

THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Felix Dane / Jörg Knocha

The Palestinian Territories are the cradle of Christianity. In present-day Nablus, formerly Sichem, God appeared to Abraham, the patriarch of all three monotheistic world religions, and promised the land to Abraham's descendants. Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is located within the old town of Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem. Even Gaza is mentioned in the Old Testament as being the place where the Jewish hero Samson suffered imprisonment and death.¹ But the days are long gone since the Christians were the dominant force in the region. For many years now the Palestinian Territories and the whole Middle East region has had an overwhelming Muslim majority – and more and more Christians are leaving. Whereas the fate of Christians in Turkey and Iraq regularly makes the news, though mostly in a negative way,² Christians in the Holy Land find themselves in a media desert. It is only during the major Christian holidays that the world casts an eye towards the Christian minority in this region. Ignored by the world community, there is a creeping loss of Christian identity within the Palestinian Territories.



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- 1 | For a comprehensive view of Palestine in Old Testament times cf. Martin Noth, *Die Welt des Alten Testaments. Eine Einführung*, Freiburg, Basel und Wien: Herder, 1992.
- 2 | For a current and very extreme example cf. John Leland, "Iraqi Forces Storm a Church With Hostages in a Day of Bloodshed," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2010, in: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/01/world/middleeast/01iraq.html?ref=todayspaper> (accessed November 1, 2010).

A LOOK AT THE DIVERSITY OF CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

The Eastern and Byzantine branches of Orthodox Christianity dominate in terms of numbers. Members of the Eastern churches are particularly proud of their long history in the Holy Land.

In the Palestinian Territories there is an enormous diversity of Christian communities. It is not just the layman who views these as a closely-knit network of a few large denominations and a myriad of tiny churches. But losing their role as the majority group has not stopped their quarrels over dogma, indeed it seems as though they are becoming ever more discordant. The Eastern and Byzantine branches of Orthodox Christianity dominate in terms of numbers. Members of the Eastern churches are particularly proud of their long history in the Holy Land. Their ancestors lived in the region as early as the first century after the crucifixion of Jesus. Christian communities grew up not only in Judaea, but in the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean. Their rapid expansion was mainly due to expulsions and intensive proselytization. Today the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Palestinian Territories also includes Ethiopian, Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox Christians, but they are still outnumbered by the Byzantine Orthodox Church. The majority of Christians belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, but this has again split into several different churches. The Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem is particularly prominent in the Palestinian Territories and within Orthodox Christianity it is considered to be the original church. It is led by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. In August 2005 the Holy Synod of Jerusalem elected Theophilus III to be the 141st primate. This high-ranking position is based on the need to be on a par with the leaders of the original Christians in Jerusalem. On top of this there are also members of the Russian and Romanian Orthodox Church.

There are also large numbers of Catholics. Outside of the Roman Catholic Church, Catholic Churches such as the Chaldean, Melkite and Maronite Churches only have a small representation. Nowadays Protestants also make up part of the Christian tapestry, largely due to the work of U.S. missionaries who were active in the Biblical *terra sancta*

during the 19th century. These are mainly made up of Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Adventists and Pentecostals.³

LOSS OF THE MAJORITY POSITION

In the 7th century a new religion conquered the centers of Christianity within the space of a few decades – Islam. This included the area which is now the Palestinian Territories. Once the Christians finally accepted defeat in the battle for followers, a *modus vivendi* with the Muslims could be achieved. During the period of Islamic expansion after Mohammed's death (632 AD), it was still possible to practice Christianity, though with one or two restrictions. These few conditions included a ban on proselytizing and churches could only be built with the permission of the Caliph.

The *rashidun*, the first four "Rightly-Guided Caliphs" after Mohammed, were generally tolerant of the majority Christian population. Abu Bakr, the first of these Caliphs, pursued a policy towards the Christians which largely allowed them to practice their religion freely as *dhimmis* upon payment of a poll tax. These laws imposed on the "People of the Book" (arab. *Ahl al-Kitab*), which chiefly meant Jews and Christians, have their origins in the Koran. The second Caliph Umar pursued a similar conciliatory policy. He captured Palestine, a designation which is older than Islam and which was mentioned as far back as the time of Herodotus.⁴

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In 637 AD Umar made an agreement with Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, which set out the rights of Christians and allowed the Caliph to take Jerusalem in a peaceful way. Although there is some doubt about the authenticity of this agreement, it is nevertheless sage to assume that there were on the whole no forced conversions under Umar's rule. As a result, Christians remained in the majority in most of the conquered Territories.

3 | Cf. Martin Tamcke, "Christen in der islamischen Welt," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2008, № 26, 8-14, in: http://www.bpb.de/publikationen/R1HJSB,0,Christen_in_der_islamischen_Welt.html (accessed October 30, 2010).

4 | Cf. Noth, 1992, n. 1, 5-7.

Around 60 years later the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. In Islam this rock is believed to be the spot from where Mohammed ascended to heaven. Its construction can, however, also be seen as the first sign of a historic change in the region's religious structure. Its position close to two of the most important sacred sites for Jews and Christians, the Wailing Wall (Western Wall of the Second, or Solomon's Temple) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, considered to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial, symbolizes the arrival of the third Abrahamic religion. The inscriptions on this edifice are a clear repudiation of the Christian Trinity, which Muslims interpret as a violation of monotheism.⁵ Caliphate dynasties ruled the region for many centuries until a new power arrived to conquer the region.

LIGHT AND SHADE UNDER THE OTTOMANS

For the period of the Ottoman Empire there is few evidence on animosity towards Christians. The relationship between Christians and the Ottoman state, however, largely started to change after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Sultan Mehmet II, also known as Mehmet al-Fatih ("The Conqueror"), granted his Christian Byzantine subjects status as a religious community (*millet*). This also applied to Christians in Palestine, which was conquered by the Ottomans in 1516 and incorporated into their Empire. The *millet* system controlled the relationship between the rulers and non-Muslims within the population. It followed the prescriptions of the Koran relating to *Dhimmi*. In this way the Christians in Palestine could freely practise their religion and exercise their rights.⁶

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In the 18th century there were more restrictions on Christians, such as special laws relating to clothing. The Palestinian Christians felt themselves closer to Europe and European values as a result of political and economic ties and also through pilgrimages. European countries saw this as an opportunity to meddle in the internal affairs of the

5 | Cf. *ibid.*

6 | Cf. Udo Steinbach, "Christen im Nahen Osten," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2008, N^o 26, 3-7, in: <http://bbp.de/publikationen/4WX84M> (accessed October 30, 2010).

Ottoman Empire. In the mid-19th century, revolutionary European ideologies combined with Western influence brought about radical reforms which resulted in Christians and other minorities being granted equal rights under the law and in the abolition of the poll tax (Tanzimat period). But when Westerners and local Christians who cooperated with them tried to use the Empire's weakness to their own economic advantage and nationalistic ideas began to take root, the Ottomans increased their efforts to create a homogeneous national population.⁷ It was not possible to further integrate the Palestinian Christians into the Ottoman Empire as for Muslims and Christians alike, religion formed the cornerstone of their sense of identity, and the kind of national identity which developed in Europe only gained a rudimentary hold. The defeat in the First World War finally sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire.

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THE ERA OF THE BRITISH MANDATE

After 1918 the conflict between Jews and Arabs meant the decline of Christian influence. Great Britain was granted the mandate for Palestine in 1920. The area of the mandate included the present-day Palestinian Territories plus Israel and Jordan. The latter became an autonomous Arab Emirate in 1922. The British promised to establish a national home for the Jewish people (Balfour Declaration, 1917) and the vehement rejection of this plan by the Arabs meant that Christians found themselves in the middle of an escalating Jewish-Arab conflict. Although they were practically equal in the eyes of the law due to the abolition of the *millet* system, their influence sank like a stone. The waves of Jewish immigration resulted in them soon losing their status as the second-largest religious community.

7 | Cf. Mustafa Gencer, "Religiöse Koexistenz. Das Verhältnis zwischen Juden, Christen und Muslimen im Osmanischen Reich," paper delivered on the 4th Interreligious Summer University of the Evangelische Akademie Loccum 2003, in: http://www.osmanischesreich.com/Geschichte/Artikel/Religiose_Koexistenz/religiose_koexistenz.html (accessed October 31, 2010).

The British, who appointed themselves protectors of Christians, particularly Protestants and Eastern Orthodox, during the period of Ottoman rule⁸, were now busy trying to mediate between Jews and Arabs. Although the spreading Arab resistance to Jewish immigration was non-denominational, it must be conceded that the Christians only played a peripheral role.

However, there were exceptions. One of the most impressive cooperations between Christians and Muslims during the Mandate era was the Arab nationalist "Muslim-Christian Union" (al-Jamiya al-Islamiya al-Masihiyah), which was formed as a reaction to the Balfour Declaration in 1918. Its symbol, a unified crescent moon and cross, was proof of the non-denominational character of the group.

In 1919 the first Palestinian Arab congress was organized in Jerusalem. It aimed to lay the foundations of an independent Palestine and strengthen resistance to British rule.

This movement was so popular that other organizations with the same name grew up in Nablus and other towns. Shortly afterwards, these local sub-groups came together to form a central association. The first Palestinian Arab congress, organized in Jerusalem

in 1919, aimed to lay the foundations of an independent Palestine and strengthen resistance to British rule. Although the congress rejected the waves of Jewish immigration, it advocated equal rights and obligations for long-established Jews. The groups held demonstrations across the country, collected signatures and sent delegates to Europe, but the increasing pressure placed on them by the British meant they gradually faded into obscurity.⁹ On May 14th, 1948, the last day of British rule, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel.

THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE AND THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE RESISTANCE

The outbreak of war in May 1948 between Israel and its Arab neighbors also hit the Arab Christians hard. Particularly those who lived in predominantly Muslim areas became victims of the war. An example of this is the fate of the Arab population in Ramle and Lydda, present-day Lod.

8 | Cf. Steinbach, Christen, n. 6.

9 | Cf. Yoshiko Kurita, "The development of secularism and non-sectarianism in the Middle East," in: Masatoshi Kisaichi, *Popular Movements and Democratization in the Islamic World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 143-160.

Ben-Gurion had by this time been appointed Prime Minister of the provisional government, and after Lod was taken by the Israeli army, he authorized the expulsion of its Arab population. Hundreds of Arabs were killed. One of the ten thousand refugees was George Habash, son of a Greek Orthodox family whose sister died of typhoid the night of the Israeli attack. The family blamed the Israeli invasion for her death, as they could not get her proper medical treatment.¹⁰ A trained doctor, Habash spent time caring for Palestinian refugees before becoming co-founder of the *Arab Nationalist Movement* (Harakat al-Qawmiyyin al-Arab). He was influenced in this by the teachings of Constantin Zureiq, a leading Arab intellectual and pivotal player in Arab nationalism. Zureiq also came from a Greek Orthodox family.

George Habash, son of a Greek Orthodox family, became co-founder of the "Arab Nationalist Movement". He was influenced in this by the teachings of Constantin Zureiq, a Greek Orthodox.

After the Six Day War in 1967 the movement fragmented and became more radical. With his long-time fellow activist Wadi Haddad, who also came from a Greek Orthodox background and had been driven out during the war, Habash founded the Marxist *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP). Together they came up with a totally new weapon in the fight against Israel. The PFLP was the first group to use plane hijacking as a terrorist tool in the Middle East. So Habash became "terrorism's Christian godfather."¹¹ An internal dispute about the direction the PFLP should take led to one of the co-founders, Nayef Hawatmeh, leaving the group and setting up the *Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (DFLP). Hawatmeh, a Greek Catholic Palestinian born in Jordan, was accused by Israel of masterminding the Ma'alot massacre in 1974, in which 21 pupils were killed. Later on, Hawatmeh became more moderate and at the funeral of King Hussein of Jordan in 1999 he even shook hands with Israeli president Ezer Weizman.¹²

10 | Cf. Scott Macleod, "Terrorism's Christian Godfather," *Time*, January 28, 2008, in: <http://time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1707366,00.html> (accessed October 31, 2010).

11 | Cf. *ibid.*

12 | Cf. "Dubiose Küsse," *Der Spiegel*, 1999, N° 35, in: <http://spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14443454.html> (accessed October 31, 2010).

The PFLP, DFLP and the various groups which emanated from them or were inspired by them were successful in bringing the Palestinian question back to world attention. But this was at a high price. The increasing brutality of the fight meant Palestinian resistance to the occupation became increasingly equated with international left-wing terrorism, which was largely led by radical Palestinian splinter groups.

In the 1970s the mainsprings of Palestinian resistance – nationalism, socialism and (pan)-Arabism hit a serious crisis. This development was fuelled by the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and the war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (1979-1989). The fight against Israel took on an increasingly Islamic tone.¹³ Up to this point the Christians had had a disproportionately large influence due to their secular, nationalistic insurrections against the British and later against Israel. But now they lost a large part of their influence in the political/militant resistance. So how is life today for Christians in the West Bank and Gaza?

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LIFE AS A CHRISTIAN TODAY

1. Gaza Strip

If we consider Christianity in historic Palestine, Gaza does not immediately spring to mind. But even here in the coastal strip between the Mediterranean, Egypt and Israel there are several thousand Christians. Estimates of their numbers vary between 1,500¹⁴ and 11,000¹⁵, which constitutes between 0.1 and 0.7 percent of the total population of 1.6 million. The great majority of them, around 90 percent, are Greek Orthodox. There is also a smaller number of

13 | Cf. Anthony Shadid, "In the Mideast, No Politics but God's," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2010, in: <http://nytimes.com/2010/10/24/weekinreview/24shadid.html> (accessed November 17, 2010).

14 | Cf. U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009: Israel and the occupied Territories*, 2009, in: <http://state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127349.htm> (accessed November 5, 2010).

15 | Cf. CIA. *The World Factbook*, in: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gz.html> (accessed November 2, 2010).

Catholics and Baptists. Since Hamas took over Gaza by force in June 2007, their situation has deteriorated. However, this is only indirectly due to the ruling Islamists, as generally Hamas and Christians have no particular problems with each other. But whenever there are attacks by radical, minority Salafi groups on the Christian minority, Hamas representatives often sit back and do nothing. The increased violence is also a reaction to Hamas's seizure of power, the war between Hamas and Israel at the turn of the year 2008/09 and the Israeli blockade of Gaza. These events have made life more difficult in Gaza and made it easier for extremist groups to attract young men to their ranks.

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Hanna Massad, a pastor in Gaza's Baptist community, refers to a series of grievances. As an Evangelical, he knows how difficult it is to live as a minority within a minority. Even some years ago he was reporting about children suffering from malnutrition and occasional threats. His church roof has already been badly damaged many times by Israeli bombardments. But in spite of everything he has never stopped making an active contribution. After completing his studies in the USA he returned to Gaza and became the first locally-born Baptist pastor. His church provides food for people in the refugee camps, 99 percent of whom are Muslims. He says: "We will never stop hoping, because without hope we can't carry on."¹⁶

Husam al-Taweel is a Christian member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, which was elected with Hamas support, and is General Secretary of the governing body of a Greek Catholic Church. In May 2009 he described the situation of Christians in Gaza as follows: "I wouldn't say there are no problems and that we live in heaven on earth (...). But there's no special discrimination against Christians. We don't see ourselves as a minority, but rather as part of the Arab majority population."¹⁷ However this assessment has

16 | Cf. "Middle East Christians: Gaza pastor," *BBC News*, December 21, 2005, in: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4514822.stm> (accessed November 9, 2010).

17 | Cf. Tom Heneghan, "Impressions from Gaza: minority Christians and Hamas," *Reuters*, May 18, 2009, in: <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2009/05/18/impressions-from-gaza-minority-christians-and-hamas> (accessed November 2, 2010).

been undermined by violence. There have been several attacks on Christian shops which used to sell alcohol. Rami Ayyad, Director of the Protestant Holy Bible Society in Gaza, was murdered in October 2007. As his religious bookstore was destroyed by a bomb just six months previously, it seems likely that this was a targeted attack on a prominent Christian. Despite Hamas Prime Minister Ismail

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Haniyeh's strong criticism of the attack and his promise that Hamas would not allow the relationship between Muslims and Christians to be sabotaged, there have been a string of attacks on Christians. These are not necessarily anti-Christian so much as anti-modern life. In recent years there have been dozens of attacks on internet cafes and stores selling videos or DVDs.¹⁸ Evangelical groups who are accused of proselytizing are particularly at risk, and Hamas also condemns these alleged activities.

On top of this, the Christians of Gaza are, like all the local population, suffering from the Israeli blockade. The Israeli blockade which has been tightened even more over recent years. Although the last few months have seen some relaxation in respect of the import of certain goods, and despite the clearance of all Jewish settlements in Gaza in summer 2005, there is still no end to the occupation in sight. All entry points to Gaza – by land, air and sea – are controlled by Israel. So Christian business people also experience difficulties bringing in certain goods. And the only way to export their goods is via the Hamas-controlled smuggling tunnel which runs along the border between Gaza and Egypt.

The majority of Christians in Gaza do indeed live in harmony with Muslims, but they are not able to practice their faith in total freedom. It is difficult for the minority to develop their own Christian identity, a situation that the radicals are also keen to maintain.

18 | Cf. Prominent Christian killed in Gaza, *Al Jazeera.net*, October 7, 2007, in: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middle-east/2007/10/2008525131736609872.html> (accessed November 2, 2010).

2. West Bank

In the West Bank life as a Christian is much simpler and easier. Around 50,000 Christians live there, 1.9 percent of the population.¹⁹ Included in this figure are around 11,600 Arab Christians living in East Jerusalem²⁰, which was to all intents and purposes annexed by Israel through the Jerusalem Law passed by the Knesset in 1980. The Christians have their own places of worship, often visible from far away, which have been built at different times during Palestine's volatile history, and they are free to celebrate their religious festivals. There are some neighborhoods with high concentrations of Christians, but many also live in predominantly Muslim areas. They are so well integrated that they can be considered an integral part of the Arab world. This is also reflected in how they perceive themselves: the majority think of themselves first of all as Palestinians or Arabs, and only after that as Christians.²¹ Attacks on Christians are condemned across-the-board in Palestinian society. After Pope Benedict XVI gave his Regensburg speech in September 2006, in which he quoted unfavorable remarks about Islam made in the Late Middle Ages by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, four churches in Nablus in the northern West Bank were firebombed. A Greek Orthodox church in Gaza City was also damaged. Although no-one was injured, the reaction was clear. Palestinian security forces were deployed to protect churches. The violence was condemned right across the political spectrum, including by Hamas representatives, and the situation soon calmed down once more.²²

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19 | Cf. Rania Al Qass Collings, Rifat Odeh Kassis and Mitri Raheb (eds.), *Palestinian Christians. Facts, Figures and Trends 2008*, Bethlehem: Diyar Consortium, 2008, 7-8.

20 | Cf. The Central Bureau of Statistics (Israel), *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2010 № 61: Population, by Population Group, Religion, Age and Sex, District and Sub-District* (Table 2.10), 114, in: http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_10x&CYear=2010 (accessed November 7, 2010).

21 | Cf. Collings et al., *Palestinian Christians*, 2008, n. 19, 58.

22 | Cf. The Associated Press, "Palestinian area churches attacked," *ynetnews.com*, September 16, 2006, in: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3304545,00.html> (accessed November 6, 2010).

For the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the biggest influencing factor on Christian life. But above all he calls for strictly non-violent resistance.²³ Christians may no longer play a leading role in any of the resistance movements, but they hold disproportionately large economic power, and their socio-political influence remains undiminished. The majority of the 250-plus Christian organizations in the Territories are based in the West Bank. They include many educational and research establishments. There are over 70 Christian schools, mostly Catholic, and many Muslims also send their children to them because of their excellent reputation.²⁴ As a result Christians have a higher level of education than other sectors of society and closely-linked to this more Christians are employed than Palestinians: just over 10 percent, compared to the national average which is almost three times as high.²⁵

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In the cultural sphere, Christians also make a significant contribution. The philosopher Edward Said and the scholar Khalil al-Sakakini are world-renowned. Christians also exert a noticeable influence in domestic politics. A presidential decree of 2001 stipulated that the heads of ten local councils must be Christians. This decree includes Bethlehem, Ramallah, Bir Zeit and Taybeh, even though some of these communities have (clear) Muslim majorities. A decree of 2005 states that at least six seats in parliament (the Palestinian Legislative Council) must be allocated to Christians.²⁶ But it should not be assumed that these are the only reasons why Christians have such political influence. At the 6th Fatah General Congress in Bethlehem in August 2009, five of the 80 elected members of the Revolutionary Council were Christians.²⁷ Their level of representation in this influential organization is hence disproportionately large compared to their share of the population.

23 | Cf. website of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, <http://www.lpj.org/newsite2006/patriarch/archives/2006/11/sabeel.html> (accessed November 2, 2010).

24 | Cf. Collings et al., *Palestinian Christians*, 2008, n. 19, 13-20.

25 | Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

26 | Cf. *ibid.*, 40-47.

27 | Cf. International Crisis Group, "Palestine: Salvaging Fatah," *Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 91*, 2009, 17, in: <http://crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2009/mena/Palestine%20Salvaging%20Fatah> (accessed November 2, 2010).

So there is a clear split in the lives of Palestinian Christians. In the West Bank they can live freely and things are relatively good from a socio-economic perspective. Their religious identity has also been able to develop under these conditions. In contrast, in Gaza they live a life on the periphery. They live as a tiny minority on this poor strip of coastline, without anyone to lobby for them and confronted with a radical minority of fanatical Salafites.

INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL FACTORS

1. The role of Christian pilgrims

The travels of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land have always been much more than just an act of religious devotion. The growing tide of pilgrims observed over the last few years is also economically significant for Christian families and communities, as one of the serious problems for all Palestinians is the high rate of unemployment. Nowadays pilgrims not only want to visit the holy places, but they also want to make contacts within the Christian community. In this way, relationships are developed which serve to further strengthen these communities.²⁸ Pilgrimages are one of the most important forms of tourism for the Holy Land (Israel and the Palestinian Territories²⁹). One third of all tourists are pilgrims, around half of whom are Catholics or Protestants.³⁰ Bearing in mind that this sector makes up seven to ten percent of the Palestinian gross national product³¹, we can get a feeling of how important this continuous stream of pilgrims really is.

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28 | Cf. Michaela Koller, "Ein Jahr nach Papstbesuch: Pilgerrekord im Heiligen Land," *Zenit.org*, July 15, 2010, in: <http://zenit.org/rssgerman-21062> (accessed November 1, 2010).

29 | The authors are aware of the fact that the Holy Land does not only comprise the Palestinian Territories and Israel. Of course it also includes the area east of the Jordan, for example. This restricted view is for simplification purposes only.

30 | Cf. Stefan Beig, "Christliche Pilger in Israel," *Zenit.org*, May 14, 2009, in: <http://zenit.org/article-17803?l=german> (accessed November 1, 2010).

31 | Cf. Rami K. Isaac, "Palestinian Tourism in Transition: Hope, Aspiration, or Reality?," *The Journal of Tourism and Peace Research*, 2010, № 1, 22, in: <http://www.icptr.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Rami-28-05-2010.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2010).

Growth in religious tourism, though, is hindered by the Israeli military administration. After a peaceful protest by Muslim and Christian Palestinians on Palm Sunday in March 2010 in favour of more freedom of movement, the main Bethlehem checkpoint was closed for several days.³² This main checkpoint, known as Checkpoint 300, was again shut down two weeks later because the Israeli authorities feared another demonstration. This once again not only affected Palestinians but also international pilgrims who have the right to visit the religious sites in Jesus's birthplace.

2. Foreign influences

Throughout history, foreign countries have always played a critical role in the Middle East, whether through the Crusades begun by Pope Urban II or the increased influence exercised as a result of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. So it is hardly surprising that Christians in the Palestinian Territories are also supported, manipulated or even threatened

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by external players. The Crusades, whether they were conceived to conquer the terra *repromissionis*, the Promised Land, or were just initiated in order to protect the Christian holy sites, are the most well-known example in what is a long series of interventions. In the 19th century there was a flourishing of political, social and economic relations between Europe and Christians living in the Ottoman Empire, of which Palestine was a part. This certainly did not help the recovery of the "Sick Man of the Bosphorus", instead the Empire began to fray around the edges as its diverse minorities came into contact with nationalistic ideas. Around the same time missionaries arrived in Palestine, mainly from the USA, to try to disseminate the different branches of Protestantism. The sober, Calvinist-based Presbyterian churches are emblematic: both then and now they focus on cooperation with partner churches, working with refugee aid organizations and the fight against hunger and poverty. They also work intensively in the areas of education and healthcare.³³

32 | Cf. Daoud Kuttab, "Israel Prevents Christian Pilgrims From Visiting Bethlehem," The Huffington Post, March 29, 2010, in: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daoud-kuttab/israel-denies-christian-p_b_517658.html (accessed November 1, 2010).

33 | For their own description of Presbyterian work in the Holy Land, cf. <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/global/israel-palestine> (accessed November 1, 2010).

But an even stronger influence is exercised by Greece, political mainstay of the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem. This Church has more followers than any other Christian Church in the Palestinian Territories, and it also owns large amounts of land. In Taybeh, a Christian village on the West Bank, it supports a housing construction project³⁴ and an educational fund³⁵. However, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is also trying to use the Church to influence Greece's foreign policy relating to Israel and the filling of high positions within the church with Palestinian Arabs. Israel is doing its best to prevent this as they fear the Church becoming arabicized, but at the moment this seems unlikely as top Church positions are reserved for ethnic Greeks.³⁶

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A topical example of the role played by foreign countries is the Vatican Synod on the Middle East held in October 2010. The two primary goals of this meeting were the strengthening of Christian identity in the region and ecumenism between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox.³⁷ The synod fathers also discussed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and called for the barrier to be pulled down, an end to the occupation of the West Bank and the lifting of the Gaza blockade. Once again they spoke out in favor of an independent Palestinian state.³⁸ Rabbi David Rosen, a leading member of the American Jewish Committee, spoke of how the Christians in the region "are unavoidably part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and how they are "particularly

34 | Cf. website of the Greek Orthodox Church in Taybeh, <http://www.saintgeorgetaybeh.org/housing.htm> (accessed November 1, 2010).

35 | Cf. website of the Greek Orthodox Church in Taybeh, <http://www.saintgeorgetaybeh.org/EducationFund.html> (accessed November 1, 2010).

36 | Cf. Sotiris Roussos, *The Patriarchate of Jerusalem in the Greek-Palestinian-Israeli Triangle: Is there a Place for it?*, 2003, in: http://hcc.haifa.ac.il/Departments/greece/events/greek_orthodox_church/pdf/sotiris.pdf (accessed November 1, 2010).

37 | Cf. website of the Special Synod for the Middle East, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091208_lineamenta-mo_en.html (accessed November 1, 2010).

38 | Cf. Stefan von Kempis, "Nahost-Kirchenführer wollen stärker zusammenarbeiten," in: <http://www.kas-aquaedukt.de/?p=300#more-300> (accessed November 1, 2010).

affected by Israeli actions to counter violence."³⁹ But there is also "a feeling of fatigue towards the whole topic of the Middle East."⁴⁰ The closing address called for the quickest possible solution to the conflict, a conflict which is first and foremost political rather than religious. For this reason the conflict should be the key to improving the situation of Christians in the Middle East.⁴¹

THE GRADUAL DISAPPEARANCE OF CHRISTIANITY

The last few decades have seen a massive wave of emigration of Christians from the Palestinian Territories. The common assumption that most Christians emigrate because they feel vulnerable to Arab hostilities, is a simplification of a complex mosaic of cause and effect. There is no theological basis in Islam for intolerance towards the "People of the Book", so there must be other factors at play. From the perception of a lack of equality in international relations and international interventions within Islamic countries a climate engendered in which extremist groups can foment hatred and propaganda against Christians. This then has a direct influence on relations between Muslims and Christians in the Palestinian Territories.⁴²

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But the real reasons why Christians emigrate are quite different. Many of them are directly or indirectly affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They have a lack of freedom and security, resulting in the deterioration of the general economic situation and a high degree of political instability.⁴³ Most Christians emigrate to Jordan, the Arabian Gulf states, the USA, Canada, some European countries and other Arab states.⁴⁴

39 | Cf. Jörg Bremer, "Christen, Juden, Muslime. Eine Bilanz der Nahost-Sondersynode im Vatikan," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 25, 2010.

40 | Cf. *ibid.*

41 | Cf. *ibid.*

42 | Cf. Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, n. 23.

43 | Cf. Collings et al., *Palestinian Christians*, 2008, Fn. 19, 58.

44 | Cf. *ibid.*, 48-50.

This turn towards the West is also linked to the fact that some Christians believe the improvement in living conditions which came about after the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the 19th century prove the general superiority of the West. Middle East countries are less developed than Europe and America because of poor government and widespread corruption. The missionaries set up social amenities, schools and hospitals. Christians were the main beneficiaries, as they looked upon the missionaries not as foreigners but as fellow-Christians, but Muslims also felt the pull of the industrialized nations.

Social factors also play a critical role in the relatively large emigration of Christians. A majority of emigrants belong to the urban middle-classes, and urban Palestinians are more likely to emigrate abroad. Christian Palestinians also have an advantage in terms of language, as their schools offer foreign language courses or sometimes teaching is multi-lingual right from the beginning. So it is easier for Christians to emigrate. They have the necessary educational background, have access to an international diaspora network, and Christian organizations often help them to emigrate, for example by offering scholarships.

One of the psychological reasons for emigrating lies in the nature of Middle Eastern countries. Many countries in this region are not democratic but are run in a dictatorial way. Pluralism, legal certainty and human rights are often limited. These restrictions affect all citizens, but in this environment minorities feel particularly insecure.⁴⁵ Another reason for the Christians' decreasing numbers as a percentage of the total population (see chart) is their lower birth rate compared to Muslims. Demographic data shows that Christian population numbers were already dropping during the period of the British Mandate, but since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this trend has escalated still more. This is the case in the Palestinian Territories as a result of the Six Day War in 1967 and the Israeli occupation, whereas the Christian population in Israel was able to stabilize. In Gaza,

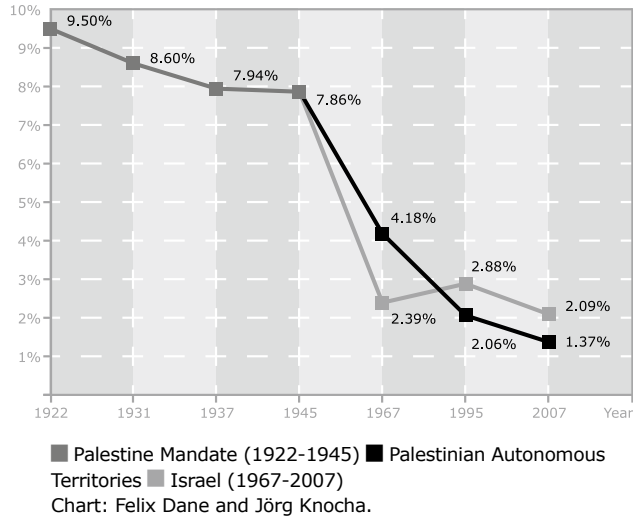
Christian population numbers were already dropping during the period of the British Mandate, but since the start of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this trend has escalated still more.

45 | Cf. Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 18-25.

fanatical Muslims with their unjustifiable militant actions must of course bear some of the responsibility for Christian emigration.

Fig. 1

Percentage share of Christians compared to the total population⁴⁶



So how are the Christians in the Palestinian Territories? This question cannot be answered with a simple “good” or “bad”. Most Christians are doing fine, many of them even better than their Muslim fellow-citizens. But just like these fellow-citizens, they are living under an occupation which makes their lives difficult. And in Gaza they are also having to cope with a rise in radical Islam.

46 | Cf. Collings et al., *Palestinian Christians*, 2008, n. 19, 7-8; The Central Bureau of Statistics (Israel), *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2010 N° 61: Population, by Religion* (Table 2.2), 87-88, in: http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_02&CYear=2010 (accessed November 8, 2010); website of UNISPAL (United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine), <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/06D649D586D1D05852562AE00725B26> (accessed November 5, 2010); website of the NGO ProCon.org, <http://israelipalestinian.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000636#chart5> (accessed November 5, 2010) and website of MidEastWeb, <http://www.mideastweb.org/palpop.htm> (accessed November 5, 2010).

In recent years, religious fundamentalists from all three monotheistic world religions have managed to bring religious narratives into a conflict which was once characterized by nationalism and anti-imperialism. Every time religious elements are brought into the debate, it makes it harder to find compromises. To improve life for Christians in the Territories and to prevent them continuing to emigrate in large numbers, above all there needs to be a new interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.