

From DC to the Vatican, baby Jesus is wearing a keffiyeh

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington's Capitol Hill neighborhood is one of several churches across the country that have created crèches called "Christ in the Rubble." Featuring the baby Jesus wrapped in a black-and-white checkered keffiyeh, the crèche is intended to remind Christians that if Jesus were born today, he would be born under the rubble. (Photo courtesy Lindsey Jones-Renaud)

The scene representing the birth of Jesus is a common December sight, artfully arranged on church lawns or entryways across the country.

But in some churches this year, the nativity crèche is looking a bit different.

The manger has been replaced with a pile of rocks, and the baby Jesus is swaddled not with a thin blanket but with a black-and-white keffiyeh, the Middle Eastern-style scarf that has become a symbol of Palestinians' resistance to Israeli aggression.

This tableau, often called Christ in the Rubble, first appeared last year in the town of Bethlehem outside the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, pastored by the prominent Palestinian minister and activist Munther Issac. All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California, quickly copied it and constructed one on its lawn.

This Advent season they are becoming more common. Even Pope Francis was presented a crèche December 7 by two Bethlehem-based artists, featuring a baby [Jesus nestled in a keffiyeh](#).

The pontiff declared "Enough wars, enough violence!" while receiving the delegation of Palestinian groups that organized the project.

In Washington, DC, less than half a mile from the US Capitol, another church assembled a Christ in the Rubble crèche last week.

The nativity scene outside St. Mark's Episcopal Church features a Black baby Jesus swaddled in a keffiyeh lying in a bed of broken bricks and clumps of concrete and wire.

It is intended to bring awareness to Israel's ongoing war that has leveled the Gaza Strip and killed more than 44,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, as well as to the plight of Palestinians in Bethlehem, located in the occupied West Bank. While most Palestinians are Muslim, there is a thriving Palestinian Christian community in Bethlehem, the site of Jesus' birth, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

"At Christmas, we sing about Bethlehem and we put up our manger scenes and talk about this story of Jesus being born in this town of Bethlehem with its themes of peace, love, joy, and hope," said Lindsey Jones-Renaud, a lay member of St. Mark's who was part of the team that assembled the crèche last week. "But there's such a disconnect between all that and what is actually happening in Bethlehem right now and in the surrounding lands."

Since the Hamas-led attacks on southern Israel on October 7, 2023, attacks on West Bank Palestinians have skyrocketed. Israeli settlers have vandalized Palestinian

property and burned homes and cars, often as Israeli security forces stand by. About [900](#) West Bank Palestinians have been killed in 1,400 attacks, according to the United Nations. More than 50 West Bank Palestinian communities have been forced to [abandon their homes](#)

On Sunday, Jones-Renaud flew to Israel on a 10-day delegation that will tour the West Bank in a show of solidarity with the Palestinian villagers—and, if necessary, to act as a buffer to protect them from the escalated attacks by Israeli settlers and the Israeli army. It is the fourth trip planned by the group Christians for Ceasefire.

Multiple US Christian organizations have protested Israel's harsh military rule on Palestinians. They have called for a cease-fire and an end to US military aid to Israel. The US has supplied more than [\\$22 billion](#) in military aid to Israel since the war in Gaza began, according to a Brown University study.

Now, during the season of Advent, these organizations are working on campaigns to bring greater awareness to the plight of Palestinians.

"We need to take more risks to stop the killing in the spirit of Christmas and the birth of the Prince of Peace," said Eli McCarthy, a professor of theology at Georgetown University and a Just Peace Fellow with the Franciscan Action Network.

The Michigan chapter of Friends of Sabeel North America, an interdenominational Christian organization working on Palestinian justice, is planning to install two moveable "Christ in the Rubble" crèches this month, one at a park and another at a market—both in Detroit.

"Symbols matter and visuals matter, and our understanding in all of our traditions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, is that God is always on the side of the oppressed," said Kim Redigan, a member of the FOSNA Michigan group and a Catholic. "God is on the side of those who are suffering. God is on the side of those who are being crushed."

Some churches will also be participating in a Mennonite Action event on December 21 called the "Longest Night for Gaza Service" to grieve the loss of Palestinian lives. And on December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, some churches will take public actions on the day Christians commemorate the gospel story of the massacre of male children in Bethlehem by King Herod.

“Scripture reminds us to seek justice, show mercy and protect innocent life,” said Steven Scammacca, a member of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church who worked on the Christ in the Rubble crèche alongside Jones-Renaud. “Those values are clearly violated by the violence in Gaza.” —Religion News Service