

CHRISTIANS OF PALESTINE

Introduction to the plight of Arab Christians in Palestine



Seminar Transcript
Houses of Parliament
25th April 2016


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مركز العودة الفلسطيني

PALESTINIAN RETURN CENTRE

Organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2015



The **Palestinian Return Centre** is an independent consultancy focusing on the historical, political and legal aspects of the Palestinian Refugees. The organization offers expert advice to various actors and agencies on the question of Palestinian Refugees within the context of the Nakba - the catastrophe following the forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948 - and serves as an information repository on other related aspects of the Palestine question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. It specializes in the research, analysis, and monitor of issues pertaining to the dispersed Palestinians and their internationally recognized legal right to return.

Christians of Palestine: Introduction to the plight of Arab Christians in Palestine
Seminar Text, Houses of Parliament, 25th April 2016

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Biographies

H.E. Ambassador Manuel Hassassian is the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK and throughout his life has worked extensively to promote the rights of the Palestinian People.

Leila Sansour started her professional life as a producer on Al Jazeera's leading documentary series "Encounter in Exile". She has produced a number of award winning shorts. Her latest film 'Open Bethlehem' was released in 2014, after ten years in the making and was selected as the film of the week by the Guardian. She also regularly freelance produces for ITN and NBC news.

Dr. Adeeb Ziadeh an associate fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK. He has a doctorate in Politics from the University of Exeter, specialising in EU foreign policy towards the Middle East. Palestinian in origin, Ziadeh obtained his BA and MA in International Studies from Birzeit University in Palestine.

Jeremy Moodey is Chief Executive of the Christian charity Embrace the Middle East. He has also worked as a British diplomat, serving in Pakistan and Rome. Jeremy is passionate about justice in the Middle East, and supporting the witness of the historic Christian communities in the region.



Introduction to the plight of Arab Christians in Palestine

When talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it is easy to forget that amidst all of the politics and international wrangling about a conflict between two religious groups, Jews and Muslims, there is another small but extremely important group who also have a deep rooted and valid claim to what is undoubtedly the most disputed “Holy Land” in the world.

It may only constitute an extremely small minority of the entire population (estimates range from anywhere between 2.3%-1.5%) but the Palestinian Arab Christians living in Palestine/Israel also have a legitimate historical and spiritual claim to the land. After all, Palestine was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the land in which he spent his short 33 year life and even shorter term of ministry and, according to Christianity, the place of his crucifixion and resurrection as well. Ever since the time of Jesus there has been a permanent presence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Not only is it a spiritual hub to which Christians from all over the world flock for pilgrimage and prayer, particularly during Christmas and Easter, but it has also been a home to countless Christians of numerous denominations for almost two thousand years. (Amelia Smith, MEMO, 2014)

Back in 1948, when Israel was established, Christians in Palestine made up around 18 percent of the population. Now it is around two percent only. They have been faced with the same discriminatory policies as Muslim Palestinians, pushing thousands to leave Palestine. In a 2006 poll, Christians living in Bethlehem said Israeli aggression and occupation was the main cause of emigration.

Christians have lived in Palestine since the rise of Christianity. Their descendants who still live in the territory today are faced with daily persecution and violence, as part of the discrimination and policies of the Israeli military occupation



which violate basic human rights. These factors, together with low birthrates, are cause to increasing emigration and a shrinking Christian population in the region.

Basic facts

The number of Palestinian Christians living in Palestine today is uncertain, but estimates range between 190,000 and 280,000 (UN data, Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, World Christian Database). Between 144,000 and 196,000 live in Israel, 40,000-75,000 are in the West Bank, and around 2,000-3,000 live in the Gaza strip. The majority of Palestinian Christians are Greek Orthodox, but groups of Roman, Syrian and Greek Catholics, Armenian and Ethiopian Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans, Copts, Episcopalians, and Maronites are also present. 80% of the Christians living in Israel are Palestinian Arabs, while the remaining 20% are non-Arab immigrants, often family members of Soviet Jews who came to settle in Israel in the 1990s.

Christian communities in Palestine since 1948

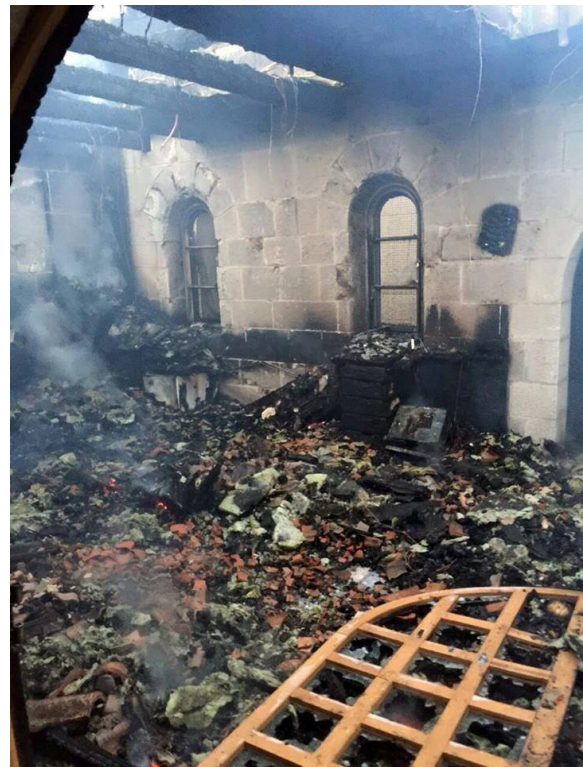
The British Mandate's Survey of Palestine, compiled for the UNSCOP in 1946, shows that 135,547 Christians lived in Palestine before 1948. The population had doubled since 1922 and was gradually increasing. The arrival of the Zionist settlers forced thousands of people to relocate over the years. Between 392 and 602 villages in Palestine were destroyed by the Israeli forces in the years following the 1948 declaration of the new State of Israel. Their residents were forced to flee or were forcefully expelled to neighboring cities and countries. Even the most conservative estimates admit that at least 7 of these villages had a large Christian community. Towns destroyed during the 1948 wars with a significant Christian community included Al Bassa, Al Mansura, Birweh, Damoun, Suhmata, Mujeidil, Maa'lul. Other towns like Ain Karim, the birth town of St. John the Baptist, or Sheik Braik, the only town of Armenians, lost the entirety of their Christian inhabitants. According to Mansour's 2004 study on the history of Christians in the Holy Land, 8-10% of the people that were forced to flee to other countries were Christians. These refugees and their descendents are still now prevented to return to their homes, despite the international laws and UN binding resolutions affirming their right of return.

An example is Kufr Birim, the only Maronite town in today's Israel. Its population consisted of 700 Christian inhabitants and only 10 Muslims (Israeli NGO Zochrot). In 1948, its population was evacuated by the Israeli military for 'security reasons'. Although the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in 1951 that the town's residents should be allowed to return to their properties, the military refused to let them in the village, and razed it to the ground. Today, only the church and belltower are standing in between the ruins of the houses, which now form a touristic site, inaccessible to Palestinians. Similar destiny was faced by the neighbouring Christian town of Iqrit. The story serves as the plot of the documentary film "The Stones Cry Out" (2013).

Discrimination

“Everyone is speaking about peace in the Middle East and the peace process. So far, however, these are simply words; the reality is one of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, deprivation of our freedom and all that results from this situation” (Palestinian Christian organization Kairos)

Christians in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (OPT) and in Israel face daily discrimination by Israeli occupation authorities, similarly to Palestinian Muslims. CBS News report, Christians of the Holy Land, highlights the injustices that push Christians to leave the country. Restrictions of movement through checkpoints and the difficulty of obtaining a permit to cross the Barrier prevent Palestinian Christians accessing places of worship, especially in Jerusalem. Both holy cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem are surrounded on three sides by the Separation Wall, which was declared illegal by the International Court of Justice (2004). The Wall separates families from their lands and from schools and hospitals. Even clergy is not immune from this treatment and is often denied the permission to enter Jerusalem or their parishes in Israel during religious celebrations.



The historic Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, in northern Israel, was set on fire by Jewish extremists in June 2015.

Bethlehem and Jerusalem, a mere six miles away, shares a vital religious and spiritual connection, a link that has now been viciously severed by Israel. Longstanding Christian rituals that used to unite the two areas, such as the Easter Procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, are now lost traditions. According to a 2009 report in the medical journal the Lancet, “although the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is visited by Christian pilgrims from all over the world, it remains inaccessible to Palestinian Christians from Bethlehem and Ramallah living only 10 km away.” ²As absurd as it may seem given their proximity to one another a simple postcard between the two cities can take months to arrive.

Bethlehem is dominated in equal measure by churches and mosques, a symbol of the increased diversity of the region’s people. Since 1948 many Palestinian Christians have been living in refugee camps outside the sacred city. The Christian population in Bethlehem now stands at a mere 28% of the total population. Just as other Palestinians they face many challenges moving from one city to another due to Israel’s Apartheid checkpoints. It is virtually impossible for them

to travel to the Gaza Strip which is home to some of the oldest Christian holy sites in the world. Likewise, Christians living in Gaza face many obstacles when travelling to Bethlehem or other holy cities in the West Bank.

The recent closure of the Old City of Jerusalem in 2015 is proof of the restrictions imposed on all Arab citizens of Israel and people from the West Bank. Holy sites in Israel, the West Bank and Jerusalem are also inaccessible by Gaza citizens who are not allowed in these territories. These policies deny Palestinian Christians of the freedom to worship, which is an internationally recognized human right (UN OHCHR).



The US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report (2009, 2011) has found that the Israeli government discriminates against non-Jews. Non-Jewish holy sites are not recognized as official worship sites, therefore they are not provided with legal protection. Allocation of funds also privilege Jewish religious groups and institutions. Moreover, interfaith marriages are only recognized if celebrated abroad, while Palestinian Christians – or Muslims – from the OPT, who marry Israeli citizens, are denied citizenship of Israel. The report also stated that, "Many of the national and municipal policies in Jerusalem were designed to limit or diminish the non-Jewish population of Jerusalem." These policies limit the daily activities of the Christian population and their institutions and violate international human rights.

Discrimination by Israeli occupation authorities includes the confiscation of land belonging to Christian families and religious properties. Land is regularly confiscated by the Israeli military and used to build military bases, illegal Israeli settlements and the Separation Wall. In the summer of 2015, 58 Palestinian Christian families and local monasteries have lost a total of 3500 dunams of land around the town of Beit Jala, northwest of Bethlehem for the continued construction of the Separation Wall, which is illegal under international law (St. Yves Catholic Center for Human Rights' report, 2015). The seizure of land by Israeli occupation forces is "a form of Christian persecution," said Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal. In addition to land confiscations, house demolitions and expropriations by the Israeli occupation forces often result in the loss of Palestinians' right to reside and work in the Old City of Jerusalem and their consequent forced expulsion (US State Department Human Rights Report, 2013).

Violent Attacks on Churches, Christian organizations and Individuals

Violent attacks by Jewish extremists on Palestinian Christians and Muslims and their property have been rising by 150% each year (UN, IMEU 2013). 154 attacks on individuals were carried out only in the first half of 2012. These 'price tag' attacks, often caught on video, include arson, vandalism, and the desecration of

churches and cemeteries. Kairos Palestine and Middle East Eye (2014) mention 43 documented cases of attacks on churches, monasteries and mosques by young Jewish extremists since 2012. Although these attacks have often been condemned by police and government as hate crimes, no action has been taken to prevent or punish these crimes, apart from small fines and postponed sanctions. This 'state of impunity' has been documented by two reports of Israeli human rights organisation Yesh Din (2015), titled Mock Enforcement and Standing Idly By. Their research show that 85% of the crimes committed by Israeli civilians on Palestinian victims fail to lead to a police investigation. Often, these crimes are witnessed by soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force, who, as reported by Yesh Din, do nothing to prevent them. They conclude that the reasons that lead to this failure "are endemic to the existence of a prolonged regime of military occupation over a civilian population [and] cannot be fully resolved so long as the occupation continues."

These attacks are not a new phenomenon. The Christian Union of Palestine and the United Presbyterian Church, between others, have reported several churches being damaged by Israeli troops in 1948, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Damages included the desecration of churches, which were used as military bases, and hundreds of people being killed inside, including priests, women and children. Christian schools, like the Church of Scotland school in Jaffa and the American-European Beth El Messianic Mission Children's Hostel, have also been the target of attacks. Complaints by clergy and individuals include regular reports of spitting, cursing, intimidation and violence towards them by Israeli settlers and Jewish extremists (Haaretz, B'Tselem).

Emigration

Jerusalem is the symbol of coexistence of everyone and it is a joint heritage of the Muslims and Christians. The Christians in Jerusalem are like the Christians in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Ramallah and all the others in Palestine in that they are all subject to the very real problem of emigration. Their emigration rates are much higher than those prevalent in the Palestinian community generally.



For example, the number of Christians in Jerusalem according to 1922 statistics was 14,700 and the Muslim population was 13,400; in 1945 the figures were 29,350 Christians and 30,600 Muslims. The number of Christians in Jerusalem dropped to 27,000 in 1947 due to the war situation that arose in Palestine on the eve of the UN Partition Plan in 1947. The number of Christians in the Holy City should have reached at least 100,000 by the year 2000, but their numbers did not exceed 12,000 and there are now only about 10,000.

In addition, 50 per cent of Christian Jerusalemites lost their homes in West Jerusalem in 1948. Israel then confiscated 30 per cent of the land owned by Christians after the 1967 occupation. All of these factors have contributed towards making the Christians a continuously dwindling community. (Hanna Eissa, Al-Jazeera 2016)

As a result of many injustices, there has been a rise in emigration of the Palestinian Christians, especially young educated Christians from the West Bank. According to the Sabeel Survey on Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel (2006), the number of those emigrating every year is double the annual Christian population birthrate, which is cause to the slow decline in the population. The main reasons given for emigration are unemployment (44.7%) and political and economic instability (42.6%), both caused by the Israeli illegal occupation and its violations of Palestinian human rights. 100% of the respondents in Israel gave their living conditions, which are affected by government discrimination against them, as the principal reason for emigrating abroad. Although the rate of unemployment is lower than for other Palestinians, 74% of unemployed people in the West Bank and 44% in Israel have been without work for more than one year. In the same year, Open Bethlehem (2006) showed that 78% of Bethlehem residents said that emigration of Christians was due to "Israel's blockade".

"There's no difference between Muslim and Christian in Palestine, we're living together as brothers," Palestinian Christian family in Gaza

The emigration of Palestinian Christians has been facilitated by the welcome offered to them by numerous Christian countries around the world. Their Muslim compatriots have not received the same welcome, although they face the same discrimination in their homeland. Israel's claim that Christians are emigrating because of the 'threat' represented by Muslims is a myth. This is proved by Israel's discriminatory policies and attacks that target Christian and Muslim Palestinians alike, as documented by international organizations, including UN and US State Department reports. The facts show that it is the Israeli colonization and occupation of Palestine and relative discriminatory practices that force Palestinian Christians to leave their Holy Land.

"The message to the Christian world, the international community and the Arab world is that this Holy Land is burning, dying and being destroyed, and if you really care about justice and equality, you have the obligation to stop this war, killing and destruction." (Patriarch Michel Sabbah, former head of the Latin Church)

Speakers

Geraint Davies MP, Host

Baroness Jenny Tonge, Chair

Manuel Hassassian, Palestinian Ambassador to the UK

Leila Sansour, is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Open Bethlehem

Adeeb Ziadeh, an associate fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK

Jeremy Moodey, is Chief Executive of the Christian charity Embrace the Middle East

Speeches

INTRODUCTIONS

Baroness Jenny Tonge introduced the event by stating the difference between anti-Semitism, which should always be strongly condemned, and criticizing the policies of the government of Israel, which is a legitimate right in any democratic country of the world.

Sameh Habeeb further introduced the issue of the Israeli occupation which affects not only Jews, Muslims, or Christians, but all Palestinians alike, whatever their religion may be.

The event started with the screening of a short documentary, *The Forgotten Victims*, by AlJazeera. The video focused on the siege of Bethlehem and the Church of Nativity by Israeli occupation forces. It also provided testimonies by Palestinian church leaders, such as Reverend Bishop Riah Abo El-Assal in Nazareth, of the numerous attacks by Jewish extremists against Christian families, individuals, and property.



Manuel Hassassian

Manuel Hassassian is the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK. This is a summary of his speech.

The distinction between the Christian and Muslim populations in Palestine is not real: they are all Palestinians and the discriminations against them by the Israeli occupation forces are the same. The distinction becomes real, as an issue, because of the Western interest in Christians, which focuses people's attention on the Christians as a minority in Palestine (1.8% of the population).

The colonial rule of "divide and conquer" has been implemented on the ground by the Israeli occupation. The Israeli army and extremist Jewish settlers make no distinction between holy sites. Both churches and mosques are regularly desecrated and experience attacks, arson, vandalism, as well as confiscations of land and destruction of buildings.

Palestinians from the OPT, both Christians and Muslims, have limited access to holy sites because of a strict regime of checkpoints, barriers, and discriminatory permits. They suffer from dire economic conditions and lack of rights.

This is the result of the political ideology of occupation. Therefore, the issue should be analysed from a national and political perspective, rather than a sectarian perspective.

Leila Sansur

Leila Sansour's speech focused on the separation wall and the encirclement of Bethlehem. This is a summary of her speech.

Christians are part of the culture, the diversity, and the fabric of Palestine. In a context of increasing Christian emigration due to the higher restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation, it is important that they remain part of it. Open Bethlehem has documented the construction of the wall in Bethlehem, which separates the city from Jerusalem. The connection between the two cities is not only spiritual; it included a thriving trade and strong social ties.

The Wall is not built on the internationally recognized Green Line but it annexes fertile Palestinian lands to the Israeli territory. In Bethlehem, the Wall separated the lands surrounding the city from the heavy populated urban area. The consequences are the dispossession of agricultural land from Palestinian families as well as the lack of space to develop the city in the future.

In this context, Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem have lost the most. In fact, historically the lands that surround the city were owned by Christian families as well as by churches and monasteries. The dispossession of their lands has contributed to a large scale relocation and emigration of Christian families with a disruption of the sense of community. The separation from Jerusalem is heightened by the development of the illegal settlement of Har Homa in East Jerusalem, which blocks the corridor that connected Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Within the city of Bethlehem, Rachel's Tomb is one of the central landmarks and is venerated by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. Historically, the site was managed by Jews and Muslims, but was visited by all religions. The tomb is now surrounded by concrete wall, which annexes it to the Israeli territory by building a long and narrow corridor, walled on both sides, running inside the city of Bethlehem. As a direct consequence of the construction of the Wall, more than 80 businesses in the neighbourhood closed down. The consequences to Palestinian livelihoods and the economy are severe.

This section of the Wall is the perfect example of why the barrier was not built for security reasons, as the Israeli government claims. In fact, as a delegation of veterans from the British army confirmed, a security wall should be built in a straight line in order to be easily patrolled. This is exactly the opposite of how the Israeli Wall was built, which clearly highlights its role in annexing Palestinian lands and historical and religious landmarks to Israel.

Adeeb Ziadeh

Adeeb Ziadeh discussed the History of Christians in Palestine.

Palestinians have contributed to education, philosophy, science, literature, physics but most importantly to the struggle against occupation. So they are one nation not two nations. Muslims and Christians are facing the same oppression.

Three factors have shaped the Christian presence in Palestine.

First factor is the civilization factor: indigenous community, belonging to the land of Jesus Christ so they are from here and belong to this land.

Second factor that shapes the Christian presence: Islamic and Christian coexistence that has been entrenched by Omar Attawi, documented the borders of the relationship between Christians and Muslims. He has drawn the relationship between the two societies. This has been the mainstream line of coexistence between the two people in history.

Unfortunately since 1917 when the British empire invaded Palestine many things changed. Now we have to talk about four factors that have shaped the relationship between Muslim and Christians because now we are dealing with a shrinking of Palestinian land

First factor is Zionism. The violent acts of Zionism which has been targeting Muslims and Christians alike. Their key word for the action of Zionists is to transfer, which is coined as drive them out. Recently it has been revealed that the Israeli government had agreed with the Argentinean and Brazilian government in the early 50s on the largest plan to transfer Christians from Khalili to Brazil and Argentina. But because unexpected reasons the plan failed and they could not proceed.

Second factor is emigration towards the west to escape the suffering endured under the Israeli occupation and it is related to the first factor.

Third factor is the open door policy used by the west itself. The west opened its door for Christians to emigrate and we felt it was easier for Christians to emigrate to the west rather than Muslims.

Fourth factor: Over the past century the percentage of Christians in Palestine has been in decline. The influx of Jewish immigrants late 1880s, the Nakba in 1948 and the 1967 occupation has played an important role in this decline.

A large number of the Arab Christians were expelled by the Jewish militias. The main disaster happened after 1967 when Christians started to emigrate to the west.

In 1894 the Christian Palestinian population was 13% and in 1922 Christians were the 10% percent. Christians in 1949 should have been 130000 out of 1.3 million total.

The in 1949 according to the bureau of Israeli statistics Christians after the Nakba were about 34000 inside Israel, which was 21% of the Arabs remained

Now in 2014, the ratio is about 7% of Palestinian Christians in Israel

To conclude, Palestinian Christians are indigenous population integral to the political cultural and historical context of Palestine

At the political level they have been citizens in the common struggle against the foreign invasion and occupation regardless of religious or ethnic identity. With the Christian figures declining there is a real risk that worship places are becoming only tourist places for Christians in Palestine, if the Arab Israeli conflict is not resolved.



Jeremy Moodey

Jeremy Moodey's speech was titled Palestinian Christians: 'the forgotten faithful'

We are here this evening to talk about the basic rights of Palestinians, and in particular the Christian minority. I agree with other speakers that it is in some ways invidious to single out Christians, when all Palestinians suffer from occupation and the denial of their rights. But as a small minority within the larger Palestinian nation, the suffering of Christians is in many ways magnified. They lack the critical mass as a community to cope with occupation, and the political and economic dislocation which results.

And it is a diminishing minority. Last week the Latin Patriarch, His Beatitude Fouad Twal, spoke in Rome about an exodus of Christians as a kind of 'bleeding', draining the Palestinian Christian community of its brightest talent. You know the statistics of Palestinian Christian emigration: 10% of the population in 1948, 20% in Jerusalem, barely 1% today. There are more Palestinian Christians from Ramallah in Dearborn, Michigan, than there are in Ramallah.

Revd Mitri Raheb of the Christmas Church in Bethlehem talks about Palestinian Christians as 'the invisible people'. Others refer to 'the forgotten faithful'. Israel trumpets the growing Christian community on its side of the barrier but it is still only 2% and most growth comes from Hebrew-speaking immigrant families and Messianic believers, not 'Arab' Christians. Those Palestinian Christians who remain are being arbitrarily re-classified by Israel as 'Arameans', in an attempt to separate them from their Palestinian Muslim neighbours. So what is going on?

Well, there are two sides of the separation barrier, and we need to examine each separately. On one side, in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, there are Palestinian Christians with no rights, or rather only those rights which the military occupiers deign to give them, which is not much. On the other side, in pre-1967 Israel, there are Palestinian Christians who have some rights in theory, although there is no written constitutional right to equality and the Basic Laws which do exist are all defined by reference to Israel's identity as a Jewish state. .

I mention 'two sides' but we must not forget that in the middle there are the Christians of occupied East Jerusalem, only a few thousand now, some of whom have Israeli citizenship but many of whom have a 'residency permit' which gives no meaningful rights and which can be (and often is) revoked at any minute.

Taking these three groups in turn, in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Palestinian Christians suffer as I say primarily because they are Palestinians, enduring just like everyone else the indignity of occupation, military checkpoints, house demolitions, arbitrary arrest or worse, and of course restricted access to the Holy Places. It is these indignities which are causing many Palestinian Christians to vote with their feet and leave.

That was the message, if you remember, of the CBS 'Sixty Minutes' programme back in 2012, a programme which so enraged Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren that he tried to discredit it even before it was broadcast. In a 2006 study by Sabeel, the Palestinian liberation theology group, almost 90% of Palestinian Christians wanting to emigrate from the West Bank said they were motivated by economic reasons or the political situation, in other words the occupation, not by fear of Islamic extremism, which is the Israeli narrative.

And in recent years the situation for Palestinian Christians in the West Bank has worsened. As Leila Sansour has noted, the separation barrier is being extended in the Cremisan valley, having a major impact on the Christians of Beit Jala. Israel's increasing Judaization of Jerusalem is making access to the Holy Places at Christmas and Easter ever harder. And restrictions on family unification are having a massive impact on Palestinian Christians because so many marriages in this tiny community are across the separation barrier. Yet Palestinian spouses of Israeli Arab citizens have no right (unlike, say, an American Jew from Brooklyn who has no family connection with the Holy Land) to settle in Israel. Is this not discrimination?

It is a slightly different story on the other side of the separation barrier, in pre-1967 Israel, where there are theoretically citizenship rights. But again the main reason why Palestinian (or 'Arab') Christians suffer is because they are Palestinian and a disadvantaged minority. Even the US State Department has described 'institutional, legal, and societal discrimination against Arab citizens' as one of the 'principal human rights problems' in Israel. Ben White has written extensively on this and Embrace the Middle East has produced a briefing paper. Palestinian Christians face discrimination when it comes to employment, citizenship rights, access to social services and land rights.

But as in the West Bank, things have got worse for Palestinian Christians as extremists have gained the upper hand in Israel's government and in its colonial-settler movement. Price-tag attacks on churches and monasteries have increased. The Israeli government has sought to divide-and-rule the Palestinian community by redefining Christians as Arameans and by trying to recruit Christians to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), following the example of the Druze. And Christian schools in Israel get a fraction of the funding which goes to Jewish Orthodox schools, as the Israeli government tries to use its funding as a means of turning Christian schools from private to public entities, dancing to the tune of the Israeli authorities.

Finally there is East Jerusalem. This is a topic I know well, as Embrace operates its own special needs school in Beit Hanina, the Helen Keller School. A Palestinian Christian school. Yet it receives probably barely a quarter of the government funding which goes to Jewish special education schools in West Jerusalem. The school's funding is dependent on its Palestinian children learning by heart the Arabic version of the Hatikvah, the Zionist national anthem. Teaching of Palestinian history and culture is discouraged. And of course Palestinian Christians in East Jerusalem are affected by the separation barrier, which divides the city from its West Bank hinterland.

Israeli discrimination against Palestinian Christians, whether they are in the occupied territory or pre-1967 Israel, is a tragic reality, and I welcome this event this evening as an opportunity to highlight it.

Recommendations

- Given the Israeli policies of expansion and annexation in the occupied Palestinian territory generally, the Palestinian Return Centre calls upon the international community to urgently exert pressure on Israel and insist upon:
- Israel to respect Christian Palestinians' rights to self-determination, including their property rights, right to freedom of movement as well as the right to work and to education, under the UN treaty bodies
- Israel to immediately comply with its obligations under international law
- Israel to cease relying on its military legal regime in the West Bank to circumvent its international law obligations for the benefit of the Palestinian people under occupation as well as its own supposed democratic values.
- The international community to refrain from assisting in maintaining the unlawful situation that has arisen and take legal measures to cease Israel's violations of international law and international human rights law, as well as to ensure enforcement of the Fourth Geneva Convention.
- To immediately refrain from violent attacks on churches, Christian organizations and individuals and prosecute those responsible according to international humanitarian law

Notes:

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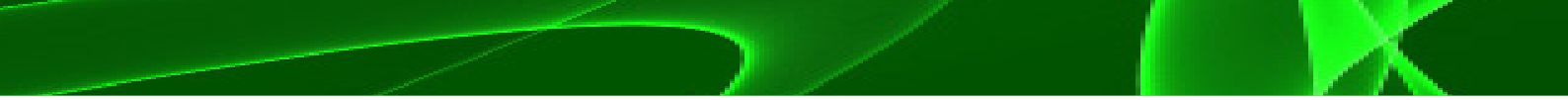
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