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The forgotten plight of Palestinian Christians

Posted By Bassim S. Khoury ■ Tuesday, April 6, 2010 - 3:52 PM ■ [+](#) Share



Christians around the world have just finished celebrating the Easter holiday--and thousands did so by making the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem (where the Church of Holy Sepulchre is one of Christianity's

most revered sites). Yet for many Palestinian Christians who have attempted to make this journey, ongoing Israeli restrictions on movement have made this a **particularly discouraging holiday**, with many being turned away at Israeli checkpoints in the West Bank, **specifically in Bethlehem** where hundreds **demonstrated** in the week leading up to Easter.

These events combined with the recent US-Israel controversies regarding Jerusalem have begun to shine a light on one of the more problematic if underreported issues surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict: namely, Israel's problematic approach to the protection of religious freedom. This of course is a far cry from the many attempts of Israeli officials and supporters to **claim it as a beacon of religious freedom** that **protects the rights of religious minorities** and notably of the Christian community in the Holy Land. The deputy consul general of Israel to Florida and Puerto Rico, Paul Hirschson, recently took **this questionable notion to extremes**, applauding Israel's efforts to protect the religious freedoms of Christians while claiming the rest of Middle Eastern countries and the international community were indifferent to or exacerbated their plight. Sadly, it is Israel that is at the cutting edge of contributing to this tragic reality for Christians in the region.

I am a Palestinian, and as my name indicates, I am Christian. I am a descendant of an orthodox priest. My great grandfather Khalil was one of the largest land owners in the area. He built our family church in Mujeidal, four kilometers to the west of Nazareth in the Galilee in the late 1800s. This flourishing period continued up to the 1930s where we managed to have an extremely vibrant life economically, culturally and politically. Though we Christians were the minority, we owned the olive press and the flour mill, and the water springs flowed in our fertile land. In effect, we were central to one of the economic lifelines of the region.

In 1948, however, the village was destroyed and we were made landless refugees. Although our family was living in nearby Nazareth (which became part of Israel), Israeli law, that 'liberal democracy' as we are constantly reminded, classified and still classifies us as "absentees" in our ancestral homeland. This label allowed Israel to confiscate the land, the flour mill and the olive press, and our church was transferred into a cow shed. The numerous efforts that spanned over 50 years to restore the latter failed, and it was only recently and after a protracted legal battle that we managed to restore it as a place of worship.

To protect us against the repeated attacks of extremists, we were given permission to build a wall around the church. However, the municipality demanded the wall to be 10 to 12 feet high to ensure "the church is not visible from the street" as it's "sight might disturb some". Additionally, we were barred from ringing church bells and from constructing toilets to serve the worshippers. Using a bathroom still depends on the goodwill and the schedule of the neighbors. Yet this is did not happen in a pariah state like Sudan, but in an Israel that stands proudly before the international community as a member of the club of western democracies.

To be perfectly candid, the treatment of Christians (and Muslims) by Israel is a crime and the silence of the world, particularly in the West, is a shameful fact. The fate of the Christians in the Holy Land is one that cannot be divorced from the ethnic cleansing of Christians in 1948 when most of us were removed from those population centers where we constituted a majority or a substantial minority--Jaffa, Haifa, Lod, Ramla, Acre, Nazareth and Jerusalem are all examples.

I remind those whose viewpoints neglect these unpleasant truths that the overwhelming majority of those who lost their homes in Bakaa', Talibiyyeh, Qtamon and other districts that became Israeli West Jerusalem were Christians. Israel turned the Christians of Jerusalem itself into refugees who were forced to move to the predominately Muslim East Jerusalem, and neighboring Arab countries. Refugees from the West of the city will always be grateful for the kind way in which they were received by the East

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Jerusalemites, who welcomed the newcomers and shared with them the eastern part of the city. But our properties in the West still stand today as a testament to these crimes. It would behoove those who are genuinely interested in our fate to come on a fact finding mission so that they can see for themselves these realities, rather than using "the plight of Christians" to score cheap propaganda points. Those American evangelical Christian communities who send millions every year to support Israeli settlers are especially welcome--they might be surprised at what they see.

This story is of course not just about Christian communities, but the overall picture of Palestinian dispossession and struggle, the essence of which is national, and not religious. In religious terms it is not the "Friday" fighting the "Saturday" first in order to fight the "Sunday" later (Muslim versus Jew, then Christian). What has happened and what continues is that the "Saturday" is squeezing out the "Sunday" to more easily caricature Palestinian society as one filled with anti-Western, Muslim extremists.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that Middle Eastern countries outside of Israel or the international community should shirk their own responsibilities when it comes to the suffering of Christians in the region. It is apparent, for example, that international bodies like the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) have often ignored this issue. Quite simply, the abuse of human rights of all minorities in the Middle East, Christians and otherwise, warrant investigation and it is extremely important to air and address incidents of abuse. But to do so, it is an inescapable fact that Israel has to look inward. Deflecting its own deficiencies on such questions onto the shortcomings of other countries or the international community, as some of its supporters seem so eager to do, is an ultimately hollow exercise in avoiding responsibility.

I challenge all people of conscience in Israel and in the world who are concerned about the plight of Christians to rectify the injustices that this community suffered decades ago and continues to face. A law should be enacted giving us rights to all our properties confiscated by Israel--something that would not even overturn any legal precedent. Indeed, this is what Israel has done in its recent evictions of Palestinians from properties in both Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, based on pre-1948 Jewish claims to those homes. Under an identical legal standard, we should be entitled to our own pre-1948 properties. As an easy first step, it could start with the northern Galilee Christian villages of Iqret and Kufur Birem (both of which are located in Israel proper). Iqret is 100 percent Christian Melkite and Kufur Birem is 100 percent Christian Maronite. During the Israeli war of independence in 1948 its inhabitants were asked to leave 'temporarily' until things quieted down. Yet all requests to go back after the war were denied and the initial 'temporary' displacement to nearby villages of Jish and Rammeh were made permanent. These inhabitants still live Israel in closeby villages--having the status of internally displaced persons--but in a Kafka-esque reality whereby the remains of their villages are close by and stand idle on unused land. Even a landmark decision by the Israeli Supreme Court in 1951, ordering the authorities to let them back, has not been implemented; blocked by governmental and security authorities, the absurdity continues to this day.

Jews and other victims waited for decades to be compensated for the patent injustices that were inflicted upon their own communities in the past. I would suggest it's high time for Israel to put its money where its mouth is and ensure that the process of compensating us Palestinians begins.

Bassim S. Khoury is the former Minister of National Economy for the Palestinian Authority. He is a private sector industrialist and human rights activist.

AFP/Getty Images

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SAMI JAMIL
JADALLAH
5:29 AM ET
April 7, 2010

Where is Western Christianity from all of this?

Israel since its creation did all its best to destroy and eliminate the presence of Islam and Christianity especially Palestinians. Starting with the 67 Jewish Occupation of Jerusalem and what remained of historic Palestine, Israel continued with the same policy not only exiling Palestinians (Muslims and Christians) from Jerusalem, but making sure that there is NO room for Palestinians. It began chocking "Christian" cities such as Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Sur Baher squeezing the people more and more, taking over their land, killing their business, and making sure there is a one way ticket out. It also colluded with custodians of Christians properties, properties held and owned for thousands of years, finding a way to steal and rob and confiscates properties belonging in trust (waqf) both Islamic and Christians. It also used its taxing powers to strip the Church of its properties. It is ironic that the same Israel that is exiling Palestinian Christian making their lives absolute hell, and depriving them of attending and reaching their holiest sites just like it did last week with Eastern Good Friday and Easter Sunday, that that is doing all it can to "Judaize" the entire land by "hook and mostly by crook" is welcoming American and Latin American Evangelical to Israel, of course as tourist, fleecing them of their money at home through an alliance between Israel and the many pastors such as Robertson, Agee and others who fleece the poor of their churches only to give it to rich Israel, a country where the average per capita income is at least 4 times the average income of members of these Evangelical churches. Israel wants only Christian tourists and cash contributors and does not give a damn about the original church; certainly it does not give a damn about Palestinians Christians and Muslims. Meanwhile the Christian world especially the Pope is too silent about the blight of Christians in the land of Christianity... I guess he has too many things on his minds lately, with an army of rapists and pedophiles masquerading as officials of the church.

► REPLY

SAMI JAMIL
JADALLAH
5:36 AM ET
April 7, 2010

From Mazin Qumsiyeh, entrapped in his own land

Sharing with you part of Mazin Qumsiyeh message: By the way Mazin was a party of the very few Christians who were able to break the siege of Jerusalem during the Holy week. They were unable to reach Jerusalem.

"Over 530 Palestinian towns and villages were depopulated. The remaining 130 villages and towns had most of their land taken and now the remaining Palestinians who comprise 20% of the Israeli population live on about 2% of the land while the Jewish population controls the rest (which is mostly Palestinian property). When we take the whole of Palestine (West Bank and Gaza included), we see that Palestinians who remained (some 50% of the population is restricted to less than 10% of historic Palestine. Thus access to land is nearly 9 folds more to the Jewish population (most of it not native) even without the return of refugees.

We visited devastated Palestinian villages like Iqrit (a catholic christian community of which only the church remains). Al-Zeeb (a fishing

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