

FACTSHEET

The Church's role in the struggle over Jerusalem

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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

The fate of Jerusalem and other holy places in the Holy Land is linked strongly to the legacy and origins of Christianity. This issue has been of particular concern to the heads of different religious denominations. The major churches have led a number of political initiatives designed to guarantee the presence of the Church in the Holy Land, but these initiatives have not been implemented due to extreme political ideologies and the absence of peace in Jerusalem. Factsheet 4 looked at ways that the Church can support the continued existence of Christians in Jerusalem. This factsheet outlines the evolving role of the Church over time, posits what that evolving role means for the future of Jerusalem and examines means by which the Church can help local Christians to overcome problems beyond simply ensuring that the community continues to exist.



Historical involvement of the Church and its community in politics

As a Church: As early as 1922 the Vatican Secretary of State publicly expressed fear that the terms of the British Mandate on Palestine, which at the time was in the process of being approved by the League of Nations, risked affording the Jewish population a privileged position over other religious groups in the Holy Land. Shortly thereafter, the Catholic Church, through the Vatican, led a political initiative among several churches to guarantee the continued presence of the Church in the Holy Land. These fears escalated in subsequent years and led by the Holy See, it was decided that the best solution to protect Church interests and the best solution for everyone concerned at that time, would be the internationalization of Jerusalem,¹ as recommended by the United Nations near the end of the British Mandate in 1947.² Church concerns about maintaining Christian and Church presence in the Holy Land continued after the Nakba in 1948. Israeli government leaders created new procedures, regulations, and laws to strengthen their religious and political identity, as well as dominance after taking control of Jerusalem in 1967, within the Old City of Jerusalem in particular. These measures raised concerns among leaders of other religions, including the full spectrum of Christian denominations, both in Jerusalem and abroad. In response, the heads of different churches, represented by local church leaders, issued several statements. Most called for a halt to violence against Palestinians, but particularly against Christian Palestinians attempting to worship, work, study and live in Jerusalem. These public outcries appear to have had little tangible positive impact, however, given that the confiscation of land and buildings in Jerusalem, among other manifestly violent actions, has continued steadily over more than half a century of Israeli occupation and annexation. Church leaders have declared that for Jerusalem to become a city of peace and a place to create harmony among all religions, requires earnest effort because “Jerusalem is a symbol and a promise of the presence of God, of fraternity and peace for humankind, in particular the children of Abraham.”³ Church leaders always have called upon all parties

¹ Corpus separatum (Latin for ‘separated body’) was the internationalisation proposal for Jerusalem and the surrounding area as part of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly with a two-thirds majority in November 1947. According to the UN Plan, the Jerusalem area would be under an international regime, conferring it a special status due to its shared religious importance. The corpus separatum was one of the main issues of the Lausanne Conference of 1949, besides the other borders and the question of the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

² Silvio Ferrari, “The Holy See and the post war Palestine issue: The internationalization of Jerusalem and the protection of the Holy Places” (International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944), Vol.60, No 2. 1984, pp. 261-283.

³ Their Beatitudes the Patriarchs and of the Heads of Christian Communities in Jerusalem, “The Significance of



concerned to comprehend and accept the nature and deep significance of Jerusalem, the City of God. These leaders consistently have maintained that no party should be allowed to appropriate the city for itself and have invited “each party to go beyond all exclusivist visions or actions and, without discrimination, to consider the religious and national aspirations of others, in order to give back to Jerusalem its true universal character and to make of the city a holy place of reconciliation for humankind.”⁴ Since 1948, and continuing until the present day, church leaders have issued statements to challenge Israel’s misconduct, but with little tangible success. The Church’s concern increased after Israel’s 1967 Jerusalem occupation and further intensified during the course of two intifadas, both of which enormously impacted the economic, social and political situation in the city and beyond.

Since 1967, Israel has strategically designed a geo-political policy with goals to create what its authors call “United Jerusalem,” under unilateral Israeli jurisdiction. This strategy has been designed to meet the Israeli goals of strengthening Jewish presence in East Jerusalem, restricting Palestinian development by confiscating and expropriating land from Palestinians and placing restrictions on land use and housing construction by Palestinians living in East Jerusalem.

Political instability in the Holy Land, and in Jerusalem in particular, creates a loss of hope for constructive socio-political change, which, in turn, causes people either to seek refuge in religion or in social withdrawal. This trend can be seen clearly in the life of the Christian community in the Holy Land.⁵ When the Israeli government denies West Bank Christian Palestinians access to Jerusalem, it creates social problems for Christian communities in Bethlehem, Ramallah and Nablus. As a result of this movement and access restriction, Christian communities in Jerusalem and the West Bank are isolated from one another. Church leaders have attempted to remove travel restrictions on West Bank Christians that prevent them from accessing Jerusalem for religious practices and social activities with their nuclear and extended family members in the Christian community. Most such attempts have been unsuccessful.

Jerusalem for Christians,” (Israel 23 November 1994). [Online]. Available at: http://www.notredamedesion.org/en/dialogue_docs.php?a=2&id=37&categoria=ecumenici.

⁴ This statement was signed by Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Latin Patriarch, Armenian Patriarch, Custos of the Holy Land, Coptic Archbishop, Syriac Archbishop, Ethiopian Archbishop, Anglican Bishop, Greek-Catholic Patriarch Vicar, Lutheran Bishop, Maronite Patriarchal Vicar and Catholic Syriac Patriarch Vicar in Jerusalem, 14 November 1994.

⁵ Bernard Wasserstein, *op cit*, p. 221. (East Jerusalem 12 Multi Sector Review Project). UNDP, 2012.



As a community: Prior to World War I, Palestinian Christians owned the two major newspapers distributed in Palestine, "Al Karmel," published in Haifa, and "Filastin," published in Jaffa. "Filastin" newspaper was founded by Issa al Issa, an active member of the Arab Nationalist Movement. "Al Karmel" was founded by Palestinian journalist Najib Nasser and was the first nationalist Palestinian newspaper. Nasser was the first Palestinian intellectual and commentator to publish warnings about the dangers Zionism posed for Palestine and Palestinians, extraordinarily prescient warnings given that he published these fears even before the crucially enabling 1917 Balfour Declaration. In 1913, he wrote, "Should we allow the Zionists to revive their nationalism at the expense of our nationalism? Have we agreed upon selling them our land piece by piece until they expel us from our land in groups and on an individual basis?" Najib Nasser additionally founded an association to convince the Turkish government to stop aiding the Zionists through land sales and to boycott Jewish products.⁶

The first Palestinian politicians came mainly from Jaffa, Haifa and Jerusalem and were organised by Palestinian Muslim - Christian associations in Palestine. In 1919, members of these associations as well as political parties, activists and educators from the Palestinian community, founded the first Palestinian National Congress, consisting of Palestinian Muslim and Christian representatives.

During the British Mandate period, Christians occupied a prominent position in political life. In 1936 there was a Palestinian general strike which lasted for six months, and the Arab Higher Committee consisted of three Palestinian political movements and six appointed board members, one-third of whom were Christians. The Committee was viewed as the official spokesman for the Palestinian people at that time.⁷

The foregoing history summarizes a small part of the significant information omitted from most history books focused on Palestine. It also is history not commonly known amongst Palestinian Christians and Muslims today. Unless these accounts of how Christians and Muslims worked together for the good of the Palestinian people as a whole are made more widely known and understood, future generations also will remain ignorant of contributions Christians made to the Palestinian cause. This ignorance may lead younger generations to avoid actively participating in the political agenda when their earnest involvement in fact could help solve some of the current problems caused by religion and nationalism.

⁶ Abdelaziz Ayyad, "Arab Nationalism and the Palestinians: 1859-1939" (Jerusalem: Passia, 1999), p. 47.

⁷ Ibid 6



Strategic issues should be addressed

International level: The Church in the Holy Land should increase efforts at the international level towards creating a coherent and well-organised action plan to address strategic issues of urgent concern to Holy Land Christians. This should be coordinated through the hierarchies of different Christian denominations in Jerusalem that, in most cases, maintain strong contacts with foreign countries because of the location of their denominational headquarters in Rome, Canterbury, Athens and other places in Europe. For example, the Latin Rite Catholic Church in the Holy Land is represented by the Vatican, while the Orthodox Rite Church is connected to Greece and Russia and the Anglican Church is headquartered in the United Kingdom. These countries should become positive diplomatic channels through which Israel can be persuaded to provide freedom of religious practice to Christians wishing to worship at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. Many Christian leaders already exert pressure toward Israel on this issue, among others, but a well-coordinated and simultaneous effort by the broadest possible array of church leaders, including in the United States, may register a stronger impact.





National aspects: Palestinian Christians constitute an integral part of the Palestinian people, and their position often reflects that of the Palestinian people. Part of their position involves political resistance to occupation, alongside all Palestinians. Another part involves their role in the peace process and reconciliation between all parties. While there are many views on how security, justice and peace can be achieved, as the prophet Isaiah stated, “the effect of justice will bring peace, quietness and security forever.”⁸ The faith of Palestinian Christians compels them to work toward peace and to oppose, through their churches and their connection to Christians throughout the world, efforts by the governing and occupying authorities to unilaterally impose terms of any so-called peace, unless based on international law. Holy Land churches and their related institutions should continue to strive towards the universal goal that every Jewish, Christian and Muslim individual in the Holy Land will live under the same laws and under the protection afforded by robust rule of law. To achieve this, the Israeli government will need to fundamentally change its attitude and practices towards the Palestinians and to halt discriminatory policies that accord Palestinians what is at best a second-class citizen status with inferior rights in their own homeland and place of origin. Palestinians, whether they live in Israel, the West Bank, including Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip or outside the country, resolutely believe that they must be accorded, and respected with, the same human rights as Jews enjoy and that this is the only means by which peace can prevail.

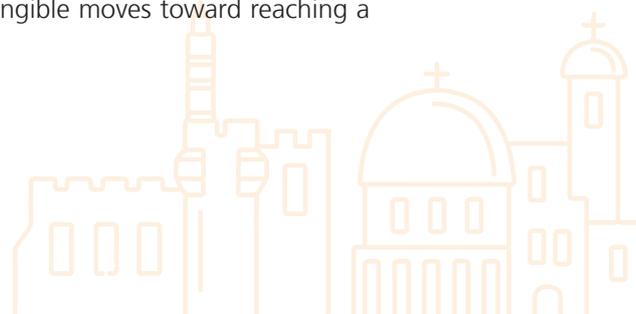
⁸ Isaiah 32:17.



Recommendations

Political strategies could reduce local Christian fears about political instability and foster a sense of potential community and personal influence on local politics. Concrete Christian political strategies that serve Christian needs concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are necessary. These strategies should deal not only with the Palestinian cause in general but also with the future survival of the Christian community in the country. Different aspects of the political strategies proposed are detailed below.

- It is necessary to develop a set of strategies to strengthen the Christian presence in Jerusalem. Jerusalem will occupy a central role in any arrangement that purports to secure a sustainable and stable peace in the Holy Land. Jerusalem also remains one of the more difficult aspects of peaceful resolution of the conflict because Jews and Muslims both claim exclusive sovereignty over the city based on their respective religions. Moreover, the Old City in particular, holds immense and important religious significance for Jews, Muslims and Christians worldwide. Religion driven exclusivist political ideologies have led to an impasse and the Christian presence in Jerusalem is threatened because of the community's small numbers and the absence of cogent strategies to bolster Christian presence. Therefore, churches, local Christians, organisations, and institutions should develop strategies to strengthen the Christian presence in Jerusalem. Jerusalem should be the focus of local and international Christian political action as it is of central importance to the Christian religion globally. The local and international Christian community must work together to strengthen their Christian identity and image in Jerusalem.
- Church leaders should be encouraged to pressure the Israeli government to reunite families. These leaders should leverage their international connections to lobby states to impose sanctions on Israel until it adopts transparent, efficient and effective procedures that facilitate the reunification of divided Palestinian families. Separation of family members from one another constitutes one of the primary reasons that Christians emigrate from Jerusalem and the country. To date, hundreds of Christian family reunification cases have been submitted to the Israeli Ministry of the Interior without any tangible progress toward resolution. The cases under consideration request that either the husbands or wives from the West Bank (the majority of spouses are from the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas) be granted permanent residency status so they can live with their families in Israel and Jerusalem. The Israeli government continues to deny this fundamental human right for families to live together as a unified family unit. For Israel to allow families to dwell together in one place will remove tremendous hardship and could form an important step to foster further tangible moves toward reaching a comprehensive peace.



- A significant problem for the political future of Christians living in Jerusalem is the lack of political representation within the Palestinian National Authority and Israel and, accordingly, the means for creating, or reacting to, political change. Awareness strategies should be implemented to increase the ability of Christian community leaders to analyse and react to any political change with the potential to impact on Christian presence in the City of Jerusalem. Notwithstanding the lack of clarity about when the conflict may conclude, all Christians in Jerusalem and worldwide should work to counter what already has been, and what still may be, lost with regard to Christian identity in the city. Despite Christians in Jerusalem being few in number, they should play a strong proactive role in preserving their Christian identity. This should include continuous engagement in dialogue and other personal efforts to build their community and overcome challenges it faces.
- Christians should develop a clear vision about the peace process based on Christian interests and values, as well as United Nations Security Council Resolutions that propose two nations sharing one Holy Land. Many documents and notable authors, such as Naim Ateek,⁹ have expressed the view that there could be two independent states, each responsible for the majority of its own internal affairs while also working together on issues of mutual interest. These two independent states together would form a joint entity in the form of a Confederation of Independent States. Jerusalem would remain a celebrated city, recognised as the capital of Israel and Palestine, as well as the seat of the Confederation government. The Confederation government would administer the Old City, thereby conferring equal ownership to every citizen. Likewise, this area would be open to all, with joint security teams controlling every entrance. The rest of Jerusalem similarly would be united city under the auspices of the Municipality of Jerusalem. State borders would be agreed but the land of Jerusalem would be classified as a part of “The City of Peace” under divine sovereignty. No matter the format or formula, a Christian presence should be ensured in whatever political or peace process may be sought, especially concerning Jerusalem and the Old City of Jerusalem.
- A Christian political movement is needed to create a concrete foundation to influence and initiate policies that affect Christians living in Israel and Palestine. Christians living in Israel must participate more actively in elections, whether through the existing Arab Coalition Party (Joint List) that currently dominates Palestinian representation in the Israeli Knesset, or by setting up a new party to gain seats in the Knesset. The charter of such a Christian political movement should, among others, focus on addressing issues related to preserving Christian presence in the State of Israel. All human beings have the right to practice their religious beliefs freely, without fear of persecution and this is what Palestinian Christians desire. The Christian presence in the Holy Land, especially in Jerusalem with its different denominations, churches and sanctuaries would need

⁹ Naim Stefan Ateek is a Palestinian priest in the Anglican Communion and founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. He has been an active leader in the shaping of the Palestinian liberation theology.

to be assured of peaceful unity and sustainable prosperity through international guarantees. The three major religious communities should be ensured the right of access to their respective holy places, freedom of expression of faith and of development. Christians living under the Palestinian Authority should be free to access all places of worship in Jerusalem at all times, not exclusively on holy days. The Old City of Jerusalem and its holy places should be granted an overarching umbrella of international guarantees that will be applied and implemented, thereby striving towards a just, stable and sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians based on international law.

- Local and international awareness raising and lobbying is needed to counter the political influence of extremist right wing Jewish and evangelical Christians. The growing influence of extremist ultra-Orthodox and Zionist views, alongside growing evangelical Christian influence, has impacted the Palestinian community in general and especially Christianity and the Christian community. These right-wing parties have become highly influential in political decision making regarding religious issues with the result that policies have been formed that are based on extremist ideological aspirations for an exclusively Jewish religious state.



