

Fact Sheet 7: Palestinian Treatment of Christian Arabs

Introduction

There are approximately 50,000 Christian Arabs living in areas under the exclusive control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This Fact Sheet focuses on the living standards of this minority.

Background Information

Recent statistics show that the Christian Arab population numbers approximately 2.4 percent of the total population. This is a significant decrease from 1948, when the figure was approximately 20%. (New York Times, 31 December 1995). Although collectively referred to as Christian Arabs, they include the Eastern Orthodox, which is the largest group, and the Catholics, who are considered to have the most powerful voice due to recent Vatican-Israel relations. By comparison, the Protestants are a tiny group.

This overall drop in population has led to major geopolitical changes. Until 1948, Bethlehem had a Christian majority of 80%. Today, under PA rule, it has a Muslim majority of 80%. Few Christians remain in the PA-controlled parts of the West Bank. Those who can emigrate often do so. It would appear that the PA is trying to conceal this massive population shift.

Pope John Paul II was mindful of these sobering facts. Significantly, during his visit to Bethlehem in March 2000, he urged Christian Arabs to remain in Bethlehem, the home of Christianity, saying, "*Do not be afraid to preserve your Christian heritage and Christian presence in Bethlehem.*"

Conversely, the Christian population in Israel has more than quadrupled since 1948. In a census conducted by the British mandatory authorities in 1947, there were 28,000 Christians in Jerusalem. Since 1948, this number has increased from 30,000 (all of Israel) to approximately 146,000 as of 1993 (Jerusalem, seventh edition; Israel Information Center, 1995). This more than 200% increase is largely seen as a result of Israel's policy of guaranteeing freedom of worship to all religions in all places.

General Institutional Persecution

The official religion of the Palestinian Authority is Islam and the basic laws of the PA are based on Koranic Shari'a. Organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad have publicly advocated the establishment of a unified fundamentalist Islamic state over the entire Middle East. It is not surprising to find numerous claims that the Christian Arabs are subject to subtle discrimination by the Palestinian Authority, as shown below. U.S. courts have even granted asylum to Palestinian Christian Arab refugees, on the grounds that they would be oppressed if they return to the PA areas.

1. Today, the PA-controlled Wakf prevents Jews and Christians from praying on the Temple Mount, an area considered to be of religious and historical importance to the Christian religion.
2. Many mosques have mushroomed adjacent to and usually taller than churches. Loudly amplified Moslem sermons have been aired during Christian services, including the Pope's April 2000 address in Nazareth. The Moslem broadcasts were so loud, in fact, that the Pope was forced to halt his speech until Moslem call to prayer was concluded.
3. Anti-Christian rhetoric is common in official PA broadcasts. For example, in a Friday sermon on October 13, 2000, broadcast live on official Palestinian Authority television from a Gaza mosque, Dr. Ahmad Abu Halabiya proclaimed: "*Allah the almighty has called upon us not to ally with the Jews or the Christians, not to like them, not to become their partners, not to support them, and not to sign agreements with them.*"
4. The treatment of Christian women, like that of Moslem women in PA-controlled areas, is also oppressive in nature. Accused of wearing "permissive" Western clothing, there have been many cases of intimidation and harassment reported by Bethlehem Christian women. Even more alarming, there have been frequent reports of rape and abduction of Christian women (especially in Beit Sahur).

PA Treatment of Christian Holy Sites

Throughout PA-controlled areas, there are numerous sites of historic or religious significance to the Christian religion. Many have become a focal point as Palestinian gunmen abused their sanctity, waging battles, hiding explosives, and more. Some examples include:

- Without prior consent of the church, Yasser Arafat turned the Greek Orthodox monastery near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem into his domicile during his visits to the city.
- On July 5, 1997, the PLO seized Abraham's Oak Russian Holy Trinity Monastery in Hebron, violently evicting monks and nuns.
- During the 2000-2002 Palestinian War of Terror, the PA's Tanzim militia chose the Christian town of Beit Jala to shoot at Jerusalem. They were specifically positioned in or near Christian homes, hotels, churches (e.g., St. Nicholas), and the Greek Orthodox club.

The most flagrant example disregard for the holiness of Christian shrines occurred last spring, during the takeover of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem by PA forces. Palestinian gunmen held over 40 Christian clergy and nuns as hostages. This takeover was not an act of desperation nor did it center around refugees seeking safe haven during the heat of battle. Very simply, over 100 armed and wanted terrorists deliberately forced the Israeli government to lay siege to the holy site. The PA's intentional strategy was designed to embarrass Israel. Abdullah Abu-Hadida, a senior Tanzim commander, later commented: *"The idea was to enter the church in order to create international pressure on Israel..."*

Sadly, once the Church was finally evacuated, it was found that it had been desecrated and defiled.

Current Status Of Christians Living In PA-Controlled Areas

According to evidence received by The Prism Group, the Christians remaining in PA-controlled areas are subjected to relentless persecution. A few limited examples include:

- In June 1997, agents of the Palestinian Authority's Preventive Security Service arrested a Palestinian convert to Christianity for regularly attending church and prayer meetings and distributing Bibles. This man is still being held in a Palestinian prison and has been subjected to physical torture and interrogations.
- In August 1997, Palestinian policemen in Beit Sahur opened fire on a crowd of Christians Arabs, wounding six of them. Arafat attempted to cover up the incident and has warned the Arab media against publicizing the story. The local commander of the Palestinian police instructed journalists not to report the incident.
- A Palestinian convert in Ramallah was recently visited by Palestinian police at his home and warned that if he continued to preach Christianity, he would be arrested and charged with being an Israeli spy.
- The Comtsieh family [a Christian family] has a building that serves as a business center in Bethlehem, but several years ago a Moslem family from Hebron took possession of the building. The Comtsieh family filed a claim with the Palestinian Authority judicial system. After long and arduous court hearings, the court ruled in the claimant's favor. However, the police never enforced the verdict. Representatives of the Hebron family later appeared with a new court verdict (signed by the same judge who ruled in the claimants' favor previously), canceling the previous verdict and ratifying the Hebron family's ownership of the property.

The PA leadership maintains that it seeks peace, with guarantees of religious freedom. Unfortunately, the facts show otherwise. The Christians in PA controlled areas have begun to pray in secret. Some are applying to move to Israeli-controlled areas, where they are assured the right to worship freely. If action is not taken to ease the plight of Christians in PA-controlled areas, it is likely that the presence of Christians in these areas will continue to dwindle until few will remain to guard the holy sites.

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