



Christmas and the Nakba

Christmas Means Love and Steadfastness for Palestinians



By Xavier Abu Eid

On a cold Thursday, December 25, 1947, the situation was tense in Palestine. But very few imagined that this would be the last Christmas that they would spend in their hometowns. Among the hundreds of villages that were totally cleansed during the Nakba of 1948 were dozens of Christian communities, including those in Ein Karem, Beisan, Al-Bassa, Suhmata, Safad, Al-Birwa, Safad, Mansoura, and Ma'lul, among others. From this time on, Christmas had more than just a religious significance for thousands of Palestinians.



Christmas celebration in the ethnically cleansed Kufr Bir'im. Photo courtesy of Waad Ghantous.



A destroyed church in Kufr Bir'im. Photo courtesy of Waad Ghantous.

Between December 1947 and 1949, almost 800,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced, among them dozens of thousands of Palestinian Christians. Take the case of Jaffa, which in 1948 was home to almost 71,000 Palestinians, among them 16,000 Christians. After 1948, only 4,000 were allowed to remain, among them a few hundred Christians. The local Melkite Church was reduced from 2,000 faithful at Christmas 1947 to around 100 at Christmas 1948. In January 1948, 25 Palestinians and the Spanish Deputy Consul, Manuel Allende, were killed by a terror attack conducted by the Haganah against the Semiramis Hotel in Qatamon, a predominantly Palestinian Christian neighborhood of Jerusalem. They were

celebrating Orthodox Christmas. This crime, together with the prominent massacre of Deir Yassin in April, prompted the exile of thousands of Jerusalemites from the western areas of the city.

Of the 150,000 Palestinians who remained in the newly established Israel in 1948, almost a third were internally displaced people, many of them from the Galilee. Among them were the villagers from the traditional Christian communities of Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im. While some of their members had been expelled to Lebanon, the vast majority remained in the Galilee, and soon after the end of the 1948 War they decided to take their

case to the Israeli courts. The courts favored the case of the inhabitants. However, the Israeli government was not willing to set a precedent of the “return of non-Jews.” On Christmas Day 1951, Iqrit was destroyed; Kufr Bir'im suffered the same fate in September 1953. The “Christmas bombardment” of their village was witnessed with shock and desolation by the survivors who were standing only three kilometers away on the mountains of the neighboring village of Jish.

In both Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im, the only structures left standing were the respective churches and cemetery gravestones. The churches were severely damaged and soon became victims of pillage from nearby Israeli-Jewish communities that would even steal their bells. By 1972, the original Palestinian communities had reorganized themselves well and decided to repair their churches. In a matter of weeks, they were able to celebrate mass again. Despite Israeli opposition, Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im returned to life with masses in celebration of Easter and Christmas, as well as weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

In Bethlehem in May 2014, Pope Francis met a family from Iqrit. He listened to them and blessed their cause. But this was not enough to make Israel change its opposition to their return. Israeli forces have disrupted several activities organized by the village committees, including camping and the planting of trees. Though over the years the people of Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im have been able to secure the Israeli-state permission to bury their loved ones in their own cemeteries, the younger generations have stated that they want to exercise their right to return while still alive.

This Christmas, hundreds of faithful are going to fill the churches of Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im, constituting three and even four generations that have continuously prayed for justice. After mass, the elders will walk with their grandchildren towards the ruins of their homes. This is the most meaningful Christmas gift for hundreds of grandchildren of those who were originally displaced.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Luke 6:20–23)

Still today there are Palestinian Christians who will celebrate this year's Christmas in a refugee camp, such as the inhabitants of Al-Dbayeh in Lebanon. At the same time, dozens of churches from various denominations have been built in Jordan in order to meet the needs of thousands of Palestinian Christian refugees. But the story continues.

The 1948 *Nakba* has significantly affected Christian life in the Holy Land. In addition, since 1967, with almost fifty years of Israeli occupation, the construction and expansion of settlements, the construction of Israel's Annexation Wall around Occupied Jerusalem – separating Jerusalem and Bethlehem for the first time in 2,000 years of Christianity – the prevailing lack of access to holy sites, the siege on Gaza, and the separation from the rest of the Christian communities in the Arab world have all given Christmas a meaning that goes beyond a traditional religious occasion.

In his Christmas homily of 2001, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, His Excellency Michel Sabbah, said to his Palestinian congregation, “You are a Christian and a witness to Jesus in his land, and you are a Palestinian deprived of your liberty. It is necessary therefore that you be Christian, and it is necessary that you ask for your liberty. Your liberty is God's gift; you don't have the right, for any reason, to resign before any strong power in this world.” For Palestinians, Christmas is both a Christian message of love and a Palestinian message of steadfastness. This message was as true a decade and a half ago as it is today. And it will remain so until the message of Christmas prevails and love brings about justice and peace.

Xavier Abu Eid is a political scientist and communications adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization – Negotiations Affairs Department. He can be followed on twitter @xabueid.