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From Humanitarian Aid to Existence



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FACTSHEET 4

From Humanitarian Aid to Existence

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FACTSHEET 4

From Humanitarian Aid to Existence

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.



Portrayal of indigenous Christians

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Palestinian Christians have ranked prominently among Arab thinkers who pioneered new ideas about nationalism and democracy and played a leading role in fostering connections between the Arab world and western countries.¹ After the 1948 Nakba, Churches, congregations and related Christian organisations were among the first to provide support and humanitarian aid to Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, who were displaced or otherwise adversely impacted by war and political changes. This support continued and was further developed through the 1967 war and occupation, the first and second Intifadas and until the present day. The Church, the local Palestinian Christian community and its related organisations still provide support in numerous ways including through humanitarian aid, social assistance, education, health, emergency programmes, economic empowerment, development and charitable organisations that serve the Palestinian community. In addition, this support also plays a pivotal role in advocacy and lobbying among other religions within the country based on Christian beliefs, as well as toward western countries regarding the Palestinian cause, justice, peace and Palestinian human rights.

¹ Rifat Odeh Kassis, "Palestinian Christians between Dreams and Reality," *The Joint Advocacy Initiative Magazine* 1:1 (Summer 2005): 16-19. [online] available at: http://www.jai-pal.org/files/JAI_Magazine_2005.pdf



The Church in the Holy Land, and in Jerusalem in particular, provides this support to the Palestinian people based on Christian beliefs and Jesus' teaching that "if one member suffers all members suffer with them."² The Church believes that a just peace reached through negotiations, guided by international law and with the aim of ending Israel's more than half century occupation, is the first step towards genuine peace and security for all.³ In addition, the Church works to strengthen Christian presence in the Holy Land. Currently, the Church and related organisations are the third largest employer of Palestinians after Palestinian Authority institutions and United Nations related organisations.⁴ The strong role and efforts of the Church and related institutions to highlight the Palestinian cause to the international community is clear but sadly it has been insufficient to prevent the indigenous Christian community from immigrating away from the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem. The role of the Church and its related institutions has been akin to a candle that consumes itself to light the way for others. Based on statistics that show a continuing decline in the population of the Christian community in the Holy Land, many outside observers, as well as Palestinians themselves, fear for the future of this community, especially in the City of Jerusalem.

The support and humanitarian aid approach carried out by the Church and its related institutions has contributed to reducing the suffering of many Palestinians and supported their struggle for justice, peace and their national rights. This support has included advocacy to the local and international Church leadership about political developments and with the aim of positively influencing international opinion and action. Due to these efforts, significant Christian funding has come to the country for the provision of humanitarian aid. This created a scenario where the Palestinian people, particularly Christian Palestinian people, were represented as 'poor' to the international community. This was true for many in the beginning, but this poverty scenario continues as a central narrative until this day, decades later, long after the immediate need for urgent humanitarian support has been met. Although the initial support and humanitarian aid approaches helped to overcome immediate and urgent needs among the

² Holy Bible. 1 Corinthians 12: 26

³ Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, (2006) "Church leader in Jerusalem urge world Churches and all the Christians to advocate for peace" [Online]. Available at: <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/>

⁴ Aroush G. (2021), "Mapping of Christian Organizations in Palestine: Social & Economic Impact" Pp. 11. Jerusalem. Based on the findings of the study there are around 296 CROs that represent the third largest employer of Palestinians after the Palestinian Authority and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).



local Christian population to some extent, these approaches did not directly and significantly contribute to maintaining and strengthening the Palestinian Christian presence in Jerusalem.

Therefore, alongside support that the Church and its related organisations have provided, and continue to provide, to the Palestinian people and its cause, the Church also should develop a new approach to fundraising and lobbying for programming and activities that will support, and bolster, the Christian community's continued existence in Jerusalem. This revised focus is urgently needed to halt Christian emigration from, and to strengthen the community's presence in, Jerusalem. Statistical information on the decreasing numbers of indigenous Christians, in particular in Jerusalem, suggests that humanitarian aid has proven ineffective in stopping Christian emigration out of the country. Thus, the Church and its related organisations should start thinking about the Christian community in terms of existence and not poverty because, according to research, more than one hundred Christian institutions and related Christian organisations maintain a presence in Jerusalem. They provide services in education, social assistance and humanitarian aid, as well as physical spaces like cultural centres, sports clubs, health institutions, theology and history centres and Christian libraries. Around thirty of these institutions provide a broad range of services to the Palestinian people in the fields of advocacy and human needs, social development programmes, peace and justice, economic empowerment, capacity building, human rights, food security and agriculture, Christian care, political eyewitness work regarding the Israeli occupation, assistance to Palestinian refugees, gender-based violence, hygiene, interfaith dialogue programming, church leadership and fortifying Christian presence by repairing churches.⁵ Meanwhile, very few Church-related organisations work directly on the goal of strengthening the Christian community in Jerusalem and none of these organisations has made promotion of the Christian community's existence in Jerusalem a goal or priority.

⁵ Palestinian bible society (2021). Research on "the church Related organization" Jerusalem.



Recommendations

The following recommendations may help the Church to achieve the strategic objective of effectively supporting the continued existence of indigenous Christians within the Holy Land:

Fundraising and lobbying for strategic planning: 'Existence, not poverty' is the top priority message for fundraising and lobbying to achieve this strategic objective. There is currently a lack of unified strategy, vision, mission and tactics, including a lack of clarity about how to strengthen Christian presence in the Holy Land among Churches, church-related organisations and the local Christian community. This has resulted in no consensus being reached on solutions to the problems that exist, especially as most Christian assistance to the Holy Land has for decades been guided by poverty assessment.

Building public awareness: it is recommended to promote public education and awareness among different Palestinian communities about the importance for Palestine as a nation to support the Christian community's right to exist as part of the Palestinian community and for the benefit of the general goals of all Palestinian people. This responsibility rests on all Palestinians, as does the imperative of overcoming current levels of mistrust between different communities. Greater public awareness is urgently required to better understand how political, social, cultural, economic and religious complications impact the existence of the Christian community. The local Christians' relationship to the land is the heart and soul of who they are, it forms their identity, guides their existence and undergirds their tenacious survival in the face of immense challenges.

Develop Christian and political leaders: The Christian community lacks the political leadership to exert a role in local politics and to influence political decision makers to grasp the gravity of threats to this community's continued existence in the Holy Land. Lacking Christian leaders to encourage and direct the Christian population to lobby for its interests and solidify its political vision, the community's perspectives on problem solving therefore are missing from public discourse. Christian leaders need to create an environment to empower the Christian community to believe it has a role to play in making decisions as part of the Palestinian people. Weaknesses the Christian community faces include a lack of political parties within the Palestinian and Israeli political systems to represent the community's interests and aspirations, as well as a lack of community empowerment more generally.





Church and Christian community approach to non-Christian communities: Church leaders in the Holy Land currently maintain a dialogue with other local religious communities but should rethink the impact of this dialogue and consider new ways of communicating to work towards reinforcing the Christian community's existence. Christians, Muslims, and Jews each consider their religion important because it is part of their unique identity and their right to exist in the Holy Land. Interfaith dialogue stands among elements that can play a positive role in dealing with some of the obstacles to such a process between religions. Communication can provide an opportunity for mutual acceptance to overcome religious misunderstanding and allow people to live in peaceful co-existence.⁶

6 H.B. Michel Sabbah. *Living Together peacefully*". Proceeding of the Conference on "Exploring Christian-Muslim

Church and Christian community approach to non-Christian communities: Church leaders in the Holy Land currently maintain a dialogue with other local religious communities but should rethink the impact of this dialogue and consider new ways of communicating to work towards reinforcing the Christian community's existence. Christians, Muslims, and Jews each consider their religion important because it is part of their unique identity and their right to exist in the Holy Land. Interfaith dialogue stands among elements that can play a positive role in dealing with some of the obstacles to such a process between religions. Communication can provide an opportunity for mutual acceptance to overcome religious misunderstanding and allow people to live in peaceful co-existence.¹

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Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that from a Christian faith perspective, and with a keen view to the Palestinian national interest, the Church, Christian community, Church-related organisations, government and the entire Palestinian community needs to alter approach and augment efforts to defend the capacity of Palestinian Christians to continue to exist, and thrive, in the Holy Land. Moreover, the prominent narrative should transform away from portraying Palestinian Christians as poor and in need of humanitarian aid towards promoting a movement to protect their very existence in the Holy Land. This undertaking will benefit the entire Palestinian people, including Christians, within the Holy Land and around the world. To achieve this objective, a campaign should be designed and undertaken that will highlight challenges that result in Christian emigration out of the Holy Land. Parallel capacity building efforts to increase Christians involvement in decision making and to encourage inter-faith dialogue and collaboration will complement this narrative transformation. By encouraging the Church and its various institutions to coordinate efforts, a positive and protected future for Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land can be secured.

