



ECLJ & ACLJ in Middle East for UN Mission on Religious Freedom
Defending the rights of Christians in the Holy Land

Terrence McKeegan and Gregor Puppink, Counsels for the ECLJ, are in Israel and the Palestinian Territories this week at the request of the United Nations Expert on Religious Freedom, to help facilitate the fact-finding mission there.

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The ECLJ, as an NGO accredited to the United Nations, and specializing in the promotion and defense of religious freedom, was asked to help assist with the country visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Holy Land. The Special Rapporteur, Asma Jahangir of Pakistan, is an independent expert elected by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor religious freedom around the world. During the mission and pursuant to her mandate, the rapporteur is examining the situation of religious freedom and persecution in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

For the past several decades, Christian Palestinians have experienced tremendous fear, persecution, and a resulting mass exodus due to the rising Islamism of the region, especially in the Gaza strip and other areas controlled by Hamas. The Christian population in the Palestinian territories has declined to only about 1 percent of the population. Formerly majority Christian cities like Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Ramallah now find Christians in the dwindling minority, with steady streams of emigrants fleeing to the West. Because of their very small numbers, most Christians in the Palestinian Territories are treated as *dhimmi*, or second-class citizens.

Historically at the United Nations and on the international stage, the dire situation of Christians in the Middle East has been ignored amid discussions of the conflict, even though a strong argument can be made that they have suffered the worst discrimination and persecution.

By participating in this mission, the goal of the ECLJ and ACLJ is to ensure that the plight of Christians in the Holy Land, and particularly the persecution of Christians in the Palestinian Territories, is properly examined and taken into account in the final report made by the Special Rapporteur to the UN.

From our experience, the remnant of the Christian presence in the Palestinian Territories can only be guaranteed by the presence of outside monitors and through pressure by the international community.

In preparation for this mission, the ECLJ and ACLJ was asked to prepare a report on the what the UN team saw as some of the most critical issues for religious freedom the Holy Land (this report is available on the ACLJ and ECLJ websites).

In addition to this report, the ECLJ team has set up a number of critical meetings of various Christian leaders and NGOs with the UN team which will give them the opportunity to get first hand accounts of the reality of discrimination and persecution experienced by the Christians. Without our involvement, many of these meetings of the UN with Christian leaders would not have occurred.

The ECLJ team is also conducting our own meetings and interviews with Christians leaders, NGOs, and scholars, and will prepare a report based on the findings.

In our next press releases, we will report on some of these important meetings, including our amazing encounter with converted Muslims.