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The **Political Struggle** of Christians in Jerusalem

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FACTSHEET 3

The Political Struggle of Christians in Jerusalem

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FACTSHEET 3

The Political Struggle of Christians in Jerusalem

This fact sheet forms part of the 'Preserving the Palestinian Christian Community' project produced by Palestinian Vision ('PalVision') with the support of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS). The project has sought to raise awareness about Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land and to highlight challenges they face, including in particular threats to their religious identity and continued presence in Jerusalem. This factsheet, along with others in the series, aims to provide a basis for advocacy work and to inform discussion about action required to protect and preserve the Palestinian Christian population in the Holy Land.





INTRODUCTION

Jerusalem is one of the most important components, and arguably even the most important component, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to its religious importance for the three major monotheistic religions. Each faith endeavours to stamp its religious identity on Jerusalem. Consequently, the issue of Jerusalem has become complicated, especially following Israel's occupation of the eastern part of the city in 1967. Political changes wrought by Israel's occupation and ensuing annexation of the city have impacted the presence and identity of the Christian community adversely. These political changes continue to intensify the Christian community's struggle to maintain its presence in Jerusalem. This factsheet presents several political and economic issues that have directly, and negatively, impacted the Christian community in Jerusalem.



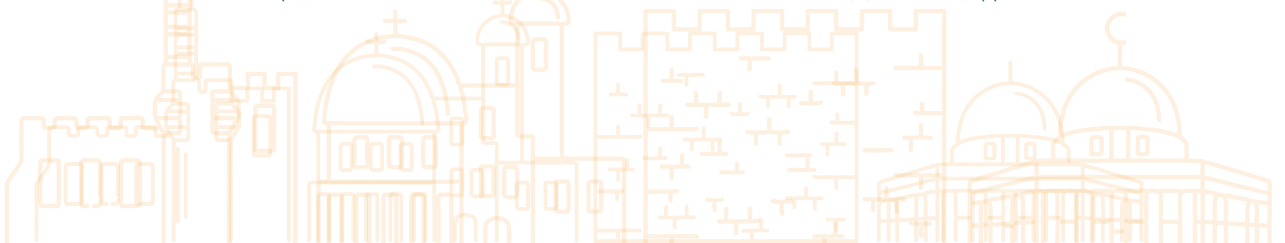
Political issues

The Israeli occupation of Jerusalem. In 1948 when the State of Israel was created, Israel took control of the western parts of Jerusalem and subsequently deemed the city as Israel's capital, a move not recognized by the international community. Jerusalem Palestinians remained in the eastern parts of the city although East Jerusalem and the West Bank were then under the control of Jordan, which annexed the territory in a move that also was not recognised by the international community at the time. Between 1948 and 1967 Jerusalem's eastern and western parts thus were physically partitioned.

On June 27, 1967, following the Six Day War, Israel extended its legal and administrative jurisdiction to all of Jerusalem including the East, West and the Old City of Jerusalem by expanding the city's municipal borders, effectively annexing these newly occupied areas and applying Israeli law to this unilaterally declared expanded municipal area. Israel's occupation of Jerusalem and its ensuing actions created a multitude of issues for the Christian community in Jerusalem as part of the Palestinian nation:

1. Demographic problems: Israeli officials and law makers agreed on the importance of preserving a Jewish majority within the expanded boundaries of Jerusalem as part of the struggle against Palestinian influence and control in East Jerusalem. Israel translated its plan to preserve a Jewish majority within the boundaries of Jerusalem by mandating, and working to preserve, a 76:24 (Israeli: Palestinian) demographic ratio in Jerusalem. To accomplish this ratio, the Israeli government encouraged Israeli Jewish immigration into the city through the restoration and expansion of the Jewish Quarter and the provision of quality housing, jobs, and services for Jewish Israelis who moved into the Old City of Jerusalem. Much of the new Jewish housing was located in the eastern and Palestinian part of the city, without any reciprocal arrangement for locating any Palestinian housing in the western side of the city that Israel conquered in 1948. At the same time, the government devised an array of legal measures to restrict new construction and expansion by the Palestinian population of Jerusalem.¹ Israel also began the construction of Jewish settlements and extensive supporting infrastructure in occupied and Israeli annexed East Jerusalem, settlements that today, after more than half a century of inexorable creeping expansion, form two rings around the entire northern, eastern, and southern perimeters of the city. The first, inner, settlement ring consists of ten settlements in Palestinian East Jerusalem that isolate East Jerusalem from its West Bank

¹ Shmuel Berkovits, *The Battle for the Holy Places: The Struggle over Jerusalem and the Holy Sites in Israel, Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip* (Hed Arzi and the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2000) (in Hebrew), pp. 174-176.



hinterland. The second, outer, ring consists of 20 settlements that split the West Bank into northern and southern halves.²

2. Residency restrictions imposed on non-Jews: Israeli government regulations stringently restrict entry, and especially residency, for non-Jews in Israel. These regulations have caused great human suffering for Palestinians in the territory occupied by Israel in 1967 and for the Christian community in Jerusalem in particular because of its small size. Adding to this are problems caused by the inability of Jerusalem Christians to establish residency in Jerusalem for Palestinian Christian spouses who are from the West Bank. Israel's labyrinthine system of movement, access and residency regulations isolate Christians who live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Jerusalem by severely constraining, and in many cases effectively eliminating, their free access to Jerusalem. Palestinians residing in the West Bank or Gaza Strip wishing to enter Jerusalem must apply for a temporary permit that is extremely difficult, and for many, impossible, to obtain. This effective closure policy has resulted in the denial of access for many Christian West Bank and Gazan Palestinians to friends, family, property and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, even during major religious holidays.
3. The effect of the Separation Wall on Christian communities: The connection between Christian communities in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other West Bank areas is of particular significance for the maintenance and continuation of a coherent Christian structure. Denial of access to Jerusalem for the West Bank Christian community severely restricts free access to social and cultural activities in the city and thus has seriously damaged the ability of Christians to conduct communal activities.

² Ibid 2. p. 177.



Economic issues

Christian economic instability. The 1948 war hostilities brought fundamental changes and political consequences to Jerusalem. Of primary importance, Jerusalem was divided into two parts: West Jerusalem consisting of new western suburbs that were rendered monolithically Israeli-Jewish after they were conquered by Israel and the Eastern suburbs, which remained Palestinian but under Jordanian control. The Nakba³ that occurred during the 1948 War and division of the city adversely impacted the local Christian community, both politically and economically. Prior to the 1948 war, nearly half of Jerusalem's Christians resided in the western suburbs of the city. During and after the war, these Jerusalem Palestinians were dispossessed of their properties and sought refuge in monasteries and other public spaces and centres. This displacement resulted in high rates of unemployment among Jerusalem Christians throughout the 1950s due to the lack of pilgrimage activities and a lack of suitable alternative employment opportunities. Years of hardship without a seeming end led to large scale Christian emigration that significantly reduced the population of the Christian community in the City of Jerusalem. The unsettled political situation and associated unrest continues to constitute a key element perpetuating economic instability for Jerusalem Palestinians, including the Christian community. It has been suggested that resolution or amelioration of political tensions could play a determining role in fostering economic stability, not just for the local Christian community, but also for all Palestinians living in Jerusalem.⁴ Several factors exacerbate the struggle of the Christian community in Jerusalem:

1. Discouragement by church leaders: Church leaders lack an action plan to encourage or incentivize local Christians to remain in Jerusalem and have not cogently acted to discourage them from emigrating. Christians who once controlled the tourism industry and other lucrative commercial interests in Jerusalem have steadily departed for Jordan and other Arab and Western countries. This has led to other Palestinians, from outside Jerusalem, gradually taking control of entire realms of commercial enterprise that formerly were dominated by the Christian community in Jerusalem.
2. Distribution of local Christians according to occupation: Few Christians are artisans or skilled or unskilled workers such as electricians, plumbers or construction workers. Few are skilled mechanics and even less work as unskilled workers. Christians mainly work in the civil service and teaching, some are self-employed, and others are employed in

³ Nakba means 'the catastrophe' in Arabic and refers to the forcible displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes during 1948. This displacement was often violent.

⁴ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation on the Palestinian Economy, West Bank, 29 May 2001.





trade and commerce. From the time of the 1948 Nakba until the 2001 start of the second intifada, employment statistics indicate that 60% of employed Christians worked in various service sectors, which provides a summary indication of the community's occupational profile.⁵ The Christian community in Jerusalem forms a distinct group due to its unique historical position and role. Nearly every Christian denomination has representation in the Holy City and during the 19th century Jerusalem attracted western states and tourism that fostered a highly profitable tourist and service industry that engaged, employed and benefited Jerusalem's Christian population. Consequently, the Christian population in Jerusalem more than doubled by the end of the British Mandate

⁵ Romell Soudah, "Christians in the Holy Land: Across the Political and Economic Divide," *The Sabeel Survey on Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel*, (Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, 2006), p. 23.

period, and the city became the largest Christian city in Palestine because of tourism and pilgrimages. Local Christians continue to serve as tour guides, tour operators, travel agents, hotel workers, restaurant workers and managers, as well as souvenir shop owners. Longstanding ties with western countries, political struggle and instability in Jerusalem, as well as other cultural and social problems that have been exacerbated since Israel's 1967 occupation and annexation of Jerusalem, have encouraged Christians in Jerusalem to look for a better future outside the country.

3. Occupational aspirations: The education that Christians pursue generates a labour force that, among others, facilitates working for institutions that provide services to the Palestinian people through not-for-profit and international organisations.⁶ Many Christian students look for specific field-of-study opportunities that are unavailable at their local university. Therefore, these students seek scholarships to various international universities, mainly in western countries. In many cases, these students opt to stay permanently in countries where they have studied. Christian students graduating from local universities frequently face difficulties securing employment related to their field of study due to a long-running political and economic situation that has constrained economic activity and employment opportunity. Furthermore, lack of specialisation in local university curriculums produces a high percentage of graduates with the same skills and degrees. This further reduces chances for finding employment and increases qualifications requirements for the positions that are advertised. For example, to apply for basic secretarial work, an applicant is required to have a university degree. A very low percentage of graduates among the Christian community complete professional degrees in agriculture, construction or commerce,⁷ areas of professional expertise with greater apparent applicability in the particular Palestine context and constrained economic environment. This results in further limiting work prospects for many Christian community university graduates.
4. Lack of affordable housing: Since 1967, under Israeli rule, the majority of Jerusalem's Christians, mainly from the urban middle class, have faced deterioration in their economic circumstances and the lack affordable housing has become a serious problem. Denial of new housing construction permits for Palestinians, which causes housing supply to lag far behind natural population growth, combined with an influx of workers from rural villages, has resulted in severe housing cost inflation in Jerusalem.

⁶ Ibid.7, p. 22.

⁷ Ibid., p. 23.



Recommendations

Politically

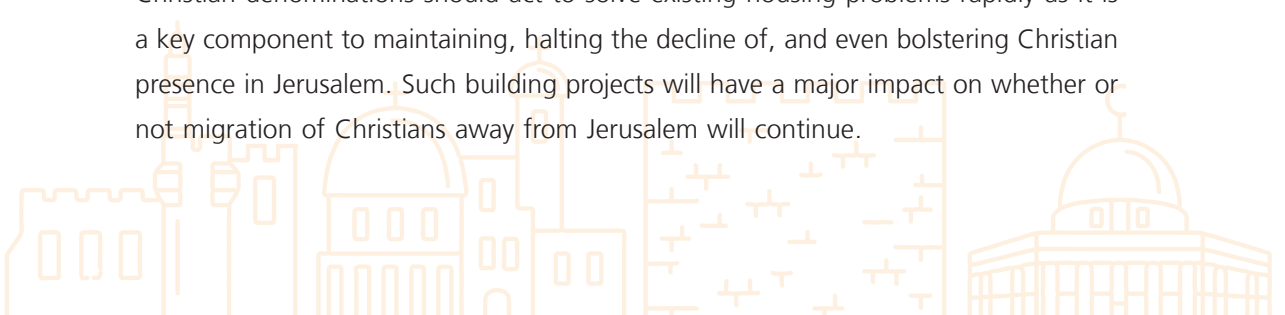
The general overarching Palestinian goal, whether Christian or Muslim, is to end the occupation and reach a stable and sustainable peace that is based on, and honours, international law. In addition to their work towards this overarching goal, the Christian community in Jerusalem and the Church should use their respective positions in Jerusalem to support and encourage the following complementary goals:

1. Encourage church leaders to pressure Israel to reunite families: Church leaders should mobilize their international networks and alliances to lobby to impose tangible costs on Israel for failing to implement transparent, effective, efficient and swift procedures to reunify families that remain separated due to the occupation, as well as policies and practices implemented by Israel throughout this period both within occupied/annexed Jerusalem and in the wider occupied territory.
2. The use and study of other examples to end physical division: There is a need to study how other nations have managed to remove physical barriers between people, as well as to initiate international advocacy to highlight the impact that Israel's Wall has on the Palestinian people of Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Israeli government must be persuaded to remove the Wall separating families and communities from one another. By way of example, the Wall is reminiscent of the Berlin Wall that separated East Berlin from West Berlin before the reunification of Germany. In relation to that Wall, US President Ronald Reagan stated in a June 12, 1987 speech from West Berlin; "There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate and tear down this wall!"
3. Develop political involvement strategies: The political future of Jerusalem Christians is impacted by the lack of Christian political representation in the Israeli government, Palestine National Authority and Jerusalem Municipal Council. This leaves the Christian population without influence or representation to assist them in adapting to, or influencing, a wide range of social, economic and political policies and practices. Awareness and action strategies should be implemented to increase the capacity of Christian community leaders to analyse, and effectively react to, any political change that has the potential to influence the Christian presence in the City of Jerusalem.



Economically

1. Christian resources. Churches, monasteries, and Christian organisations have been built throughout history in the Holy Land. Some are living institutions and some are churches that control holy sites related to Christianity. Most of these churches and institutions, however, are not effectively, or sufficiently, directing their significant resources to develop the economy of the Christian communities. Church institutions are not working with local communities to construct development plans that will generate income for local Christians, which could have a huge positive impact on economic survival and sustainability for these communities. Church leaders and institutions should consider and address these matters urgently and lead a new approach.
2. Business productivity thinking: Jerusalem Christian community members primarily work in service institutions, as employees, or in long-established, family-owned, businesses. Often, their business ethics and working methods are antiquated and many people lack the tools and creativity to develop or modernize their own businesses. Support should be provided to Christian business owners to modernise their businesses. This is especially relevant in the COVID-19 era, when many of the traditional sources of tourist income have been heavily disrupted or ceased altogether.
3. Economic strategies and solutions to benefit the Christian community: Christian economic strategies and solutions should be developed by the Church, Christian organisations and the local Christian community in Jerusalem to overcome economic difficulties. These should be as inclusive as possible to include as many denominations and parts of the community as possible.
4. Develop a career-counselling plan for Christian students. Students graduate from school lacking direction and clear thinking about what they aspire to do with their lives and what field of higher studies will best fit with their career goals and interests. The development of career-consulting plans should aim to introduce practical guidance about what skills are needed in the marketplace. This service should better support young Christians by guiding them toward sustainable employment within the Holy Land that will allow them to prosper and thereby reduce the attractiveness of overseas employment opportunities and immigration.
5. Implement a donor-driven residence-building project: There is an evident need for the local Christian community, in cooperation with Christian-related donor agencies, to work towards implementing more building projects to provide affordable housing for local Christian communities in Jerusalem. Coordination between church leaders and the local community will be essential to implement this recommendation. The various Christian denominations should act to solve existing housing problems rapidly as it is a key component to maintaining, halting the decline of, and even bolstering Christian presence in Jerusalem. Such building projects will have a major impact on whether or not migration of Christians away from Jerusalem will continue.





6. Establish financial resource facilities: There is a need to establish Christian development funds to enhance financial resources available to productive sectors and thereby facilitate their modernization and improvement. These funds should offer low interest medium and long-term financing. For example, there is a clear need to improve Christian access to money within the Christian private sector. Making these financial resources available would finance the investment required to reinvigorate economic growth, which could intensify as more peaceful conditions prevail.

Conclusion

This factsheet sets out the political challenges that Christians in Jerusalem face, how these impact on them economically and thereby contribute to the decline of conditions the Christian community in Jerusalem. Political stability can only come when Israel's occupation and illegal unilateral annexation of Jerusalem are halted and reversed. This remains the central aspiration of all Palestinians. In the absence of this outcome and resolution, however, this factsheet makes several recommendations about political and economic approaches that will contribute towards creating the conditions required for Christians to continue to reside, and thrive, in Jerusalem.

