



Targeting of Churches in the Gaza Strip

**An Analytical Study on the Impact of the Assault on the Christian Presence and the Most
Vulnerable Groups**

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Methodology	7
2.1 Contextual Analysis.....	8
2.2 Field Monitoring and Documentation.....	8
2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	9
2.4 Document and Secondary Sources Review	9
2.5 Triangulation.....	11
2.6 International Legal Framework and Classification of Violations.....	11
2.7 Christian Presence in Gaza: Social and Demographic Transformations.....	12
2.8 Disability Inclusion and the Most Vulnerable Groups.....	14
2.9 Formulation of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations	15
2.10 Scope and Limitations of the Study	16
2.11 Recommendations and International Advocacy	16
3. Incidents Targeting Churches and the Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip	18
3.1 Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church – Gaza Old City	18
3.1.1 Historical, Religious, and Community Background.....	18
3.1.2 Facts of the Targeting and Its Implications	19
3.1.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting.....	21
3.1.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups ..	22
3.2 Holy Family Catholic Church – Al-Zaytoun, Gaza	24
3.2.1 Religious, Social, and Humanitarian Background.....	24
3.2.2 Facts of the Targeting and Repeated Attacks	25
3.2.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting.....	27
3.2.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups ...	28
3.3 Al-Ahli Arab (Baptist) Hospital – The Anglican Christian Institution in Gaza	30
3.3.1 Historical, Religious, and Humanitarian Background.....	30

3.3.2 Facts of the Targeting and Repeated Attacks	31
3.3.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting	33
3.3.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups ...	34
4. International Legal Framework and Analysis of Patterns of Violations	35
4.1 Protection of Churches, Civilian Objects, and Humanitarian Protection Spaces.....	35
4.2 Protection of Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups During Armed Conflicts	36
4.3 International Legal Classification of the Violations	37
4.4 Illegal Occupation and the Crisis of International Protection	39
5. Implications of the Targeting of Churches for the Christian Presence in Gaza and Palestine	41
5.1 Churches as Spaces of Protection and Collective Memory	41
5.2 Psychological, Spiritual, and Social Impact on the Palestinian Christian Community.....	42
5.3 Sustainability of the Palestinian Christian Presence and the Risks of Demographic Decline.....	44
5.4 Historical Pluralism and Palestinian National Identity.....	45
6. Erosion of Spaces of Protection and Care for the Most Vulnerable Groups.....	46
6.1 Difficulties in Evacuation, Movement, and Access to Protection.....	47
6.2 Loss of Care Networks and Community Support	48
6.3 Profound Psychological, Social, and Humanitarian Impact	48
6.4 Erosion of Protection Spaces Amid the Widespread Collapse of Services.....	50
7. Finding and Conclusions	51
8. Recommendations of the Study.....	55
9. Conclusion	58

Executive Summary

This study examines the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip within the context of the systematic, widespread, and ongoing Israeli aggression since 7 October 2023, as part of the broader attacks directed against civilians, civilian objects, and spaces of humanitarian protection in the Strip. The study adopts a human rights, humanitarian, and legal perspective that goes beyond viewing churches merely as places of worship, approaching them instead as an integral part of the historically rooted Palestinian Christian presence, as well as spaces of community protection, humanitarian care, and Palestinian national memory. Accordingly, any harm inflicted upon them is connected to far deeper human, cultural, spiritual, and national dimensions that extend far beyond direct material destruction.

The study is based on a multi-source methodology that combines field monitoring and documentation, in-depth interviews, international legal analysis, and cross-verification of evidence and information, including testimonies from religious and national figures, foremost among them Archbishop Atallah Hanna, in addition to an extensive review of relevant international, ecclesiastical, human rights, and media reports and documents. The study also adopts a disability inclusion approach as a guiding analytical lens to understand the disproportionate impact of the aggression on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, amid the widespread collapse of civilian infrastructure and essential services in the Gaza Strip.

The study presents a detailed analysis of incidents related to the targeting of Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church, the Holy Family Latin Church, and the Arab Ahli Hospital (Baptist Hospital), including the historical, religious, and societal backgrounds of these institutions, the nature of the attacks against them, the associated human and material losses, and the resulting humanitarian, social, psychological, and spiritual impacts. The study also documents how churches and Christian institutions, during the aggression and under unlawful occupation, were transformed into spaces of collective refuge and humanitarian shelter for civilians and forcibly displaced persons, both Christians and Muslims alike, amid the widespread collapse of spaces of safety and civilian protection in Gaza.

The documented facts presented in the study demonstrate that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions was not merely an attack on religious or heritage buildings but rather carried deeper consequences affecting the collective sense of safety and stability, while reinforcing the perception that the boundaries separating places of worship from military targeting had collapsed. The study further reveals how certain churches, which should have enjoyed special protection under international law, became sites where civilians and displaced persons were subjected to bombardment, killing, or direct

danger while seeking refuge inside them, thereby deepening the sense of loss of humanitarian protection even within religious spaces themselves.

The study highlights the compounded impact of the aggression on the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, particularly in light of the already limited number of indigenous Palestinian Christians and their continuous decline over recent decades as a result of the blockade and closure, repeated military attacks, economic and social deterioration, direct and indirect forced displacement, and the erosion of conditions necessary for stability and survival. According to official data issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2017, the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip stood at 1,138 individuals, while subsequent church and media estimates indicate a continued decline in numbers prior to the current aggression, alongside growing concerns over the accelerating demographic contraction of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Strip. The study explains that the danger of these transformations does not lie merely in their numerical dimension, but rather in what they signify regarding the sustainability of an indigenous Palestinian component deeply rooted in Palestinian national identity and in the historical pluralism of Palestinian society.

The study also highlights the disproportionate impact of the aggression on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups within churches and Christian institutions, whether in terms of difficulties related to evacuation, mobility, reasonable accommodation, and access to care and essential services in line with a disability inclusion approach, or in terms of the loss of spaces of community protection and support networks that these institutions had provided during periods of siege and aggression. The documented facts reveal that the targeting of religious and humanitarian shelters and care spaces intensified isolation, fear, and loss of security among many persons with disabilities, older persons, patients, and children, amid the near-total collapse of Gaza's health and service infrastructure.

The study concludes that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip raises grave legal and humanitarian concerns in light of the rules of international humanitarian law, customary international law, international human rights law, and international criminal law, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians, civilian objects, places of worship, and cultural property during armed conflicts and unlawful occupation throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, as affirmed by the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. It further stresses that the repeated attacks on churches and spaces of humanitarian refuge, together with the extensive harm inflicted upon civilians sheltering within them, necessitate independent and effective international investigations, as well as accountability and an end to impunity.

At the same time, the study emphasizes that the issue of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip cannot be reduced to a narrow religious or sectarian framework. Rather, it is intrinsically linked to the protection of the civilian population, the preservation of Palestinian historical pluralism, and the safeguarding of Palestinian collective memory and spaces of humanitarian refuge, human dignity, and national dignity in the face of aggression and grave violations. When churches, where civilians and forcibly displaced persons sought refuge as safe havens and among the last remaining spaces of humanitarian protection, become sites of bombardment, fear, and death, the issue transcends the targeting of a sacred religious site and becomes a profound moral, legal, and humanitarian question concerning the capacity of the international system to protect human beings during armed conflicts.

In this context, ecclesiastical and national testimonies acquire particular significance as expressions of the profound humanitarian and existential tragedy experienced by Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip, as well as of their organic connection to Palestinian national identity. As His Eminence Archbishop Atallah Hanna affirmed in his testimony to QADER for Community Development, defending Palestine is a defense of Christian history itself, and Palestinian Christians are not a separate minority detached from their people, but rather an authentic and integral part of the Palestinian people, their history, memory, and struggle for freedom, justice, and human dignity. Their cause is the cause of the entire Palestinian people (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025).

1. Introduction

This study emerges at an exceptionally critical moment in the history of the Palestinian people, within the context of one of the most severe waves of aggression and genocide crimes witnessed in the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023. Israeli military attacks have targeted churches and the Christian presence in the Strip, with all that this presence represents in terms of profound religious, cultural, and historical symbolism deeply rooted in Palestinian history across centuries. The impact of the aggression has not been limited to targeting places of worship as civilian objects protected under international law, but has also extended to humanitarian and spiritual spaces that had become shelters for forcibly displaced civilians, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, amid the widespread collapse of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.

The gravity of this targeting stems from the fact that it affects an integral component of the Palestinian social fabric and national identity, while raising questions that go beyond the material dimension of widespread destruction to encompass the profound implications for the future of the Christian presence in Gaza and throughout Palestine, as well as for Palestinian social cohesion in the face of an Israeli aggression that has targeted people, stone, and collective memory alike.

QADER for Community Development, guided by its role in promoting citizenship, defending indivisible rights and inherent human dignity, particularly the rights of the most vulnerable groups, sought to prepare this study based on the systematic documentation of evidence-based facts, lived testimonies, and verified field evidence. This includes monitoring and analyzing the humanitarian, social, cultural, and legal impact of the aggression on the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip and throughout Palestine, with particular focus on persons with disabilities, whose risks of exposure to violence, exclusion, and loss of protection are significantly heightened during armed conflicts.

The study is grounded in direct and continuous fieldwork carried out within the Gaza Strip by the organization's field monitoring team, as well as in pivotal testimonies from religious and national figures, foremost among them Father Atallah Hanna, one of the most prominent Palestinian Christian voices advocating for rights and dignity. It also draws upon an in-depth analysis of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law, enabling the study to provide a comprehensive reading of the humanitarian and legal dimensions of targeting churches and Christian institutions, while linking these violations to pathways of international accountability and relevant protection mechanisms.

What the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip is facing today cannot be viewed as an isolated or incidental event, but rather as an extension of historical challenges that have escalated in an unprecedented manner due to the large-scale Israeli aggression and its far-reaching consequences. This reality has reshaped the conditions of a community limited in number yet deeply rooted in Palestinian history and national identity. These developments also revive critical questions regarding the future of religious and cultural pluralism in Palestine under conditions of aggression and displacement. Therefore, this study is concerned not only with documenting violations, but also with understanding their structural implications for the sustainability of the Christian presence itself, the role of churches as spaces of community and spiritual protection, and Palestinian social cohesion, while linking these issues to protection pathways, remedies, accountability, and the prevention of impunity.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-source human rights and analytical methodology that combines field documentation, legal analysis, and a socio-historical reading of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip. This approach enables the study to examine the targeting of churches and Christian institutions not as isolated incidents, but as part of the broader Israeli aggression against civilians and civilian objects, and the profound humanitarian, social, and cultural consequences that have resulted from it. The methodology is grounded in the collection of field-based evidence and its cross-verification, as well as the

analysis of the impact of the targeting on the Christian presence and the most vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities, while taking into account the humanitarian, symbolic, and rights-based dimensions of these sites as spaces of worship and community protection alike. The methodology includes the following elements:

2.1 Contextual Analysis

This included a review of the historical, geographical, and social context of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, as well as the role of the churches and Christian institutions examined in the study, including the Latin Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Arab Ahli Hospital (Baptist Hospital), which has Anglican ecclesiastical roots and religious symbolism linked to the Christian presence in Gaza, in spiritual, community, and humanitarian life. The analysis also included an in-depth reading of the demographic and social transformations affecting Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip, the threats faced by the Christian presence before and after the aggression on the Strip, and the connection of these dynamics to the broader context of unlawful occupation, blockade, widespread humanitarian collapse, and its impact on the social fabric and spaces of protection and humanitarian care.

2.2 Field Monitoring and Documentation

This included conducting field visits to the three churches and Christian institutions examined in the study, as well as the targeted sites and surrounding areas, with the aim of documenting evidence-based facts and monitoring the humanitarian, social, and legal impact of the targeting, while adopting disability inclusion as a guiding analytical lens in understanding the impact of the aggression on the most vulnerable groups in the Gaza Strip. This included:

- Monitoring damage and direct physical evidence in religious buildings and their facilities.
- Collecting testimonies from eyewitnesses, victims and survivors, and church officials.
- Gathering reliable photographs, video footage, and information of documentary and analytical value.
- Assessing the impact of the targeting on children, women, persons with disabilities, and older persons.
- Understanding the role played by churches and Christian institutions as shelters and spaces of community protection during the aggression.

The monitoring and documentation process adhered to relevant ethical principles and international standards, including respect for human dignity, informed consent, avoiding exposing victims or witnesses

to harm, ensuring confidentiality, privacy protection, and information security, as well as strengthening the credibility of evidence and its potential use in human rights analysis and relevant accountability processes.

2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The study included conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with religious and national figures, representatives of churches and Christian institutions, affected families, activists and humanitarian workers, as well as persons with disabilities and members of their families, with the aim of documenting the humanitarian, spiritual, social, and legal dimensions of the targeting, and understanding its impact on the Christian presence, the role of churches as spaces of community protection, and mechanisms of resilience and adaptation within Palestinian society during the ongoing aggression.

The interviews specifically included testimonies from:

- Father Atallah Hanna – Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem – in his capacity as a national and spiritual reference figure.
- Representatives of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip.
- Christian families whose homes or places of refuge were targeted.
- Activists and humanitarian workers involved in the field response.
- Persons with disabilities, or members of their families, who were directly or indirectly affected by the targeting.

The interviews focused on the humanitarian, spiritual, and rights-based dimensions of the attacks, as well as on the transformations affecting the sense of safety, the sustainability of the Christian presence in Gaza and throughout Palestine, and Palestinian social cohesion considering the aggression and its deep and far-reaching consequences.

2.4 Document and Secondary Sources Review

The study included the review and analysis of a wide range of relevant documents and secondary sources with the aim of supporting fact verification, conducting cross-checking and triangulation between available sources and evidence, understanding the historical and legal context of the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip, and linking field-based incidents to international legal and humanitarian frameworks. This review included:

- Statements, documents, and testimonies issued by churches, Christian institutions, patriarchates, and relevant religious bodies, including pastoral statements, humanitarian appeals, testimonies by religious figures, and documents related to the conditions of forcibly displaced persons and victims inside churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip.
- Relevant United Nations reports and mechanisms, including reports of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (COI), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Special Rapporteurs, relevant United Nations agencies, and international documents and positions related to the protection of civilians, civilian objects, and religious and cultural sites during armed conflicts.
- Human rights reports and legal and humanitarian analyses issued by reliable international and local organizations, including reports related to patterns of targeting, civilian protection, forced displacement, the protection of places of worship, and the protection of the most vulnerable groups during humanitarian emergencies, armed conflicts, and unlawful occupation in the Palestinian territory.
- Reliable media investigations and reports issued by international agencies and highly credible media institutions, including visual materials, field investigations, and open-source materials of documentary and analytical value.
- Historical and demographic documents and materials related to the Christian presence and churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip and Palestine, including demographic data and transformations associated with the Palestinian Christian presence across decades.
- International statements, appeals, and correspondence related to the protection of places of worship, spaces of humanitarian refuge, and the protection of civilians and civilian objects, particularly religious and cultural sites during armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies.
- Relevant international legal and normative frameworks, including the Geneva Conventions, the 1907 Hague Regulations, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, customary international law, the two International Covenants, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and relevant international resolutions, including United Nations Security Council Resolution 2475 (2019) on the protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict and humanitarian response, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

These sources contribute to supporting the cross-verification of information, strengthening the analytical and legal framework of the study, and linking field-based incidents to broader human rights,

humanitarian, and historical contexts, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the impact of targeting churches and Christian institutions on the Palestinian Christian presence, the most vulnerable groups, and the Palestinian social fabric in the context of the ongoing aggression.

2.5 Triangulation

The study adopted a triangulation methodology for information and evidence verification, as one of the key tools for strengthening reliability and accuracy in high-risk environments. This approach is based on comparing and analyzing information derived from multiple sources and different types of evidence before incorporating it into the analytical or legal framework of the study, through:

- Direct testimonies, including those of religious figures, victims and survivors, and eyewitnesses.
- Physical and technical evidence such as photographs, video footage, traces of bombardment, and relevant documents and reports.
- Reliable sources, including international, human rights, media, and church reports, as well as relevant official documents.

This methodology contributes to strengthening the credibility of the documented facts, examining consistency across different narratives and forms of evidence, enhancing the quality, reliability, and integrity of the evidence, and developing a more accurate human rights, legal, and humanitarian analysis prior to the adoption of the study's final findings.

2.6 International Legal Framework and Classification of Violations

The study examined a multi-layered legal analysis of the targeting of churches and Christian organizations in the Gaza Strip, in light of the rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (IHRL), customary international law (CIL), and international criminal law, while taking into account the specific nature of places of worship and Christian organizations as protected civilian objects and spaces of community and humanitarian protection during armed conflict and the unlawful occupation in the occupied Palestinian territory. This analysis includes:

- Examining the nature of the targeting and whether it constitutes direct attacks against places of worship and Christian organizations, or forms part of a broader pattern of attacks against civilians and civilian objects, while assessing whether the patterns of targeting may, based on evidence-based analysis and cross-verification of credible evidence, amount to the gravest international crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and potentially acts constituting genocide.

- Assessing grave violations through an intersecting legal analysis of the rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Human Rights Law (IHRL), customary international law (CIL), and other relevant legal frameworks.
- Analyzing the impact of the targeting on persons with disabilities and other groups in vulnerable situations, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), relevant General Comments and Concluding Observations issued by treaty bodies, reports of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (COI), and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2475 (2019) on the protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict.
- Analyzing the impact of the targeting on religious symbols, the Palestinian Christian presence, and cultural and religious identity within the context of conflict and unlawful occupation, considering international protection frameworks relating to civilian objects, places of worship, and cultural property.

2.7 Christian Presence in Gaza: Social and Demographic Transformations

This section examines the demographic and social transformations related to the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, while linking them to the broader context of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. It seeks to provide an understanding of the impact of repeated and large-scale Israeli attacks, particularly the ongoing assault since 7 October 2023, on the sustainability and future of this presence.

Official data issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, alongside intersecting church, media, and other estimates, indicate a continuous decline in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip over recent decades. While some church and media sources estimated their population in the thousands during the 1990s, the 2017 census conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics recorded only 1,138 Christians in the Gaza Strip. Subsequent estimates indicated a further decline in numbers prior to the ongoing assault since 7 October 2023, amid growing warnings regarding the accelerating demographic contraction of the Christian presence in the Strip.

Although some estimates vary in the absence of an updated population census following the assault, available indicators converge on a central reality: the sharp and accelerating **decline in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip**. This reflects mounting concerns regarding the sustainability and future of this historic presence amid the large-scale assault and the erosion of the conditions necessary for survival and stability (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, alongside credible church, human rights, and media sources).

The study treated official population data as the primary point of reference, while also drawing on church and media estimates, as well as qualitative testimonies, as interpretive indicators linked to the realities of the assault and forced transfer, and the rapid demographic transformations and threats imposed on the Gaza Strip as a result. This approach is particularly significant considering the absence of an updated population census following the assault, and the ongoing preparations for the 2027 Population, Housing, and Establishments Census.

This sharp decline is therefore not understood merely as a demographic shift, but rather as an indicator of the growing risks threatening the sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip amid the large-scale assault and the erosion of the conditions necessary for survival, protection, and stability. This includes:

- Examining the historical context of changes in the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip and linking them to broader demographic, social, and political transformations in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Palestine as a whole.
- Analyzing the political, economic, social, and humanitarian factors associated with the decline in numbers over the decades, including the effects of the Israeli occupation, blockade, military attacks, and direct and indirect forced transfer.
- Assessing the impact of the assault on feelings of safety and stability, as well as intentions to remain or migrate, in the context of repeated waves of targeting, forced transfer, policies of persecution and apartheid, and the loss of community protection and future prospects.
- Evaluating future risks that may threaten the sustainability of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip and across Palestine more broadly, and the implications of this for Palestinian national identity and the historical pluralism of Palestinian society.
- Analyzing the implications of these developments for the Palestinian social fabric, the concept of inclusive citizenship, and the historical social relations that have long constituted part of the Palestinian national structure.

Accordingly, the study does not approach the demographic transformations associated with the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip as a purely statistical issue, but rather as an indicator of deeper transformations affecting the sustainability of religious and cultural pluralism in Palestine. It further reveals the impact of repeated attacks on Gaza, policies of forced transfer, and the erosion of spaces of protection and stability on the future of an indigenous Palestinian component deeply rooted in Palestinian history and national identity over many centuries.

These transformations also highlight how demographic vulnerability, within the context of protracted conflict and forced transfer, can evolve into an existential threat affecting the continuity of the Palestinian Christian presence and its social, cultural, and spiritual roles within Palestinian society.

2.8 Disability Inclusion and the Most Vulnerable Groups

The study adopts disability inclusion as a cross-cutting structural analytical framework across its various components, enabling an understanding of the disproportionate and compounded impact of systematic Israeli attacks on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. It further examines how the targeting of churches and Christian organizations undermines spaces of community protection and the essential services upon which civilians rely during armed conflict and belligerent occupation. This component includes the documentation and analysis of:

The impact of Israeli attacks on protected civilians, including persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, within churches and Christian organizations, or while these spaces were being used for humanitarian shelter and community refuge.

- Challenges related to safe evacuation, mobility, and access to protection, healthcare, essential services, and assistive devices, particularly amid the collapse of infrastructure and the disruption of support and care networks during the assault.
- The role of churches and Christian organizations as spaces of protection, humanitarian assistance, and community support, including the care and support networks they provided for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.
- The impact of Israeli targeting of places of worship and community services on the autonomy and dignity of persons with disabilities, as well as on their safe, sustainable, and effective access to networks of support, care, and humanitarian protection.
- The prolonged psychosocial and humanitarian consequences resulting from the loss of spaces of community protection, the erosion of traditional systems of support and care, and the deepening of isolation and vulnerability during armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies.

The findings of this analysis were integrated into the study's broader framework to strengthen its comprehensive, intersectional human rights and humanitarian analysis of the documented violations. This approach links the targeting of churches and Christian organizations to its impact on vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities, and on the sustainability of community protection systems,

while also examining how large-scale attacks and destruction contribute to deepening exclusion and vulnerability and undermining networks of support, care, and human dignity in the Gaza Strip.

2.9 Formulation of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Following the completion of monitoring, documentation, and cross-verification of evidence and information, the study's findings and recommendations were formulated within an integrated analytical framework linking field realities to the broader legal, humanitarian, and social contexts. This approach enables the development of an in-depth understanding of the nature of the targeting of churches and Christian organizations in the Gaza Strip and its far-reaching consequences. This includes:

- Analyzing the nature and patterns of targeting, and their implications within the context of Israeli attacks against civilians and civilian objects.
- Analyzing the impact of the targeting on the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip and Palestine as a whole, including its historical, social, and cultural sustainability. This includes transformations related to feelings of safety and stability, intentions to remain or to undergo direct or indirect forced transfer, and the implications of these dynamics for the historical pluralism and national identity of the Palestinian people.
- Analyzing the disproportionate impact of the assault on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, particularly amid the erosion of spaces of community protection, the collapse of essential services, and the growing risks of structural discrimination, violence, exclusion, and loss of access to support, care, and protection networks during armed conflict and belligerent occupation.
- Analyzing the implications of the targeting for the Palestinian social fabric, historical pluralism, the concept of inclusive citizenship, and networks of community protection and support. This includes its impact on long-standing social relations, the sustainability of the Palestinian social structure, and the unity of the Palestinian people's shared human and national destiny.
- Drawing out the human rights, humanitarian, and legal implications related to the protection of places of worship, civilian objects, and protected groups during armed conflict and unlawful occupation in the Palestinian territory, while linking these findings to pathways of international accountability and the legal obligations incumbent upon states, United Nations bodies, and other relevant actors.

2.10 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study faced a range of methodological and contextual limitations associated with the nature of the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip and the extensive destruction it inflicted upon infrastructure and civilian objects, alongside the continuous deterioration of humanitarian and security conditions and the difficulties of safely accessing certain affected sites and their surrounding areas. The study was also affected by restrictions on the movement of field researchers, repeated disruptions to communication networks and electricity, and the complex humanitarian and security environment. In some cases, it further relied partially on testimonies and information that could not be immediately completed due to the risks surrounding victims and witnesses.

Nevertheless, these limitations were addressed through the adoption of a cross-verification methodology for evidence and information, relying on more than one independent source for each documented incident. This approach strengthened the reliability of the analysis, the quality of the evidence, and the integrity of the study's final conclusions.

2.11 Recommendations and International Advocacy

In light of the documented facts and the legal, humanitarian, social, and psychosocial analysis presented throughout the study, an integrated framework of recommendations, human rights interventions, and international advocacy pathways was developed with the aim of protecting civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects in the Gaza Strip; safeguarding the Palestinian Christian presence; strengthening the protection of vulnerable groups; and ensuring international accountability and non-impunity. The study also sought to connect the documented violations with relevant international legal frameworks and mechanisms for protection, accountability, and remedy, thereby contributing to national and international efforts aimed at protecting the Palestinian people and preserving spaces of humanitarian refuge during armed conflict and unlawful occupation in Palestine.

Within this context, the study developed a package of recommendations, human rights interventions, and international advocacy measures, including:

- Emphasizing the need to protect, preserve, support, and empower the Palestinian Christian presence as an integral component of the national identity and the historical and cultural pluralism of Palestinian society. This includes working to provide the humanitarian, social, and economic conditions that enable Palestinian Christian citizens to remain on their land, continue

their spiritual and societal role, strengthen their resilience, and preserve their historic and human presence in Palestine.

- Directing human rights demands and advocacy interventions toward the United Nations and its bodies and agencies, Special Rapporteurs, states, international organizations, and global churches in order to strengthen international protection for civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects in the Gaza Strip; ensure respect for and implementation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law; and protect places of worship and spaces of humanitarian refuge during armed conflict and unlawful occupation in Palestine.
- Affirming the protection of churches and Christian organizations as an obligation under international law, while supporting their rehabilitation and the restoration of their spiritual, social, and humanitarian roles during recovery and reconstruction phases. This would contribute to strengthening community resilience, sustaining the Palestinian Christian presence, and protecting networks of support, care, and social cohesion.
- Stressing the necessity of integrating a disability inclusion approach throughout all phases of humanitarian response, recovery, and reconstruction, while enhancing the protection of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups during armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies, and ensuring their safe and sustainable access to protection, healthcare, essential services, and humanitarian assistance.
- Drawing on the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice issued on 19 July 2024, as well as the United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-10/24, as an international legal framework establishing obligations upon states, United Nations bodies and agencies, and international organizations. These obligations include the protection of civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects in Gaza; safeguarding the Palestinian Christian presence; refraining from recognizing unlawful situations arising from the unlawful occupation; refraining from providing aid or assistance that contributes to its continuation; and supporting pathways toward accountability, remedy, and non-impunity.

The study further emphasizes that churches which became spaces of humanitarian refuge and safe shelter for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, particularly for the most vulnerable groups, no longer represent places of worship alone. Rather, they have become witnesses to the fragility of international protection and to the enduring human need for a space that remains inviolable, and for a final meaning of human dignity in times of assault and collapse.

3. Incidents Targeting Churches and the Christian Presence in the Gaza Strip

The targeting of churches and Christian organizations in the Gaza Strip, whether directly or indirectly, represents one of the most serious developments associated with the systematic and large-scale Israeli assault on the Strip since 7 October 2023. This is due to the consequences extending beyond material destruction to affect spaces of community protection, religious symbolism, and the historical presence of Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip. These churches and organizations were not merely religious buildings or service facilities; rather, over many decades, they constituted part of the Palestinian social, humanitarian, and cultural fabric, serving as spaces for worship, care, protection, and community solidarity. During the assault, they sheltered hundreds of forcibly displaced Palestinians, including both Christians and Muslims alike.

The gravity of this targeting is further heightened by the already limited number of Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip, alongside growing concerns regarding the sustainability of their historic presence, the erosion of feelings of safety, and the diminishing trust in the presumed protection afforded to religious sites and civilian objects under international law. The incidents addressed in this section also reveal the disproportionate impact of the ongoing assault on persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, particularly amid the collapse of protection systems and essential services, and the loss of spaces for humanitarian and community support during armed conflict and belligerent occupation.

The following section presents and analyzes the incidents related to the three churches and Christian organizations examined in this study, supported by historical, social, and human rights analysis, and grounded in documented testimonies, verified incidents, and relevant church, human rights, and international reports.

3.1 Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church – Gaza Old City

3.1.1 Historical, Religious, and Community Background

Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church is considered one of the oldest historic churches in Palestine and the world, with its earliest origins dating back to the fifth century CE. It constitutes one of the most prominent religious and heritage landmarks associated with the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). Throughout its long history, the church has been associated with a spiritual, social, and humanitarian role that extended beyond the Christian community itself, serving as a space for social gathering and as part of the historical memory and authentic Palestinian national identity, clearly reflecting the historical pluralism of Palestinian society.

Over many centuries, the church was not merely a religious or archaeological landmark but remained a living part of the deeply rooted Palestinian Christian presence in Gaza City. This carries important implications related to the continuity of the historical presence of Palestinian Christian citizens within the broader Palestinian national fabric. Its historical and spiritual character also granted it a particular symbolic status among the residents of the Gaza Strip, as one of the few landmarks that endured successive political transformations, wars, and occupations, before once again finding itself at the center of the widespread destruction inflicted upon the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023.

During the systematic Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, the church was transformed into a refuge for civilians and forcibly displaced persons seeking protection and safety amid the intensifying bombardment and targeting of residential neighborhoods and civilian objects. It became one of the last remaining spaces of community protection where civilians sought shelter during the assault, including displaced families, children, older persons, and individuals from the most vulnerable groups, in a scene reflecting the unprecedented erosion of civilian and humanitarian spaces of safety in Gaza City.

In this context, Archbishop Atallah Hanna affirmed in his testimony to QADER for Community Development that churches and Christian organizations in the Gaza Strip were transformed during the assault into spaces of protection and humanitarian shelter for civilians and forcibly displaced persons amid the widespread collapse of spaces of safety and protection across the Strip. This included receiving persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups within monasteries and churches, despite the severe shortages of food, milk, medicine, care, services, and essential needs (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025).

3.1.2 Facts of the Targeting and Its Implications

On the evening of 19 October 2023, the compound of the Church of Saint Porphyrius was subjected to an Israeli airstrike that resulted in the complete collapse of one of the buildings affiliated with the church complex and caused extensive damage to surrounding structures, while the main historic sanctuary of the church remained standing. The attack killed 18 Palestinian Christian civilians, including women and children, and injured dozens of people who had sought shelter inside the church and its surroundings (Amnesty International, 2023; Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). The military attack took place at a time when the church compound was being used as a place of refuge and humanitarian shelter for civilians and persons forcibly displaced, amid the widening bombardment and the absence of safe spaces in Gaza City.

This incident acquires heightened gravity given that the church compound was neither an abandoned site nor isolated from the civilian population. Rather, it was widely known as a place of civilian refuge and humanitarian shelter amid the expanding bombardment and the lack of safe spaces in Gaza City. Furthermore, the nature of the victims, the humanitarian function carried out by the site at the time of the attack, and the failure of the occupying authorities to provide public information or evidence regarding the alleged military target, or to announce the establishment of an independent and transparent investigation committee and publish its findings, clearly demonstrate a disregard for the principles of international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of military necessity, proportionality, distinction, and the obligation to take precautions necessary to protect civilians and civilian objects, especially in light of the repeated large-scale attacks targeting places of worship, healthcare facilities, residential neighborhoods, and civilian infrastructure across the Gaza Strip.

The incident provoked widespread international and ecclesiastical condemnation. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem described the military attack targeting the church as a **“war crime,”** while the World Council of Churches condemned the targeting of a religious site sheltering civilians and displaced persons (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, 2023; World Council of Churches, 2023). These statements reflect the magnitude of the shock caused by the bombing within religious and humanitarian circles, particularly given the transformation of the church into a humanitarian protection space for civilians protected under international law. The targeting of the church also renewed attention to the erosion of international protection afforded to places of worship and civilian objects during armed conflicts, and to the increasing dangers faced by civilians who seek refuge in religious spaces as among the last possible places of shelter amid the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

In contrast, the Israeli military announced that it had targeted a Hamas “command and control center” near the church and claimed that the damage inflicted on the church building was unintended. However, it failed to provide public information or evidence, or to establish an independent and transparent investigation committee and publish its findings, in a manner that would allow verification of whether the attack complied with the rules of international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of military necessity, proportionality, distinction, and the obligation to take precautions necessary to protect civilians and civilian objects.

This occurred within the broader context of widespread and repeated attacks targeting civilians, residential neighborhoods, hospitals, universities, schools, places of worship, and civilian infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip, constituting strong indications of grave violations of international law that require independent international investigations, the publication of findings, and the pursuit of

international accountability, justice, and non-impunity, as well as the protection of the sanctity of the church and those who sought refuge there as a safe haven for humanitarian protection during the assault. This also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of international protection mechanisms for places of worship and humanitarian refuge spaces during armed conflicts.

3.1.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting

The targeting of the Church of Saint Porphyrius was not merely an incident affecting a historic religious building; rather, it represented a profound humanitarian and spiritual shock for the Palestinian Christian community and for the civilians who had sought refuge in the church as one of the last remaining spaces of community protection in Gaza City. The bombing further deepened the collective sense of collapse in trust regarding the presumed protection afforded to religious sites and civilian objects under international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and customary international law. It also reinforced among many Palestinian Christians a growing sense of vulnerability and fear concerning the future of their existence within the Gaza Strip, which has endured years of blockade, amid the large-scale assault and the extensive humanitarian and social consequences it has produced.

The targeting of the church also revealed the erosion of the boundaries separating religious and humanitarian spaces on the one hand, and the sphere of military operations on the other, in a manner that led many civilians to feel that places of worship themselves were no longer capable of providing even the minimum level of psychological or symbolic protection historically associated with them during conflicts and humanitarian crises under the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory, as affirmed by the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. This transformation was not limited to its direct material or security impact, but also carried profound psychological, spiritual, and social consequences for a small Palestinian Christian community living under the continuous fear of forced transfer, contraction, and the loss of historical continuity within the Gaza Strip.

The impact of the attack extended further by reinforcing the sense that traditional spaces of refuge, long associated in the collective consciousness with sanctity, safety, and humanitarian protection, had collapsed. It reproduced feelings of insecurity even within religious and historical sites that are presumed to enjoy special protection under international law. These effects acquire additional gravity given the symbolic nature of the church as part of the Palestinian religious and national memory, and the extent to which harming it represents a threat that transcends physical destruction to undermine the sense of stability, belonging, and historical continuity of a community already facing the risks of contraction and ongoing demographic erosion, while deepening feelings of helplessness and uncertainty among many civilians.

In this context, many civilians no longer viewed the church merely as a place of worship or a historical landmark, but rather as part of the humanitarian and collective memory associated with the ideas of protection, serenity, and continuity in the face of fear, siege, and repeated attacks. Consequently, the targeting of a space historically associated with refuge and hope left an impact extending far beyond the immediate moment, affecting the deeper sense of safety, stability, and the ability to seek shelter even within the places most closely connected with reassurance and sanctity in human and spiritual consciousness. This transformation also deepened the perception that the ongoing assault on Gaza no longer targets bodies and buildings alone, but has expanded to encompass the symbolic and spiritual spaces that people once regarded as among the last remaining meanings of protection, serenity, human continuity, and refuge in the face of collapse and ongoing fear.

This incident further demonstrates the complex nature of targeting religious and humanitarian spaces during armed conflicts, particularly when places of worship themselves become spaces for collective refuge and humanitarian shelter for civilians and persons forcibly displaced. In such circumstances, any attack on these sites produces consequences that extend beyond direct human and material losses to affect collective memory, the social sense of safety and stability, human dignity, and trust in the protection presumed under international law for civilian objects and places of worship during armed conflicts. The incident also illustrates how targeting places of worship that perform humanitarian and social functions during conflicts contributes to undermining local networks of solidarity, care, and protection, while weakening the ability of civilian communities to endure and survive in the face of forced transfer, violence, and the widespread collapse of humanitarian and service infrastructures.

3.1.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups

The Church of Saint Porphyrius was sheltering, alongside displaced families, individuals from the most vulnerable groups, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, which significantly heightened the humanitarian risks during the bombing, particularly in relation to movement, evacuation, access to protection, medical care, and essential services. These risks were further exacerbated by the sudden nature of the attack, the overcrowding within the church compound, and the widespread collapse of the healthcare and service infrastructure in Gaza, leaving response, evacuation, and post-attack care capacities severely limited and nearly non-existent for persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups.

Available facts and reliable sources indicate that, at the time of the attack, the church compound was sheltering displaced families and civilians from the most vulnerable groups, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, amid the absence of alternative safe spaces and the escalating

bombardment across Gaza City. Although no publicly available lists identifying the persons with disabilities present inside the church at the moment of the attack have been published, the nature of the compound as a collective humanitarian shelter, together with the profile of those displaced within it, demonstrates that persons with disabilities were among the groups most exposed to risks associated with difficulties in movement, evacuation, and access to care and protection during the attack (Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023).

These facts further reveal the extreme vulnerability of persons with disabilities during large-scale attacks targeting civilian objects and community refuge spaces, particularly since the beginning of the assault on the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023. This vulnerability has been intensified by the near-total collapse of the healthcare sector and essential services in Gaza, power and communications outages, and the severe difficulties in accessing assistance, medical care, and safe evacuation. Such risks acquire even greater gravity when attacks occur in religious or humanitarian spaces that were presumed to function as places of civilian and community protection during armed conflicts.

The targeting of the church undermined one of the community protection spaces that had provided civilians with a minimum level of safety and humanitarian, social, and spiritual support during the assault. The impact extended beyond the immediate human and material losses to deepen feelings of fear, loss of protection, and exclusion among persons with disabilities, amid the erosion of support networks and the systematic collapse of spaces of refuge and community care during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

These facts demonstrate that the impact of targeting community refuge spaces extends beyond direct human losses to undermine the limited environments that enabled persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups to access minimum levels of safety, care, and community support during the assault. They also reveal the unequal nature of the risks faced by these groups under prolonged occupation, where difficulties related to movement, evacuation, and access to essential services become direct threats to life and dignity, particularly amid the collapse of protection systems, care structures, and essential services throughout the Gaza Strip.

The targeting of the Church of Saint Porphyrius further demonstrates that attacks on places of worship during armed conflicts do not merely damage buildings or religious facilities, but also strike at spaces of community protection, historical memory, and the collective sense of safety and stability. The incident illustrates how the targeting of a religious and historical site sheltering civilians and displaced persons evolved into an event that transcended its immediate physical boundaries, affecting the very presence of

Palestinian Christians and deepening feelings of vulnerability and loss of protection amid a large-scale assault and the accelerating collapse of humanitarian and civilian spaces in the Gaza Strip.

3.2 Holy Family Catholic Church – Al-Zaytoun, Gaza

3.2.1 Religious, Social, and Humanitarian Background

The Holy Family Latin Church is the only Catholic church in the Gaza Strip and belongs to the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. For decades, it has constituted a major religious, spiritual, and humanitarian center for the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza (Latin Patriarchate, 2023; Vatican News, 2024). The role of the church has not been limited to its traditional religious function, but has extended to the provision of educational, healthcare, social, and humanitarian services, reinforcing its position as an active and integral component of the Palestinian social fabric and as a space for solidarity and community care amid the blockade and repeated attacks on the Gaza Strip.

The church was not merely the seat of the Catholic parish in Gaza, but was also closely associated with shelter, care, and humanitarian support services, including the care of older persons, persons with disabilities, patients, and other most vulnerable groups, particularly through its affiliated facilities and the convent of the Missionaries of Charity sisters (Latin Patriarchate, 2023; Vatican News, 2024). Over many years, these facilities carried out humanitarian and social functions that extended beyond the scope of traditional religious service and became part of local care networks providing daily support and social protection for the most vulnerable groups amid the prolonged blockade and deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip, which has been subjected to repeated military attacks. The church and its facilities were also consistently associated with hosting patients, older persons, and persons with disabilities and providing them with humanitarian and pastoral assistance, further strengthening their role as spaces of humanitarian protection that contributed to preserving social cohesion and safeguarding human dignity amid blockade, military assault, and the repeated collapse of civilian and service infrastructure in the Gaza Strip.

During the large-scale Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023, the church and its facilities increasingly transformed into a space for humanitarian protection, collective shelter, and refuge for civilians and persons forcibly displaced, directly and indirectly, including both Christians and Muslims, amid the widespread collapse of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, the absence of safe spaces, and the expansion of displacement. Throughout successive periods, the church sheltered children, women, older persons, patients, and persons with disabilities, giving its presence a heightened humanitarian dimension that extended beyond its traditional religious role and rendering any attack against it, or

exposure of it to danger, a matter carrying direct consequences for the right to life, physical safety, and humanitarian protection of civilians during armed conflicts.

3.2.2 Facts of the Targeting and Repeated Attacks

The Holy Family Church and its affiliated facilities were subjected, during the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, to a series of military attacks and incidents targeting civilians and displaced persons within the church compound and its surroundings. On 16 December 2023, the two Christian women, Nahida Khalil Anton and her daughter Samar Kamal Anton, were killed by Israeli sniper fire while inside the church compound, and several other civilians were injured while attempting to assist them (Latin Patriarchate, 2023; Vatican News, 2023; ACN International, 2023). The gravity of this incident is heightened by the fact that it did not occur in the vicinity of an armed confrontation or a declared military site, but rather inside a religious compound widely known for its humanitarian and sheltering function during the assault on the Gaza Strip. This prompted widespread condemnation and clear criticism regarding repeated violations of the rules protecting civilians and religious objects safeguarded under international law. The incident also acquired an additional humanitarian dimension given the victims' involvement in community care services within the church and in supporting children with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups.

In the same context, the convent of the Missionaries of Charity affiliated with the church was subjected to shelling that destroyed the electricity generator, caused a fire, and damaged facilities sheltering persons with disabilities, older persons, and patients (Latin Patriarchate, 2023; Vatican News, 2023). Church and human rights sources indicate that the convent was sheltering dozens of persons with disabilities at the time of the attack, and that the destruction of the electricity generator and fuel supplies caused direct harm to conditions of care, accommodation, and access to essential services, particularly for individuals dependent on electricity, continuous medical support, or assistive devices for survival, mobility, and basic healthcare. This significantly worsened the humanitarian and health risks faced by these groups amid the widespread power outages, the near-total collapse of the healthcare sector, and the severe difficulties in evacuation and access to safe medical care during the assault. The incident further reveals the complex humanitarian consequences resulting from attacks on religious and humanitarian care and shelter spaces, where military attacks evolve from causing material damage to facilities into direct threats to the conditions necessary for survival and dignified living for persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups.

The church was targeted again on 17 July 2025 in a direct Israeli military strike that killed three people and injured others, including the parish priest, Father Gabriel Romanelli, who sustained shrapnel injuries while inside the compound. The attack caused extensive material damage affecting parts of the church

roof, internal facilities, and courtyards that had been sheltering hundreds of displaced persons (Latin Patriarchate, 2025; Vatican News, 2025; Reuters, 2025; AP, 2025). The attack provoked widespread international and ecclesiastical condemnation, particularly given the clearly identifiable religious, humanitarian, and sheltering nature of the site and its sanctity, as well as its transformation during the assault into a space for collective refuge and temporary accommodation for civilians and persons forcibly displaced in the Gaza Strip.

This attack also renewed attention to the expanding risks facing places of worship and civilian protection spaces during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip, as well as to the erosion of the presumed protection afforded under international law to religious and humanitarian objects and to civilians seeking refuge within them as among the last remaining places of shelter during armed conflicts.

The repeated targeting of the church and its facilities, despite the clear visibility of their religious, humanitarian, and sheltering functions, demonstrates the expanding dangers confronting places of worship and civilian protection spaces during the assault on the Gaza Strip. This reflects a serious erosion in the effectiveness of the presumed protection afforded under international law to religious objects and civilians who seek refuge in them as among the last remaining spaces of shelter during armed conflicts and belligerent occupation. It further reveals the growing fragility of humanitarian and religious environments that are supposed to enjoy special protection under international law, as well as the widening gap between the legal guarantees established under its provisions and the reality of effective protection for civilians and civilian objects during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

The facts related to the targeting of churches and Christian institutions further reveal the grave implications of repeated attacks against religious, cultural, and humanitarian objects during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly when these sites are widely known for their civilian and sheltering functions and are being used to protect civilians and displaced persons. The impact of these violations extends beyond direct human and material losses to undermine the special protection afforded to religious and cultural sites and to harm historical memory, community identity, and the human existence of the groups who sought refuge within them during the assault.

In light of the systematic, repeated, and widespread nature of these military attacks targeting religious, cultural, and humanitarian objects, serious legal implications arise regarding the possibility of classifying them within the framework of grave violations of international humanitarian law and the category of international crimes under international criminal law, particularly in relation to the protection of religious and cultural objects and civilians during armed conflicts and under the illegal occupation of the occupied

Palestinian territory. These legal dimensions will be examined in a comprehensive and detailed manner later in the section dedicated to the international legal and normative framework of the study.

3.2.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting

The targeting of the Holy Family Church constituted a profound blow to one of the most important spaces of community and spiritual protection for Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip and reinforced the perception of the collapse of the boundaries separating places of worship from sites of attack during the large-scale assault. The attacks also deepened feelings of fear and uncertainty regarding the future of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, particularly considering the small size of the Christian community and the erosion of spaces of safety and protection. Throughout the assault, the church demonstrated a significant role in sheltering persons forcibly displaced and in providing humanitarian assistance and essential services despite repeated threats and attacks.

The targeting of the church further revealed the increasing collapse of the boundaries separating religious and humanitarian spaces on the one hand, and the sphere of military operations on the other, thereby deepening the collective perception that places of worship themselves no longer provide even the minimum level of psychological or symbolic protection historically associated with their spiritual and humanitarian functions during conflicts and humanitarian crises.

The impact was not limited to the Palestinian Christian community alone, but extended to the broader social fabric, which viewed the church as a space of solidarity, care, and collective refuge amid the accelerating collapse of civilian and humanitarian spaces in the Gaza Strip. The attacks also carried profound psychological, spiritual, and social consequences for a small Palestinian Christian community already living under the continuous fear of forced transfer, contraction, demographic erosion, and the loss of historical continuity.

The targeting reinforced the perception of the collapse of traditional refuge spaces historically associated in the collective consciousness with sanctity, safety, and humanitarian protection, reproducing feelings of insecurity even within religious sites presumed to enjoy special protection under international law. These consequences acquire additional gravity given the symbolic significance of the church as part of the Palestinian religious and national memory, and the extent to which harming it constitutes a threat that transcends material destruction to undermine feelings of stability, belonging, and historical continuity within a community already facing the risks of contraction and ongoing demographic erosion.

These facts demonstrate that targeting places of worship performing humanitarian and sheltering functions during conflicts extends beyond attacks against religious objects or direct human losses and instead contributes to undermining community protection and solidarity networks, weakening the ability of civilian communities to endure and survive, and deepening the collective sense of loss of safety, protection, and human dignity.

3.2.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups

The targeting of the Holy Family Church and its affiliated facilities deepened the risks faced by persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups, particularly as the church had transformed during the assault into a space for humanitarian protection and collective shelter for civilians and persons forcibly displaced. The impact of the attacks was not limited to direct material damage but extended to undermining one of the few remaining environments that provided a degree of safety, community support, and humanitarian care within a context marked by the widespread collapse of civilian infrastructure and essential services in the Gaza Strip. The damage inflicted on the church's humanitarian facilities also disrupted the daily care networks and community support systems upon which persons with disabilities, older persons, and patients relied during periods of blockade, bombardment, and forced transfer, particularly in the absence of sufficient humanitarian alternatives capable of providing life-saving protection and care.

These consequences particularly affected persons with disabilities, older persons, patients, and children, who face compounded challenges related to movement, evacuation, and access to food, medicine, healthcare, facilities, and assistive devices. Church and human rights sources indicate that the church's affiliated facilities, particularly the convent of the Missionaries of Charity, which at the time of the attack sheltered dozens of persons with disabilities, older persons, and patients, documented the presence of at least 54 persons with disabilities inside the convent when it was shelled in December 2023. The attack resulted in the destruction of the electricity generator, the outbreak of fire, and direct damage to conditions of care, accommodation, and access to essential services (Latin Patriarchate, 2023; Vatican News, 2024). These damages acquired heightened gravity given that some residents depended on electricity, assistive devices, continuous healthcare, and medical support necessary for movement, breathing, and daily medical follow-up, amid the collapse of the healthcare sector and the severe shortages of fuel, medicine, and essential supplies in the Gaza Strip.

These incidents revealed the compounded risks faced by persons with disabilities during armed conflicts and under the illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly given that some individuals depend on electricity, assistive devices, or continuous medical care, making power outages,

the destruction of generators, and fuel shortages direct threats to life, health, and human dignity. These risks were further intensified by the near-total collapse of the healthcare sector and essential services, the severe difficulties in accessing assistance, medical care, and safe evacuation, and the absence of humanitarian corridors and accessible mechanisms for protecting persons with disabilities during situations of danger and humanitarian emergencies. This clearly demonstrates the unequal and disproportionate humanitarian burden borne by the most vulnerable groups during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

The damage inflicted on the church's affiliated facilities and the disruption of their humanitarian and social functions also contributed to deepening the effects of isolation, exclusion, and loss of protection experienced by the most vulnerable groups, particularly amid repeated and widespread forced transfer across the Gaza Strip, the deterioration of the healthcare system and care institutions for persons with disabilities, power and communication outages, and the absence of safe corridors and accessible evacuation mechanisms for persons with disabilities. The impact was not limited to the loss of shelter or the disruption of essential services but extended to undermining the ability to continue providing daily care and health, psychological, and social support for groups directly dependent on stable environments and sustained community support networks for survival and protection.

These facts demonstrate that targeting shelter and care spaces with religious and humanitarian functions does not only result in direct human and material losses, but also leads to the collapse of the few environments that had provided minimum levels of protection, care, and community support for persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip. They further reveal that the collapse of these spaces does not affect all civilians equally, but instead imposes particularly severe and disproportionate consequences on persons with disabilities, older persons, and patients, whose ability to survive and access protection is closely tied to the continuity of care, shelter, humanitarian and psychosocial support services, and the existence of accessible arrangements facilitating evacuation, movement, and access to essential services.

The incidents involving the targeting of the Holy Family Church reveal that attacks on places of worship performing humanitarian and sheltering functions during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation do not merely undermine religious or civilian protection, but also disrupt the community care networks upon which persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups depend for survival and access to minimum levels of protection and human dignity. These incidents further demonstrate how places of worship, amid blockade and the widespread collapse of civilian infrastructure, become part of alternative humanitarian protection systems, rendering their targeting or the disruption of their humanitarian

functions a serious indication of the erosion of protection afforded to religious and humanitarian objects during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory. This also raises serious legal implications concerning the commission of grave violations under international humanitarian law and international obligations relating to the protection of civilians, persons with disabilities, and religious and cultural objects in the occupied Palestinian territory, as well as the corresponding elements and constitutive acts of international crimes under international criminal law.

3.3 Al-Ahli Arab (Baptist) Hospital – The Anglican Christian Institution in Gaza

3.3.1 Historical, Religious, and Humanitarian Background

The Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) is one of the oldest Christian medical institutions in the Gaza Strip, with historical roots connected to the Anglican institution that, for decades, played a religious, humanitarian, and healthcare role within Palestinian society (WHO, 2023; Anglican Patriarchate, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023). Since its establishment, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital has formed part of the historical Christian presence in the Gaza Strip and has been closely associated with the provision of medical care and humanitarian services without discrimination, reinforcing its position as a healthcare and community institution with deeply rooted humanitarian and religious dimensions within the Palestinian national fabric.

Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) was not separate from the religious and humanitarian structure of the Anglican institution in Gaza but rather constituted a direct extension of its historical role in providing care and public service as part of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip. Although medical in nature, the hospital consistently retained a clear religious, humanitarian, and cultural dimension through its church affiliation, its community symbolism, and the humanitarian mission it carried out for decades without discrimination. Within both local Palestinian and international consciousness, the Baptist Hospital became associated as one of the most prominent Christian humanitarian institutions in the Gaza Strip and as a place of care, refuge, public service, and civilian protection during crises. Consequently, any targeting of the hospital or disruption of its humanitarian and medical functions became directly connected to the broader context of targeting Christian and humanitarian spaces and institutions during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip (WHO, 2023; Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

During the large-scale Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) increasingly transformed into a collective space for humanitarian protection, emergency medical care, and refuge for civilians and persons forcibly displaced, amid the accelerating collapse of the healthcare sector and the shutdown of many hospitals and medical facilities. Hundreds of civilians sought

shelter within the hospital and its surroundings, including wounded individuals, patients, children, women, older persons, and persons with disabilities. This gave the hospital a heightened humanitarian dimension extending beyond its conventional medical function and rendered any attack against it, or disruption of its medical and humanitarian services, a direct violation of civilians' rights to life, health, and humanitarian protection during armed conflicts.

3.3.2 Facts of the Targeting and Repeated Attacks

During the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) was subjected to a series of attacks and damages affecting its facilities and vital departments, within the broader context of widespread attacks targeting healthcare facilities and civilian objects in the Gaza Strip. On 14 October 2023, parts of the cancer treatment center and clinics affiliated with the hospital were damaged because of shelling targeting its surroundings and facilities, causing damage to the medical infrastructure and healthcare services provided to patients and wounded individuals (WHO, 2023; PCHR, 2023). These attacks occurred at a time when the hospital was experiencing increasing pressure due to the massive influx of wounded persons, patients, and displaced civilians, amid the rapid deterioration of the healthcare sector and the shutdown of several medical facilities as a result of their systematic targeting by the Israeli military during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

On 17 October 2023, **one of the deadliest and most internationally shocking incidents of the assault occurred** following the targeting of the hospital courtyard, which was crowded with civilians and displaced persons who had sought refuge there as a safe haven amid the expanding bombardment and the absence of safe spaces in Gaza City (United Nations, 2023; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2023; WHO, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023; Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2023). The attack resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties, including both killed and injured persons, and triggered widespread international condemnation and calls for independent and transparent investigations into the incident and accountability for those responsible. The incident also constituted a shocking turning point in global humanitarian consciousness given the scale of civilian casualties and the nature of the targeted site as a medical facility and a place of collective refuge.

This incident acquires exceptional gravity given that the hospital was clearly known for its medical and humanitarian functions and for hosting large numbers of civilians, wounded persons, patients, and displaced individuals inside and around its premises at the time of the attack. Furthermore, the nature of the site, its protected medical function, the dense civilian presence within it, and the failure of the unlawful occupying authorities in the occupied Palestinian territory to provide public information or evidence, or to announce the establishment of an independent and transparent investigation committee and publish

its findings, raise serious legal and human rights concerns regarding potential violations of the rules of international humanitarian law, particularly those relating to the protection of medical facilities and civilians, as well as the principles of military necessity, proportionality, distinction, and the obligation to take precautions during military operations, especially in light of the widespread and repeated attacks targeting hospitals, healthcare facilities, and civilian objects throughout the Gaza Strip.

Within the context of systematic and repeated attacks, the hospital was targeted again on 13 April 2025 in an Israeli military strike that destroyed vital parts of the facility and rendered essential departments out of service, including extensive damage to the medical infrastructure and humanitarian services it provided (Reuters, 2025; Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, 2025; Palestinian NGO Network, 2025). This military attack further undermined the hospital's capacity to respond to escalating medical and humanitarian needs amid the accelerating collapse of the healthcare sector in Gaza, the worsening shortages of medicine, fuel, and medical supplies, and the continued immense pressure on the few remaining operational healthcare facilities in the Gaza Strip.

The repeated targeting of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) reveals the expanding risks confronting healthcare, religious, and humanitarian facilities during the assault on the Gaza Strip, reflecting a serious erosion of the presumed protection afforded under international law to hospitals, medical objects, and civilians seeking treatment, protection, or refuge within them. These incidents further demonstrate the widening gap between the legal guarantees established for the protection of medical facilities during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation, and the reality of effective protection amid repeated attacks targeting the healthcare and civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, together with the severe and accelerating collapse of the healthcare system's capacity to respond to the basic humanitarian needs of the civilian population.

In light of the repeated and systematic nature of these military attacks targeting healthcare, religious, and humanitarian facilities in the Gaza Strip, together with the continuing blockade and closure, strong legal indications arise regarding the possibility of classifying these acts within the framework of grave violations of international humanitarian law and the category of international crimes under international criminal law, particularly in relation to the protection of hospitals, medical objects, and civilians during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory. These dimensions will be addressed in detail later in the section dedicated to the international legal and normative framework of the study.

3.3.3 Humanitarian and Social Dimensions of the Targeting

During the assault, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) was not merely a medical facility but had transformed into a collective space for humanitarian protection, medical care, and civilian refuge amid the expanding bombardment and the erosion of safe spaces in the Gaza Strip. Consequently, the significance of targeting the hospital cannot be measured solely by the scale of material destruction or the number of casualties, but also by its profound impact on the collective sense of safety and on trust in the international protection presumed to be afforded to medical, religious, and humanitarian facilities protected under international law.

The targeting of the Baptist Hospital further revealed how medical facilities themselves had shifted from spaces of humanitarian protection and care into sites directly exposed to danger and attack during the systematic and large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip, thereby deepening the collective perception of the collapse of civilian and humanitarian safety systems within the besieged territory. Many civilians no longer viewed hospitals as protected spaces capable of providing treatment or refuge during bombardment, but rather as environments vulnerable to paralysis, attack, or collapse at any moment, despite the special protection granted to them under international humanitarian law.

The impact of targeting the hospital was not limited to undermining its direct medical or humanitarian function, but also extended to profound psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions, particularly given its historical association with the Anglican institution and the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip. The targeting of a medical institution with deeply rooted religious and humanitarian foundations was not perceived merely as an isolated incident affecting a healthcare facility, but as an additional assault on spaces representing the humanitarian and historical presence of Palestinian Christians and on one of the institutions associated in the collective consciousness with care, public service, and civilian refuge during crises. These incidents also deepened the collective perception of the collapse of environments traditionally associated with protection, care, and humanitarian neutrality, reinforcing among many civilians a sense of insecurity even within medical and religious facilities presumed to enjoy special protection.

These facts demonstrate that targeting medical facilities with religious and humanitarian dimensions extends beyond disrupting healthcare services or damaging medical infrastructure, and instead affects broader networks of protection, care, and community solidarity while weakening civilians' ability to endure and survive amid forced transfer and the widespread collapse of humanitarian and service infrastructures in the Gaza Strip. The targeting of a hospital with religious and humanitarian roots further

reveals the complex nature of attacks on medical facilities, where such attacks simultaneously undermine the rights to life, health, human dignity, and civilian protection spaces.

3.3.4 Impact of the Targeting on Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups

Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (Baptist Hospital) played a vital role in providing medical care and humanitarian services to wounded individuals, patients, and persons with disabilities amid the accelerating collapse of the healthcare sector in Gaza and the immense pressure placed upon hospitals and medical facilities during the assault. The hospital's role was not limited to emergency treatment alone, but also constituted a humanitarian anchor point for the most vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons, chronically ill patients, and wounded individuals requiring continuous care or specialized medical devices and supplies. Its services acquired increasing existential importance as large numbers of healthcare facilities were rendered out of service and safe access to treatment and medical care became severely restricted during the assault.

The targeting of the hospital and the disruption of parts of its services undermined one of the few remaining spaces capable of providing medical and humanitarian care and protection, thereby intensifying the vulnerability of groups directly dependent on the continuity of healthcare services for survival and the preservation of minimum conditions of dignified living. This impact was particularly severe for persons with disabilities, persons with limited mobility, and patients dependent on electricity, assistive devices, or continuous medical follow-up, especially amid widespread power outages and shortages of fuel, medicine, and medical supplies. The deterioration in the hospital's operational capacity further deepened the risks faced by these groups, particularly when access to medical care, treatment, and continuity of healthcare services became directly linked to life, survival, and human dignity during the assault.

The attacks on the hospital also contributed to deepening the effects of exclusion and loss of protection experienced by persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups, particularly amid difficulties related to evacuation, the deterioration of rehabilitation and specialized care services, and the absence of humanitarian corridors and accessible mechanisms for evacuation and protection during situations of danger and humanitarian emergencies. These risks acquire even greater gravity for individuals whose survival depends on the continuity of medical care and daily healthcare services, where access to treatment or safe evacuation during attacks becomes extremely difficult or, in some cases, impossible.

These incidents demonstrate that targeting healthcare facilities or disrupting their operational capacity during armed conflicts does not only result in direct human losses, but also undermines the systems of

protection, care, and survival upon which the most vulnerable groups depend, foremost among them persons with disabilities across different disability categories, thereby directly affecting the rights to life, health, and human dignity. These facts further reveal the unequal nature of the humanitarian burden borne by the most vulnerable groups during the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip, particularly when access to treatment, electricity, assistive devices, or continuous medical care becomes a matter directly linked to survival itself. This raises serious legal and human rights implications considering the rules protecting medical facilities, civilians, and persons with disabilities under international humanitarian law and relevant international conventions.

4. International Legal Framework and Analysis of Patterns of Violations

The examination of the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip cannot be limited to presenting the facts and the associated human and material losses, but also requires a reassessment of these incidents in light of the rules of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law, together with the related international obligations concerning the protection of civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territory. When read within their broader structural context, these incidents reveal a deepening crisis concerning the limits of the effectiveness of the international protection system, the erosion of spaces of safety and humanitarian protection, and the escalating risks associated with targeting human, cultural, and religious existence amid the large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip.

4.1 Protection of Churches, Civilian Objects, and Humanitarian Protection Spaces

The facts and evidence related to the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip do not reveal isolated or disconnected incidents that may be interpreted merely as incidental consequences of military operations. Rather, when examined cumulatively and in conjunction with cross-referenced evidence, they demonstrate repeated patterns of attacks affecting places of worship, civilian shelter centers, and sites possessing particular religious, cultural, and humanitarian significance within the context of a large-scale and prolonged assault characterized by an unprecedented level of destructive intensity.

The gravity of these patterns stems not only from the human and material damage they caused, but also from the nature of the targeted sites themselves, which during the assault functioned as **last refuges for civilians**, including children, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, patients, and persons forcibly displaced, amid the widespread collapse of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip.

When read within the broader context of widespread attacks targeting hospitals, shelters, United Nations facilities, and civilian and religious objects in the Gaza Strip, these incidents reveal a growing erosion of the effective protection that civilians and humanitarian refuge spaces are presumed to enjoy during armed conflicts, reflecting a dangerous gap between the legal guarantees established under international law and the reality of protection on the ground (COI, 2024; OHCHR, 2024; WHO, 2024). Places of worship, medical facilities, and shelter centers are no longer perceived as spaces enjoying effective protection, but have, in many cases, become locations exposed to danger, attack, and collapse despite the special protection afforded to them under international law.

The cases examined in this study demonstrate that churches and Christian sites were not targeted merely as physical structures, but as civilian, humanitarian, and spiritual spaces performing functions of protection, shelter, and care for civilians during times of conflict, thereby granting them enhanced protection under international law. These sites constitute protected civilian objects that may not be targeted or subjected to military attack as such, in accordance with the strict standards imposed under international law, particularly in light of the absence of publicly declared and clear rules of engagement, the repeated attacks against religious and civilian sites sheltering displaced persons and civilians, and the implications of such attacks regarding violations of the principles of military necessity, distinction, proportionality, and precaution during military operations. The gravity of these incidents is further intensified by the continuing absence of effective accountability, remedies, and reparations, which entrenches impunity and undermines the effectiveness of the international protection system in responding to grave violations committed during the assault on the Gaza Strip.

The seriousness of these incidents does not lie in weak documentation or lack of information, despite the importance of preserving the quality of evidence, classified data, and chain of custody procedures, but rather in the continued commission of grave violations despite the extensive United Nations and human rights reporting and the warnings issued by international commissions of inquiry, special rapporteurs, and independent experts. This reveals a deepening crisis in the effectiveness of international protection, enforcement, and accountability mechanisms, while increasing the risks of impunity and the continuation and repetition of violations.

4.2 Protection of Persons with Disabilities and Other Most Vulnerable Groups During Armed Conflicts

The gravity of these serious violations is heightened by the fact that churches and Christian sites in the Gaza Strip were not performing solely religious functions but had transformed during the large-scale assault into humanitarian protection centers and civilian shelters for persons forcibly displaced, including

children, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and patients. Consequently, exposing these places to attack or danger does not only undermine the protection afforded to religious and cultural objects, but also affects the broader humanitarian protection system for civilians during moments of comprehensive collapse of civilian infrastructure, essential services, and care systems, as well as the absence of safe alternatives in the Gaza Strip.

The facts and evidence further reveal another deeply concerning dimension relating to the targeting of, or exposure to danger of, civilian refuge spaces in the absence of safe alternatives, thereby intensifying the vulnerability of the most at-risk groups, including children, persons with disabilities, patients, and older persons. This issue acquires particular importance in light of international obligations concerning the protection of persons with disabilities during armed conflicts, **including Article 11 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, which obliges States to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, humanitarian emergencies, and armed conflicts, in addition to obligations established under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international instruments.

These incidents also demonstrate that the most vulnerable groups were not only exposed to the risks of direct military attacks but also faced **the accelerating collapse of networks of care, support, and access to life-saving essential services**, including healthcare and rehabilitation services, medication, assistive devices, psychosocial support, and means of movement and safe evacuation. This significantly intensified levels of vulnerability, isolation, and risk for persons with disabilities, particularly those dependent on continuous care, medical devices, or daily assistance for survival, mobility, and access to essential services.

4.3 International Legal Classification of the Violations

In this context, the targeting of churches and religious and cultural sites is governed by a range of peremptory international legal rules, including the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocol I of 1977, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, as well as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Taken together, these legal frameworks affirm that places of worship and cultural and religious sites enjoy special protection, and that intentionally directing attacks against them, where they are not being used for military purposes, constitutes **war crimes** under Article 8(2)(b)(ix) of the Rome Statute, which criminalizes attacks directed against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, charitable purposes, or historic monuments.

The legal characterization of the attacks examined in this study is not limited solely to the targeting of civilian and religious objects but also extends to the nature of the attacks themselves in terms of proportionality, distinction, and the precautions required during military operations. International humanitarian law imposes **a strict obligation to distinguish between military objectives, and civilians, and civilian objects** and prohibits indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks expected to cause excessive civilian harm or extensive damage to civilian objects in relation to the anticipated military advantage. In light of the large number of civilian casualties and the nature of the targeted sites as known shelters for persons forcibly displaced during the assault on the Gaza Strip, the incidents presented reveal serious legal indications of clear violations of the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution, particularly in the context of repeated military attacks, the extensive scope of civilian harm, the absence of publicly declared and transparent rules of engagement, and the continuing state of impunity and lack of effective accountability and remedy.

From the perspective of international criminal law, the repeated attacks on places of worship and civilian shelters, together with the extensive human and material damage associated with them, strengthen the legal indicators and evidence suggesting that such acts may amount to crimes against humanity where committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed **against the civilian population**. At the same time, the legal classification of such crimes remains subject to independent legal and judicial investigation and to the assessment of the elements of the crime in accordance with recognized international standards.

The incidents relating to the targeting of churches and Christian sites also raise legal and cultural dimensions extending beyond direct material damage to encompass **the protection of religious and cultural pluralism and the historical existence of the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza**. Attacks on churches are therefore not interpreted solely as attacks on religious buildings, but also as assaults on an authentic historical, cultural, and humanitarian component of the Palestinian people and on the spiritual and cultural heritage associated with these sites. This grants the issue additional dimensions considering the legal rules protecting cultural and religious heritage during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation in Palestine, particularly where the attacks concern sites possessing historical and spiritual symbolism deeply rooted in the Palestinian presence extending across centuries.

The facts and evidence relating to the systematic and repeated targeting of churches and Christian sites during the assault on the Gaza Strip, together with the accompanying targeting of civilians and religious and cultural objects, widespread destruction, forced transfer, and dismantling of Palestinian social and cultural structures, fall within patterns that may strongly constitute **crimes against humanity** as defined

under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, particularly **the crime of persecution on national, cultural, and religious grounds** under international criminal law. This international crime intersects with the crime of apartheid as a form of systematic persecution in accordance with the definitions and legal characterizations established under the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and **Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid** and Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, especially where such acts are accompanied by severe deprivation of the civilian population's fundamental rights and the systematic and continuous targeting of their human, cultural, and religious existence.

4.4 Illegal Occupation and the Crisis of International Protection

These military attacks cannot be separated from their long-term impact on the sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, particularly considering the limited size of the Christian population and the expansion of forced transfer, together with the erosion of spaces of protection, care, and refuge associated with religious and humanitarian institutions. Repeated attacks against churches and Christian institutions do not merely destroy physical objects, but also undermine the social, cultural, and spiritual environments connected to the continuity of the historical Christian presence in Palestine and weaken the conditions necessary for human and social survival. When these incidents are examined within the broader structural context of illegal occupation, settlement expansion, annexation, and apartheid, attacks against churches and Christian sites do not appear as isolated events detached from the wider political and legal environment that continuously produces patterns of exclusion, violence, and systematic deprivation against the Palestinian population, its religious and cultural components, and its historical identity.

This grants these grave violations dimensions extending beyond direct material harm to encompass the broader structures of systematic oppression and domination in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly where such attacks are accompanied by the destruction of spaces of protection, care, and human and cultural existence upon which local communities depend amid the large-scale assault and continuing policies of forced transfer.

These incidents acquire an additional **legal dimension in light of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice issued on 19 July 2024 concerning the legal consequences arising from Israel's policies and practices in the occupied Palestinian territory**, which concluded that the continued Israeli presence in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, is unlawful, and that policies and practices relating to settlement, annexation, and systematic discrimination constitute violations of international law and of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Attacks against

churches and Christian sites cannot therefore be separated from the broader structure of illegal occupation and the associated violations affecting civilians and civilian and religious objects throughout the occupied Palestinian territory.

This historic Advisory Opinion issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), together with **the subsequent United Nations General Assembly resolution A/RES/ES-10/24**, further affirmed that all States and international organizations, including United Nations bodies and agencies, are obligated not to recognize as lawful situations arising from the occupation, not to render aid or assistance contributing to its continuation, and to cooperate to bring it to an end in accordance with international law. Consequently, these grave violations committed against civilians and religious and cultural objects, including churches, Christian sites, and the Palestinian Christian presence in Gaza, engage not only the responsibility of the occupying power, but also impose international legal obligations upon all actors to ensure respect for international humanitarian law, prevent any contribution to the continuation of violations, and support international accountability mechanisms and the principle of non-impunity.

Within the framework of international responsibility, grave violations of international law give rise not only to individual criminal responsibility for perpetrators of international crimes, but also to international responsibility for all States under international law, including obligations to halt violations, guarantee non-repetition, conduct effective investigations, hold those responsible accountable, and provide reparations and compensation to victims. Furthermore, Common Article 1 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions obliges all States Parties not only to respect the Conventions, but also to ensure respect for them, thereby **imposing legal and moral obligations upon the international community as a whole**, including United Nations bodies, agencies, and international organizations, in response to grave violations committed during armed conflicts, including attacks targeting churches and Christian sites and threats to the sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip.

When examined cumulatively and in conjunction with the broader context of widespread attacks against civilians and civilian objects in Gaza, these repeated patterns of targeting reveal **a profound crisis** concerning the limits of the effectiveness of the international legal system itself in guaranteeing effective protection for civilians during prolonged armed conflicts, particularly with respect to religious, cultural, and humanitarian objects presumed to enjoy enhanced protection. They further demonstrate that the continued absence of international accountability not only weakens legal protection but also contributes to the reproduction and normalization of grave violations within the international sphere.

Accordingly, the targeting of churches and Christian sites in the Gaza Strip cannot be isolated from the broader context of the assault and the accompanying widespread destruction of civilian, humanitarian,

and cultural infrastructure, nor from the wider legal and political structure of the illegal occupation and its prolonged effects on the Palestinian people and their human, cultural, and religious existence. The gravity of these incidents lies not only in the number of victims or the scale of destruction, but also in their profound implications regarding the targeting of places that are presumed to remain protected under international law even in the darkest circumstances of armed conflict, thereby exposing the limits of the effectiveness of the international protection system and its capacity to safeguard civilians and religious and cultural sites and to prevent impunity in contexts of prolonged armed conflict.

5. Implications of the Targeting of Churches for the Christian Presence in Gaza and Palestine

The targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip extends beyond attacks on places of worship or religious and historical facilities, revealing a deeper impact affecting the sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence itself as an integral component of the Palestinian people, their national memory, and their historical pluralism. The documented incidents, their analysis, and the intersections between the available evidence further demonstrate that attacks against churches cannot be understood solely through the lens of direct material damage or human losses, but must also be examined in light of the profound psychological, spiritual, and social consequences they have produced, as well as the growing fears they have generated regarding the future of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip **during one of the harshest moments of humanitarian exposure in contemporary Palestinian history.**

5.1 Churches as Spaces of Protection and Collective Memory

The churches targeted in the Gaza Strip were not merely physical structures existing within a geographic landscape, but had, over many decades, constituted spaces of protection, care, humanitarian and spiritual refuge, while simultaneously carrying a collective memory linked to the deeply rooted Palestinian Christian presence in this land. During the recent assault, these spaces acquired exceptional significance after transforming into sites of civilian and humanitarian refuge for civilians and displaced persons amid the widespread collapse of safe spaces in Gaza. Consequently, their targeting cannot be understood solely as attacks against places of worship, but rather as assaults on spaces of community life, memory, serenity, and humanitarian refuge at a moment when people were searching for a final sanctuary for survival.

The incidents examined in this study demonstrate that churches in the Gaza Strip were not closed spaces limited to their own religious communities during the assault, but instead became civilian and **humanitarian refuges sheltering both Christians and Muslims** amid the large-scale intensive

bombardment and the comprehensive collapse of safe spaces in Gaza, in a scene that profoundly reflected the unity of Palestinian fate in the face of the assault. Accordingly, the targeting of these churches did not produce sectarian isolation or social division but instead revealed the depth of the shared Palestinian social fabric and demonstrated that the protection of churches was not an exclusively Christian demand, but rather a broader Palestinian demand connected simultaneously to the protection of human beings, refuge, and human dignity. Yet the gravity of this targeting lies in the fact that it struck one of the last remaining spaces that practically embodied the meaning of community solidarity among the components of the Palestinian people, transforming places of worship, care, and protection into spaces of fear, shock, loss, and profound human exposure.

The enduring social significance here lies in the fact that churches performed functions extending far beyond worship. They were places of gathering, care, support, preservation of memory, provision of humanitarian services, and protection of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. With the damage inflicted upon or disruption of these spaces, it is not only the Christian community that loses its historical institutions, but Palestinian society as a whole that loses an authentic part of the community protection networks that have long contributed to social cohesion and resilience. The church in Gaza was not a religious wall dividing communities, but rather a shared space, and when this space is targeted, the loss affects the Palestinian social fabric in its entirety.

In this context, **ecclesiastical and humanitarian testimonies** reveal that the churches' relief and humanitarian role was not limited to members of the Christian community but extended to all surrounding residents amid the collapse of services and the absence of safe alternatives. Archbishop Atallah Hanna stated that the assistance sent to churches "is not limited only to Christians but also includes all residents in the surrounding areas" (QADER, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025). This testimony demonstrates that churches in the Gaza Strip did not merely perform a religious or symbolic role, but formed part of the humanitarian and social structure that attempted to preserve a minimum level of protection and resilience in the face of humanitarian collapse, before they themselves, with all the memory, spirit, and human meaning they carried, became spaces threatened by bombardment, exposure, fear, and loss.

5.2 Psychological, Spiritual, and Social Impact on the Palestinian Christian Community

The targeting of churches and Christian institutions does not produce only material destruction but also leaves profound psychological and spiritual trauma extending far beyond visible damage. In the collective consciousness, religious spaces carry meanings of reassurance, hope, continuity, and spiritual refuge during times of fear and collapse. When such spaces are targeted, the sense that there remains a final

sanctuary outside the logic of bombardment and destruction begins to fracture, and the place that was expected to provide serenity and protection is transformed into a space of anxiety, psychological collapse, and loss of safety.

This trauma is not limited solely to Palestinian Christian citizens, but extends to Palestinian society as a whole because it affects the memory, sanctity, and humanitarian and moral function of these spaces, transforming them from symbols of shared life, protection, and serenity into witnesses to violence and profound human exposure at a moment when people were searching for a final refuge for survival amid a large-scale military assault. These incidents also reveal a deep collapse in the presumed humanitarian protection system during armed conflicts, particularly when religious and civilian refuge spaces themselves become exposed to repeated attack or danger.

In the face of this fear and exposure, many Palestinian Christians continued to hold firmly to worship, prayers, and religious rituals as psychological and spiritual spaces of resilience and as a means of preserving human meaning in the face of fear, loss, and widespread collapse, in a scene reflecting a profound determination to hold onto life, hope, and faith despite the harsh surrounding reality.

Among the harshest implications is that the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, which has been under blockade for years, affected the most vulnerable groups inside places that were presumed to be among the safest. Children, older persons, patients, wounded individuals, and persons with disabilities across different disability categories did not seek refuge in churches because they were sites of confrontation or combat, but because they had historically constituted spaces of protection, serenity, and humanitarian and spiritual refuge during times of fear and crisis. When these sanctuaries themselves become places of fear and attack, this reveals **a profound erosion of the humanitarian and moral boundaries** that are supposed to govern the protection of civilians during armed conflicts. For persons with disabilities, the tragedy becomes even more severe due to difficulties related to movement and evacuation, the loss of assistive devices, the disruption of healthcare and care services, and the erosion of community support and protection networks.

In this context, **the testimony of Archbishop Atallah Hanna** acquires particular significance when he clearly referred to the transfer of persons with disabilities to monasteries and churches under tragic conditions marked by severe shortages of food, medicine, and essential needs, reflecting the scale of humanitarian exposure experienced by the most vulnerable groups within spaces that were presumed to provide protection, care, serenity, and hope (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025).

5.3 Sustainability of the Palestinian Christian Presence and the Risks of Demographic Decline

These implications acquire particular gravity given the limited number of Christians in the Gaza Strip and the fact that this presence has experienced continuous decline over recent decades due to repeated military attacks, blockade and closure, deteriorating economic and social conditions, and the absence of educational and employment opportunities. The recent assault has pushed this presence to an even more precarious threshold. When the Christian community in Gaza loses its homes, churches, institutions, and spaces of safety, the question is no longer limited to rebuilding a religious structure but rather concerns the possibility of preserving an indigenous and historically rooted Palestinian component within its homeland. Here lies one of the most serious implications: **the targeting of churches opens the way to the gradual demographic disappearance of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip**, not through an explicit policy of expulsion, but through the creation of material, psychological, and security conditions that render continued existence itself nearly impossible.

Official data issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, together with converging ecclesiastical, human rights, and media estimates, indicate a continuous decline in the number of Palestinian Christians in the Gaza Strip over recent decades within a cumulative context linked to the prolonged blockade, repeated military attacks, policies of forced transfer, deteriorating economic and social conditions, and the erosion of the foundations of stability and survival. According to the 2017 census, the number of Christians in the Gaza Strip stood at 1,138 persons, while later church and media estimates pointed to a further decline prior to the assault ongoing since 7 October 2023, amid growing fears regarding the accelerating demographic contraction of the Christian presence in the Gaza Strip (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Vatican News, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

In this context, ecclesiastical and national testimonies acquire particular importance as qualitative indicators of the depth of the humanitarian and existential crisis experienced by Palestinian Christians in Gaza. Archbishop Atallah Hanna stated that the number of Christians in Gaza had been close to 10,000 persons during the 1990s, before declining rapidly until reaching only a few hundred today, warning that the number is **“likely to decrease further or even face local extinction”** amid the loss of homes and livelihoods and the continuation of the assault and forced transfer (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025).

The gravity of these transformations does not lie merely in their numerical dimension, but in their profound implications concerning the future of an indigenous Palestinian component historically rooted within Palestinian national identity. The issue is not simply one of population decline, but rather of the erosion of the conditions necessary for survival, safety, and human, social, and spiritual stability within

the Gaza Strip, together with the growing fear that the historical Christian presence may become a community threatened by continuous decline under the weight of repeated assaults on Gaza, policies of forced transfer, **loss of safety, and inadequate humanitarian response**. These transformations also reveal a profound assault on the historical pluralism of Palestinian society and on the cultural and humanitarian fabric formed over centuries of coexistence and shared national belonging.

In this context, the growing concerns regarding **the future of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip** are connected not only to the fate of an authentic Palestinian component, but also to what the erosion of this historical presence may represent as a broader human, national, and cultural loss affecting the very image of Palestine as a historical space of pluralism, shared belonging, and deeply rooted civilizational continuity extending across centuries.

5.4 Historical Pluralism and Palestinian National Identity

This danger cannot be treated as a specifically Christian concern or merely a numerical issue affecting one indigenous Palestinian component. The Christian presence is not a religious margin within Palestinian society, but rather one of the pillars of historical pluralism and Palestinian national identity.

Palestinian Christians have long been, and continue to be, an authentic component of the Palestinian national movement and of the intellectual, cultural, educational, legal, and social renaissance movements. Over decades, they have contributed to shaping modern Palestinian national consciousness, defending freedom, dignity, and justice, and conveying the Palestinian narrative to the world through its various languages and platforms. Their presence has never been marginal or incidental within Palestinian history but has instead been closely connected to the formation of Palestinian national identity itself and to the historically pluralistic character of Palestinian society extending across centuries. Accordingly, attacks against Gaza's churches and Christian institutions do not merely constitute assaults on religious sites or a particular population group but affect an authentic component of Palestinian national memory and of the cultural and humanitarian fabric that shaped Palestine as a historical space of pluralism, coexistence, and deep-rooted belonging.

Their presence was never marginal or incidental within Palestinian history but was closely intertwined with the formation of Palestinian national identity itself and with the historically pluralistic character of Palestinian society extending across centuries. Accordingly, attacks against Gaza's churches and Christian institutions do not merely constitute assaults on religious sites or a particular population group but rather affect an authentic component of Palestinian national memory and of the cultural and humanitarian fabric that shaped Palestine as a historical space of pluralism, coexistence, and profound belonging.

In this context, ecclesiastical and national testimonies acquire particular significance in affirming that the Palestinian Christian presence cannot be reduced to a narrow sectarian or isolationist framework but is instead regarded as an integral part of the Palestinian people and their collective national identity. Archbishop Atallah Hanna expressed this clearly when he stated: **“We are not a minority in Palestine; rather, we are Palestinian Christians, part of the Palestinian people, and our cause is the cause of the entire Palestinian people.”** The testimonies presented in the interview further demonstrate that defending the Palestinian Christian presence cannot be separated from defending the cultural and spiritual history of Palestine itself. Archbishop Atallah Hanna also emphasized that Christianity “was not imported from the West,” but originated in Palestine as the homeland of the first Church, and that Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre represent the essence of the historical and spiritual Christian presence in this Holy Land (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025).

Accordingly, the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip does not merely affect places of worship or historical sites but strikes at one of the authentic components of Palestinian national identity and the historical pluralism that has been shaped through centuries of shared existence and common national belonging. It further demonstrates that protecting the Palestinian Christian presence is not simply an ecclesiastical matter or a narrow sectarian concern, but rather a national, human rights, and humanitarian issue connected to the protection of collective memory, Palestinian pluralism, and the right of people to remain in their land with dignity and safety, free from the fear that the final refuge may itself become a space of bombardment, collapse, and loss.

6. Erosion of Spaces of Protection and Care for the Most Vulnerable Groups

The incidents involving the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip reveal not only direct material and human losses, but also demonstrate how the large-scale assault and the accelerating collapse of civilian infrastructure and essential services have led to the erosion of spaces of protection and care upon which the most vulnerable groups depended in confronting fear, displacement, and the loss of safety. Churches and the humanitarian institutions associated with them did not merely perform religious or symbolic functions, but constituted, for many civilians, including children, older persons, patients, wounded individuals, and persons with disabilities, spaces of community protection, care, psychological, spiritual, humanitarian, and rehabilitation support amid blockade, assault, and the continuing collapse of living conditions in the Gaza Strip.

6.1 Difficulties in Evacuation, Movement, and Access to Protection

Difficulties related to evacuation, movement, accessibility arrangements, and access to places of protection constituted some of the harshest challenges faced by the most vulnerable groups during the assault on the Gaza Strip, particularly amid the large-scale Israeli military bombardment, fire belts, destruction of roads and infrastructure, the near-total collapse of healthcare, ambulance, and transportation services, the continuation of blockade and closure policies, and the obstruction of humanitarian response efforts. This suffering was compounded for persons with disabilities across different disability categories, as well as for older persons and patients, many of whom found themselves unable to move quickly or safely access spaces of refuge or evacuation due to the absence of assistive devices and the support necessary for movement and protection.

The movement of civilians toward churches and Christian institutions during the assault was not driven solely by the need for physical shelter, but also by the association of these spaces in the human and spiritual consciousness with meanings of protection, serenity, and refuge during times of fear and collapse. However, the repeated attacks and dangers surrounding these places revealed the fragility of the very concept of a “safe haven” during the assault, demonstrating that vulnerable groups could no longer find protection even within spaces historically associated with reassurance, care, and humanitarian survival.

This transformation also reflected a profound collapse in the sense that there remained a final space in which civilians could seek refuge away from fear, bombardment, and continuous human exposure, even within places historically associated with mercy, serenity, and hope.

In this context, the severity of conditions faced by persons with disabilities is further intensified by the loss of assistive devices, wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, hearing and visual aids, and by the disruption of rehabilitation, treatment, and healthcare services, rendering movement, evacuation, and access to food, medicine, and shelter increasingly difficult and dangerous. Humanitarian exposure is further exacerbated by the absence of accessibility arrangements and accommodation measures, as well as by difficulties in accessing shelters and temporary accommodation in a manner that preserves the dignity, independence, and basic needs of the most vulnerable groups (QADER for Community Development, Urgent Appeal on Prioritizing the Inclusion of the Needs of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Response and Reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, October 2025).

6.2 Loss of Care Networks and Community Support

Churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip did not perform solely religious functions, but also constituted part of the networks of care and community support upon which families and the most vulnerable groups had relied for decades, whether through the provision of humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support and care services, or the creation of spaces for solidarity and community inclusion during times of crisis. With the damage inflicted upon and disruption of these institutions, the loss extended beyond buildings and direct services to encompass the erosion of social bonds and networks of protection and support that had provided many people with a sense of safety, stability, and human solidarity.

The gravity of this erosion is particularly severe for persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups, many of whom depend directly on family and community support networks, daily care, and continuous healthcare and rehabilitation services. With the collapse of specialized centers, the disruption of services, and the loss of assistive devices and care systems, daily life becomes increasingly harsh and complex, and the loss of community support itself becomes an additional factor deepening feelings of isolation, exposure, and insecurity. The disruption of care networks further increases the burden on families already facing forced transfer, loss of income, and the widespread collapse of essential services.

In this context, the role played by churches and Christian institutions during the assault acquires particular significance as spaces of humanitarian support and refuge open to civilians generally, and not solely to members of the Christian community. Ecclesiastical and humanitarian testimonies revealed that these institutions attempted to preserve minimum levels of care and community solidarity despite severe shortages of food, medicine, and essential needs, reflecting the scale of pressure and collapse affecting the entire humanitarian and social structure of the Gaza Strip. These incidents further demonstrate that churches and their affiliated institutions did not merely perform an emergency relief role, but constituted part of the moral and humanitarian structure that sought to preserve the very idea of community solidarity and mutual protection at a moment when Palestinian society was, and continues to be, confronted with unprecedented levels of collapse, fear, and loss of safety.

6.3 Profound Psychological, Social, and Humanitarian Impact

The impact of targeting churches and Christian institutions is not limited to direct material destruction or human losses but extends to deeper levels affecting the human sense of safety, serenity, and dignity. Historically, churches have been associated in the collective consciousness with meanings of hope, continuity, and spiritual protection during times of fear and collapse. When these spaces are transformed

into sites of bombardment, danger, and trauma, the psychological impact extends far beyond the immediate moment to affect the human relationship with the very idea of a safe place.

Among the harshest psychological consequences is that many children, survivors, and forcibly displaced people experienced fear inside places of worship and shelters they had believed to be protected or less exposed to danger. When individuals lose trust in the existence of a safe space, they become more vulnerable to deeper collapses in their sense of security, stability, and belonging, particularly amid ongoing bombardment, loss of shelter, and separation from networks of support and care. These experiences leave long-term effects associated with chronic fear, complex trauma, and disrupted relationships with place and serenity, especially among children, persons with disabilities, and other most vulnerable groups. The gravity of these effects further intensifies when places of worship and refuge themselves become associated in individual and collective memory with images of fear, bombardment, destruction, and loss, after having historically symbolized serenity, hope, and spiritual and humanitarian protection.

This impact becomes even more severe for persons with disabilities, many of whom depend on psychological and spiritual stability, daily routines, support services, and accessibility arrangements to preserve minimum levels of independence and human balance. The loss of assistive devices, healthcare, rehabilitation and care services, together with separation from familiar environments and support networks, all contribute to intensifying feelings of fear, isolation, exposure, and loss of control over daily life. Repeated forced transfer and difficulties related to movement and evacuation further deepen feelings of helplessness and psychological and social exhaustion among the most vulnerable groups. The continuation of the assault and the uncertainty surrounding the future also intensify the difficulty of psychological and social recovery, particularly for groups that have lost any sense of stability or ability to restore normal and safe daily life.

In the face of this widespread psychological and social collapse, many civilians, including Palestinian Christian citizens, sought to hold onto prayers, religious rituals, and daily community relationships as means of preserving minimum levels of psychological, spiritual, and human balance amid fear, loss, and large-scale collapse. These practices reflected a profound determination to hold onto life, hope, and human meaning despite bombardment, forced transfer, and the loss of safety, at a time when traditional spaces of protection were rapidly eroding under the weight of the assault and the continuing humanitarian collapse.

6.4 Erosion of Protection Spaces Amid the Widespread Collapse of Services

These incidents reveal a broad and profound erosion of humanitarian and civilian protection spaces in the Gaza Strip amid the near-total collapse of healthcare, relief, and social services, infrastructure destruction, and the continued targeting of humanitarian objects and facilities. Churches and humanitarian institutions are no longer recalled in the collective consciousness solely as spaces of worship, care, and serenity, but have also become associated with images of bombardment, fear, humanitarian exposure, and the loss of any sense that there remains a space protected from danger.

These incidents further expose the limits of the effectiveness of the international protection system in preventing attacks against civilian and religious refuge spaces during armed conflicts, particularly in light of the continuation of attacks despite the extensive condemnations and reports issued by the United Nations, international commissions, and human rights organizations, together with the absence of effective international accountability, remedies, and reparations (COI, 2024; OHCHR, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). This reality deepens the sense among local communities, including the Palestinian Christian community, of the absence of protection and the erosion of trust in the ability of the international system to guarantee minimum standards of safety and human dignity.

The danger of this erosion is not limited to the present moment but extends to the humanitarian and social future of the most vulnerable groups in the Gaza Strip, particularly persons with disabilities across different disability categories, especially when spaces of protection, care, and refuge themselves are transformed into environments of fear, collapse, and insecurity. This reality further demonstrates that the widespread collapse of services and community structures not only intensifies immediate humanitarian suffering, but also gradually undermines people's ability to endure and preserve their psychological, social, and human balance in the face of the ongoing assault, while deepening feelings of isolation, exposure, and instability among groups most dependent on networks of care, support, and community protection.

In this context, the protection of the most vulnerable groups cannot be understood merely as a relief or service issue, but rather as a matter directly connected to the protection of human dignity itself and to the right of people to access safety, care, and refuge without fear that the final sanctuary may become yet another space of exposure and loss. These incidents further demonstrate that any humanitarian response or reconstruction process that fails to place the needs of the most vulnerable groups at the center of its priorities, and in genuine partnership with them, will contribute directly or indirectly to reproducing marginalization and exclusion and to deepening the long-term effects of humanitarian and social collapse,

thereby threatening prospects for humanitarian recovery, community inclusion, and dignified and safe living in the post-assault period and within the envisioned Palestinian future.

Ecclesiastical and national testimonies related to the attacks on churches in the Gaza Strip further demonstrate that the psychological and spiritual impact extended beyond fear of bombardment or loss of shelter to encompass a profound sense of rupture in the historical relationship with the very idea of a safe place, as well as fear regarding the continuity of the Palestinian Christian presence in one of the world's oldest Christian environments. In this context, churches emerged not as closed religious spaces, but as part of Palestinian national memory and as humanitarian spaces carrying meanings of refuge, resilience, and shared belonging in the face of assault and widespread humanitarian exposure (QADER for Community Development, interview with Archbishop Atallah Hanna, September 2025). These testimonies further reveal that attacks against churches and Christian institutions do not merely produce temporary psychological and spiritual effects but leave a deep wound in the Palestinian collective consciousness associated with the ideas of protection, serenity, and the continuity of human and historical existence in this land.

Taken together, these impacts demonstrate that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip, which has endured a prolonged blockade for many years, was not merely an attack on religious buildings or humanitarian facilities, but constituted a profound psychological, spiritual, and social trauma affecting the very foundations of human security, collective memory, and Palestinian social bonds. These incidents further exposed the fragility of protection spaces amid the large-scale military assault and reopened fundamental questions concerning civilians' ability to seek refuge, the limits of the effectiveness of international law and international protection mechanisms, and the future and sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence in one of the world's oldest Christian environments, within a reality in which the spaces once believed to be the safest and most sacred are rapidly eroding, even within places of worship and humanitarian and spiritual refuge, and at the very moments when protection, serenity, and survival are needed most.

7. Finding and Conclusions

The documented incidents, together with the legal, social, and psychological analysis presented in this study, indicate that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip was not merely a series of isolated incidents affecting religious sites during the large-scale assault on the Strip since 7 October 2023, but rather formed part of a broader reality that profoundly and complexly affected civilians, civilian objects, and spaces of humanitarian and spiritual protection. The findings demonstrate that the impact of these attacks extended far beyond direct human and material losses to affect the

foundations of community safety, the Palestinian Christian presence, collective memory, and the networks of protection and care upon which civilians, particularly the most vulnerable groups, depend during times of danger and collapse.

The study, considering the evidence and incidents analyzed, leads to a set of interconnected findings:

First, the documented incidents demonstrate that churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip did not perform solely religious functions, but constituted during the assault humanitarian protection spaces, civilian shelters, and centers of community support that received displaced Christians and Muslims alike. Consequently, targeting them or exposing them to danger did not merely affect religious buildings, but struck the very spaces of humanitarian refuge at a moment marked by the widespread collapse of civilian infrastructure and essential services and the absence of safe alternatives within the Strip.

Second, the study reveals that the targeting of churches produced a profound psychological, spiritual, and social impact extending beyond the Palestinian Christian community to affect Palestinian collective consciousness. Historically, churches were associated with meanings of serenity, protection, and shared life, and during the systematic and large-scale assault on the Gaza Strip they became spaces of collective refuge for civilians. Their targeting therefore generated a widespread perception of the collapse of the humanitarian and moral boundaries that were presumed to protect civilians, sacred places, and spaces of refuge during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation throughout the occupied Palestinian territory.

Third, the study demonstrates that the assault intensified fears relating to the sustainability of the Palestinian Christian presence in the Gaza Strip, particularly given the already limited size of the Christian population, as documented in this study, together with repeated waves of forced transfer, loss of safety, and damage inflicted on churches and institutions connected to the spiritual, social, and humanitarian life of the Christian community. The study indicates that the danger lies not only in direct human and material losses, but also in the creation of psychological, security, and living conditions that render continued existence itself increasingly fragile and difficult over the medium and long term. These findings further reveal that attacks on spaces of religious and humanitarian protection threaten not only civilian safety, but also the ability of small historical communities to continue surviving within their homeland amid assault, collapse of resilience conditions, and loss of safety.

Fourth, the study confirms that persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups experienced a disproportionate and compounded impact resulting from the systematic targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip and the disruption of their humanitarian and social functions. These

groups faced complex challenges relating to movement and evacuation, the loss of assistive devices including prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs, and crutches, the interruption of healthcare and rehabilitation services, and the erosion of networks of community support and protection, at a time when churches represented for many one of the few remaining spaces offering a sense of safety, stability, and humanitarian and spiritual support.

Fifth, the incidents and patterns examined in the study reveal strong legal indications of grave violations of international humanitarian law, including attacks against civilian, religious, and cultural objects, exposing civilians and protected places to danger, and violations of the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution during military operations. When examined cumulatively and in an interconnected manner, the incidents further indicate that some acts associated with the widespread and repeated targeting of civilians and religious and humanitarian sites in the Gaza Strip may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the crimes of persecution and apartheid on national, cultural, and religious grounds under international criminal law. This necessitates an independent international criminal investigation and the assessment of the elements of international crimes in accordance with recognized international legal standards.

Sixth, the study reveals that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions did not produce sectarian division or social fragmentation within Palestinian society, but instead profoundly demonstrated the unity of human and national destiny among Palestinians, as churches became spaces of collective solidarity sheltering displaced persons without discrimination. The danger of these attacks lies in the fact that they struck one of the last remaining spaces that practically embodied the meaning of solidarity and shared community protection amid assault and collapse.

Seventh, the incidents demonstrate that the targeting of churches left a profound impact on Palestinian collective memory, as places historically associated with spiritual life, serenity, and survival became linked to bombardment, victims, humanitarian exposure, and loss of protection. These incidents are likely to become a lasting part of the Palestinian narrative associated with the assault on the Gaza Strip, not merely as attacks against religious sites, but as moments exposing the limits of the effectiveness of international protection and the fragility of civilians even within the most sacred and protected spaces in human and spiritual consciousness and within the Palestinian collective conscience.

Eighth, the study confirms that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip cannot be separated from the broader context of the illegal occupation throughout the occupied Palestinian territory and the large-scale assault accompanied by systematic destruction of Palestinian civilian, humanitarian, and cultural infrastructure, resulting in the undermining of community protection

networks, erosion of safety, and deepening humanitarian and social vulnerability, particularly for the most vulnerable groups and those most in need of humanitarian assistance.

Ninth, the incidents examined in the study reveal the limits of the effectiveness of the international protection system and mechanisms for enforcing international law in the face of grave violations committed during the assault on the Gaza Strip, including violations affecting civilians, civilian objects, and religious and cultural sites. Despite the clarity of the protection rules established under international law and the numerous condemnations, appeals, and reports issued by the United Nations, human rights organizations, and church institutions, attacks on churches and civilian and humanitarian institutions continued, as did the blockade of the Gaza Strip and the widespread destruction, deepening both local and international feelings of helplessness regarding the ability to provide effective protection for civilians or ensure accountability, justice, and non-impunity. These incidents harshly expose the gap between the existence of international legal rules and the actual capacity to enforce them, while reopening fundamental questions regarding the effectiveness of the international system itself when it comes to protecting human beings and spaces of humanitarian refuge in contexts of aggression and prolonged grave violations.

Tenth, the study confirms that the Advisory Opinion issued by the International Court of Justice on 19 July 2024, together with United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-10/24, impose not only legal obligations upon Israel as the unlawful occupying power, but also responsibilities and clear obligations upon all States, United Nations bodies and agencies, and international organizations not to recognize unlawful situations, not to render aid or assistance contributing to their continuation, and to ensure respect for international law and the protection of civilians and civilian and religious objects. In this context, the incidents associated with the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip reveal the urgent need for the international community to assume its legal and humanitarian responsibilities more effectively, including the protection of civilians, support for international accountability, and the preservation and support of the Palestinian Christian presence by all possible means as an integral component of Palestinian national identity and the historical pluralism of Palestinian society.

The incidents examined in the study further reveal that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip was not connected solely to the physical space itself, but also to the humanitarian, spiritual, and historical meanings associated with these places as spaces of protection and serenity within Palestinian collective consciousness. Consequently, attacks against these spaces produced not only human and material losses but also affected the human sense that there remained a final refuge to which

civilians could turn in the face of fear, collapse, and loss of safety. These attacks reflected a profound erosion of trust in the ability of religious and humanitarian places to continue fulfilling their traditional role as spaces of protection, survival, and reassurance during armed conflicts and situations of widespread humanitarian exposure.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip was not merely an attack against religious or humanitarian sites, but constituted a profound assault on the structures of humanitarian, spiritual, and social protection and on the Palestinian Christian presence as an authentic component of Palestinian national identity and the historical pluralism of Palestinian society. These incidents further expose the limits of the effectiveness of the international protection system in responding to grave violations committed during armed conflicts and illegal occupation, while underscoring the urgent need for international accountability, the protection of civilians and civilian objects, the prevention of impunity, and the preservation of what remains of spaces of humanitarian, spiritual, and human existence in the Gaza Strip and Palestine more broadly.

8. Recommendations of the Study

In light of the documented incidents and evidence, as well as the legal, humanitarian, social, and psychological analysis presented in this study, and considering the profound impact that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip has had on civilians, spaces of humanitarian protection, the Palestinian Christian presence, and Palestinian social structures more broadly, the study recommends the following:

First, the urgent adoption of effective international measures to ensure the immediate protection of civilians, civilian objects, and religious and cultural sites in Gaza, including churches and Christian institutions, to ensure respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and to put an end to attacks targeting or exposing civilians and spaces of humanitarian refuge to danger.

Second, support for and implementation of independent, transparent, and effective international investigations into grave violations committed against civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects in the Gaza Strip, particularly the targeting of churches and Christian institutions, while ensuring international accountability and preventing impunity in accordance with international criminal law and relevant international standards. In this context, the study emphasizes the necessity for the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to undertake their responsibilities in a serious and effective manner and to accord this process the highest priority.

Third, reaffirming the necessity of protecting, preserving, supporting, and empowering the Palestinian Christian presence as an authentic component of Palestinian national identity and the historical and cultural pluralism of Palestinian society, while ensuring humanitarian, social, economic, and security conditions that enable Palestinian Christians to remain on their land and continue their spiritual, social, and national role. This includes taking into consideration the needs of persons with disabilities and other most vulnerable groups within protection, humanitarian response, recovery, and reconstruction efforts, and ensuring their access to essential services, support, care, and protection.

Fourth, supporting the rehabilitation of churches, Christian institutions, and their affiliated facilities, and restoring their spiritual, social, and humanitarian role, including the reconstruction of spaces of community protection, care, and support that were damaged or disrupted as a result of the assault on the Gaza Strip, in a manner that contributes to strengthening community resilience and sustaining the Palestinian Christian presence within its homeland and on its land.

Fifth, ensuring the integration of a disability inclusion perspective across all stages of humanitarian response, recovery, and reconstruction, and adopting special measures to protect persons with disabilities during armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies, including ensuring safe and sustainable access to protection, healthcare, essential services, humanitarian assistance, assistive devices, and support equipment, while guaranteeing the free and effective flow of humanitarian and medical aid, services, and personnel without obstacles or restrictions.

Sixth, calling upon United Nations bodies and agencies, international organizations, global churches, and human rights and humanitarian organizations to strengthen efforts related to protection, documentation, and humanitarian, psychological, and social support for affected civilians in the Gaza Strip, while supporting and empowering initiatives, institutions, and programs connected to preserving the Palestinian Christian presence, safeguarding religious and cultural heritage, strengthening the resilience of local communities, and protecting spaces of community and spiritual protection from erosion and collapse.

Seventh, strengthening international efforts aimed at protecting places of worship and religious and cultural sites during armed conflicts and the illegal occupation throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, and activating relevant international mechanisms for the protection of religious and cultural heritage, in order to ensure that sacred places and spaces of humanitarian refuge are not transformed into targets of military attacks or exposed spaces vulnerable to danger and grave violations, while guaranteeing respect for the special protection afforded to them under international law.

Eighth, supporting national and international efforts aimed at documenting violations and preserving Palestinian collective memory related to the assault on the Gaza Strip, including documentation of attacks against churches and Christian institutions, and safeguarding the humanitarian and human rights narrative associated with victims, survivors, and spaces of humanitarian refuge, in accordance with international standards of evidence-based monitoring and documentation, and in a manner that guarantees the integrity of evidence, chain of custody, and its potential use in accountability and international justice processes.

Ninth, calling upon the international community to fulfill its legal and moral responsibilities in light of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice issued on 19 July 2024 and United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/ES-10/24, including the obligation not to recognize unlawful situations arising from the illegal occupation, not to provide aid or assistance contributing to its continuation, and to adopt effective measures to ensure respect for international law, protect civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects in the occupied Palestinian territory, and support international accountability mechanisms, enforcement of international law, and the prevention of impunity.

Tenth, reaffirming that the protection of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip is not a narrow religious or sectarian matter, but rather a comprehensive humanitarian, national, and human rights issue connected to the protection of civilians, preservation of Palestinian historical pluralism, safeguarding of spaces of humanitarian refuge, collective memory, human dignity, and national identity in the face of aggression and grave and prolonged violations, thereby reinforcing the right of all components of the Palestinian people to remain safely and with dignity on their land and within their homeland.

This study further confirms that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip does not merely affect places of worship or religious and historical sites, but strikes at the very structure of humanitarian protection, historical pluralism, and Palestinian existence itself during **one of the harshest moments of humanitarian exposure in contemporary history**. It further demonstrates that the protection of civilians, spaces of humanitarian refuge, and religious and cultural sites is not merely an abstract legal issue, but **a genuine test of the effectiveness of the international system** and its ability to preserve human dignity and prevent the collapse of moral and legal boundaries during armed conflicts and under illegal occupation.

9. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the ongoing Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip on 7 October 2023, churches in Gaza have no longer been recalled in memory solely as places of worship, but as spaces where civilians sought refuge from fear, hunger, bombardment, and uncertainty, and within which they attempted to hold onto what remained of the meaning of life, serenity, and human dignity. When danger extended to these very spaces, the issue was no longer merely about religious buildings or historical sites, but about a profound humanitarian exposure affecting the collective sense that there remained a final place to which people could turn in the face of collapse and continuing fear.

Through the documented incidents and evidence, together with the legal, humanitarian, social, and psychological analysis presented, this study demonstrates that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip was not merely a series of attacks against religious buildings or historical facilities during the large-scale assault on the Strip, but revealed a deeper crisis connected to the erosion of humanitarian protection, the targeting of civilian objects, the undermining of networks of care and community support, and the deepening vulnerability of groups most exposed to danger, within the context of a broad and prolonged assault affecting Palestinian people, their spaces of life, dignity, and human existence in a comprehensive manner.

Churches that transformed during the assault into spaces of collective refuge and received forcibly displaced civilians, Christians and Muslims alike, did not merely perform a religious role, but constituted, at a moment of comprehensive collapse, one of the final spaces still associated in the human consciousness with meanings of protection, serenity, dignity, and hope. Consequently, targeting them or exposing them to danger produced not only grave human and material losses, but also struck at the very **idea of the “humanitarian refuge,”** leaving a profound psychological, spiritual, and social impact extending beyond the Palestinian Christian community to affect Palestinian collective consciousness.

The study further demonstrates that the targeting of churches and Christian institutions cannot be separated from the broader context of the illegal occupation and the assault accompanied by the destruction of Palestinian civilian, humanitarian, and cultural infrastructure, widespread targeting of civilians and protected objects, undermining of spaces of safety and protection, and deepening humanitarian and social vulnerability, particularly for persons with disabilities and other groups most vulnerable and in need of protection and support. The documented incidents harshly revealed that the most vulnerable groups were those most exposed to danger even within places presumed to be among the safest and most sacred in human, legal, and spiritual consciousness, while reflecting the scale of collapse affecting the humanitarian protection system in the Gaza Strip.

These incidents further confirm that the protection of churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip is not a narrow religious or sectarian issue, but is directly connected to the protection of civilians, preservation of Palestinian historical pluralism, safeguarding of collective memory, spaces of humanitarian refuge, and human and national dignity. The Palestinian Christian presence is not incidental or marginal within Palestinian history, but rather an authentic component of its national, cultural, and humanitarian formation. Consequently, undermining this presence or pushing it toward erosion, forced transfer, or loss of safety affects the very image of Palestine itself as a historical space of pluralism and shared belonging.

The study also reveals the erosion of the effectiveness of the international protection system and mechanisms for enforcing international law in the face of grave violations and international crimes committed during armed conflicts and the illegal Israeli occupation throughout the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territory, despite the clarity of international legal rules relating to the protection of civilians and civilian, religious, and cultural objects. The continuation of attacks against churches and humanitarian and civilian institutions, together with the continuation of blockade and widespread destruction, and the inability to provide effective civilian protection or ensure accountability and non-impunity, has reopened fundamental questions regarding the ability of the international system to protect human beings and human dignity during the harshest moments of humanitarian exposure.

In this context, the study reaffirms that protecting churches and Christian institutions in the Gaza Strip, preserving the Palestinian Christian presence, and protecting civilians and spaces of humanitarian refuge are not merely matters of moral or humanitarian solidarity, but international legal obligations imposed by international humanitarian law, international human rights law, international criminal law, and relevant decisions of the International Court of Justice and the United Nations. Protecting these humanitarian and spiritual spaces is directly connected to protecting the Palestinian person, their right to life, safety, dignity, and continued existence within their land and homeland.

Ultimately, the churches in which civilians sought refuge in Gaza were not seeking special privilege, nor demanding immunity beyond the rules of law and humanity. Rather, they represented **the final humanitarian appeal** in the face of comprehensive collapse: that there should remain at least one place that is not violated, and one final meaning for protection and human dignity. When this very place itself becomes exposed to bombardment, fear, and humanitarian exposure, the issue extends far beyond attacks on stone or place, transforming instead into a profound moral, legal, and humanitarian question concerning the future of humanity itself and the capacity of the world to protect what remains of the meaning of humanity in a time of aggression and collapse.