

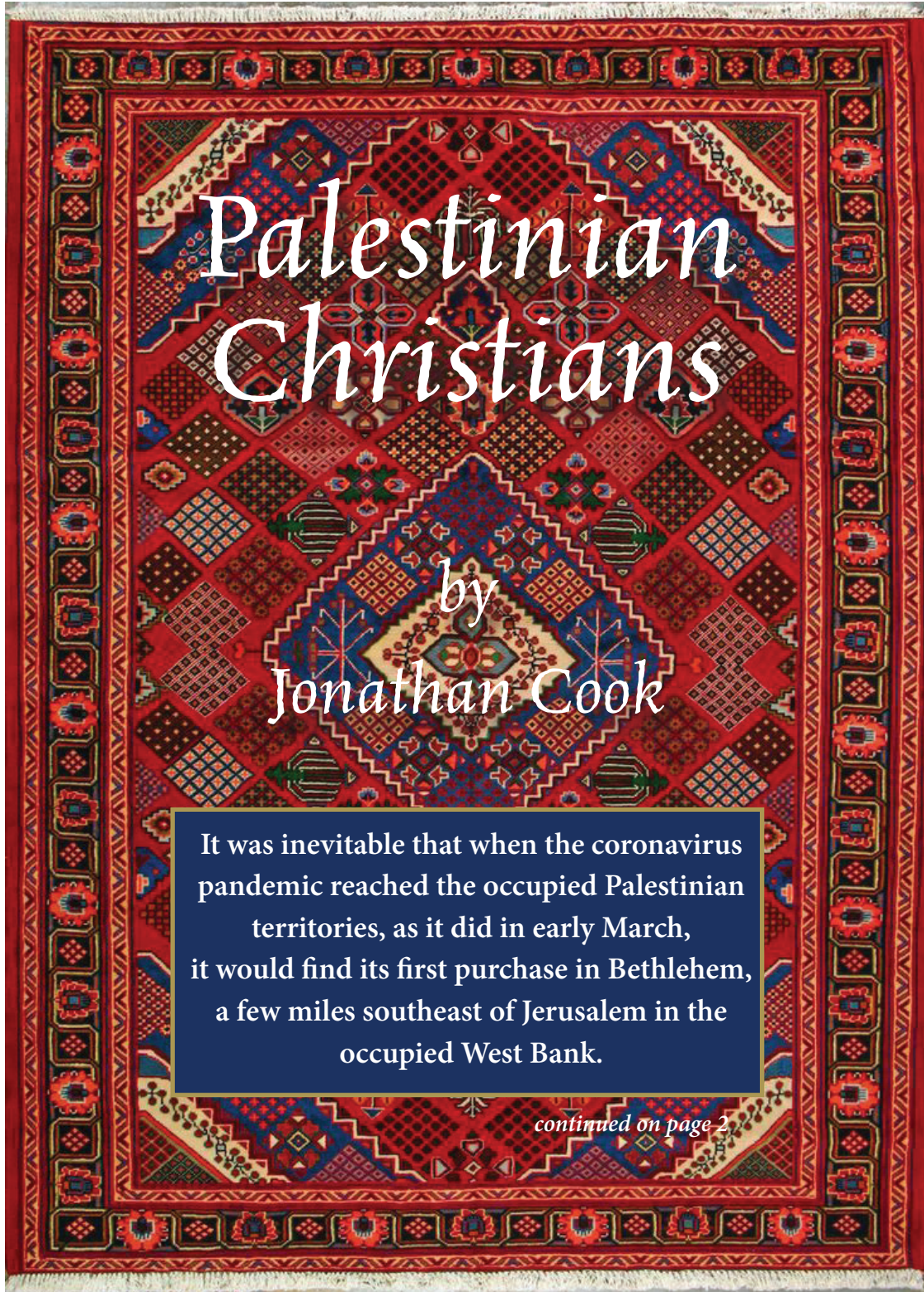
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Palestinian Christians

by

Jonathan Cook

It was inevitable that when the coronavirus pandemic reached the occupied Palestinian territories, as it did in early March, it would find its first purchase in Bethlehem, a few miles southeast of Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank.

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Staff at the Angel Hotel in Beit Jala, one of Bethlehem's satellite towns, tested positive after they were exposed to a group of infected Greek tourists. Israel worked hurriedly with the Palestinian Authority – the Palestinians' permanent government-in-waiting in the occupied territories – to lock down Bethlehem. Israel was fearful that the virus, unlike the city's Palestinian inhabitants, would be difficult to contain. Contagion might spread quickly to nearby Palestinian communities in the West Bank, then to Jewish settlements built illegally by Israel on Bethlehem's lands, and finally on into Israel itself.

The Palestinian territories were under a form of lockdown long before the arrival of the coronavirus, however. Israel, the occupying power, has made sure that the entire Palestinian population is as isolated from the world as possible – their voices silenced, their experiences of oppression and brutality at Israel's hands near-invisible to most of the Israeli public and to outsiders.

But Bethlehem, the reputed site of Jesus's birth 2,000 years ago, is the one Palestinian area – outside East Jerusalem, which has been illegally annexed by Israel – that has proved hardest for Israel to hermetically seal off. During visits to the Church of the Nativity, tourists can briefly glimpse the reality of Palestinian life under occupation.

Some 15 years ago Israel completed a 26 foot-high concrete wall around Bethlehem. On a typical day – at least, before coronavirus halted tourism to the region – a steady stream of coaches from Jerusalem, bearing thousands of Christian pilgrims from around the world, came to a stop at a gap in the concrete that served as a checkpoint. There they would wait for the all-clear from surly Israeli teenage soldiers. Once approved, the coaches would drive to the Nativity Church, their passengers able to view the chaotic graffiti scrawled across the wall's giant canvas, testifying to the city's imprisonment and its defiance.

Like the plague-bearing Greeks, visitors to Bethlehem could not avoid mixing, even if perfunctorily, with a few locals, mostly Palestinian Christians. Guides showed them around the main attraction, the Church, while local officials and clergy shepherded them into queues to be led down to a crypt that long ago was supposedly the site of a stable where Jesus was born. But unlike the Greek visitors, most pilgrims did not hang around to see the rest of Bethlehem. They quickly boarded their Israeli coaches back to Jerusalem, where they were likely to sleep in Israeli-owned hotels and spend their money in Israeli-owned restaurants and shops.

For most visitors to the Holy Land, their sole meaningful exposure to the occupation and the region's native Palestinian population was an hour or two spent in the goldfish-bowl of Bethlehem.

In recent years, however, that had started to change. Despite the wall, or at times because of it, more independent-minded groups of pilgrims and lone travelers had begun straying off grid, leaving the Israeli-controlled tourism trail. Rather than making a brief detour, they stayed a few nights in Bethlehem. A handful of small, mostly cheap hotels

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like the Angel catered to them, as did restaurants and souvenir stores around the church.

In tandem, a new kind of political tourism based in and around Bethlehem had begun offering tours of the wall and sections of the city, highlighting the theft of the city's land by neighboring Jewish settlements and the violence of Israeli soldiers who can enter Bethlehem at will.

A few years ago, the famous anonymous British graffiti artist Banksy gave a major boost to this new kind of immersive tourism by allying with a Bethlehem tour guide, Wisam Salsa, to open the Walled-Off Hotel. They converted an old building boxed in by the wall, liberally sprinkling it with Banksy's subversive artworks about the occupation, as well as installing a gallery exhibiting the work of Palestinian artists and a museum detailing the occupation's history and Israel's well-tested methods of control and repression.

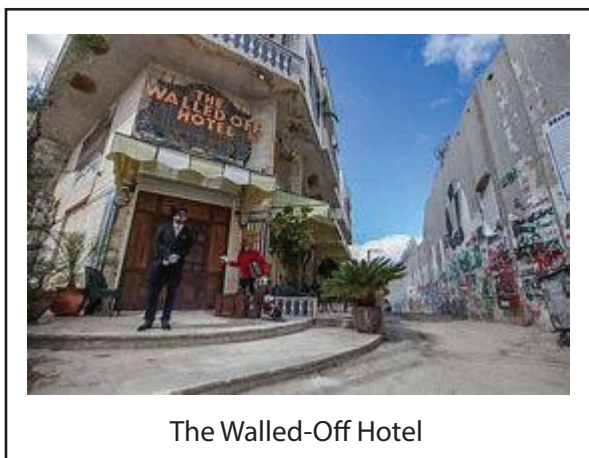
Admittedly, few visitors managed to get a room in Banksy's small hotel, but many more came to sit in the lobby and sip a beer, produced by one of a handful of newly emerging breweries run by Christian Palestinians, or add some graffiti to the wall just outside with the help of a neighboring art supplies shop.

Before coronavirus, the Walled-Off offered daily tours of Aida, a refugee camp attached to Bethlehem, whose inhabitants were expelled from some of the more than 500 Palestinian communities Israel erased in 1948 – in the Nakba, or Catastrophe – to create a Jewish state on their homeland. There, visitors not only learned about the mass dispossession of Palestinians, sponsored by the western powers, that made Israel's creation possible, but they heard the camp's inhabitants tell of regular violent, night-time raids by Israeli soldiers and of the daily struggle for survival when Israel tightly controls and limits essentials like water.

Until the coronavirus did Israel's work for it, Israeli authorities had noted with growing concern how more

tourists and pilgrims were staying in Bethlehem. According to Israeli figures, there are about a million tourist overnights annually in Bethlehem. And that figure was growing as new hotels were built, even if the total was still a tiny fraction of the number of tourists staying in Israel and Israeli-ruled East Jerusalem.

The new trend disturbed the Israeli authorities. Bethlehem was proving an Achilles' heel in Israel's system of absolute control over the Palestinians for two reasons.



The Walled-Off Hotel

First, it brought money into Bethlehem, providing it with a source of income outside Israel's control. The Israeli authorities have carefully engineered the Palestinian economy to be as dependent on Israel as possible, making it easy for Israel to punish Palestinians and the PA economically for any signs of disobedience or resistance. Aside from its tourism, Bethlehem has

been largely stripped of economic autonomy. After waves of land thefts by Israel, the city now has access to only a tenth of its original territory, and has been slowly encircled by settlements. The city's residents have been cut off from their farmland, water sources and historic landmarks. Jerusalem, once Bethlehem's economic and cultural hinterland, has become all but unreachable for most residents, hidden on the other side of the wall. And those working outside the tourism sector need a difficult-to-obtain permit from Israel's military authorities to enter and work in low-paying jobs in construction and agriculture inside Israel, the settlements or occupied Jerusalem. Israel's second ground for concern was that foreign visitors staying in Bethlehem were likely to learn first-hand something of the experiences of the local population – more so than those who simply made a brief detour to see the church. A self-serving narrative about Palestinians central to Israeli propaganda – that Israel stands with the west in a Judeo-Christian battle against a supposedly barbaric Muslim enemy – risked being subverted by exposure to the reality of Bethlehem. After all, anyone spending time in the city would soon realize that it includes Palestinian Christians only too ready to challenge Israel's grand narrative of a clash of civilizations.

From Israel's point of view, a stay in Bethlehem might also open tourists' eyes in dangerous ways. They might come to understand that, if anyone was behaving in a barbaric way and provoking an unresolvable, religiously inspired clash, it was not Palestinians – Muslim or Christian – but Israel, which has been brutally ruling over Palestinians for decades.

For both reasons, Israel wished to prevent Bethlehem from becoming a separate, rival hub for tourism. It was impossible to stop pilgrims visiting the Church of the Nativity, but Israel could stop Bethlehem developing its own tourism industry, independent of Israel. The wall has been part of that strategy, but it failed to curb the development of new tourism ventures – and in some cases, as with the Banksy hotel, had actually inspired alternative forms of tourism.

In early 2017 the Israeli authorities finally acted. The daily Haaretz newspaper revealed that the interior ministry had issued a directive to local travel agencies warning them not to allow their pilgrimage groups to stay overnight in Bethlehem, with the implication that the firms risked losing their licenses if they did so. According to Haaretz, the government claimed that “potential terrorists were traveling with groups of tourists.”

Bethlehem is lucky that, unlike other Palestinian communities, it has allies Israel cannot easily ignore. Haaretz's exposure of the new policy led to a rapid backlash. International churches, especially the Vatican, were worried that it was the thin end of a wedge that might soon leave the City of the Nativity off-limits to its pilgrims. And Israeli travel agencies feared their business would suffer. Pilgrim groups from poorer countries that could not afford Jerusalem's high prices, especially for accommodation, might stop coming to the Holy Land.

As one agent told Haaretz: “The meaning of a letter like this is the end of incoming tourism from India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and eastern European countries like Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine. All the tourists who visit Israel and sleep in Bethlehem are doing that primarily to reduce costs.” The loss of such tourists not only threatened to deprive Bethlehem of the benefits of tourism but threatened Israel's much larger tourism sector. Soon afterwards, the Israeli authorities backtracked, saying the directive had been a draft issued in error.

Why the Shrinkage?

Bethlehem's plight – a microcosm of the more general difficulties faced by Palestinians under occupation – offers insights into why the region's Palestinian Christian population has been shrinking so rapidly and relentlessly.

The demographics of Bethlehem offer stark evidence of a Christian exodus from the region. In 1947, the year before Israel's creation, 85 percent of Bethlehem's inhabitants were Christian. Today the figure stands at 15 percent. Christians now comprise less than 1.5 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank – some 40,000 of a population of nearly 3 million – down from 5 percent in the early 1970s, shortly after Israel occupied the territory in 1967.

In 1945 Bethlehem had nearly 8,000 Christian residents, slightly more than the 7,000 who live there today. Natural growth should mean Bethlehem's Christian population is many times that size. There are, in fact, many times more Palestinian Christians overseas than there are in historic Palestine. The 7,000 Christians of Beit Jala, next to Bethlehem, are outnumbered by more than 100,000 family members who have moved to the Americas.

Israel ostensibly professes great concern about this decline, but actually it is only too happy to see native Christians depart the region. Their exodus has helped to make Israel's clash of civilizations narrative sound more plausible, bolstering claims that Israel does indeed serve as a rampart against Muslim-Arab terror and barbarism. Israel has argued that it is helping Christian Palestinians as best it can, protecting them from their hostile Muslim neighbors. In this way, Israel has sought to mask its active role in encouraging the exodus.

The rapid decline in the numbers of these Christians reflects many factors that have been intentionally obscured by Israel. Historically, the most significant is that Palestinian Christians were nearly as badly impacted as Palestinian Muslims by the mass expulsions carried out by Zionist forces in 1948. In total, some 80 percent of all Palestinians living in what became the new state of Israel were expelled from their lands and became refugees – 750,000 from a population of 900,000. Those forced into exile included tens of thousands of Christians, amounting to two-thirds of the Palestinian Christian population of the time.

Palestinian Christians who remained in historic Palestine – either in what had now become Israel or in the territories that from 1967 would fall under Israeli occupation – have naturally shrunk over time in relation to the Muslim population because of the latter’s higher birth rates. Palestine’s Christians mostly lived in cities. Their urban lifestyles and generally higher incomes, as well as their greater exposure to western cultural norms, meant they tended to have smaller families and, as a result, their community’s population growth was lower.

But rather than acknowledge this historical context, Israeli lobbyists seek to exploit and misrepresent the inevitable tensions and resentments caused by the mass displacements of the Nakba, developments that had a significant impact on traditionally Christian communities like Bethlehem. During the events of 1948, as rural Palestinian villages were ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces, the refugees sought shelter either in neighboring states like Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, or in West Bank cities.

Bethlehem found its demographics transformed: an 85 percent Christian majority before the Nakba has been reversed into an 85 percent Muslim majority today. These dramatic social and cultural upheavals – turning the city’s majority population into a minority – were not easy for all Bethlehem’s Christian families to accept. It would be wrong to ignore the way these changes caused friction. And the resentments have sometimes festered because they are incapable of resolution without addressing the source of the problem: Israel’s mass dispossession of Palestinians, and the continuing tacit support for these abuses by the international community.

Given this context, it has been easy for inter-family rivalries and conflicts that are inevitable in a ghettoized, overcrowded community like today’s Bethlehem to be interpreted by some members of the minority group as sectarian, even when they are not. The lack of proper law enforcement in Palestinian areas in which Israel rather than the PA is the ultimate arbiter of what is allowed has left smaller Christian families more vulnerable in conflicts with larger Muslim families. In the competition for diminishing resources, family size has mattered. And whereas globalization has tended to encourage increased identification among Palestinian Christians with the west and its more secular norms, the same processes have entrenched a religious identity among sections of the Muslim population who look to the wider Middle East for their ideas

and salvation. Consequently, a cultural gap has widened.

These problems exist but it would be wrong to exaggerate them – as Israel’s loyalists wish to do – or to ignore who is ultimately responsible for these tensions. That is not a mistake most Palestinian Christians make. In a recent survey of Christians who have emigrated, very few pointed to “religious extremism” as the reason for leaving the region – just 3 percent. The overwhelming majority cited reasons relating in some way to Israel’s continuing malevolent role in controlling their lives. A third blamed a “lack of freedom”, a quarter “worsening economic conditions”, and 20 percent “political instability.”

To make sense of the specific problems faced by the Christian community, other historical contexts need to be understood. Palestinian Christians break down into four broad communities. The first is the Eastern Orthodox Churches, dominated by the Greek Orthodox. The second is the Catholic Churches, led by the “Latin” community that looks towards Rome, although they are outnumbered among Palestinians by Greek and Syrian Catholics. The third category is the Oriental Orthodox churches, which include the Copts, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox. And finally, there are various Protestant Churches, including the Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists.

Long before Israel’s creation on most of the Palestinians’ homeland, Christians were concentrated in and around Palestine’s urban centers. In Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, large numbers of Christians coalesced around sites associated with Jesus’s life. This tendency was reinforced as Palestine’s cities flourished and expanded from the 18th century onwards under Ottoman rule. The Ottomans encouraged the immigration of Christians to these centers of worship and cultivated a confessional system that made conditions attractive for the foreign Churches.

The result was a relatively privileged urban Christian population that consisted largely of merchants and traders, and benefited from the resources poured in by the international Churches as part of their missionary work, including schools and hospitals. Christians were typically wealthier, better educated and healthier than their Muslim counterparts often living nearby in isolated rural communities as peasant farmers. In addition, Christian families had good connections to the international Churches through local clergy, as well as the staff of

Church-run schools and hospitals.

Those differences have proved significant as Palestinian Christians and Muslims alike have struggled under Israeli colonization, whether inside Israel's internationally recognized borders or in the occupied territories.

Israel's institutionalized racism towards Palestinians – systematic land thefts, uninhibited state and settler violence, as well as restrictions on movement and the denial of educational and employment opportunities – have put pressure on all Palestinians to leave. But Christians have enjoyed significant advantages in making their escape. They could tap their connections in the Churches to help them settle abroad, chiefly in the Americas and Europe. And that path was made easier for many given that relatives had already established lives overseas following the mass expulsions of 1948. As a result, the emigration of Palestinian Christians is generally reckoned to have been around twice that of Muslims.

Israel's oft-repeated claim that Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are responsible for the exodus of Christians out of the Holy Land is given the lie simply by examining the situation of Palestinian Christians both inside Israel, where neither Hamas nor the PA operate, and in East Jerusalem, where the influence of both has long been negligible. In each of those areas, Israel has unchallenged control over Palestinians' lives. Yet we can see the same pattern of Christians fleeing the region.

And the reasons for Gaza's tiny Palestinian Christian population, today numbering maybe only 1,000, to leave their tiny, massively overcrowded enclave, which has been blockaded for 13 years by Israel, barely needs examining. True, it has been hard for these Christians – 0.0005 percent of Gaza's population – to feel represented in a territory so dominated by the Islamic social and cultural values embodied by the Hamas government. But there is little evidence they are being persecuted.

On the other hand, there is overwhelming proof that Gaza's Christians are suffering, along with their Muslim neighbors, from Israel's continuing violations of their most fundamental rights to freedom, security and dignity.

The picture in the West Bank, meanwhile, needs closer study. As noted, Palestinian Christians have generally enjoyed

historic privileges over their Muslim compatriots that derive from their historic connections to the Churches. They have been able to exploit tourism as guides, drivers and guesthouse owners. They enjoy greater access to church-run schools and, as a consequence, improved access to higher education and the professions. They possess more valuable urban land, and many own shops and businesses in the cities. There are both Muslim and Christian lawyers, shopkeepers and business owners, of course, but proportionately more Christians have belonged to the middle classes and professions because of these various advantages.

While Israel's occupation policies have harshly impacted all Palestinians, some have been hit harder than others. And those who have tended to suffer most live not in the main cities, which are under very partial Palestinian rule, but in rural areas and in the refugee camps. Those in the camps, in places such as Aida, next to Bethlehem, lost their lands and property to Israel and have had to rebuild their lives from scratch since 1948. Those living in isolated farming communities designated by the Oslo accords as "Area C" (a temporary designation that has effectively become permanent) are fully exposed to Israel's belligerent civil and military control.

The residents of these communities have few opportunities to earn a living and have been most vulnerable to Israeli state and settler violence, as well as land thefts and the severe water restrictions imposed by Israel. In practice, these precarious conditions are endured disproportionately by Muslim Palestinians rather than Christians.

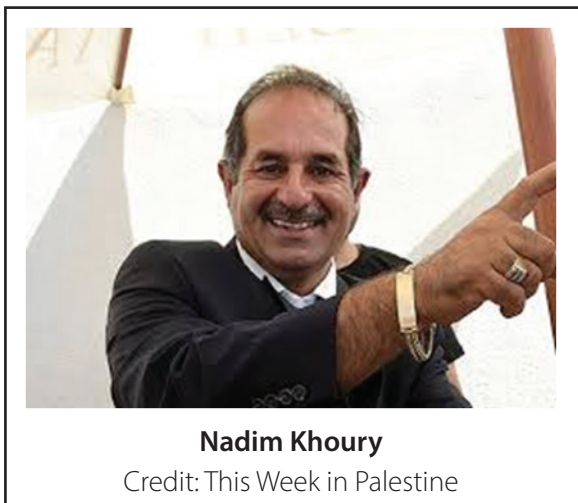
Nonetheless, Israel's policies have increasingly deprived urban Christian families of the opportunities they had come to expect – the kind of opportunities westerners take for granted. And significantly, unlike many Muslim Palestinians, Christians have continued to enjoy one privilege: an escape route out of the region to countries where they have a chance to live relatively normal lives.

The damage to Christian life has been felt particularly keenly in relation to movement restrictions – one of the ways Israel has established a system of near-absolute control over Palestinian life. Those involved in trade and business, as many Christians are, have struggled to succeed as those restrictions have intensified over the past quarter-century, since the introduction of measures under the Oslo accords. An elaborate system of checkpoints and permits

was established to control Palestinians' freedom to move around the occupied territories and to enter Israel in search of work. Over time the system was enforced by a lengthy steel and concrete "separation barrier" that Israel began building nearly two decades ago.

Taybeh's Beer Challenge

Typifying the difficulties of trading under these circumstances is the Taybeh micro-brewery in a West Bank village of the same name, in a remote location north of Ramallah overlooking the Jordan Valley. Taybeh is exceptional: its 1,300 inhabitants comprise the last exclusively Christian community in the occupied territories. The village – its name means both "good" and "delicious" in Arabic – is reputedly on the Biblical site of Ephraim. A small church marks the spot where Jesus reputedly retired with his disciples shortly before heading to Jerusalem, where he would be crucified. Taybeh has its own Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox schools, and a Catholic nursing home.



Nadim Khoury

Credit: This Week in Palestine

Nonetheless, Taybeh has long been in demographic meltdown. Today, its population is dwarfed by those of its diaspora: some 12,000 former residents and their descendants live abroad, mostly in the United States, Chile and Guatemala. Daoud and Nadim Khoury, two brothers who were themselves raised in the US, established the Taybeh brewery shortly after their return to the West Bank village under the Oslo accords. The business depended on the experiences and connections they had gained abroad.

For them, developing a sustainable business like the brewery was a way to halt and reverse the gradual demise

of their village and the loss of its Christian heritage. They feared that any further decline in numbers would leave Taybeh's lands and its ancient olive groves vulnerable to takeover by the three Jewish settlements that surround the village. The business was seen as a way to save Taybeh.

Maria Khoury, Daoud's Greek wife, whom he met at Harvard, says the conditions of village life have continued to deteriorate. Unemployment stands at 60 percent, and Israel shuts off the water four times a week to preserve supplies for the Jewish settlements. The drive to the nearest Palestinian city, Ramallah, takes five times longer than it did 20 years ago – when it took little more than 15 minutes. That was before checkpoints and roadblocks were established on local roads to protect the settlers.

The Khourys have succeeded in their ambition to develop a range of award-winning beers made to the highest purity standards. The family has expanded into making boutique wines, and has built a prestige hotel in the village center, belying Taybeh's small size. An annual Oktoberfest, modeled on German beer-drinking celebrations, has helped to put the remote village on the map. And a few restaurants have opened as Taybeh has tried to reinvent itself, with limited success, as a weekend-break destination.

But despite all these achievements, their larger ambitions have been foiled. Movement restrictions imposed by Israel's military authorities have stymied efforts at growing the business. With a domestic market limited by opposition to alcohol consumption among most of the Palestinian population, Taybeh brewery has depended chiefly on exports to Europe, Japan and the US. But the difficulties of navigating Israel's hostile bureaucracy have sapped the business of money, time and energy, making it hard to compete with foreign breweries.

Daoud told me at one Oktoberfest that the brewery faced Israeli "harassment in the name of security." He noted that even when the crossing points were open, Israel held up the company's trucks for many hours while bottles were unloaded and individually inspected with sniffer dogs. Then the bottles had to be reloaded on to Israeli trucks on the other side of the checkpoint. Apart from local spring water, all the beer's ingredients and the bottles have to be imported from Europe, adding further logistical problems at Israeli ports. The ever-creative Khourys have been

forced to circumvent these problems by licensing a plant in Belgium to produce its beers for foreign export. But that has deprived the village of jobs that could have gone to local families.

And while the Khourys struggle to get their products into Israel, Israel has absolute freedom to flood the occupied territories with its own goods. “The policy is clearly meant to harm businesses like ours. Israel freely sells its Maccabee and Goldstar beers in the West Bank,” Daoud told me. Such experiences are replicated for Palestinian businesses, big and small, across the West Bank.

In Jerusalem, the Christian population has been shrinking too, even though the city has been entirely under Israeli control since its eastern neighborhoods were occupied and illegally annexed by Israel in 1967. The Palestinian Authority was briefly allowed a minimal presence in East Jerusalem in the late 1990s, but was effectively banished when the second intifada erupted a few years later, in 2000. A similar fate soon befell Jerusalem’s politicians associated with Hamas. After they won the Jerusalem seats in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Israel expelled them to the West Bank.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Israel has not been keen to provide official figures for the exodus of Christians from Jerusalem. However, rather than growing, as one would have expected over the past five decades, the numbers have dropped significantly – from 12,000 in 1967 to some 9,000 today, according to Yousef Daher, of the Jerusalem Interchurch Center, located in Jerusalem’s Old City. Of those, he estimated that no more than 2,400 remained in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, where Israel has made life especially difficult.

Jerusalem is historically, symbolically, spiritually and economically important to the Palestinian people, and houses key Muslim and Christian holy sites. It has long been regarded by Palestinians as the only possible capital of their future state. But Israel views the city in much the same terms – as the religious and symbolic heart of its hybrid religious and ethnic national project. It has shown no interest in sharing the city as a capital, and has instead viewed it in zero-sum terms: whatever benefits Israel requires a loss to the Palestinians.

Gradually Israel’s stranglehold over Jerusalem has become

complete. The wall it began building through the city more than 15 years ago has not only separated Palestinians in Jerusalem from Palestinians in the West Bank but has divided the city itself, placing more than 100,000 Palestinians on the wrong side, cutting them off from the city of their birth.

Two years ago, President Donald Trump added a US seal of approval by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and moving the US embassy there.

Those Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem still on the “Israeli” side of the wall have found themselves isolated and ever more vulnerable to the abuses inherent in Israel’s system of control. They have suffered planning restrictions that make it almost impossible to build homes legally. Israel demolishes dozens of Palestinian houses every year in the city, leading to ever greater overcrowding. Meanwhile, Israel has seized vast tracts of land in East Jerusalem for its illegal settlements and has helped Jewish settlers take over Palestinian homes.

The city’s security forces act as an occupying power in Palestinian neighborhoods, while city authorities pursue an official policy of “Judaization,” making Jerusalem more Jewish. Israel has accorded the city’s native Palestinian population a “residency” status that treats them as little more than immigrants. Many thousands who have left the city for extended periods to study or work abroad have returned to find their residency permits revoked.

The city’s Christian residents face similar problems to Muslims. But as a very small community, they have also faced specific pressures. Israel’s policy of cutting off Jerusalem from the West Bank, and especially from the nearby cities of Bethlehem and Ramallah, has left the city’s Christians particularly isolated. With many working as merchants and traders, the so-called “separation” policy has hit them hard economically.

Similarly, because the communal marriage pool is small for Christians in Jerusalem, many have been forced – at least, before the wall was erected – to search for a spouse among Christian populations nearby in the West Bank. That now leaves them disproportionately exposed to Israel’s increasingly draconian family unification policies. Typically Jerusalem’s Palestinians are denied the right to live with a West Bank spouse in the city, or to register the

children of such marriages as Jerusalem residents. That has forced many to move into the West Bank or abroad as the only way to stay together.

As in Bethlehem, many of Jerusalem's Christians work in tourism, either as tour guides or as owners of souvenir shops in the Old City's Christian Quarter. That has proved a particularly precarious way to make a living in recent decades, with tourism collapsing on repeated occasions: during two lengthy intifadas, during Israel's attacks on Gaza, and now from the coronavirus.

Israel will soon make it even harder for the Old City traders to make a living, when it completes a cable car into East Jerusalem. Currently many tourists enter via Jaffa Gate into the Christian Quarter, where shopkeepers have a chance to sell them goods and souvenirs. But the cable car will "fly in" tourists from a station in West Jerusalem directly to an illegal settlement complex at the City of David in Silwan, just outside the Old City walls. From there, either they will be guided straight into the Jewish Quarter through Dung Gate or they will pass through a network of underground passages lined with settler-owned shops that will take them to the foot of the Western Wall. The aim appears to be not only to make the Old City's Palestinian population invisible but to deprive them of any chance to profit from tourism.

Land Sales by Churches

But the problem runs deeper still for Palestinian Christians – and is felt especially acutely in Jerusalem. Local Christians have found themselves effectively pawns in a three-way international power-play between Israel, the established, land-owning Churches in the region, primarily the Vatican and Greek Orthodox Churches, and the evangelical movements. None of the parties represent their interests.

It is easy for pilgrims to ignore the fact, as they tour the Holy Land, that the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches are not local. They are vast foreign enterprises, based out of the Vatican and Greece, that are as concerned with their commercial viability and diplomatic influence on the global stage as they are with the spiritual needs of any specific flock, including Palestinian Christians. And in recent years that has become increasingly evident to local congregations.

The problems were symbolized two years ago when,

for the first time in living memory, the main Churches shuttered the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the presumed site of Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem. Church leaders said their actions were in response to Israel launching a "systematic and unprecedented attack against Christians in the Holy Land." In that way, they mobilized international sympathy, and Israel quickly backed down. But only in the most tangential sense were the Churches looking out for the interests of local Christians. Their show of force was actually motivated by concern for their business interests.

The then mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, had sought to impose back taxes on the Churches' substantial land-holdings in Jerusalem, hoping to recoup \$180 million. Despite the impression presented by Church leaders, the row was not really about holy sites. Over the centuries, the Churches have become major real-estate enterprises in the Holy Land, benefiting from donations of land and properties in Jerusalem and elsewhere that have been made by Palestinian Christians and overseas pilgrims. The Greek Orthodox Church, for example, is the largest land-owner in the region after the Israeli state.

Historically, the Churches enjoyed a tax exemption derived from the charitable status of their spiritual mission and outreach work with Palestinian communities, including the provision of schools and hospitals. But increasingly the Churches have downgraded their charitable works and diversified into other, more clearly commercial ventures, such as shops, offices and restaurants. Pilgrimage hostels have been redeveloped into well-appointed and profitable hotels. Part of the income has then been siphoned off to the Church authorities in the mother countries rather than reinvested in strengthening local Palestinian communities.

That was why Aleef Sabbagh, a Palestinian member of the Orthodox Central Council, described the Holy Sepulcher protest as a "charade." The Church had not been closed to protest Israel's savagery towards Palestinians during either of the two intifadas, or in protest at the exodus of local Christians from the region. The foreign Churches found their voice only when they needed to protect their profits from real-estate and investment deals.

That does not, however, mean that Palestinian Christians have no reason to be concerned about Israel's efforts to bully the Churches' into paying more taxes, or that they

were indifferent to the brief stand-off at the Sepulcher Church. The Vatican and Orthodox Patriarchate have become increasingly cowed in relation to Israel in recent decades, both as Israel has become ever more assertive of its powers in the region and as western states have shown they will support Israel however badly it treats Palestinians.

Israel has many points of leverage over the international Churches. It can, and has, frozen clerical work visas needed by their thousands of staff in the Holy Land. Israel regularly obstructs planning permits for the Church needed to build or renovate properties. And far-right groups close to Israel's governing coalition regularly menace clergy in the streets and vandalize Church property, including cemeteries, under cover of darkness. Israeli police have rarely caught or punished the perpetrators of such attacks.

Most notable of these attacks was a fire set by arsonists in 2015 that gutted sections of the Church of the Multiplication, the site on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus is reputed to have fed a large crowd with loaves and fishes. Graffiti in Hebrew scrawled on a church wall read: "Idol-worshippers will have their heads cut off?"

This strategy of weakening and intimidating the international Churches has been particularly glaring in relation to Orthodoxy. Each new Patriarch, the highest Orthodox figure in the region, must be jointly approved by the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Israel. And in the case of the last two Patriarchs, Irineos I and Theophilos III, Israel, unlike the PA and Jordan, has dragged its heels before approving their appointment. Irineos had to wait nearly four years, and Theophilos two and a half. The reason why has gradually become clear to local Christians.

Shortly after each Patriarch has belatedly received approval, evidence has come to light that his advisers have overseen the sale of some of the Churches' vast landholdings in Israel and the occupied territories. These shadowy deals, usually selling invaluable land for a comparative pittance, have been

made to Israeli companies or overseas organizations that it has later emerged acted as a front for Jewish settler groups.

The most infamous case concerns the sale to settlers of two large properties, serving as Palestinian-run hotels, at a highly strategic location by Jaffa Gate, the entrance into the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. These sales appear to be part of the price paid for Irineos to win Israeli approval. Israel has long been keen to Judaize Jaffa Gate because it effectively serves as a bridge between West Jerusalem, in Israel, and the Jewish Quarter, the main settler colony in the occupied Old City. Reporting on the land sales at Jaffa Gate, the Haaretz newspaper revealed tape recordings of a

Jerusalem settler leader boasting that his organization, Ateret Cohanim, had a veto over the appointment of each Patriarch. He said Ateret Cohanim would only give its blessing once the Patriarch had sold it land.

The pattern appears to have repeated with Theophilos, who is accused of selling numerous plots of land near Bethlehem, West Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Nazareth and Caesarea. The Church is reported to have pocketed more than \$100 million from the deals. In 2017 some 300 Palestinian Christians filed a criminal complaint to the Palestinian attorney general in Ramallah, accusing the Patriarch of "treason." The same year, 14 local Orthodox institutions – representing many of the half a million Greek

Orthodox Christians in the occupied territories, Israel and Jordan – severed ties with Theophilos and his synod, and demanded his removal.

Palestinian Christians have increasing grounds for concern that the Churches are not looking out for their interests when they make these deals. Historically, lands were donated to the Greek Orthodox Church as an endowment, and the income used for the collective good of the Orthodox community in the Holy Land. But local communities say the money is nowadays siphoned off to the foreign Church authorities.



Theophilos III
Credit: Wikipedia

Further, nearly a quarter of land in East Jerusalem is reported to be Church-owned, including the Mount of Olives, Sheikh Jarrah and large swaths of the Old City. Many Palestinian Christians live in these areas, which are being aggressively targeted by the settler movement. Local Christians have little faith that the Church will not sell these lands in the future, leaving them vulnerable to eviction by settlers.

Atallah Hanna, the only Palestinian serving as a Greek Orthodox archbishop, has been repeatedly punished for speaking out against the Patriarch's policies. He issued a statement about the land sales at Jaffa Gate: "Those who sell and forfeit our real estate and Orthodox endowments do not represent our Arab Church, its heritage, identity and historical presence in this holy land."

The effort to financially "squeeze" the Churches by the Jerusalem mayor in 2018 should be seen in this light. If the Churches face big new tax bills, the pressure will increase on them over the longer term either to be more submissive to Israel, for fear of attracting additional taxes, or to sell off yet more land to cover their debts. Either way, Palestinian Christians will suffer.

An Obstacle to the End-Times

A separate essay could be written about the role of overseas Christian evangelical movements in damaging the situation of Palestinian Christians. Suffice it to point out that most evangelical Christians are largely indifferent to the plight of the region's local Christian population.

In fact, Zionism, Israel's state ideology, draws heavily on a Christian Zionism that became popular among British Protestants more than 150 years ago. Today, the heartland of evangelical Zionism is the United States, where tens of millions of believers have adopted a theological worldview, bolstered by prophecies in the Book of Revelation, that will see a Jewish "return" to the Promised Land to bring about an apocalyptic end-times in which Christians — and some Jews who accept Jesus as their savior — will be saved from damnation and rise up to Heaven.

Inevitably, when weighed against a fast-track to salvation, the preservation of Palestinian Christians' 2,000-year-old heritage matters little to most US Christian Zionists. Local Christians regularly express fears that their holy sites and way of life are under threat from a state that declares itself

Jewish and whose central mission is a zero-sum policy of "Judaization". But for Christian Zionists, Palestinian Christians are simply an obstacle to realizing a far more urgent, divinely ordained goal.

US evangelicals have, therefore, been pumping money into projects that encourage Jews to move to the "Land of Israel," including in the settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Their leaders are close to the most hawkish politicians in Israel, such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The political clout of the evangelical movements in the US, the world's only superpower and Israel's chief patron, has never been more evident. The vice-president, Mike Pence, is one of their number, while President Donald Trump depended on evangelical votes to win office. That was why Trump broke with previous administrations and agreed that the US would become the first country in modern times to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, effectively killing any hope for the Palestinians of securing East Jerusalem as their capital.

Given this international atmosphere, the isolation of Palestinian Christians and their leaders is almost complete. They find themselves marginalized within their own Churches, entirely ignored by foreign evangelical movements, and an enemy of Israel. They have therefore tried to break out of that isolation both by forging greater unity among themselves and by setting out a clearer vision to strengthen ties to Christians outside the Holy Land.

One important milestone on that path was the publication of the Kairos Palestine document in December 2009, drawing on a similar document drafted by mainly black theologians in apartheid South Africa in the 1980s. Kairos Palestine, which describes itself as "the Christian Palestinians' word to the world about what is happening in Palestine," has been signed by more than 3,000 leading Palestinian Christian figures, including Atallah Hanna, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop for the Sebastiya diocese; Naim Ateek, a senior Anglican priest; Mitri Raheb, a senior Lutheran pastor; and Jamal Khader, a senior figure in the Latin Patriarchate.

The Kairos document calls unequivocally on "all the churches and Christians in the world ... to stand against

injustice and apartheid” and warns that “any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings.” It asks Christians abroad to “revisit theologies that justify crimes perpetrated against our people and the dispossession of the land.” And further, it supports the wider Palestinian BDS call to boycott, divest and sanction Israel and those who conspire with the oppression of Palestinians. It describes non-violent resistance as a “duty” incumbent on all Palestinians, arguing that such resistance should end only when Israeli abuses end, not before.

Faced with inevitable accusations of antisemitism from Israel partisans in the west, most of the overseas Churches – including importantly, the World Council of Churches – have failed to respond to this Palestinian Christian call. Only the Presbyterian Church in the US has endorsed the document, while the United Church of Christ has praised it. Predictably, Israel lobbyists have tried to undermine the document’s significance by correctly highlighting that the foreign Church leaderships in Palestine, such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, have refused to endorse it. But then, these kind of Church leaders have rarely had the interests of their Palestinian congregations foremost in their minds.

Nonetheless, Israel is deeply concerned by the document. Were it to be accepted, it would bring the international Churches onboard with the wider Palestinian BDS movement, which calls for an international boycott of Israel. Israeli leaders deeply fear the precedent set by the international community’s treatment of apartheid South Africa.

Of the three planks of the BDS campaign, the most troubling for Israel are not the boycott or sanctions components, but the threat of divestment – the withdrawal of investments from Israel by Churches, civil society organizations, trade unions and pension funds. Were the Churches to adopt BDS, such actions could quickly gain a moral legitimacy and spread. The Kairos document is therefore viewed as the thin end of a very dangerous wedge.

Atallah Hanna, as the most senior cleric to have signed the document, has found himself particularly in the crosshairs from Israel. In December last year he ended up in hospital in Jordan, treated for “poisoning by chemical substance,” after a tear gas canister was reportedly thrown into the grounds of his church in Jerusalem. In the circumstances, Hanna’s claim that Israel had tried to “assassinate,” or

at the very least incapacitate, him resonated with many Palestinians.

Certainly Hanna has found himself repeatedly in trouble with the Israeli authorities for his Palestinian activism. In 2002, during the second intifada, for example, he was seized at his home in the Old City of Jerusalem and charged

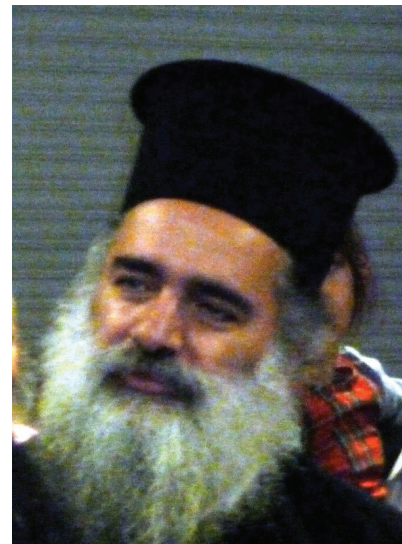
with “suspicion of relations with terrorist organizations,” a trumped-up allegation relating to the fact that he had spoken in favor of the popular uprising against Israeli occupation.

In a meeting with a foreign delegation last year, Hanna warned that Israel, with the support of the international community, was being allowed to gradually transform Jerusalem: “The Islamic and Christian holy sites and endowments are targeted in order to change our city, hide its identity and marginalize our Arabic and Palestinian existence.”

Unwelcome Israeli Citizens

The final community of Palestinian Christians to consider is the largest group, and the one most often overlooked: the 120,000 living in Israel with a degraded form of citizenship. These Palestinians have been exclusively under Israeli rule for more than 70 years. Israel falsely trumpets the claim that its Palestinian minority enjoys exactly the same rights as Jewish citizens. And yet the decline in the number of Palestinian Christians in Israel closely mirrors the situation of those in the occupied territories.

The Palestinian Christian population emerged from the events of 1948 in relatively better shape than their Muslim compatriots inside the territory that was now considered Israel. Aware of western states’ priorities, Israel was



Atallah Hanna
Credit: Wikipedia

more cautious in its approach to the ethnic cleansing of communities with large numbers of Christians. As a result, the 40,000 Christians in Israel at the end of the Nakba comprised 22 per cent of the country's new Palestinian minority. A few years later members of this minority would gain a very inferior form of Israeli citizenship.

Israel's early caution in relation to Palestinian Christians was understandable. It feared antagonizing the western, largely Christian states whose backing it desperately needed. That policy was typified in the treatment of Nazareth, which was largely spared the wider policy of expulsions. However, as with Bethlehem, Nazareth's Christian majority began to be overturned during 1948, as Muslims from neighboring villages that were under attack poured into the city, seeking sanctuary. Today, Nazareth has a 70 per cent Muslim majority.

The proportion of Christians among the Palestinian population in Israel has fallen more generally too – from nearly a quarter in the early 1950s to about 9 percent today. There is a similar number of Druze, a vulnerable religious sect that broke away from Islamic orthodoxy nearly 1,000 years ago. The rest of Israel's Palestinian population – over 80 per cent – are Sunni Muslim.

The Christian exodus has been driven by similar factors to those cited by Palestinians in the West Bank. Within a self-declared Jewish state, Christians have faced diminished educational and employment opportunities; they must deal with rampant, institutional discrimination; and, after waves of land confiscations to Judaize the areas they live in, they can rarely find housing solutions for the next generation. Israel has encouraged a sense of hopelessness and despair equally among Christians and Muslims.

Problematic for Israel has been the fact that Palestinian Christians have played a pivotal role in developing secular Palestinian nationalism in both the occupied territories and in Israel. For obvious reasons, they have been concerned that Palestinian national identity should not deform into a divisive Islamic identity, mirroring Israel's own hybrid ethnic and religious nationalism.

Given the difficulties of political activism for Palestinians inside Israel — for decades it could lead to jail or even deportation — many, especially Christians, joined the joint Jewish-Palestinian Communist party, on the assumption

that its Jewish cadre would ensure protection. The most prized benefit of membership of the Communist party were scholarships to universities in the former Soviet bloc. Israel's segregated school system, which included a near-dysfunctional state system for Palestinians, ensured higher education in Israel was mostly off-limits.

The scholarships were a boon to Christians because they enjoyed access to surviving, private Church-run schools in cities like Nazareth, Haifa and Jaffa that offered a better education. But Israel's hope was that, once outside the region, many would never return — and indeed, this did become an additional factor in the decline of Israel's Palestinian Christian population.

Onward Christian Soldiers

But the advantages enjoyed by Palestinian Christians soon came to be seen by Israel as a liability. The Christians lived mostly in cities. Many had the advantages of access to good schools and higher education. Some had been exposed to the wider world through attending universities abroad. And Christians enjoyed connections to sympathetic communities abroad. Their continuing presence in the Holy Land, as well as their articulation of Palestinian nationalism to outsiders, served to undermine Israel's claims of a simple Judeo-Christian clash of civilizations with Islam.

It was in this context that in late 2012 Israel secretly revived plans to recruit into the Israeli army Christian youth in Nazareth and its environs, using Christian Scout groups as the vehicle. Neither Muslims nor Christians in Israel are drafted into the army on leaving school, unlike Jewish and Druze youngsters. However, they can volunteer, though in practice only a tiny number do. Figures suggest there are a few dozen Christian families, typically poorer ones, whose sons join the army. But from 2012 onwards, the Netanyahu government worked hard to introduce a draft for Christians, hoping to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims in Israel.

Netanyahu schemed on several fronts. He aggressively promoted the small number of Christian families with children in the army to suggest that they were representative of the wider community. Meanwhile, he claimed that the overwhelming majority of Christians who publicly opposed his plan did so only because they had

been intimidated by their Muslim neighbors.

The Israeli media trumpeted too the fact that Netanyahu had recruited a “religious leader” – Jibril Nadaf, a Greek Orthodox bishop in Nazareth – to support the draft of Christians. In fact, it was widely rumored in Nazareth at the time that Nadaf was being pressured by Israel’s secret police,

the Shin Bet, to offer his support. Only much later did the Israeli media report that Nadaf had been investigated for sexual assaults on young men, and that the Shin Bet had hushed up his case.

At around the same time Israel introduced the option of registering a new nationality, “Aramaic”, on Israeli identity cards. Israel has always refused to recognise an “Israeli” nationality because it would risk conferring equal rights on all Israeli citizens, Jews and Palestinians alike. Instead many rights in Israel are accorded to citizens based on their assigned nationalities – with the main categories being “Jewish”, “Arab” and “Druze”. “Jewish” nationals receive extra rights unavailable to Palestinian citizens in immigration, land and housing, and language rights. The new “Aramaic” category was intended to confer on Christians a separate nationality mirroring the Druze one.

The obscure “Aramaic” identity was chosen for two reasons. First, it referred to a time 2,000 years ago when Jews like Jesus spoke Aramaic – now almost a dead language. Aramaic therefore fused Jewish and Christian identities, replicating the claim of “blood ties” Israel had fostered with the Druze community. And second, Aramaic had already been cultivated as an identity by the handful of Palestinian Christian families that volunteered to serve in the army. For them, Aramaic lay at the heart of a pure, proud, supposedly original Christian nationalist identity. They argued that their forefathers’ Aramaic heritage and language had been usurped and corrupted by the arrival of Arab and Islamic identities in the region during the Arab conquests in the seventh century.

For those who promoted it, including the Israeli government, “Aramaic” was not a neutral Christian identity but consciously intended as an anti-Arab, anti-Muslim



Jibril Nadaf with PM Netanyahu

Credit: Electronic Intifada

identity. It was intimately tied to the government’s larger, fanciful agenda of turning the local Christian population into Palestinian Christian Zionists.

In tandem with these developments, Netanyahu’s government also began aggressively squeezing the resources available to Church schools operating in Nazareth and elsewhere. An arrangement that had historically provided partial state funds for

private religious schools, primarily to help the Jewish ultra-Orthodox, began to be progressively withdrawn from Church schools. Pupils in the dozen such schools in Nazareth, which serve both Christians and Muslims, staged an unprecedented strike in 2014 as it became harder for the schools to cover costs. The government offered a way out: the schools, it proposed, should come under the umbrella of the state education system. So far the Church schools have managed to resist.

Although the policy has not been implemented yet, there are indications of what Israel ultimately hoped to achieve. The aim, it seems, was to reinvent the Church schools as “Aramaic” schools, limiting the intake to Christians and teaching a curriculum, as with the Druze, that emphasized the “blood ties” between Jews and Christians and prepared pupils for the army draft. The first such school, teaching in Aramaic, has opened in Jish, a village in the central Galilee that is home to some of the main families that volunteer to serve in the Israeli army.

In fact, Israel failed dismally in its efforts to persuade Christians to accept the draft, and appears to have largely abandoned the plan, even after dedicating several years to bringing it to fruition. Israel should have guessed that such a scheme was unlikely to succeed. In a city like Nazareth, too many Christians are professionals – doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers serving their community – and have no interest in gaining the sole advantage of military service the poorer Druze have depended on: lowly jobs after the draft in the security sectors, as prison wardens or security guards.

But that may not have been Israel’s only goal. In line with its long-standing ambitions, Israel also doubtless wanted to intensify sectarian tensions between Christians and

Muslims in places where the two communities live in close proximity, especially Nazareth. And for a variety of reasons, sectarian divisions have started to emerge over the past few years. The causes are manifold, but Israel's efforts to recruit Christians to the army – to divide them from Muslims – undoubtedly exacerbated the problem.

Another significant factor was the gradual demise of the Communist party, especially in Nazareth, after it came to be too closely identified with Christians and was seen as playing a role in maintaining their relative privileges. That led to a backlash in Nazareth that saw Ali Salam, a populist politician who revels in comparisons with Donald Trump, becoming mayor after subtly exploiting these sectarian tensions.

It also did not help that for nearly two decades nihilistic Islamic movements edged ever closer to Israel's borders – first with al-Qaeda, and later with Islamic State. That has unnerved many Palestinian Christians and Muslims in Israel. In recent years it has provoked a political reaction from some who have begun to wonder whether a militarily strong, western-backed Israel was not the lesser regional evil.

Israel has every interest in reinforcing such developments, exploiting tensions that shore up its clash of civilizations narrative. Paradoxically, it is Israel's long-term interference in the region and a more recent policy of direct military intervention by the US in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Iran that has created the very conditions in which Islamic extremism has prospered. Between them, Israel and the US have sown despair and generated political voids across the Middle East that groups like Islamic State have filled with their own narrative of a clash of civilizations.

For Israel, recruiting Palestinian Christians to its side of this self-serving clash narrative – even if it is only a few of them – is helpful. If Israel can muddy the waters in the region by finding enough allies among local Christians, it knows it can further dissuade the international Churches from taking any substantive action in addressing the crimes it has perpetrated against Palestinians unhindered for more than seven decades.

Israel's great fear is that one day the international Churches may assume moral leadership in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ending the traumas set in train by the Nakba.

Judging by the Churches' current record, however, Israel appears to have little reason to worry. ■

About this Issue

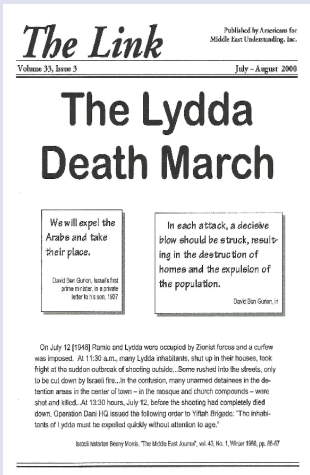


Jonathan Cook is a British freelance writer who lives with his family in Nazareth. This is his ninth feature article for *The Link*. All his previous articles going back to 2010 are available on our website: www.ameu.org.

And while you are on our website, there is another *Link* article I'd urge you to read. Several times in his current article, Cook notes that Christian as well as Muslim Palestinians suffered the horrors of the Nakba, or the Catastrophe when, in 1948, Zionist forces drove 750,000-plus Palestinians from their homes. The town of Lydda was overrun on July 12, 1948. Some inhabitants, seeking refuge in the town's mosque and church compounds, were shot and killed. Others were stripped of their jewelry and money and forced out of Lydda on what, for many, was a death march. Two independent eyewitnesses -- Audeh Rantisi and Charles Amash -- agreed to recall that terrifying experience in our July-August 2000 *Link*. To my knowledge, this is their only account in English.

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