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CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL

A COMPLEX QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Lars Hänsel

Galilee¹ and Jerusalem², the heartlands of the New Testament, are today part of the State of Israel. Christians only make up a small proportion of the total Israeli population. As a percentage of this total, their proportion is sinking, but in real terms their numbers are growing. Christians in Israel are mainly Arabs who are Israeli citizens, which gives them complex identity issues and different points of reference. Although their religious freedom is guaranteed,³ local Christian Arabs are faced with two challenges relating to their situation as a dual minority. On the one hand they are part of the Arab sector in Israel and hence bound up in the tense and complex relations between the Jewish majority and Arab minority. Secondly, as Christians they are a minority within the Arab sector and exposed to increasing socio-economic and religious pressure from the Muslim majority.

- 1 | In Nazareth, around the Sea of Galilee and in Tabgha and Kapernaum, site of the Sermon on the Mount.
- 2 | The status of Jerusalem has been disputed since 1948. It is part of a future peace agreement. East-Jerusalem is part of the former Jordan territories that Israel took over in 1967. UN resolution 242, issued in the same year, calls for a "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict" (it is not said "the" or "all" territories). The mainly Jewish West Jerusalem and the predominantly Arab East Jerusalem have been governed as a united Israeli city since 1967. The Vatican continues to call for an "internationalization" of Jerusalem (or at least for international guarantees). The Palestinians reject this proposal as they see (East-)Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Other Christian centres such as Bethlehem and Gaza are today part of the Palestinian Autonomous Territories.
- 3 | Freedom House considers religious freedom in Israel as a given. But they find fault with the way the Arab minority is treated, despite their guaranteed political rights. Cf. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7845&year=2010> (accessed November 6, 2010).

Despite their small numbers and complex situation, the Christian minority in Israel has the potential to play an important mediating role. It can act as a bridge between Jews and Arabs and between Jews and Christians, both within Israel and between Israel and Christian churches worldwide.

A CHRISTIAN MICROCOSM WITHIN THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Many different Christian denominations are represented in Israel, making it a microcosm of the Christian world.⁴ Based on the Church's history,⁵ Christian communities in Israel today can be divided into four basic categories:⁶

1. Historically, the oldest group in the Holy Land is the Orthodox Christians (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and Romanian Orthodox churches).
2. The second-largest group is the non-Chalcedonian, monophysitic churches⁷ (Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and a small Nestorian church).
3. In third place we find the Latin Church and its associated Churches⁸ (Latin, Maronite, Greek Catholic/Melkite, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Coptic Catholic and Chaldean Catholic Churches).
4. Smallest in terms of numbers and historically the youngest are the Protestant Churches (Evangelicals, Baptist, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian and Pentecostal).

4 | Cf. Daniel Rossing, „Microcosm and Multiple Minorities – The Christian Communities in Israel,” in: *Israel Year Book and Almanac* (1999), 28–45.

5 | Cf. Friedrich Heyer, *2000 Jahre Kirchengeschichte des Heiligen Landes*, Hamburg 2000.

6 | Not included in this formula are small groups such as the Christian Jews who believe in Jesus and follow the teachings of early Christianity, and particularly reject the reshaping of Jesus's message outside the Jewish context (beginning with Paul). Cf. Heyer, *Kirchengeschichte*, 322 et sqq., n.5. Mormons living in Israel are also excluded from these categories.

7 | The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD declared the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human. Some Eastern churches rejected this doctrine and believe only in the one, divine, nature of Christ (“Monophysites”).

8 | For more on the history of the relationship between Israel and the Catholic Church, cf. Uri Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David: the Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy – 1967*. Bloomington 2005.

Like all citizens, Christians enjoy freedom of belief and conscience in accordance with Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948, along with the right to freely practice their religion. In 1967 free access to all holy places was guaranteed by law.⁹ However, Israeli interactions with Christian holy sites are less problematic than their relationship with Muslim sites. Muslim holy places such as the Temple Mount, (today the place of the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock) are sacred to both Jews and Muslims and at the centre of the Arab-Israeli conflict, whereas Christian sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are not directly claimed by the Jews.

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In addition, most Christian church communities in Israel are today "recognized churches" and as such are self-sufficient in questions of civil law. These churches have their own courts which make rulings based on their own canonical law and appoint their own judges.¹⁰ This system has been in force since the Ottoman era, when Sharia law was the official civil law, but non-Muslim religious minorities within the *millet* system were granted autonomy in civil law issues.¹¹

STATISTICS

Christians in the Holy Land are historically predominantly Arabs, particularly since the spread of Islam in the 7th century, and in today's Israel they are part of the Arab/Non-Jewish population. Arabs currently make up over 20 percent of the population of Israel.

9 | Israel has a policy of preserving the status quo with regard to Christian sites cf. David E. Guinn, *Protecting Jerusalem's holy sites: a strategy for negotiating a sacred peace*, Cambridge 2006, 120.

10 | Certain areas fall under the jurisdiction of Israeli civil law, such as cases relating to guardianship, adoption and inheritance matters where the parties do not wish to appear before a religious court, cf. Rossing, *Microcosm*, n. 4, 16.

11 | Legislation is currently on the table at the Knesset to give Non-Jews the right to enter a civil partnership.

Table 1

Population of Israel: Religions¹²

2009	Number	Percent
Jews	5,703,700	75.5
Arabs and Druze	1,535,600	20.3
Non-Jews	283,000	4.2
Total	7,552,000	100.0

Included in the figure for Non-Jews are the Non-Jewish partners of immigrants, who could be Christians.

The total number of Christians has grown continuously over the last two decades. However, as a percentage of the total population of Israel their numbers have sunk to just above two percent due to Jewish immigration and general population growth. So in terms of numbers, Christians only represent a small proportion of the population.¹³

Table 2

Christians in Israel

1990	1995	2000	2008	2009
114,700	120,600	135,100	150,200	151,700

If we look at the birth rate among Christians, it is clear that future demographic developments will lead to Christians becoming more and more a minority. Christians have the lowest birth rate in Israel.¹⁴

12 | CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 2.21.

13 | CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 2.21. Cf. the statistics on Catholics published by the Vatican, which are higher than the figures published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. According to these statistics, the number of Catholics in Israel has fluctuated over the last 20 years but has increased in more recent years. http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_24_speciale-medio-oriente-2010/02_inglese/b04_02.html (accessed November 6, 2010).

14 | CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 3.13.

Table 3

Birth rate in Israel 2009

Christians	Jews	Muslims	Total Population
2.15	2.90	3.73	2.96

At the same time their average age is higher than the average of the whole population in Israel, and it is more comparable with that of the Jewish majority than with that of the Arab Muslims.¹⁵

Table 4

Average age in Israel 2009

Christians	Jews	Muslims
32.5	31.4	19.9

DIFFERENT GROUPS

The following Christian groups in Israel need to be distinguished from a political point of view and because of their specific role in society¹⁶:

1. Arab Christians in the North of Israel

First of all, there are Arab Christians in Israel who mostly live in cities but also in villages in the north of the country. Their main centers are Nazareth and Haifa. Their situation is one of a Christian minority within the Arab sector in Israel, which in turn is a minority within a predominantly Jewish society. Complex questions of identity thus play a decisive role. The political and social agenda is mainly influenced by internal Israeli issues. Within the Arab minority there are increasing tensions between Christians and Muslims.

15 | CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2010, table 2.21.

16 | Cf. also Amon Ramon, *Nozrut ve Nozrim be Medinat Ha Jehudim* (Hebrew: Christianity and Christians in the State of the Jews; forthcoming, manuscript provided by the author).

2. Christians in Jerusalem and Surrounds

The situation of Christians in Jerusalem is mainly influenced by their position at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict¹⁷ and the contested status of Jerusalem. Their agenda is largely set by this conflict.¹⁸ The increasing segregation of the Palestinian Autonomous Territories causes particular problems, making contact with Christians living there much more difficult.¹⁹ The security wall between Israel and the West Bank also means that it is harder for Christians to gain access to the holy places. For example, Christians in Jerusalem have to make wide detours in order to reach Qubeibe, considered to be the site of historical Emmaus, but which today lies on the other side of the wall. It is also now difficult for families to legitimately reunite with their relatives living under the Palestinian Authority. And, a whole range of historic privileges, such as tax privileges, are based on verbal agreements which were often not guaranteed in writing.²⁰ Another problem is the current visa restrictions on foreign church representatives who want to live in Jerusalem's Christian communities.²¹ And arguments between Christian churches which relate to the status quo established by Sultan's decree in 1852 and which are subject to Israeli State arbitration also have a role to play.

The security wall means that it is harder for Christians to gain access to the holy places. Christians in Jerusalem have to make wide detours in order to reach Qubeibe, considered to be the site of historical Emmaus.

17 | Cf. Amnon Ramon, *Freedom of Religion and the Status of the Christians in Jerusalem, 1967-1997*, Jerusalem 1999.

18 | Cf. the "Kairos-Palestine" document, published in December 2009 by former church officers and laymen, which is clearly biased in adopting only the Palestinian national narrative.

19 | Cf. Daphne Tsimhoni, "Christians in Jerusalem: A Minority at Risk," in: *Journal of Human Rights*, 4/2005, 391-417, 412 et seq. and Danny Tirza, "The Influence of Christian Interests in Setting the Route of the Security Fence in Jerusalem", in: *Jerusalem Viewpoints*, N° 568 November-December 2008.

20 | Bernd Mussinghoff, head of the German Association of the Holy Land in Jerusalem pointed out to the author during a personal interview that these questions are playing a role in the current talks between Israel and the Vatican, and that solutions should be found which can then be applied to other churches.

21 | Cf. Tsimhoni, *Christians*, n. 19, 403 et sqq.

3. Christian Immigrants and Guest Workers

Today there are two more groups to add to the ranks of Christians who have lived in the Holy Land for centuries, as listed above. One of these comprises the dependents of Russian immigrant Jews who are avowed Christians and in some cases live with Jews in mixed marriages. The increased segregation of the Palestinian Territories has resulted in fewer Palestinian workers coming to Israel. They are being replaced by guest workers, mainly from the Asia and Eastern Europe, who live in Israel either legally or illegally. There are estimated to be 200,000 guest workers in Israel, a large percentage of them Christians. There are, however, no precise statistics available on the number of Christians among the guest worker population, nor on Christian dependents of immigrants.

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These Christians are not involved in the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians and between Jews and Arabs in Israel. They live in Jewish cities and, unlike the Arab Christians, are nowadays integrated into Jewish society through familial and cultural ties.²²

The focus of this article is solely on the specific situation of Arab Christians, the first, largest and most relevant group in Israel today.

THE COMPLEX IDENTITY OF ARAB CHRISTIANS

Today, Jews make up the majority of Israeli society. As Arabs, Christians share the problems of the Arab minority in Israel. They are part of the complex and often strained relationships between Jews and Arabs.²³ As Non-Jews, Israeli Arabs find themselves in a state of friction with the Israeli state, which sees its national identity as Jewish (and democratic), even if Judaism is not designated the official state religion. As Arabs they live as a minority within a

22 | Cf. paper by David Rosen on the Bishop's Synod in Rome 2010, in: *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, 8, October 13, 2010.

23 | Cf. Overview of the main causes of tensions between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority: Eli Rekhess, "The Arabs of Israel after Oslo: Localization of the National Struggle", in: *Israel Studies*, Vol. 7, № 3, 2002, 1-44.

Jewish majority. And the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, particularly with the Palestinians, means that Israeli Arabs find their loyalties split between Israel and the Arab nation.

The complex position of Israeli Arabs is made all the more complicated by the Arab Christians' identity issues. Many Christians think their identity is in crisis and feel increasingly alienated.²⁴ They are not only part of an Arab minority in a Jewish state but as Christians form another minority within this predominantly Muslim minority.

Their identity is linked at least to the following reference points: As ethnic *Arabs* they have lived in their homeland for centuries and are bound up in the complex relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel. As *Palestinians* they identify with the development of a national Palestinian identity and as such are part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As *Israeli citizens* they are part of the State of Israel, which in its symbolism and constitution is a democratic Jewish state. As *Christians* they are part of the many Christian denominations and international churches which are represented in Israel, affording them special contacts and relationships, particularly with the West. Some churches, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, are headed by a foreign clergy, other churches by a local clergy, like the Greek Catholic Church. On a lesser level, their sense of identity is also linked to their (extended) family or to a particular political party.

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Within these general parameters, different groups emphasize different elements of their complex identity.²⁵ Tensions between nation and religion are a determining factor in this.

24 | Wadie Abunassar, "Identity Crisis of Arab Christians in Israel," unpublished manuscript (provided by author).

25 | Cf. *ibid.*, 6 et sqq. The complex identity also leads to a multitude of ways in which they refer to themselves: "Israeli Arabs", "Arab Israelis", "Palestinian Israelis", "Arab-Palestinian Citizens of Israel" etc. Cf. Shadia Qubti, *Majority-minority relations in divided societies – the case of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel*, Diss., Dublin 2009, 6.

EMPHASIS ON CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The majority of Arab Christians today appear to emphasize above all their religious identity and consider the most important aspect of their life to be their Christian faith. The advance of modernity in Israel, and the strong tendencies which are emerging towards more secularization and individualization present this group with particular challenges. This is felt particularly acutely because Christians generally live in urban areas. Other challenges include new forms of spirituality, which are often brought into the communities by Christian guest workers and which present a challenge for communities with more traditional views. Finally, tensions between the different Christian churches and denominations can also present challenges for Christians in Israel.

The identity crisis between religious and national identities is particularly noticeable in young people. Young Christians believe local churches do too little to strengthen specifically Christian religious identity.

The increasing Islamization of Israel's Arab minority and the equating of "Islam" with "Arab" among the majority of Arabs has also led to Christians letting their Arab nationality fade into the background while consciously placing more emphasis on their Christian identity. This identity crisis between religious and national identities is particularly noticeable in young people. Young Christians believe local churches do too little to strengthen specifically Christian religious identity. This is for example shown in the way church school timetables are not sufficiently utilized to focus on the role of Christians in society who predominantly identify themselves by their religion.

EMPHASIS ON NATIONAL ARAB IDENTITY

Other Arabs with a Christian background particularly lay emphasis on their Arab ethnicity and secular Palestinian nationality. Here the religious aspect plays a secondary role. In the past these Christians had, and still have, the most influence on society.

Since the middle of the 20th century, Christians have not only used Arab nationalism to highlight the fact that they are part of the Arab nation. They have also provided many leading figures who have helped to shape secular Arab nationalism. Notable among these is Emil Habibi, who was

born in 1922 into a Palestinian Christian family and who later was one of the founders and leaders of the Israeli Communist Party. Another is George Habash, who was born in 1926 near Tel Aviv in present-day Lod to a Greek Orthodox family. He was one of the founding members of the radical Marxist-Leninist *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP), and he acted as its General Secretary from its beginnings right up to the year 2000. Edward Said exerted a particularly strong influence on the Arab national identity. Born in Jerusalem in 1935 to a Christian family, his particular concern was the European vision for the rediscovered Levant since the beginning of the 19th century. Nowadays it is mainly politicians such as the long-serving Knesset representative Azmi Bischara who take responsibility for an Arab national identity in Israel.

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By focusing on the (secular) nation as the decisive element of society, Christians managed to overcome their previous precarious position within a majority Muslim society. As *dhimmi*, Christians received certain protections and privileges, but were still subordinate to the Muslim majority, and were not equal in the eyes of the law. By contrast, a society based on national identity is by definition a society in which all its citizens are equal.

Nowadays Arab Christians feel a traditional sense of duty as regards the issue of Arab nationalism and support their Palestinian brothers in their desire to establish a Palestinian state. The two-state solution is nowadays considered mainstream by Arab Christians in Israel.

But many Christians are also aware that a Palestinian state would also put them into a minority position. Therein lies the dilemma for Arab Christians: "The Arab Christians of the Holy Land are whole-heartedly in favor of the establishment of a free Palestinian state. But they are not blind to the fact that the Arab nationalist movement will never achieve the necessary conditions for Christians to be treated as equal citizens," namely the total secularization of politics."²⁶

26 | Heyer, *Kirchengeschichte*, n. 5, 354. Cf. the draft Palestinian constitution of 2003 (which has up to now not been passed and which exists in several versions), which gives a critical role to Sharia law: cf. Art 7: The principles of Islamic Sharia ▪

REACTIONS TO THE IDENTITY CRISIS

The current identity crisis caused by the conflict between religion and nation produces a range of reactions, as well as among Muslims and Jews that are also familiar with this crisis. Assimilation to (Muslim) Arab society is one possible way of coping with the identity crisis: The emphasis is placed on cultural common ground while Christian elements are played down.²⁷ This is one way to try to minimize any friction with the Muslim majority. This is particularly obvious in the different way of naming Arab children. A typical example of this is how the well-known Christian politician Azmi Bischara named his eldest son Omar, a typically Arab name, rather than giving him a specifically Christian name.

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Some Christians also react by displaying a clear pro-Israeli attitude, in order to lessen the tensions with the Jewish majority. In the 1960s there were efforts to set up a "Christian list" for the Knesset, but there were so few of them that their hopes of winning were always going to be forlorn. Nowadays Christians of this conviction vote mainly for Zionist parties, many of them join the Israeli army.²⁸

Other Christians have managed to find a foothold for themselves in the complex area of identity by rediscovering religion and spirituality as a way to set themselves apart but also as a way to find a fixed point of reference. Another way of dealing with the crisis of identity and associated tensions is to emigrate. Christians generally find it easier to emigrate and live in a Christian or secular environment because of their strong relationships with Churches in Europe and North America and because they have often been educated in Church educational establishments with Western values. In this way they can escape their dual sense of alienation.

act as the main source for the legislature, and Art. 5: Arabic and Islam are the official Palestinian language and religion. Christianity and other monotheistic religions are only to be "respected", i.e. they do not have full legal status, as was criticized by the former Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambri, in 2003. <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/55389> (accessed November 18, 2010).

27 | Cf. Rossing, *Microcosm*, n. 4, 13.

28 | Cf. Abunassar, *Identity*, n. 24, 9.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN ISRAEL

Since the early 19th century and the European rediscovery of the Middle East, Christians who largely lived their lives in subordinate positions to their Muslim rulers have been supported by the European powers. They became the agencies of Western institutions, particularly in social and educational fields. Since the mid-19th century, European and North American churches have established a wide network of missionary schools in the Holy Land. As the educational level of Christians increased, so did their degree of urbanization, their standard of living and their public influence.

Even today, Arab Christians are a particularly successful minority in Israel. Their socio-economic situation, level of education and political participation in Israel's democratic process are well above the average.²⁹ Their influence has its roots in the numerous social institutions and educational establishments which are supported by the various churches. Christian students regularly graduate from high school with some of the best results in the whole of Israel.

In 2008, 59 percent of Christian students passed the High School Diploma, compared to 42 percent of Muslim students and 64 percent of Jewish students.³⁰

According to the 2006 census, 56 percent of Christian students applied for a place at university, a significant percentage compared to the Muslims with 31 percent and the Jews with 48 percent. Students at private Christian schools greatly outperform students attending state-run Arab schools.³¹ The high level of education among Christians allows them to retain their values and identity. But paradoxically it also makes it easier for young Christians to emigrate.

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29 | Cf. Daphne Tsimhoni, "Israel and the Territories – Disappearance", in: *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 3, № 1, 2001, 31-42.

30 | Ramon, Nozrim (forthcoming), n. 16.

31 | Cf. *Yearbook of Arab Society in Israel (1): Population, Society, Economy*, Aziz Haider, The Vaan Leer Institute in Jerusalem 2005, 123; Elie Rekhess, "Education Dilemmas in Mixed Cities, Together but Apart", in: *Mixed Cities in Israel*, The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation, Tel Aviv, 2007, 103.

In terms of their socio-economic situation, today's Christians are more similar to the Jewish population than to the Muslim Arab population. This is also reflected in their birth rates and average age.³² According to Raed Mualem, Vice-President of the Catholic Mar Elias Colleges, 25 percent of Arab Christians work in academic professions. This percentage is the same as for Jews but far exceeds the Muslim Arabs (14 percent).³³

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But at the same time, Christians are finding themselves increasingly under pressure. The Arab population's economic prosperity and growing middle-class mean that Muslims are increasingly competing with Christians in the limited job market, particularly in the middle and higher income brackets.³⁴ Socio-economic differences are becoming less noticeable, particularly in urban areas. This competition is further sharpened by the improving levels of education among Muslims, who often attend church-run private schools. Up to 70 percent of students attending church schools in Nazareth are Muslims.

REACTIONS OF MUSLIM SOCIETY

Across the whole Middle East, Christians are facing a general trend towards growing Islamization.³⁵ This also holds true for Christians in Israel. Since the 1970s, there has been an Islamic revival among Muslim Arabs in Israel. The Islamic Movement in Israel, with its more moderate southern branch and its more radical, hard-line northern branch under Sheikh Raed Salah is part of a regional movement with links to organizations including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbollah and Hamas.

32 | Cf. Dov Friedlander, "Fertility in Israel," in: *Population Bulletin of the United Nations*, 48/49, 2002, 403-410, 406 et seq.

33 | See Raed Mualem, "The Arab Christian Community in Israel," text of a speech for the 74th ROACO meeting at the Vatican, January 23-25, 2006 (provided by author).

34 | Cf. Daphna Tsimhoni, "Die Christen im Staat Israel – Zwischen Religion und Politik," in: *Araber in der israelischen Politik*, Tel Aviv, 1998, 63-72, 63 and 66 (in Hebrew).

35 | The Coptic Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria, Antonius Naguib, referred to this current trend at the Synod of Middle Eastern Bishops which has just ended at the Vatican, cf. <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE69A4AO20101011> (accessed November 6, 2010).

These Muslim Arabs within Israel are much closer to their fellow Muslims in other Arab countries than to their Arab Christian compatriots.

Unlike Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs tend to feel closer ties with political developments in the Palestinian Autonomous Territories and above all they share in the radicalization of Islam, even if in slightly watered-down form. As a result, radical Islam is gaining ground among Israel's Muslim Arabs. Ziad Abu Amr lists the following reasons for the growth of Islamism among the Palestinians³⁶, reasons which also apply to Israel's Arab population:

1. The founding of Israel in 1948, which was seen as an seizure of Muslim land.
2. The Israeli victory over the Arab military in 1967.
3. The Iranian Revolution in 1979.
4. The political vacuum left by the decline of the PLO since the end of the 1970s, and
5. The active role of the Islamic Movement in the 1987 Intifada, which attracted widespread support and created a religion-based political alternative to the nationalist secular programme of the PLO.

The Islamic Movement in Israel, particularly its northern branch, refuses to take part in national elections. They believe the Koran has sole authority and jurisdiction and cannot accept any secular authority, especially not that of Zionists and Jews.³⁷ This also leads to friction with those who are involved in Arab political parties. So the Islamic Movement presents a dual challenge to Arab Christians in Israel: On the one hand it puts pressure on their religious beliefs by stressing that Islam is the religion of Arabs and often equates "Islam" with "Arab". And on the other hand the promotion of the *ummah* as the universal Muslim community transcending nations serves to antagonize those Christians for whom nationalism is an important part of their identity.

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36 | Ziad Abu Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, <http://thejerusalemfund.org/ht/d/ContentDetails/i/2971> (accessed November 6, 2010).

37 | Cf. Eli Rekhess, *Arabs*, n. 23, 17.

The present-day strength of the Islamists has largely resulted from the crisis in Arab nationalism, something they reject. For Islamists there is no separation of religion and state. They recognize only the difference between the *Dar al Islam* (House of Islam) and the *Dar al Harb* (House of War), i.e. between the people of Islam and the people outside Islam, who are considered to be enemies. There is no room in this way of thinking for the neutral, secular concept of a nation. For this reason, Islamists reject secular nationalism as being anti-Islam and castigate it as a "Western idea" and a "Western import".

So some Christians feel doubly pressured by Muslim society: because of their religion and because of their national identity. Many of them feel alienated, not just in Israel but also within Arab society.

NAZARETH CASE STUDIES

Two case studies³⁸ from Nazareth are symptomatic of the fraught relationships which exist between Christians and Muslims within the Arab minority in Israel and throw light on the battle for identity and the growing marginalization of Christians. Both cases relate to the circumstance that Islamists are attempting to both show off and safeguard their influence through the erection of deeply symbolic buildings.

For centuries, there were good relations between Muslims and Christians in the Biblical town of Nazareth, but this all changed in 1948 and later with the founding of the Islamic Movement in Israel. The Christians in Nazareth were regarded as advocates of Communism and Nationalism, bringing them into conflict with their Muslim neighbors. Additionally, Muslims in Nazareth for their part changed radically. The Israeli local elections in 1989 reflected this change within Muslim society from Islam as a cultural phenomenon to Islam as a political movement.

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38 | Cf. Chad F. Emmet, "The Siting of Churches and Mosques as an Indicator of Christian-Muslim Relations," in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 20, N° 4, October 2009, 451-476 and Daphna Tsimhoni, A case study of Muslim-Jewish relations in the state of Israel, in: Marchall J. Breger et al. (ed.), *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, London 2010.

Whereas up to then Muslims had generally been politically passive, they now started to pursue the concrete application of their ideas and became involved in politics. Five Islamist mayors were elected during these elections, plus 45 municipal councils, including Nazareth.³⁹

In 1989 the Islamic Movement laid claim to a piece of land directly between two churches, in order to rebuild the ruins of a mosque which were to be found there. Despite resistance, the Islamic Movements succeeded in completing the building in 1990, erecting a minaret which towered over both churches. Local Christians perceived this construction between two churches to be symbolic of the Islamic Movement's desire to demonstrate their dominance and power.

Controversy and frustration was engendered among local Christians by the Islamic Movement's attempt to build a large mosque directly next to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth.

Even more controversy and frustration was engendered among local Christians by the Islamic Movement's attempt to build a large mosque directly next to the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. The controversy was sparked by the town's plans to pull down a school dating from the Ottoman era which was located near the Basilica, in order to make more room for pilgrims visiting for the millennium celebrations. At the edge of the square had lain since the Middle Ages the totally neglected grave of Saladin's nephew, Shabab al Din, which belonged to the Muslims as waqf (sacred Islamic ground). Islamists then declared the land where the school stood to also be waqf land (although it belonged to the town), thus extending their claim far beyond the site of the grave. In 1997 they erected a tent over the ruins of the demolished school as a temporary mosque, which was named after Shahab al Din. The new mosque's minaret, situated close to two other existing mosques, was intended to tower over the Basilica of the Annunciation with a height of 86 meters plus an additional light installation.

After the 1998 local elections the Islamists gained a majority on Nazareth's city council. The Christian mayor Jeraisi was re-elected by a tiny majority, but his hands

39 | Cf. Rafael Israeli, "The Anti-Millennium: the Islamization of Nazareth," in: *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Nº 428, 11 Nisan 5760, April 16, 2000.

were tied and the city was paralyzed. The core problem was the controversy over the Shahab-ad-Din mosque. The Israeli government set up a commission to empower the city once again. In the end the Israeli authorities, after interventions from the Holy See and President George W. Bush, supported the position of the Christians and stopped the construction of the mosque in 2003, while granting the Muslims a small shrine at the edge of the square.

Even if the Islamists did not get all their own way, they at least made their ambitions very clear. Radical Salafists are gaining influence within the Islamic Movement and already have significant influence in the West Bank.

Radical Salafists are gaining influence within the Islamic Movement and already have significant influence in the West Bank. They are fighting to establish a Caliphate under Sharia law and reject secular democracy.

The Imam of the Shihab-al-Din mosque, Nazim Abu Salim, is himself a member of the Salafist movement. The Salafists are fighting to establish a Caliphate under Sharia law and reject secular democracy. The movement is said to have links to Al Qaeda and international terrorist groups.⁴⁰ Nazim Abu Salim also led the resistance in Nazareth to Pope Benedict XVI's visit in 2009, which nevertheless went peacefully and gave new heart to Nazareth's Christian community. But tensions are still continuing and with the radicalization of the movement around Nazim Abu Salim, they are only likely to get stronger.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS IN ISRAELI SOCIETY

Despite the small number of Christians and their internal divisions, variety of denominations and numerous challenges, Christians in Israel today have the potential to build bridges in many directions, as long as they are not put under too much pressure to meet unrealistic expectations. Their many reference points are not just a source of insecurity and hence a disadvantage, but they can also be seen as providing a wealth of experience and a good foundation for understanding in many areas.

40 | Cf. Jack Khoury, "Imam from Nazareth suspected of supporting terror groups," *Haaretz*, October 6, 2010, <http://haaretz.com/news/national/1.317518> (accessed November 6, 2010).

The ties that many Christians have to the West and the huge interest of international churches in the Christians of the Holy Land as the cradle of Christianity makes them a source of suspicion for Jews as well as Muslims⁴¹, but it also makes them particularly interesting. Jews see Christians as potential missionaries and anti-Semites, while Muslims often see them as descendants of the Crusaders and modern Western colonialists. But cultural and religious ties with the West could be important for both Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims as a means of gaining Western support for themselves via good relations with local Christians.⁴²

Raed Mualem, who has been working on a concept to improve the status of Christians in Israel,⁴³ sees Christians today as “a bridge between Israel and the Western world as well as between Israel and the Arab world”.

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Arab Christians are tied into Arab culture and understand Islam, but their religious roots lie in Judaism. Their experience of living in both cultures could make them a bridge between Jews and Muslims in Israel. Christians are particularly active in the area of inter-religious dialogue.

Christians can also act as bridges between Christians and Jews in Israel. Christian immigrants and guest workers go to Hebrew language schools and live in a Jewish context. Programmes such as that of the Roman Catholic Church in Jerusalem target these immigrants and try to consolidate their bridging role.⁴⁴ As part of the international church, Christians can become a bridge between Jews and Christians, not only in Israel, but worldwide.⁴⁵

41 | Rossing, *Microcosm*, n. 4, 42.

42 | Rossing, *Microcosm*, n. 4, 42 states: „There is considerable evidence that the Palestinian leadership understands this somewhat better than the current Israeli leadership.” Cf. also Heyer, *Kirchengeschichte*, n. 5, 351.

43 | Cf. Mualem, Arab Christian Community, n. 33.

44 | Cf. Contribution by the Vicar of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, David Neuhaus, at the Middle East Council of bishops, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, October 6-12, 2010.

45 | Cf. interview by Archbishop Elias Chacour with *Vatican Radio* on October 15, 2010 (in Hebrew): <http://radiovaticana.org/HEB/Articolo.asp?c=430740> (in Hebrew) (accessed November 6, 2010).

In fact the dialogue between Jews and Christians has deepened. David Rosen⁴⁶ points to three factors which have contributed to better relations between Jews and Christians over the last few decades: firstly, the visits of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI after the start of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican in 1993 led to a positive perception of the Catholic Church and a high degree of cooperation.⁴⁷ In addition, Rosen states that Christians who are well-integrated into Jewish society bring about a new understanding of Christianity among Jews. Finally the third factor is the many Israeli organizations which strive for both Jewish-Arab and inter-religious dialogues, many of whose members are often Christians. Rosen describes it as a typical „Christian métier“ to strive to overcome the prejudice and misunderstanding which encumbers the Holy Land. Christians already have a high profile which they can use in future to help promote dialogue and understanding between people with different ethnic, religious and political tendencies within Israel and beyond.

46 | Paper by David Rosen at the Bishops' Synod in Rome 2010, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, October 8-13, 2010.

47 | Cf. documents published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel of the Chief Rabbinate-Vatican Joint Commission. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Jerusalem, 2009.