

Christians in Palestine

A threatened community?



Mural from the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem. Photo: Nefissa Naguib

Christian Palestinians constitute one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, and their presence in Palestine dates back to the Roman Era. In modern times, they have been instrumental in shaping a Palestinian national identity, and their influence on Palestinian society far exceeds their numbers. Christian Palestinians also have a history of large-scale emigration. Their survival as a community in Palestine is threatened.

Christian Palestinians constitute one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, and their presence in Palestine dates back to the Roman Era. In modern times, they have been instrumental in shaping a Palestinian national identity, and their influence on Palestinian society far exceeds their numbers. Christian Palestinians also have a history of large-scale emigration. Their survival as a community in Palestine is threatened. With less than 49 000 people left in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, there are fears that places like Bethlehem and Jerusalem may have very few Christians left in the near future.

that Palestinian emigration, both Christian and Muslim, is a result of the hardships caused by Israel's occupation. Israeli authorities contend that Muslim radicals force Christians to leave and the Palestinian Authorities does little to protect them. This dispute is part of the Israeli-Palestinian battle for international sympathy, and challenges Israel's strong support among Christian communities in the West.

Earlier this year, the US news program 60 Minutes made a story on the flight of Christians from the West Bank. Fearing a story that would blame Israel for the hardships of Christian Palestinians, Israel's Ambassador to the US contacted the head of CBS News in an attempt to kill the story. After it was aired, the program ignited massive protest from political groups

Bård Helge Kårtveit

Researcher

CMI CHR.
MICHELSEN
INSTITUTE

CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

The plight of Christian Palestinians is a matter of heated debate. The Palestinian Authority argues

BRIEF FACTS - CHRISTIANS IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

- History in Palestine dates back to early Christianity
- Est. 49 000 people in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza (2006).
- The Christian triangle of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour is home to appr. 22 000 Christians.
- 50 % belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, 15 % to the Roman Catholic Church, 10 % the Greek Catholic Church, and the rest divided between more than ten different churches.
- Primarily employed in health sector, cultural and educational institutions and Palestinian tourism
- Politically engaged, and widely oriented towards, left-wing secular movements.
- Long history of emigration, with large migrant networks in Latin America, North America, Northern Europe and Australia.
- Well-know Christian Palestinians: George Habash, founder of PFLP, Hanan Ashrawi, PLO spokeswoman, and Edward Said, Palestinian-American Academic.

and individuals in the US, who accused the news channel of inciting hatred against Israel.

A LONG HISTORY OF EMIGRATION

While this dispute is centered on more recent events, Christian emigration from Palestine dates back more than one hundred years. From the late 1800s, economic depression and political suppression triggered large-scale migration from Palestine and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Equipped with extensive western contacts, Mission School education and knowledge of European languages, local Christians lead the first waves of emigration from Palestine. Since then, both Christians and Muslims have emigrated in large numbers, especially during periods of political hardships. During WWI, many young Palestinians left for Latin America to escape conscription in the Ottoman army. After the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, thousands of people left Palestine in search of freedom and safety, primarily in the Americas. Early emigrants would help new generations of family members to join them in their host countries, establishing chains of family migration that continues today making emigration an attractive and feasible option for potential new emigrants. Today, the Christian Palestinian diaspora is mainly spread throughout the Americas, Northern Europa, and Australia. In Chile alone, an estimated 90 000 people are believed to descend from Bethlehem emigrants, four times the current population of Christians in Bethlehem. Thanks to extensive family networks abroad, top notch education because of access to church-based private schools in Palestine and other factors, Christian Palestinians have emigrated three times the rate of Muslim Palestinians.

A STRUCTURAL DRIVE TOWARDS EMIGRATION

At different times, Christian emigration has been driven by political and economic hardships, and in recent decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the primary source of such hardships. In particular, during the Second Intifada (2000-2005), a period of low intensity warfare between Israel and Palestinian militants, Israeli military measures in the West Bank was a brutal blow against Christian Palestinian livelihoods.

In the Bethlehem districts – a Palestinian Christianity stronghold - the local economy is heavily dependent on the tourist industry built around Bethlehem's biblical heritage. However, during the Second Intifada, Israeli isolated the West Bank from Israel, devastating tourism in Bethlehem as well as other sectors of the local economy. The most important isolation measure was the building of the Separation Wall between Israel and the West Bank. In violation of international law, the Wall cuts through the Northern part of Bethlehem, and is built like a crescent around the town. As a result, large areas of Bethlehem land has ended up on the Israeli side, out of the reach of the Christian Palestinian landowners. Bethlehem, which has always depended on close ties with Jerusalem, was cut

off from the city, and Northern Bethlehem, once a thriving commercial district, was transformed into a ghost-town. Bethlehem hotels and souvenir-shops - the lifelines of many local families - were left empty.

The Separation Wall has been complemented by new border policies banning West Bank-residents from entering Jerusalem, a network of checkpoints and roadblocks restricting Palestinian movements within the West Bank, and a denial of West Bank residency for Palestinians who hold foreign passports. These and other measures have strengthened a structural drive towards further emigration, a drive to which internationally oriented, well-educated middle class Christian Palestinians have been particularly responsive.

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

Between 2001 and 2005, more than 3000 out of 25 000 Christians left the Bethlehem District alone. Since then, an estimated 700 – 900 Christians have left Palestine each year. Combined with low birth rates and an ageing community, this has served to diminish the Christian presence to little more than a remaining one percent of the Palestinian population, casting doubts about their survival as a community in Palestine.

The flight of Christians is part of a broader problem; the flight of well-educated and ambitious middle-class Palestinians to other parts of the world. This trend has been exacerbated by a thwarting of the Palestinian economy, leaving young Palestinians in want of employment and economic opportunities in the West Bank.

After almost two decades of political stalemate between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, a continued expansion of Israeli settlements, and deepening divisions between the Hamas leadership in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the prospects for a two-state solution are getting slimmer. With a shortage of jobs and economic opportunities, and little hopes of a political long-term settlement, emigration remains an option for many Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim.

THE ROLE OF PALESTINIAN CHURCHES

Among those who remain on the West Bank, local churches are important sources of support. Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches run schools, health clinics, cultural centres and various charities in the Palestinian territories. Seeking to halt emigration, local churches try to ease the economic burden on young Palestinians, and build housing complexes to provide affordable housing to young families. Through their various institutions, local churches also provide employment to one out of three Christian Palestinians in the West Bank. In spite of this, poor Palestinians express resentment towards some of the churches for not doing enough. The

Greek Orthodox Church in particular which has vast financial resources and land holdings is accused of being unwilling to provide services responding to the needs of their local laity.

For many years, local churches were also seen as reluctant to take a stand in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so as not to offend international donors, or jeopardize their properties and interests in Jerusalem. Since the late 1980s, this has gradually changed, and local churches have become more outspoken in their support of Palestinian statehood. In 2009 the heads of all the historic churches in Palestine signed the 'Kairos-document' – a joint statement calling for an international boycott of Israeli products as a response to Israel's occupation and settlement activities in the West Bank and Gaza.

PALESTINIAN ISLAMISM - A SOURCE OF CONCERN

The churches advocate unity across sectarian divides, and stress the destructive effects of Israel's occupation. At the same time, Palestinian society is also ridden with internal tensions, some of which represent serious concerns among Christian Palestinians.

Since the early 1980s, Palestinian society has seen the emergence of a culture of Islamic piety, characterized by a drift towards pious norms of everyday conduct, and conservative family and gender norms. Often seen as reverberating from the Islamic revolution in Iran, this has been accompanied by the growth of political Islam as an ideology, and the emergence of Hamas as a political movement. In response to this, some Christian communities have become more inward-looking, minimizing contact with their Muslim neighbours. These parallel processes have fuelled alienation and mutual distrust between Christians and parts of the Muslim population in the West Bank. When local conflicts erupt between people of different regional, class-based, and sectarian backgrounds, they are increasingly framed in sectarian terms. One example is the rising number of land disputes between old Bethlehem landowning families, and immigrant families from other parts of the West Bank. Locally, these are mainly seen as land disputes between Christian and Muslim families, ignoring other factors.

MINORITY VULNERABILITY

Many Christians are alarmed by the popular support among their Muslim neighbours for Hamas and other Islamic movements. They feel that the Palestinian society is drifting towards a social order based on Islamic norms and ideals. While some fear infringements on their religious freedoms and places of worship, many Christians are more worried about infringements on their social freedoms. They fear the emergence of a conservative cultural climate in which they can no longer live in

accordance with their own norms, interact with member of the other sex in public places, serve and enjoy alcohol in their cafes and restaurants etc. To a large extent, this is already a reality for the tiny Christian communities in the Northern part of the West Bank, and for the less than 3000 Christians who still live in Gaza, and who find themselves under pressure to conform to Islamic norms. This sense of cultural vulnerability is strengthened further by the emigration of their young members.

At the same time, local Christians are reluctant to express such worries in public. When Christians raise concerns about sectarian tensions, this is seen by many as the illegitimate whining of a spoiled Christian elite. Muslims in Bethlehem, East Jerusalem and Ramallah are often poorer, less educated, and less influential than their Christian neighbours, and thus have a hard time understanding their sense of vulnerability. In addition, any focus on sectarian tensions in Palestine can be used by Israeli authorities to divert attention from the Israeli occupation, which is a far greater cause of concern among local Christians.

At times of heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions, sectarian tensions are swept aside, as Christian Palestinians emphasize their national commitments, and their identification with the hardships of fellow Palestinians. Christian leaders strongly condemned the Israeli wars on Gaza, in 2009 and 2012. In November 2012, a group of one hundred Palestinian church leaders and Christian community leaders signed a public statement calling on European countries to support President Abbas's bid for Palestinian statehood at the UN General Assembly.

A MINORITY WITH A VOICE

Within the political establishment, Palestine's Christian community is seen as a diplomatic asset and a valuable link to Christian communities in the West. The importance of retaining their presence is widely appreciated. This was reflected in the diplomatic efforts of the Palestinian Authority to have the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO earlier this year. A rare triumph of Palestinian diplomacy, local Christians saw this as recognition of their own cultural heritage, both within the Palestinian Authorities, and within the international community.

Since July 2007, the Palestinian Territories have been split between a Fatah-led government in the West Bank, and a Hamas government in Gaza. In a community marred by bitter polarization, Christian Palestinians have thrown their weight behind President Mahmoud Abbas and the West Bank Government, widely seen as representing a bulwark against political Islam.

By their own accounts, the social and economic hardships endured under Israeli occupation remains the most powerful drive for emigration

This brief is written as part of an institutional collaboration between Chr. Michelsen Institute and Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, financed by NORAD.

Editor: Ingvild Hestad. Copy editor: Lisa Arnestad

If the West Bank is thrown into new periods of political unrest and economic paralysis, Christian Palestinians are likely to be among the first to leave.

among Christian Palestinians. At the same time, sectarian tensions and strong Islamist currents is a source of great concern within the community. Nonetheless, the readiness among Christian community leaders to take a clear stand in the conflict between rivaling political factions, reflect a strong faith among local Christians that they have a voice in Palestinian national politics, and a stake in its future development.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

If the West Bank is thrown into new periods of political unrest and economic paralysis, Christian Palestinians are likely to be among the first to leave. In the meantime, Christian

community leaders are trying to combat emigration, and to retain a viable community of local Christians in Palestine.

Christian communities in other parts of the region face similar challenges. Though far more numerous than in Palestine, Christians in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan see their own communities dwindle through large-scale emigration. Within their national settings, they also witness Islamists demand greater influence on the shaping of the futures of their countries. It remains an open question how this will affect the position of local Christian communities in Palestine and its neighbouring countries.

Further reading

Kårtveit, B (2012) 'A rule of uncertainty. Rights of residency in the occupied West Bank.' Review of Women's Studies. Special Issue (1). Institute of Women's Studies, Birzeit University. pp. 24-34.

Kårtveit, B. (2010) 'In fifteen years there'll be none of us left!' Attachments, resilience and migration among Bethlehem Christians.' PhD Dissertation, University of Bergen

Lybarger, L. D. (2007). "For Church or Nation? Islamism, Secular-Nationalism, and the Transformation of Christian Identities in Palestine", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75(4): 777-813.