

State of siege: Conflict at the Church of the Nativity

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

As anyone following the news knows, Palestinians and Israelis offer two entirely different accounts of the violence (and two different accounts of what has happened in the region since the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948). The siege at the Church of the Nativity is one more example.

The Israeli story is that a large group of armed terrorists forcibly entered the church on April 2. The gunmen took dozens of civilians hostages, including Christian clergy. They used them as human shields, and launched attacks on the Israeli soldiers who surrounded the church. With great restraint, Israel has been attempting to rescue the hostages and capture the terrorists. In Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's words, "Murderers . . . have commandeered the church and are holding the clergymen hostage."

The Palestinian story goes like this: As the Israeli army invaded Bethlehem and Israeli tanks approached Manger Square on April 2, around 240 Palestinians, including some armed men, entered the church seeking safety. The armed Palestinians, most of whom are members of the Palestinian Authority tourism police or policemen from a nearby police station, laid down their arms. The priests, nuns and monks who remained in the church did so of their own volition to protect both the church and those seeking sanctuary. Those inside the church are suffering together as the Israeli army tortures them, projecting unbearably loud noises into the church compound and denying those inside medical help, food and water.

Which story is closer to the truth? A small band of Palestinians on the Israeli wanted list no doubt were among those who first entered the church. They reportedly shot open the lock on the Franciscan convent's door in order to get in.

But it was soon evident that only a few of the people inside the church were "gunmen" and no one was being held hostage. Compelling and credible testimony came from the 35 or so Franciscan friars, several Franciscan nuns, six Armenian

monks and six Greek Orthodox priests whose monasteries and convent are part of the church compound and who remained in the church. Through their spokesperson, Father David Jaeger, the Franciscans repeatedly asserted that the religious were “not hostages; they are in their own house, in the precise place where they belong, in fidelity to their divine calling, and in obedience to the orders of their superiors.”

The Franciscans warned that the Israeli use of the term “hostage” was meant “to legitimize a perhaps imminent military assault.” On April 11 Father Giacomo Bini, the head of the Franciscan order, stated that “to date, none of the roughly 200 Palestinians who are with the friars has committed any act of violence.”

Those Palestinians who gradually decided to leave the church and were allowed to do so by the Israelis insisted that they had stayed inside of their own volition. Perhaps the most candid comment was from Fuad Hasan al-Aham, 19, who left the church on April 25 as part of the cortege of nine teenagers carrying the coffins of two men killed by Israeli sniper fire. On April 2, Aham had left his house in Bethlehem to go to the drugstore to get medicine for his ailing mother. When he saw Israeli tanks and soldiers moving toward him in Manger Square, he fled into the church.

Aham complained that some of the older men in the church had tried to hog blankets, and he talked about some of the bickering that broke out as people got hungrier and more desperate. But he said the civilians stayed voluntarily to help the men under siege in case the Israeli army attacked. “The young men inside feel their presence is very important,” he said.

People inside the church compound have been killed by Israeli snipers. How they died is a subject of controversy. Sergeant Stephane Doré, one of the Israeli army sharpshooters stationed around the church compound, said he has picked off two Palestinians, but insists that he and his fellows shoot only at armed men.

But Father Jaeger reported to Catholic World News that Israeli troops had opened fire on the Franciscan monastery and killed a monastery worker who was going about his daily tasks. In the process, the snipers set fire to the monastery courtyard.

After first labeling all who took refuge in the Church of the Nativity as terrorists, Israel said that about 30 of the approximately 240 are “dangerous wanted men.” On May 1, in response to a request from Palestinian negotiators, it provided a list of the wanted men who may be in the church. The list, published by the *Jerusalem Times*,

consisted of only ten people—residents of Bethlehem or of nearby Dheisheh refugee camp and connected with groups such as Hamas and al-Fatah.

Amid news of further fighting at the church and damage to the building, a CNN reporter on May 1 asked the Israeli consul general in New York, Alon Pinkus, “Can Israel really gain enough from this siege to make it worthwhile, especially since it risks angering the Christian world?” In answering, Pinkus reverted to Israel’s original, now discredited, claim: “The people in there are terrorists holding hostages.”

Neither side of this conflict is innocent, but the stories by the clergy in the church compound provide the most believable account. They indicate that the siege is yet another instance of the brutality of Israel’s military occupation. People subjected to a brutal occupation and who feel themselves to be powerless are likely to turn to terrorism. The only hope for peace is to end the occupation.