

The plight and flight of Palestinian Christians



By Dr Hanan Chehata

Palestinians can be Christians too

The “*Palestinian problem*” is usually perceived to be a “*Muslim*” problem; a conflict between the Jews and the Muslims and, for the most part, it is. However, it is easy to forget that amidst all of the politics and international wrangling there is another small but extremely important group who also have a deep rooted and valid claim to what is undoubtedly the most disputed “*Holy Land*” in the world. It may only constitute an extremely small

minority of the entire population (estimates range from anywhere between 2.3%-1.5%)¹ but the Palestinian Arab Christians living in Palestine/Israel also have a legitimate historical and spiritual claim to the land. After all, Palestine was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the land in which he spent his short 33 year life and even shorter term of ministry and, according to Christianity, the place of his crucifixion and resurrection as well. Ever since the time of Jesus there has been a permanent presence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Not only is it a spiritual hub to which Christians from all over the world flock for pilgrimage and prayer, particularly during Christmas and Easter, but it has also been a home to countless Christians of numerous denominations for almost two thousand years.

However, in the last few decades there has been a perceptible exodus of Christians from the Holy Land. As the number of Jewish settler-colonists from all over the world has increased, the number of Christians living in the region has declined sharply. Whereas a few decades ago the number of Christians in Bethlehem, the city in which Jesus was born, was estimated to be around 70%, now they constitute well below a third of the total population.

There are many complicated reasons for this exodus, including the rise of Zionist extremism and economic hardships caused by discriminatory Israeli policies. A few of these reasons will be discussed briefly below.

Economic hardships endured by the Christian population

It is important to acknowledge that the suffering imposed on the Muslims in the region as a result of the Zionist policies of the Israeli government have also been endured by the seldom mentioned Christian



population. They are by no means immune to Israel's discriminatory practices and they too have suffered from economic hardship and strife caused by Israel's sieges, the creation of the illegal Separation Wall, curfews, restrictions on trade and the myriad of other aspects of the military occupation that go largely unreported in the media. A study produced by the [Sabeel](#) organisation on *"Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel"* stated that *"the continuous confiscation of land, military roadblocks and the Separation Wall, coupled with restrictions on mobility and access, give the impression*



that people are living in a cage, dehumanized, with little hope for freedom and normal living. This situation really affects the core of the Christian community in Palestine and is the primary factor for forcing Christian Palestinians to leave."

The resultant economic strife seems to be the most overwhelming incentive for Palestinian Christians to migrate away from the region. [Romel Soudah](#), in a report published by the Sabeel organisation, concluded that *"Overall, the most inviting reason to emigrate is an economic one. Those who are leaving in order to work and those who are leaving because of the bad economic and political situation represent 87.3% of the total respondents. This is not surprising. The WB [West Bank] economy, during the past three decades, has experienced poor performance, absence of economic confidence, and high uncertainty. Therefore, the lack of job security and opportunity, associated with the high cost of living, has pushed many Christians to emigrate in search of a better life and economic opportunities."*

The [Bethlehem Christian](#) website also explains how, for example, traditional Christian trade has been affected adversely in recent years: *"As a way to spread Christianity, the monks taught the Christians how to carve the olive wood; since then, Christians have been carving the beautiful religious crafts from one generation to another. In recent years, the Handicrafts trade has suffered a great deal of hardship due to social, economic and political pressures because of the sharp decline in tourism and the diminishing numbers of craftsmen who left their traditional trade and immigrated due to difficult conditions in their homeland."*

The demographics of change

One of the first major waves of Christian migration from the Holy Land in modern history occurred during the 1948 [Nakba](#) (Catastrophe). *"The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was a major push*



factor that resulted in Christian Palestinians, along with other Palestinians, leaving their homes, towns, villages and cities.”

The result of the ongoing Christian exodus is clear and tangible. It has been reported in a study undertaken by [Dr Bernard Sabella](#), Professor of Sociology at Bethlehem University, that *“Some localities in Israel such as Tiberias, Safad, Beisan and Beersheba, which had small Christian populations in the 1940s, have none today. Others such as Haifa, Nazareth, Jaffa and Ramle continue to have Christian populations but only in Nazareth does the number of Christians today surpass their numbers in 1945.”* Furthermore, *“Today, a most generous estimate of the total number of Palestinian Christians in the Palestinian Territories would not surpass the 50,000 mark... using the calculation method based on 2% annual growth back in 1967, the Christian population by 2007 should have been at least 100,000. Accordingly, the total number of Palestinian Christians and their children born abroad who have left the Palestinian territories since 1967 would be estimated at no less than 50,000 Christians. In the years since 2000 alone, with the political impasse caused by continued Israeli occupation and the resulting Second Intifada, close to 4000 Christian Palestinians have left, primarily from the Bethlehem area.”*

A focus on Bethlehem and Jerusalem

Bethlehem has always been the beating heart of Christian Palestine and Jerusalem, a mere six or so miles away, shares a vital religious and spiritual connection, a link that has now been viciously severed by Israel. Longstanding Christian rituals that used to unite the two areas, such as the Easter Procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, are now lost traditions.



A sealed off route between Bethlehem and Jerusalem

According to a 2009 report in the medical journal the Lancet, *“although the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is visited by Christian pilgrims from all over the world, it remains inaccessible to Palestinian Christians from Bethlehem and Ramallah living only 10 km away.”*² As absurd as it may seem given their proximity to one another a simple postcard between the two cities can take months to arrive.

As [Dr Bernard Sabella](#) explains *“The special situation of Bethlehem-Jerusalem calls for an in-depth examination since the traditional historical religious ties between the two biblical cities make a pilgrimage visit to the Holy Land unthinkable without free access and mobility between them. Nowadays, the Separation Barrier [sic] has created a concrete separation between the two cities that is neither aesthetically acceptable nor suitable to honor the One born in the city 2000 or so years ago. The sight of*



the Separation Barrier makes any visitor or pilgrim's heart cry with sadness at the ugliness of Surrounding Bethlehem of the Nativity with such a concrete structure. Although the Israeli authorities claim that all this is being done for security reasons, it is actually leading to thousands of Palestinians in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem being denied access to each other's cities. All this encourages the exodus of Christians from the Holy Land and from the Bethlehem area in particular. Israel should be held responsible as its measures of population control are clearly a factor that pushes Palestinians in the Bethlehem area, as elsewhere, to leave for good."

According to the [Open Bethlehem](#) organisation, *"The current situation is grim. The walls and fences that encircle Bethlehem have turned this 4000 year old city into a prison for its 160,000 citizens. The number of tourists visiting Bethlehem has dropped from nearly 92,000 in 2000 to a mere 7,249 in 2004. In the last five years 9.3 per cent of the Christian population of Bethlehem has emigrated. Restaurants, shops and commercial outlets have shrunk and Bethlehem's economy is threatened."*

To put a more human face to it, in an article on *"Arab Christians"* in the June 2009 edition of the [National Geographic](#), Jon Belt describes the inane – some might say insane – but common situation whereby a family has been ripped apart by the Israeli division of the land and these two cities. He describes the story of a Christian man who is *"from Bethlehem, in the West Bank, so his identity papers are from the Palestinian Authority; he needs a permit from Israel to visit. Lisa, whose family lives in the Old City, holds an Israeli ID. So although they've been married for five years and rent this apartment in the Jerusalem suburbs, under Israeli law they can't reside under the same roof. Mark lives with his parents in Bethlehem, which is six miles away but might as well be a hundred, lying on the far side of an Israeli checkpoint and the 24-foot-high concrete barrier known as the Wall."*

This discrimination knows no bounds and gives scant regard to positions and titles. *"At the checkpoint, Christians are treated like all other Bethlehem residents: with extreme suspicion. Even the Mayor [Victor Batarseh](#)... is not allowed to remain on the Israeli side of the wall past 7pm. "It's degrading" says Batarseh. "If I'm invited to cocktails in Jerusalem, I can't go because I don't have permission." He is 73 years old."*

The impact of this destruction of the ties between the two cities was highlighted by [Henry Hyde](#), a senior U.S. Republican Congressman (also chairman of the House International Relations Committee), who wrote a harshly worded letter to President Bush in 2006 denouncing Israel's separation wall. He wrote *"We fail to understand how the route of the security fence [sic] in Jerusalem, which creates an impassable barrier between two regions fundamental to the Christian faith – the birth of Jesus (Bethlehem) and his resurrection (Jerusalem) and imprisons 200,000 Palestinians on the Israeli side will improve Israel's security."* He further wrote, Israel's actions *"go beyond the realm of legitimate security concerns and have negative consequences on communities and lands under their occupation."*

It is interesting to note that despite Israel's repeated and unwavering protestations that the wall is purely a security measure, according to one [Zogby Poll](#) (2006), 9 out of 10 Bethlehemites believe that the separation wall is there as part of an Israeli scheme to confiscate Palestinian land.



The persecution of Palestinian Christians



In a recent article in [JPost](#), it was reported that *“News stories about young Jewish bigots in the Old City spitting on Christian clergy who make conspicuous targets in their long dark robes and crucifix symbols around their necks surface in the media every few years or so. It's natural then, to conclude that such incidents are rare, but in fact they are habitual. Anti-Christian Orthodox Jews, overwhelmingly boys and young men, have been spitting with regularity on priests and nuns in the Old City for about 20 years, and the problem is only*

getting worse.” The article goes on to say that such incidents in fact occur on a daily basis. This in itself goes some way to demonstrate the tension between the Jewish and Christian communities and illustrates the reason why so many Christians now feel uncomfortable in their own homeland.

This type of behaviour may also explain why, according to the Zogby poll, *“seven out of ten Christians in Bethlehem believe Israel treats the town's Christian heritage with brutality or indifference.”* Tension between the two groups is inevitable in an atmosphere where the *“Christians of Bethlehem overwhelmingly (78%) blame the exodus of Christians from the town on Israel's blockade.”* This is in sharp contrast to the views held by American's who are more inclined to blame Islamic politics [45.9%] and where only a very small portion [7.4%] blame Israel. This tension between some Jews and Christians would perhaps be surprising to some in the West who seem to overwhelmingly believe that the main tensions are between Muslims and Christians. The 2006 [Zogby Poll](#) in fact showed that while *“Americans are sceptical about Muslims and Christians living contentedly alongside each other - only 17% thought they lived together in peaceful coexistence - the Palestinian survey showed they do: around 90% of Christians said they had Muslim friends, and vice-versa.”*

Attacks on Christian Holy Sites

Tensions are not only caused by the mistreatment of individual Christian residents in the Holy Land; Christian places of worship have also suffered from the ravages of the ongoing struggle between Zionists and Palestinians and frequently get caught, literally, in the cross-hairs. In 2002, for instance, Israeli troops laid siege to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem which is one of one of the Holiest sites in all of Christendom, as it is believed to be the birthplace of Jesus. Two hundred people, including civilians and those from various Holy Orders, were subjected to a horrific five week ordeal after tanks and



snipers entered the Manger Square and surrounded the Church on the grounds that they were hunting down some militants who had been given sanctuary in the church. The ensuing gunfire, tank presence, fire nearby and military conditions were not acceptable in such a holy and revered site and sent shockwaves around the Christian community worldwide.



Similarly, numerous churches have been destroyed during Israeli military incursions, divided from their congregations by the wall and exposed to dilapidation following the long sieges and restrictions on growth and development. Christian cemeteries have also been subjected to mistreatment and desecration.

Conclusion: A threat to the very foundation of Christianity



There is not just an abiding threat to the presence of the individual Christians who are being forced to leave their homeland, but there is also an even greater threat to the preservation of Christianity itself in the region. This threat is perceived to be very real. In an interview with [Christian Today](#), Reverend Garth Hewitt, the founder-Director of the Amos Trust and Honorary Canon of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, expressed his concern for the continued survival of Christianity in Palestine: *"I believe if we don't deal with this issue soon we will lose the whole Christian presence in*

the Holy Land."

As a result, according to Christian Today, [ex-The Bishop of Jerusalem](#), the Rt Rev Riah Abu El-Assal, *"urged Christians in Britain to become better informed of the situation and to visit Palestine to see the situation for themselves."* He also called on Christians in Britain to support the work of the different church institutions and to continue to pray for peace and justice in Palestine, as well as to challenge the Government to take a different route to end the Israeli occupation. Similarly, this year ["Pope Benedict XVI urged the dwindling Arab Christian minority to persist patiently in its struggle to survive and hold on to its religious and cultural identity when he met with bishops from Iraq, Iran and Turkey who were in Rome to report on their dioceses early this year."](#) However, despite his urgings, the Vatican does not seem to be using its considerable weight and authority to effect any real change in the lives of its



Palestinian followers. Instead of urging the long-suffering Palestinians to be steadfast and to continue to preserve their presence in the Holy Land, perhaps their right to exist in freedom there is something that Church leaders should be pushing Israel to recognise. The Christian Church worldwide is a force to be reckoned with and while many Christian individuals (such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu), organisations (such as the World Council of Churches) and individual churches are doing their best to ease the suffering of Palestinians of all faiths, the establishment as a whole is certainly not focussing its considerable resources or influence on the Palestine issue. As time runs out for Palestinian Christians, maybe this is something it should start to do before the presence of Christianity in the region is just a distant memory.

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¹Accurate statistics are hard to come by and different organisations tend to quote different figures. All figures given therefore should be taken to be rough estimates.

²Rajaie Batniji, Yoke Rabaia, Viet Nguyen-Gillham, Rita Giacaman, Eyad Sarraj, Raija-Leena Punamaki, Hana Saab, Will Boyce, "Health as Human Security in the occupied Palestinian territory." March 2009 The Lancet Pp48-58, p54.

