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# Israel kills three in Gaza Catholic church sheltering elderly, children

At least three people were killed and 10 others wounded, including a priest, in Israel's attack on the church.

Parish priest of the Holy Family Church, father Gabriele Romanelli, receives medical attention, after he suffered light leg injuries following an Israeli strike on the church in Gaza City [Dawoud Abu Alkas/Reuters]

By Al Jazeera Staff

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Israeli forces have bombed Gaza's [only Catholic church](#) sheltering elderly, children, wounding at least 10 others, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said, as the military continues its assault across the besieged enclave.

At least one person is in critical condition as a result of Thursday's strike on the Holy Family Church in Gaza City, the Patriarchate said in a statement. The church's priest was also lightly wounded, it added.

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Among those killed were the parish's 60-year-old janitor and an 84-year-old woman who was receiving psychosocial support inside a Caritas tent in the church compound, according to the Catholic charity Caritas Jerusalem.

Israeli attacks across Gaza on Thursday killed at least 32 Palestinians, including 25 in Gaza City alone, medical sources told Al Jazeera.

Footage of the Holy Family Church attack published by a Palestinian activist and verified by Al Jazeera shows Father Gabriel Romanelli, the church's pastor, following the Israeli attack. The video shows the priest with his right leg bandaged but otherwise in good condition.

"The people in the Holy Family Compound are people who found in the Church a sanctuary – hoping that the horrors of war might at least spare their lives, after their homes, possessions, and dignity had already been stripped away," the Patriarchate said in its statement after condemning the deadly attack.

Shadi Abu Dawoud, a 47-year-old Palestinian Christian, said the church's main hall was housing dozens of displaced citizens, mainly children and elderly people, and that all were "peaceful civilians".

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"My mother suffered serious injuries in the head; she was wandering in the church's yard with other elderly women [when Israeli forces attacked]," he told Al Jazeera. "We were taken by surprise by this Israeli air strike. This is a barbaric and unjustifiable act."

Mohammed Abu Hashem, a 69-year-old man who lives beside the church, said he was in the ruins of his home when there was a huge explosion that covered the area in black smoke, adding that he never thought the Israelis would attack the church.

"The Israeli air strike was massive, totally horrifying," he said. "The horror we are living in is beyond description. No words could describe what we are living through. It is not even close to what you watch [on TV] or hear."

Father Bashar Fawadleh, the parish priest of Christ The Redeemer church in Taybeh, nearly Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, said he spoke about the attack with the assistant parish priest of the Holy Family Church in Gaza City.

"He told me that the bombing was very hard. They bombed the church itself," Fawadleh told Al Jazeera. "Our feeling is between hope and sorrow, between life and death."

Fawadleh reiterated calls for a ceasefire to stop the "horrible war in Gaza".

## 'War of extermination'

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attributed the strike to "stray ammunition", adding that Israel was investigating the incident and "remains committed to protecting civilians and holy sites".

His statement was issued after a call from United States President Donald Trump, who had contacted the Israeli leader after having "not a positive reaction" to the strike, according to White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt.

"It was a mistake by the Israelis to hit that Catholic church, that's what the prime minister relayed to the president," Leavitt said.

Reporting from Jordan's capital Amman, Al Jazeera's Hmdah Salhut said Netanyahu issued the statement after coming "under pressure" from Trump, echoing the Foreign Ministry's earlier announcement that an investigation was underway.

"It's a little bit hard to believe any sort of Israeli investigation that happens after 21 months of war because the military oftentimes absolves itself of any sort of wrongdoing. There is no one held accountable," said Salhut.

The ministry had also asserted Israel did not target churches or religious sites despite [repeated attacks](#) since the start of the war on Gaza, she added.

Pope Leo, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, said he was "deeply saddened to learn of the loss of life and injury caused by the military attack" on the Gaza church, according to a telegram signed on his behalf by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state.

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Pope Leo "assures the parish priest, Father Gabriele Romanelli, and the whole parish community of his spiritual closeness", the telegram said.

The pontiff renewed his "call for an immediate ceasefire, and he expresses his profound hope for dialogue, reconciliation and enduring peace in the region".

His predecessor, the late Pope Francis, had held [nightly calls](#) with the church's parishioners in a show of solidarity with them. The last call took place the day before he died in April.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, said in comments to [Vatican News](#) that an Israeli tank hit the church "directly".

"What we know for sure is that a tank – the [Israeli army] says by mistake, but we are not sure about this – they hit the church directly, the Church of the Holy Family, the Latin church," he added.

Since the start of the war on Gaza, Israel has repeatedly attacked religious sites, including mosques and churches. In October 2023, just days after the deadly assault began, the Israeli army bombed the Church of Saint Porphyrius, the Gaza Strip's oldest, killing at least 18 people.

An independent United Nations commission report [said](#) last month that Israel has committed the crime against humanity of "extermination" by attacking Palestinian civilians sheltering in religious sites and schools in Gaza.

The report by the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, said Israel has destroyed more than half of all religious and cultural sites in the territory, as well as more than 90 percent of school and university buildings in Gaza.

Meanwhile, Hamas slammed the attack as "a new crime committed against places of worship and innocent displaced persons".

"It comes within the context of the comprehensive war of extermination against the Palestinian people," the group said in a statement shared on Telegram.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also blamed Israel for the strike, saying attacks against "the civilian population that Israel has been carrying out for months are unacceptable".

Only about 1,100 Christians live in Gaza, according to a US Department of State report in 2024. The majority of Palestinian Christians are Greek Orthodox, but there are also Roman Catholics living there.

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