Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity to be in danger. After extensive renovation by the Palestinian government, funded by private and official donors, the church's mosaics and other elements, damaged by a fire centuries ago, were restored. But we Palestinian Christians, who have been living continuously in Bethlehem for 2,000 years, do not want our churches to become museums. We want Christian pilgrims from around the world, including Arab Christians, to come to Bethlehem to visit the living stones. For now, we are blessed that our people still hope and insist on a better tomorrow despite the absence of any serious peace talks.

When we lit the Christmas tree, we prayed that the light from Bethlehem — from the darkness of military occupation — would reach the entire world. Our faith is not in a change of heart by our occupiers, but in the justice of our cause. Two millennia ago, the skies of Bethlehem were lit as angels heralded the birth of Jesus by declaring, "Peace on Earth and goodwill to all." This Christmas, all of us in his hometown continue to yearn for that true peace.

\*

Note to readers: Please click the share buttons above. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

*Hanna Hanania is the mayor of Bethlehem.*

*Featured image is from Wikimedia Commons*

The original source of this article is [The Jordan Times](#)  
Copyright © [Hanna Hanania](#), [The Jordan Times](#), 2023

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Hanna Hanania](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)