

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS AND THE DEFENCE OF EQUAL HUMAN RIGHTS

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- *Changing the discourse* •

ABSTRACT

The author of this op ed explains how Palestinian Christians have changed their discourse of resistance and their vision for a future political settlement in relation to the Israeli Palestinian issues of occupation and peace. After being pioneers in the Palestinian revolution, armed struggle and the first Intifada, Palestinian Christians started changing the discourse in the second Intifada and from there, they ventured another leading role in non-violence and creative resistance to end this endless de facto conflict by setting a liberation theology and logical vision that respects human rights for everyone in the region.

KEYWORDS

Peace | Palestine | Palestinian Christians | Speech | Resistance

1 • Introduction

Palestinian Christians: people of Palestine even before Jesus Christ and the early mother church are an integral part of the many peoples who have inhabited this land for centuries. They come from different and mixed ethnicities and cultures including Canaanites, Arabs, Philistines, Jews and Nabateans.

Palestine, historically part of greater Syria, lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river from West to East. The Red Sea from the south to the Lebanese borders and the Syrian Golan heights in the north.

Palestine Christians are linked to different Christian denominations, including Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, Catholicism (Eastern and Western rites), Anglicanism, Lutheranism and other branches of Protestantism. They number 6–7% of the 12 million Palestinians with approximately 70% living outside Palestine and Israel. Their language is both the local dialect of Palestinian Arabic and Classical Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic. In 2009, there were an estimated 50,000 Christians in the Palestinian territories, mostly in the West Bank, with about 3,000 in the Gaza Strip. The majority of Palestinian Christians (75%) live in the Palestinian diaspora.

Palestinian Christians have resisted all kinds of occupation together with their brothers and sisters of the different faiths. They resisted the oppression of the Ottomans side by side with Jews and Muslims. They also fought the British mandate of Palestine.

After the British mandate ended in 1948, Muslims, and Christians Arabs resisted the takeover of their land and the establishment of the state of Israel. Christians and Muslims sided against the Jewish Israeli project over Palestine. Since then, Palestinian Christians became pioneers in the revolution including armed resistance and later in non-violence.¹

In this op ed, I present a portrait on the involvement of Palestinian Christians in the defense of human rights for their people, particularly the right to be free as equals on their land (self-determination and settlement in the land).

2 • First game changer: Discourse from mainstream resistance

At the beginning of the first intifada in 1987,² Palestinian Christians chose non-violent civil disobedience against Israeli policies. At that time the people of Beit Sahour (an adjacent town to Bethlehem with a Christian majority occupied in 1967 by Israeli forces) refused to keep paying the same taxes while not having the adequate rights and services. Their slogan was “No taxation without representation”.

During the second intifada, Palestinian Christians deviated from the mainstream resistance and away from violence and militarization. The imbalance in power to fight

was obvious to them. Instead, many Christian Palestinian leaders became more involved in Church related organizations, such as YMCA, YWCA, clubs and scouts, SABEEL, Wiam, Arab Educational Institute, etc., and other non-Governmental organisations thus becoming closer to their religious leadership.

By Christmas 2000, I for example, managed to gather a group of my close friends and established together what we called then the Laity committee in the Holy Land. It was a resistance initiative that offered Palestinian Christians an alternative to the unbalanced military struggle. We tried to interpret the political developments and communicate them to the local and international Church leadership and the international community. We somehow became agents of a discourse, advocating on behalf of our people. Despite these efforts, our belief in international law³ and the fact that peace might still be possible, we were witnessing instead more violence and more hatred. The second intifada resulted in the death of over 6,300 Palestinians and 1,178 Israelis between 2000-2005.

3 • Second game changer: Recognition that current attempts are not working

Today, after negotiating peace for over 20 years,⁴ Israelis are still building on the land that is supposed to be freed for the Palestinians. When negotiations started, there were 100,000 settlers in the West Bank. Now there are over 620,000!⁵

And instead of having peace for the two peoples we have a wall which took more land from the West Bank, further dividing the two peoples. The Israelis on one side living normal life, enjoying more land and water. The Palestinians on the other side, deprived of freedom of movement, access to worship and livelihood.

The Palestinians were promised peace and reconciliation but received more hatred and oppression, corruption and manipulation. The Palestinians started to realize that the peace process was a big lie, and an opportunity only for the Israelis to grab land while Palestinian life became increasingly unbearable. This is when we started favoring the word “Justice” over the word “Peace”.

Israelis also do not seem to be convinced of the two-state solution.⁷ The majority do not see how this land can be divided. Their party leaders have talked many times about Israel annexing what is left from the West Bank.

However, it is not enough to put the blame on the other. Palestinians are also divided between a religious political leadership under Hamas in Gaza and a more secular political leadership in Ramallah that is seen as corrupt and weakened by the occupation and the unilateral nature of peace agreements.

In order to get the peoples of this land out of this cycle of violence, we are obliged to read the past differently and thus the future too.

4 • Moment of revision: needing a new discourse

We understand that the dignity of a person is highly valued. We understand that religious significance is a drive behind one's dignity. We also realize that living under occupation is a humiliation. While we understand that with hope people can overcome and can endure, we also understand that without dignity one can feel desperate enough to lose hope and faith too.

During the last five years of halted negotiations – with no war but also no peace, the continued illegal settlements in the West bank and the unilateral control of every aspect of Palestinian life by the Israelis - this generation, especially the youth, have lost faith. Not only in the promise of justice and international legitimacy. But also faith in their leadership, being religious or political. And they have lost respect for their parents who have made them inherit a century of humiliation. We need a new discourse.

The idea of a new discourse can be seen in the 2006 statement by Palestinian Christian leaders who echoed the Heads of Churches position on Jerusalem, first made during the Camp David negotiations:

Different solutions are possible. The city of Jerusalem might remain united but sovereignty in this case must be shared, exercised according to a principle of equality by both Israelis and Palestinians. However, the city might also be divided if this be the desire of the two peoples who live here, with two distinct sovereignties, the aim of which would be to reach a true unity of hearts in the two parts of the city.⁸

Similarly, the idea of a new discourse was well articulated in February 2016 by the Commission for Justice and Peace of The Catholic Church of The Holy Land:

Change the situation. Shake it out of its immobility. There is enough space in the land for us all. Let all have the same dignity and equality. No occupation and no discrimination. Two peoples living together and loving each other according to the way they choose. They are able to love each other and to make peace together.⁹

The National Coalition of 32 Christian Organizations in Palestine named the current period the “Impossible moment” in their open letter to the Ecumenical family.¹⁰ These organizations pleaded for a more active role by the International Churches to end this situation of suffering.

Despite these ecumenical efforts, President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. Palestinians were filled with anger and sadness.

This unlawful recognition gave a green light for more aggressive policies against the non-Jewish population, mainly Palestinian Christians and Muslims, on Church property and the sanctity of Al Aqsa Mosque. Giving Israel exclusive sovereignty over the city is considered as an illegal and dangerous development. The US position has also encouraged the Likud¹¹ ruling party to unanimously vote in favour of annexing the West Bank as policy.

In response, Church leaders met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah of Jordan and had a press conference in Bethlehem after President Trump's announcement. An official statement by the heads of Churches warned: "Exclusivity over the Holy City will lead to very dark realities".¹²

The role of the church in presenting a new discourse in diplomatic issues was shown recently. In 2018, the Churches of Jerusalem were concerned and resisting Israeli policies. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III spent several weeks warning about new proposed Israeli legislation that was being discussed in the Knesset. The legislation would permit the state to confiscate ecclesiastical lands at the end of lease periods and to provide compensation to the companies on which the residential projects were built.¹³

In protest in February 2018, the Heads of Churches took an unprecedented measure by closing the Holy Sepulcher Church for three days. The church is considered the most important site in Christianity. It is major site for pilgrims while visiting the Holy Land as the Church complex includes the sites of Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified and also his tomb. The protest forced Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to put on hold the aggressive legislative measures until further notice.¹⁴

Palestinian Christians continue searching for a way out of this ongoing suffering. Nine years after the Kairos Palestine document was published in 2009,¹⁵ the 2018 Kairos Palestine conference reaffirmed that

*True peace cannot be achieved by fear of and separation from the other; It is only achieved when both the oppressed and oppressors are healed and redeemed; and consider each other as equal in dignity and worth. God can and will make all things new, but he will use us the faithful to achieve this.*¹⁶

5 • In conclusion:

A new vision, a bi-national democracy called Israel Palestine

One thing Palestinian Christians have in common is that they all feel proud of still being

here and continue to survive: it is witness to their faith. Together with their Church leadership, they call and work for an inclusive Jerusalem, shared by the two peoples living in it. It is the centre of their life and faith.

A two state solution no longer seems to be an option, with nothing left on the negotiating table, Palestinians in general and Christians in particular must go back to basics. In order not to surrender to injustice, and in order to bring up our new generations with dignity we, Palestinian Christians pledge a new vision. We express that loudly and clearly. We can only see dignity, justice and peace when everyone in this land enjoys equal rights in a single country called Israel Palestine.

The Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land recently set out this vision:

We believe that equality, whatever political solutions might be adopted, is a fundamental condition for a just and lasting peace. We have lived together in this land in the past, why should we not live together in the future too? This is our vision for Jerusalem and the whole land, called Israel and Palestine, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁷

Since the inhabitants of this land are multi ethnic groups, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, Baha'is, Armenians, Russians, Ethiopians, and others and since they come from different origins, Canaanite's, Arabs, Jews, Nabateans, Philistines, etc., we can only see a solution that is multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-religious.

Politically, a democratic state sharing borders with Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt. Full rights and citizenship would be given for everyone born there, including returning refugees and Israeli immigrant decedents and for all those who live in the territory today.

A one entity solution is the only solution where justice of heaven and the justice on earth would kiss each other, as the Bible says (Psalms 85.10). After all, we, as Christians, believe that God created us all equals in his image and we are loved equally as sons and daughters. With the inhabitants of Israel-Palestine living under one democratic state, self-determination on an equal footage would be ensured. Every human being enjoying full rights as a citizen.

The extended agony of the peoples under occupation or in refugee camps must end. Confidence in a better future should take the place of fear. Dignity must take the place of humiliation. Sharing instead of division and separation. Belonging to one human race instead of racist laws and legislations.

We lived together in the past for thousands of years, why cannot we in the future?

NOTES

- 1 • More of Palestinian Christians in “Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land,” Institute for Middle East Understanding, December 17, 2012, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://imeu.org/article/palestinian-christians-in-the-holy-land>.
- 2 • The intifadas were two Palestinian uprisings against Israel, the first in the late 1980s and the second in the early 2000s. The intifadas had a dramatic effect on Israeli-Palestinian relations; the second, in particular, is seen as marking the end of the 1990s era negotiating process and ushering in a new, darker era in Israeli-Palestinian relations. See Nami Nasrallah, “The First and Second Palestinian Intifadas,” in *Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, eds. David Newman and Joel Peters (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 56-68. In 2015, there was an increase of violence occurred in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict starting early September 2015 and lasting into the first half of 2016, known as the “Intifada of the Individuals” by Israelis or the “Knife Intifada” or “Stabbing Intifada”.
- 3 • The international law became a major arena of regional and international tension since the birth of Israel in 1948, resulting in several disputes between a number of Arab countries and Israel. The main points of dispute (also known as the “core issues” or “final status issues”) are: (1) Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem (Israel has also annexed the Golan Heights, but that territory is not claimed by Palestinians), construction of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories and the erection of the Israeli West Bank barrier; (2) how borders should be decided between Israel and a Palestinian state; (3) the right of return of the Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars. See: Beth A. Simmons and Richard H. Steinberg, *International Law and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 4 • The Peace process period can be traced back to 1970s, but in the context of the Palestine Israel deal of exchanging land for peace, the 1993 Oslo Agreement is the date commonly referred to and which was supposed to bring about a two state solution based on the borders of 1967. See *id. ibid.*
- 5 • “Statistics on Settlements and Settler Population,” B’Tselem, January 16, 2019, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.btselem.org/settlements/statistics>.
- 6 • The Israeli West Bank barrier or wall is a separation barrier in the West Bank or along the Green Line. Israel considers it a security barrier against terrorism, while Palestinians call it a racial segregation or apartheid wall. With a total length of 708 kilometres (440 miles), the border traced by the barrier is more than double the length of the Green Line, with 15% running along it or in Israel, while the remaining 85% cuts at times 18 kilometres (11 mi) deep into the West Bank, isolating an estimated 25,000 Palestinians from the bulk of that territory. The barrier was built during the Second Intifada (2000) and was defended by the Israeli government as necessary to stop the wave of violence inside Israel that the uprising had brought with it. See: Dona J. Stewart, *The Middle East Today: Political, Geographical and Cultural Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
- 7 • “Two-State Solution Israeli-Palestinian History,” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/two-state-solution>.
- 8 • “Status of Jerusalem, Patriarchs and Heads of the Local Christian Churches in Jerusalem, 2006,” World Council of Churches - Oikoumene, September 29, 2006, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/other-ecumenical-bodies/status-of->

jerusalem-patriarchs-and-heads-of-the-local-christian-churches-in-jerusalem-2006/.

9 • "Catholic Church: a New Vision for Justice and Peace!," Kairos Palestine, February 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/resources/statements/133-catholic-church-a-new-vision-for-justice-and-peace>.

10 • "Open Letter from The National Coalition of Christian Organizations in Palestine to the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement," Kairos Palestine, June 12, 2017, accessed July 31, 2019, <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/kairos-palestine-blog/231-nccop-open-letter-to-the-wcc>.

11 • Likud (The Consolidation), officially the Likud-National Liberal Movement, is a centre-right to right-wing political party in Israel. A secular party, it was founded in 1973 by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon in an alliance with several right-wing parties.

12 • Quoted by Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit General Secretary, World Council of Churches. Address at the opening session of "Al-Azhar Al-Sharif International Conference on Supporting Jerusalem," World Council of Churches - Oikoumene, January 17, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/al-azhar-al-sharif-international-conference-on-supporting-jerusalem>.

13 • "'Enough is Enough' - The Closure of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem,"

Middle East & Europe - Global Ministries, February 26, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, https://www.globalministries.org/_enoug_is_enough_the_closure_of_the_church_of_the_holy_sepulchre_in_jerusalem.

14 • "Holy Sepulchre Reopens After Three-Day Closure," Serbian Orthodox Church, February 28, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, http://www.spc.rs/eng/holy_sepulchre_reopens_after_threeday_closure.

15 • Kairos Palestine is an organization primarily known for its issuance in Bethlehem in December 2009 of the Kairos Palestine document, a call by a number of Palestinian Christians to Christians around the world to end the Israeli occupation, available at "A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering," Kairos Palestine, 2009, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>.

16 • "Kairos Palestine 9th Anniversary Conference Statement," Kairos Palestine, December 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/kairos-palestine-blog/267-kairos-palestine-9th-anniversary-conference-statement>.

17 • "Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries Calls on People of Holy Land to Build Bridges of Respect and Love," Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, May 22, 2019, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.lpj.org/assembly-catholic-ordinaries-invites-people-of-the-holy-land-to-build-bridges-of-respect-and-love/>.

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