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Developing Strategies to Strengthen **Christian Presence** in the Holy Land

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FACTSHEET 6

Developing Strategies to Strengthen Christian Presence in the Holy Land

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FACTSHEET 6

Developing Strategies to Strengthen Christian Presence in the Holy Land

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

Churches and their related organisations play an important role in providing assistance and support to the Palestinian community through education, social services, health, humanitarian aid, development, cultural centres, employment and housing. As a result of this extensive support, Church Related Organisations (CRO's) have become the third largest employer in Palestine.¹ This assistance has helped the Palestinian community, including both Muslims and Christians, to overcome economic difficulties that the Palestinian people have experienced since the Nakba in 1948.² The Church's mission has been clear in providing assistance to the Palestinian people, including that it has endeavoured to reduce emigration out of the country by the Palestinian Christian community. Unfortunately, despite all the power and services that the Church and CRO's continue to provide, these efforts have not sufficed to prevent a decline in the number of Palestinian Christians residing in the Holy Land. For many years, Palestinian Christians have been concerned with several key issues that threaten their continued existence in the Holy Land. These include, but are not limited to, the unstable political environment, poor economic conditions that have been exacerbated by COVID-19, religious challenges, as well as church strategies regarding local Christians.³ It does not suffice for the Church merely to save itself, however. Palestinian Christians make a valuable contribution to the fabric of Palestinian society and its rich heritage. A well-coordinated and strategic approach is now needed to safeguard their future in Palestine, alongside other religions of the Palestinian people.

1 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 (155,000 employees) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) (17,767 employees) and CROs employ a total of (9098 employees).

2 Ibid 1. Pp. 10. "CROs have provided services to approximately 37% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. This study establishes that the services of CROs touch the lives of over 1,900,000 Palestinians every year. For instance, four out of six specialised hospitals (67%) in Jerusalem are affiliated with churches."

3 Salman, U. (2017) Research: "Strengthen the Christian Presence in the Holy Land through the implementation of a Strategic Planning Program". P.p. 4-6. University of Wales Trinity Saint David. UK.



Purpose of Strategic Planning

The importance of strategic planning is not new. There are many examples from the Bible that illustrate strategic thinking, planning and implementation in action, for example. Strategic planning is a process that helps focus on aligning available collective resources to best take advantage of opportunities and protect against risks. The purpose is to formulate a concrete strategic plan based on a clear vision and mission that can be translated into an executable strategic programme of tangible activities that focuses on strengthening the Christian presence in the Holy Land. This approach will meaningfully contribute toward maintaining and preserving the local Christian communities and congregations in the Holy Land, as well as to strengthening the Church as an entity based on a single and unified Palestinian community.

For many years, the Church and Holy Land Palestinian Christians have been concerned about their continued presence as their community has dwindled in size. It is now time for the churches, Church Related Organisations (CROs) and the local Christian community to join forces with other external partners. Together, and based on concrete research and a joint strategic plan, they should adopt a range of new approaches to strengthen Holy Land Christian presence and identity, as well as to halt and reverse Christian community emigration from the Holy Land.



Research Question

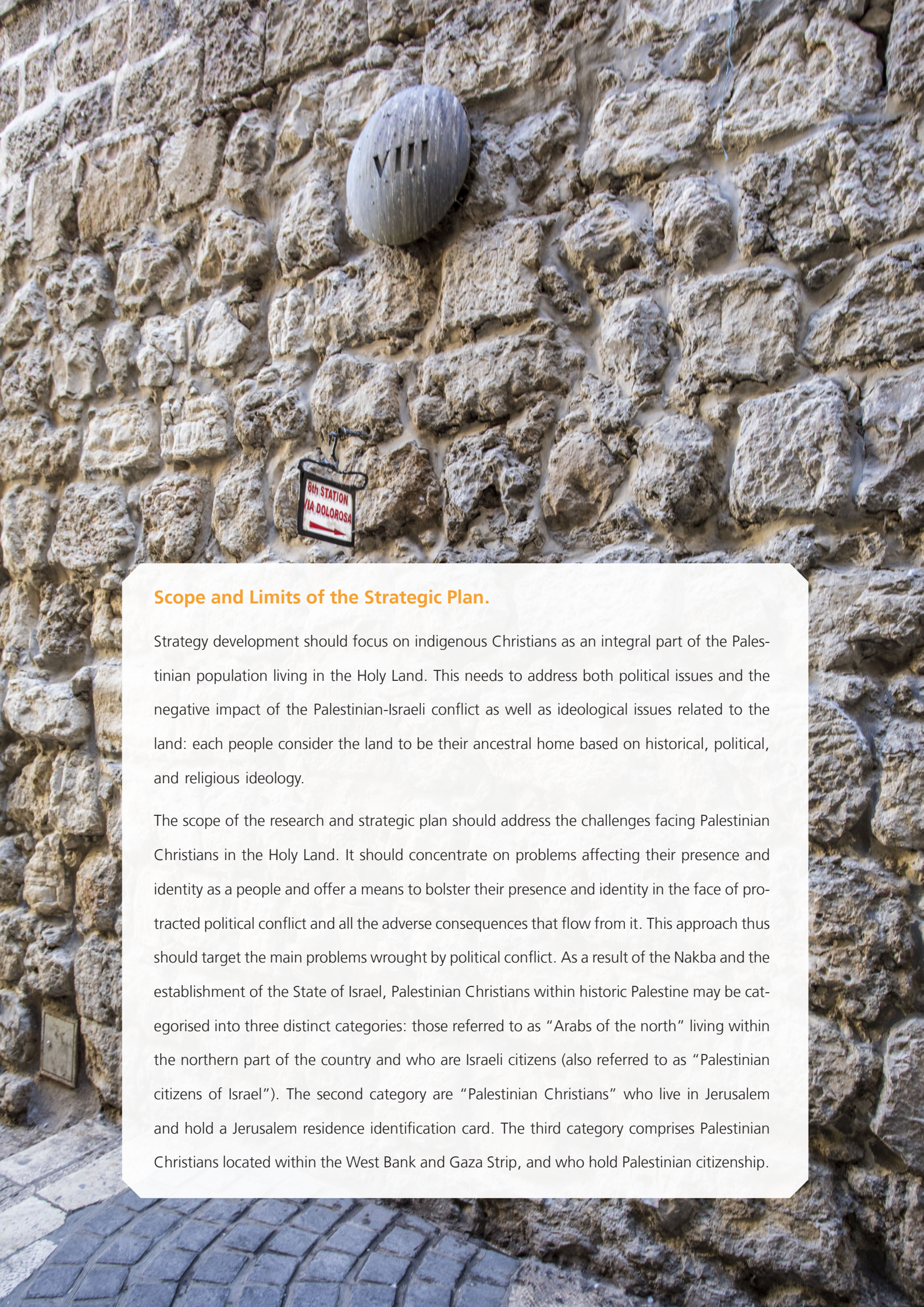
The first step in undertaking this type of research is to identify the vision and mission. This should then be followed by identifying a strategic plan to review the question that the research was founded upon. The question that should be asked is:

“What tangible actions will assist the local Christian community and its Church leaders to mitigate the exodus of fellow Christians to other countries and to preserve a strong Christian identity and presence in the Holy Land?”

To usefully and accurately answer this research question, several steps must be taken: first, relevant information must be gathered to identify the issues that lie at the heart of each problem. Second, a SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) should be performed on the information gathered to ascertain the underlying causes of these problems. Third, the gathered and analysed evidence should inform conclusions on the methods that will best contribute towards solving these problems, including a set of actions that can be transformed into a strategic programme and activities.⁴ This strategic programme and activities could be implemented through CROs (schools, churches, parish centres, tourism sector and Christian related organisations), Palestinian official and non-governmental institutions, relevant international organisations and diplomatic missions that maintain a presence in the country. Implemented strategic programme activities should increase the individual and community sense of belonging, as well as ownership of religious identity, and thereby secure a future Christian presence in the Holy Land. Finally, implemented strategic programme activities should tangibly mitigate, and even reverse, the loss of Christians from the Holy Land due to emigration to other countries.

⁴ Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd Edition, pp.3 - 41. [Online]. Available at: http://www.community.csusm.edu/pluginfile.php/21115/mod_resource/content/1/





Scope and Limits of the Strategic Plan.

Strategy development should focus on indigenous Christians as an integral part of the Palestinian population living in the Holy Land. This needs to address both political issues and the negative impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as ideological issues related to the land: each people consider the land to be their ancestral home based on historical, political, and religious ideology.

The scope of the research and strategic plan should address the challenges facing Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land. It should concentrate on problems affecting their presence and identity as a people and offer a means to bolster their presence and identity in the face of protracted political conflict and all the adverse consequences that flow from it. This approach thus should target the main problems wrought by political conflict. As a result of the Nakba and the establishment of the State of Israel, Palestinian Christians within historic Palestine may be categorised into three distinct categories: those referred to as “Arabs of the north” living within the northern part of the country and who are Israeli citizens (also referred to as “Palestinian citizens of Israel”). The second category are “Palestinian Christians” who live in Jerusalem and hold a Jerusalem residence identification card. The third category comprises Palestinian Christians located within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and who hold Palestinian citizenship.

Objectives of the Strategic Plan

The objectives of the Strategic Plan are to provide practical solutions that the local Christian community and its organisations can implement through activities devised under a concrete strategic planning programme. Implementing actors should include Church related organisations, Palestinian official and non-governmental institutions and international organisations. The research objective is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the range of problems facing Palestinian Christians, most notably threats to their future presence in the Holy Land and religious identity. Analysis dictated by the research objective may be categorised into five major problem areas: cultural, economic, political, religious, and social.

The proposed analysis may be conducted by recounting the historical role played by institutional churches vis-à-vis the Christian community in the Holy Land and proceeding on to a detailed examination of the current role played by these institutional churches. This may be achieved by first identifying the particular problems facing the community, including social, economic, emigration and human rights issues, as well as the challenges of living in a multicultural society. Second, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) should be performed on the gathered information to pinpoint the causes of identified problems. Third, solutions to the problems should then be proposed as a set of pilot project recommendations that could be carried out through a strategic set of activities and programmes. Lastly, the recommendations should be categorised from most to least useful, according to their anticipated influence and impact on the Christian community and identified strata within it. For instance, programmes based on education would target youth who attend schools and universities and would have a more direct impact on students.⁵ Thus, the outcomes of this research would provide an objective opportunity for community leaders to identify the most promising and appropriate solutions to current problems facing Palestinian Christians.

⁵ Ibid 3.P. 8





Methodology

The most appropriate methodology to answer the research question and provide the best solution is considered to be a SWOT Analysis. SWOT evaluates the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats posed by existing problems identified through the research. The structural methodology consists of several stages that will lead to appropriate actions to achieve solutions.

Strategic Plan Implementation Stages

1. Structured literature review

A literature review should be conducted to extract information regarding the cultural, economic, political, social, and religious problems faced by local Christians in the Holy Land geographical area. This should begin with the historical chronology of the first Christians in the Holy Land, their situation, and changes that have affected them directly and indirectly. This information will provide a solid baseline from which comparisons may be made between the past and present.

2. Categorise problems

Particular attention should be paid to categorising local Christians' past and current failures, defeats, losses, and ability to identify the best possible solutions. Each of the five major problems contains several sub-problems and each will undergo a separate analysis.

3. Analyse Data

The analysis of these sub-problems should focus on their history, causes, context that created them, their impacts on the local Christian community and what the future impact is likely to be for the local Christian community.

4. Categorise results and develop strategic solutions

Following this analysis of each sub-problem, the results of each sub-problem should be categorised under one of the five major problems. Identified strategic solutions will be derived from the results for each problem.

5. Create strategic programmes

Strategic solutions are the ideas that will be realized thru strategic programmes. These programmes may best be implemented by Christian-related organisations that target the Christian community in the Holy Land.



Conclusion

As custodians of Christianity in the Holy Land, local Christians, as well as Christians worldwide and the entire Palestinian community with all of its religious and cultural background, have a responsibility to better understand the complex history of Christianity in the Holy Land and the events that have shaped modern-day Christian faith and identity. The Christian presence in the Holy Land, as well as in the rest of the Middle East, has played a major role in setting a concrete foundation for the cultural and social developments that underlie Christian teachings on justice and peace. Holy Land Christians are not immigrants, invaders or expatriates; they trace their ancestry back to New Testament times and earlier. They have their own unique traditions, language, and religious liturgy.

The complex history of Christianity in the Holy Land can be divided into two parts: historical development of the church in the Holy Land, and development of local Christians as a continuous living community. Church authorities in the Holy Land express serious concerns about the religious messages presented in their local parishes, messaging which significantly influences the relationship between the church hierarchy and the local Christian community.⁶

Unfortunately, the majority of Holy Land Christians, as well as Christians from other countries, are unaware of basic religious doctrine and historical facts, referring instead to church leaders, scholars and other writers for this fundamental information.

⁶ Salman Usama, Article "Institutional Church and the Christian Community in the Holy Land", Living Stone foundation Magazine, Issue # 36, London 2011. Pp.13 -15. Available online at: <http://www.livingstonesonline.org.uk/livingstones36.pdf>.



This lack of a common educational background has rendered many within the local Christian community ignorant of Christian theology, similar to how the international Christian community is ignorant about problems facing the Christian community in the Holy Land. This paper outlines an approach for developing a strategic plan to gather vital evidence about the challenges facing Christians in the Holy Land and for proposing appropriately targeted interventions to address these challenges. It is hoped that a collaborative approach, driven by the Christian community but with support from a wide range of other Palestinian and international individuals, organisations and institutions, can generate and sustain the protection required for Palestinian Christians to continue to live, work and prosper in the Old City of Jerusalem.

