

# Christian-Muslim relations in Palestine



By  
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### **An overview of the Christian presence in Palestine**

The estimated number of Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem is 51,710, making the percentage of the Palestinian Christians in the Occupied Territories two percent of the Palestinian population.<sup>i</sup> There is, in contrast, a higher percentage of Christians in Israel. The percentage of the Arab Christians in Israel - including Israeli Occupied Jerusalem - is 1.66, according to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. Bethlehem, which traces its roots to the very origin of the Christian faith, is the home to the highest percentage of Christians in Palestine (43.4%), followed by Ramallah (24.7%), then Jerusalem (17.9%).

Christianity has a long standing history in Palestine, and Palestinian Christians belong to several traditional communities of faith. The first are the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox churches, the second is made up of the Syrian, Coptic and Armenian Orthodox churches, and a third category consists of those churches belonging to the Catholic family of churches. There are also a small but increasing number of evangelical churches, including the Lutheran and Episcopal churches.

Over the past century, the percentage of Christian Palestinians has been in decline. The influx of Jewish immigrants since the late 1880s, the Nakba of 1948 and the expulsions of 1967 played a big role in diminishing the presence of Palestinian Christians. During the Deir Yassin Massacre of 1948, over a quarter of a million Palestinians, many of them Christian, were displaced or disappeared. Many of the 531 villages that were levelled in 1948 had a mix of Christian and Muslim inhabitants. To this day, millions of Palestinians have been expelled from their lands, and rendered homeless and as refugees. Of the remaining Palestinian Christians, most of them have emigrated at an increasing rate from 1990 onwards, because of lack of freedom and security and due to the deteriorating economic situation.



### **A relationship of trust in the face of Israeli adversity**

Various Christian Zionist propaganda sources claim that the main problem for Palestinian Christians is their Muslim neighbours.<sup>ii</sup> The decline of Christian presence in Palestine is portrayed as the fault of Muslims and not of the illegal Israeli occupation.<sup>iii</sup> Christian Zionist tours to the Holy Land contribute towards the spread of this myth and frame the conflict in an anti-Muslim way in order to distract attention from Israel's continued violations of international law.

Even though the relationship between Palestinian Christians and Muslims is not always a rosy one, the above claims are far from true. Palestinian Christians are an indigenous, integral part of the Arab Palestinian culture and civilization in the political, historical and religious spheres. At the political level, Palestinian Christians have been fellow citizens in the common struggle against foreign or colonial invasion, regardless of its religious or ethnic identity. Many seats in the current Palestinian Legislative Council are held by Palestinian Christians. This amounts to more or less 8% of the seats, whereas Christians only make up 2% of the population of the West Bank and Gaza. Similarly, the Samaritans, who number three hundred and twenty persons, have one seat in the Council. Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter are observed, and Christians continue to be an integral part of the Arab Palestinian culture and civilization. A relationship of peaceful coexistence is also found on the personal level. People from both religions visit each other during religious festivals, and in Jerusalem schools run by Christian churches have a majority Muslim student population.

Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim counterparts, have experienced a long history of dispossession and have not been immune to Israeli policies of occupation and discrimination. Not only do they have to deal with the day to day hardships that come with occupation, but they are also dismayed by the fact that many of their fellow Christians in Europe and North America unquestionably support the Israeli regime. Western Christians (in particular American and Britain) have, for a variety of reasons, tended to show greater sympathy towards the state of Israel than towards the worsening condition of the Palestinian people. This alliance can be



traced back as far as 1917, when the United Kingdom issued the Balfour Declaration and established Palestine as a “national home for the Jewish people”. More recently the Nixon administration in 1973 provided Israel with a full replacement of all its tanks, planes and ammunition during the October War against Egypt and Syria.

However, Western Christian alliances with Israel go beyond a political alliance. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there has been a significant influence of Christian theological attitudes toward Israel which has been devastating on the indigenous Palestinian Christian community. The rise of Evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism has fermented the unquestionable support for the state of Israel. As was highlighted by the Pope earlier this month during his visit to Cyprus, *“the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories is creating difficulties in everyday life....moreover; certain Christian fundamentalist theologies use Sacred Scripture to justify Israel’s occupation of Palestine.”* A 46-page text published by the Vatican: [The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness](#) stresses how this fundamentalist theology is making the situation for Christian Arabs even more sensitive.<sup>iv</sup>

Christian Zionist support for Israel is also manifested in the shape of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, encouraged particularly by the Israeli Government Tourist Office.<sup>v</sup> This support has an objectionable consequence on the indigenous Palestinian Christian communities. Many of the Western pilgrims appear not only ignorant of recent Middle Eastern history, but surprised to find an Arab Christian presence at all. Like their Muslim neighbours, they are subject to daily experiences of humiliation at checkpoints and roadblocks and prevented from making pilgrimage to their Holy places of worship. Palestinian Christians are routinely prohibited from travelling to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem, where the church commemorates Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection from the dead, whilst Palestinian Muslims in the West Bank and Gaza strip are prevented from travelling to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.



In December 2009, a group of Palestinian Christians, including Archbishop Michel Sabbah, the retired Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem published ["A Moment of Truth"](#) , a call for help to the international community on behalf of the Palestinian Christians. They severely criticised “theologians in the West who try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the Israeli infringement of our rights, urge for non violent resistance tools such as boycott and divestments and call for a stop on Israeli ‘racism and apartheid’.” In an interview with Sabbah earlier this year, he clearly spoke on behalf of all the Christian Churches in Palestine when stating that *“Israeli Occupation is the Main cause of Instability in the Middle East”*.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Palestinian Christians and the Islamic resistance**

Contrary to what is propagated in the media, the relationship between Christians and the Islamic resistance in Palestine is one of respect. Although tensions arise between the Christian minority and the rest of the population, these are not the result of a systematic discrimination against them, but are more due to the everyday anguish of the siege and occupation.

With regard to the Islamic resistance Movement (Hamas), [Article 31 of its Charter](#) specifically says, *“Hamas is a humane movement which cares for human rights and is committed to the tolerance inherent in Islam as regards attitudes towards other religions...under the shadow of Islam it is possible for the members of the three religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism to coexist in safety and security”*.

An example of the coexistence is the situation of Palestinian Christians in Gaza, contrary to the Israeli propaganda (*hasbara*). School playgrounds are places where coexistence between Muslims and Christians takes place. The Holy Family School in Gaza City is part-funded by the Vatican. Father Emanuel Musallem explains how he is the priest of more than 4,000 Christians in Gaza. His school has more than 1,200 students, 1,000 of which are Muslim. Father Emanuel explains how many Hamas leaders are sending their children to this school, because he is not



preaching “Christianity”, he is rather “spreading the light of knowledge in his Palestinian nation”. Father Emanuel declares himself first an Arab, then a Palestinian, and then a Christian.



**Palestinian Muslim and Palestinian Christian girls playing in the playground.**

On another level, Hamas has always demonstrated respect for Christmas religious festivities. In December 2003, they were the first to organize an assistance package and donations to families whose houses were damaged by the Israeli Defence Forces in Rafah. The movement went even further and on Christmas Eve 2003 when several officials dressed up as Santa Claus and distributed presents to Christian children in Bethlehem. Another example of the tolerance and respect between the two communities was when

Declaration number 67 was issued by Hamas in 1990, cancelling a general strike which coincided with the religious Christmas holidays.

Another issue which is frequently discussed in the media is whether or not Hamas is encroaching upon women’s rights in the Gaza strip. Calls to ban male hairdressers from cutting women’s hair and a ruling stating that female lawyers had to cover their hair when acting in civil courts were denounced by many in the international community. However, even though, to some extent, the atmosphere in the region is more conservative, these measures were not approved of by the majority of the population and were therefore never implemented. Hana Afana, a 24 year old trainee maths teacher explains how Hamas is imposing a religious code, and how [what is really worrying for the women in the region is the siege and the economic situation](#). Qualified professionals and graduates like her find themselves unable to find a job. According to Mona Ahmad al-Shawa, who runs the women’s unit at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, basic human rights such as access to electricity, running water and medical treatment are what women want.



Muslims and Christians in Palestine are not just bonded at the playground or in the spiritual sphere. They share the sheer disappointment with the Oslo process and the rampant corruption of the Palestinian Authority, which has misappropriated billions of dollars worth of aid from the international community. Hamas winning the elections in the territories reflected the disillusionment of Palestinians, and was a natural reaction to their dissatisfaction. Often regarded as a military organization, the movement engages well beyond its military wing. It runs a network of social, educational, health and economic services, especially in Gaza. Christians in Bethlehem and Ramallah, tired of the PA's corruption and sex scandals, were not afraid to vote for Hamas.

**Collaboration between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Israeli State - "The Holy Land is not for Sale or Lease"**

The Palestinian Authority is, however, not the only one accused of corruption and scandalous transactions, and there seems to be internal strife between the different Palestinian Christian communities. The Greek Orthodox Church has been portrayed as collaborating with Israel since 1967, due to its involvement in land and political disputes. The Orthodox Church is the biggest private owner of land in Jerusalem and owns most of the land in the West Bank on which the Christian religious sites, including the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem where Christians believe Jesus was born, are built. Much of this land was donated to it by Orthodox Christian Palestinians in the late 1800s. Over the last few decades the church has increased land sales to the Israeli authorities or leased land to them for a period of 999 years. Examples of these transactions include the sale of St. John's property in the Christian quarter on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1990, the transfer of fifty dunams near Mar Elias monastery, and the sale of two hotels and twenty seven stores on Omar Bin Al-Khattab square near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



The church's land sales have come against a background of corruption allegations. Nicholas Papadimas, a previous church treasurer in Jerusalem, was involved some of the sales before he fled the country and was charged in Greece with stealing church funds in a separate case. On being appointed as patriarch in 2005, Theophilos had promised to stop selling Palestinian land, but he was also involved in many shady undertakings with Israel. The current patriarch, Irineos, has also been accused of being behind secret land deals with two international Jewish investment groups.

Another source of tension comes from the fact that the Greek clergy do not allow Arab clergymen from rising in the church. This is the case of the prominent Palestinian Christian clergyman, Abdullah Hanaa. On the 13th of November 2009, Theofilos removed Abdullah from his position as the deputy head from the Orthodox Church. This resulted in widespread condemnation from the Palestinian Greek Orthodox Community, who demonstrated in their thousands in the streets of Ramallah.



**Several hundred Palestinian protestors from the Council of Arab Orthodox Institutions and Organizations in Palestine, representing 19 groups, protested at the Greek Orthodox Church's involvement with the Israeli State and the removal of Abdullah Hanaa from his position. The placards read: "The Holy Land is not for Sale or Lease".**



The Israeli authorities have used the church's corruption and financial difficulties to their political advantage and applied additional political pressure to ensure that the choice of patriarchs is beneficial to Israel's land acquisition policies. One of the church's Jerusalem properties was purchased by Israel with the involvement of the Ateret Cohanim association which is dedicated to buying Arab property in Jerusalem and settling Jews there.

Both the Christian and Muslim Palestinian communities have suffered at the hands of the Occupation. Excavations near the gate of Maryam in the Western Wall of the Church of the Sepulchre in November 2009 are a recent example of this. Far from collaborating with the Israeli entity, the struggle against the occupation should unite not only the different Christian Churches, but also the Muslim community.

### **Conclusion**

According to Hanna Massad, pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, "The last 5 years have been very difficult for all the Palestinians - Muslims and Christians". Gaza Baptist Church is one of only three churches serving the 4,000 Christians living among the Gaza Strip's 1.5 million inhabitants. Hanna explains how the siege united the community. Because of the lack of basic food, Christian charities have provided food for families, 99% of which are Muslim. During the 2009 bombings, "the church ceiling fell down up to 6 times".





**Gaza Baptist Church  
ceiling falling down**

The plight of the Palestinian Christian is very much connected to that of the Palestinian Muslim in that both, whether in the Occupied Territories or inside Israel itself, are experiencing daily injustices at the hands of oppressive and discriminatory policies imposed on them by the Israeli government. The conflict is therefore not between Muslims and Christians; nor between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Palestinian Christians; it is between Palestinians as a whole and Israel's occupation and apartheid establishment. It is indeed hard to be Palestinian Christian. But it is equally hard being a Palestinian Muslim. It is hard simply being a Palestinian.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.annadwa.org/en/media/pdf/pal\\_christian\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.annadwa.org/en/media/pdf/pal_christian_booklet.pdf) "Palestinian Christians, Facts, Figures and Trends", Diyar 2008

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.cfi.org.uk/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/christianspersecuted.pdf> "Christians in the Holy Land: persecuted under the Palestinian Authority"

<sup>iv</sup> The Catholic Church in the Middle East, paragraph 18. Vatican City 2009

<sup>v</sup> Whitaker, 1994, The Ethical Challenges of Managing Pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Stephen R. Sizer

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.alternativenews.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2402:michel-sabbah-israeli-occupation-main-cause-of-instability-in-the-middle-east&catid=119:english&Itemid=878](http://www.alternativenews.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2402:michel-sabbah-israeli-occupation-main-cause-of-instability-in-the-middle-east&catid=119:english&Itemid=878) Michel Sabbah, "Israeli Occupation Main Cause of Instability in the Middle East". January 2010

