

“Blessed Are Those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness”

Palestinian Christians in the National Struggle for Freedom



By Xavier Abu Eid

uring the early years of the British Mandate of Palestine, an official report was sent to the foreign office in London referring to the demonstrations that were taking place against the Balfour Declaration and the Zionist project: “The petitions are identic. They protest against Palestine being ‘appropriated’ by the Jews. They are signed by both Moslems and Christians.” This statement could have been a surprise to those who believed that the Zionist enterprise was a “Judeo-Christian” goal, but it was not to those who knew the reality of Palestine, and particularly of its Christian population.

Lord Balfour, the British foreign secretary who promised Palestine to the Zionist movement, was highly influenced by a combination of colonialist

and Christian Zionist views and didn’t believe that the Palestinians were worthy of achieving freedom in their homeland. He declared: “Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires or prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit this ancient land.” This view was strongly opposed by Rt. Rev. Rennie MacInnes, the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem at the time, who understood the consequences of the British-Zionist collaboration on his own Arab-Palestinian congregation.

Large numbers of Palestinian Christians were part of the Palestinian national movement from its very beginning. This prominence in the struggle for national independence can be understood from several perspectives, including most notably the higher education rates of Christians at that time in comparison to the rest of the population. But another factor of deep importance was the centuries-old Arab case against the Greek domination of the Jerusalem Orthodox Patriarchate. The disregard shown by the Greek hierarchy of the patriarchate against its Arab congregation reached its peak in 1923, when against the calls of its own Arab faithful, the patriarchate transferred a piece of land to a Zionist group (the “Zionist Palestine Land Development Company”). It was the first of several land transactions rejected by the Palestinian people. For

the Christians involved in the national movement, including the strong voices of Khalil Sakakini and Yacoub Farraj, the Arabization of the patriarchate was an integral part of the Palestinian struggle for national liberation.

At the core of the national movement were the “Muslim-Christian Associations,” particularly prominent in the ports of Jaffa and Haifa. They were served by a combative media that was mainly owned by Palestinian Christians. This was the case of *Falastin* (Palestine) newspaper, published in Jaffa since 1911 by Issa al-Issa, whose editorial line not only included strong opposition to the Zionist project but also a whole section called “Orthodoxiat” on the struggle to end the discrimination against Arabs in the patriarchate. Najib Nassar published a prominent essay against Zionism in 1913 in his magazine *Al Karmel*, published in Haifa. A report of Zionist intelligence agents identified Palestinian Christians, such as Issa al-Issa, as their most active opponents. One of the most well-known actors during the British Mandate was the Melkite archbishop of Galilee, Gregorios Hajar, who enjoyed great networks in the Arab world. His death in a car accident in 1940 was blamed by the Palestinian street on the British authorities, considering him a martyr for the Palestinian cause. His funeral in Haifa brought some 25,000 people to the streets.

Good Friday procession at Cremisan Monastery near Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of Xavier Abu Eid.



The unified national movement known as the Arab Higher Committee had a board of six people, including two Christians. Among them was Alfred Rock, from Ein Karem, perhaps the first member of the Latin (Roman Catholic) Church with prominence in the national movement. When the discussions over the partition of Palestine took place, Christians played a significant role in the lobby efforts against the partition. They joined the incipient diplomatic corps initiated by Jamal Hussein and Musa Alami, taking prominent posts in the Palestinian representations in Geneva, Paris, London, Washington, and New York. Among them was Henry Kattan, the renowned lawyer graduated from the universities of London and Paris, who became the

that resisted the Haganah attempts to take over the Old City through Jaffa Gate, paying a heavy price of dozens of Armenian-Palestinians killed due to Zionist bombardments; or the brigade led by Khalil Abu Ghattas in Beit Jala that prevented the invasion of the city after the fall of Al-Malha, dozens of thousands of Palestinian Christians were forcibly displaced. Among the most remembered areas of ethnic cleansing were the traditional Jerusalem neighborhoods of Qatamon, Baqaa, and Talbiya, where the renown intellectual Edward Said took his first steps. One of the decisive moments in the fall of those neighborhoods was the Haganah terrorist attack that blew up the Semiramis Hotel while Palestinian Christians, mainly from the

the region. Some became diplomats serving other Arab countries, many were either integrated into the Jordanian system that had annexed the West Bank or became followers of pan-Arabist ideologies, particularly among those in Syria.

A few others, though, remained committed to the resurgence of an Arab-Palestinian national movement. Among them was Fr. Ibrahim Ayyad, whose biggest contribution to the national cause was securing the Latin Patriarchate's purchase of plots of land to prevent them from being taken by the Zionist movement, including almost 30,000 dunums of land in the northern Jordan Valley area of Tayasir. But he was also active politically, securing funds and political support for the

Bank. The 13 churches of Jerusalem now had their headquarters in East Jerusalem under Israeli control. This dramatically affected the work of the Christian institutions that were used to having open contacts with the Arab world, including, notably, the Latin Patriarchate Seminary in Beit Jala. The Arab defeat led to the resurgence of the Palestinian national movement, mainly from the young generation that had been expelled during the *Nakba*. Among them was George Habash, a medical doctor educated in Beirut who served in the hospital of his hometown Lydda during the fall of the city and who was shocked by the images of the expulsion of dozens of thousands of people, including the cold-blooded assassination of his



Khalil Sakakini

Hilarion Capucci

Kamal Nasser

Ghassan Kanafani

Naji Ali

Karim Khalaf

George Habash

Emile Habibi

voice of the Palestinian people in the deliberations that were taking place in the United Nations. Emile Ghouri, the right hand of national leader Abdel Qader Hussein, a political scientist from the University of Cincinnati, also played an important role.

The *Nakba*, catastrophe, of 1948, became an inevitable outcome for the work of British colonialism, Zionist strategic planning, and Arab disorganization. It also represented a blow to the Christian Palestinian communities. While there were cases of stoic heroism, such as Michel Issa leading the last attempts of resistance in Jaffa alongside a few dozen fighters; the Armenian Brigade

Abussouan and Lorenzo families, and the Spanish Deputy Consul Manuel Allende-Salazar, were preparing to celebrate Orthodox Christmas: almost 30 people were killed.

After 1948, the Palestinian leadership was dismembered, though an attempt was made to create a Palestinian government under the title of "the Government of all Palestine," with its headquarters in Gaza. A Palestinian Christian, Michael Abcarius, became its finance minister. By that moment, almost 60 percent of the Palestinian Christian population had already been displaced from their homes. Most of the Palestinian leadership of the pre-*Nakba* years was dispersed throughout

national cause. He was condemned to exile after he was accused of being involved in the assassination of King Abdallah of Jordan in 1951, a charge he denied. In Beirut he became the head of the Roman Catholic Ecclesiastical Court, and it has been said that Yasser Arafat sent a delegation of people to meet him, in the early sixties, to get his blessing for the creation of Al-Fatah. Fr. Ayyad died in Palestine after returning there with Yasser Arafat during the nineties. His body was buried in the compound of the Latin Church of his hometown Beit Sahour.

In 1967, an Israeli aggression ended with the full occupation of historic Palestine, including Gaza and the West

neighbor. Dr. Habash led a group of Arab nationalists highly inspired by the Algerian Revolution that, turning to the left, formed the Marxist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). This included not only intellectuals such as Ghassan Kanafani and Naji Ali, but military masterminds such as Wadie Haddad, a refugee from a Melkite family expelled from Safad in Upper Galilee.

Another member of the Melkite community, Nayef Hawatmeh, became the leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The Palestinian Communist Party also had a prominent membership of Palestinian Christians from before

the *Nakba*, including Fouad Nassar and the renowned writer Emile Habibi. After 1967, following the split between Israeli/Palestinian/Jordanian communist parties, a well-known personality from Beit Jala, Fouad Rizk, became one of the most important leaders in the occupied West Bank. Closer to the Pan-Arabist ideas of the Ba'ath Party was Kamal Nasser. A native of Birzeit and educated at the American University of Beirut, Kamal Nasser rapidly escalated in the political hierarchy of the Palestinian national movement until he became a member of the PLO Executive Committee and spokesperson. He was assassinated in 1973 by an Israeli commando in Beirut, alongside his colleagues Kamal Adwan and Mohammad Yousef Najjar.

suffered a terror attack in 1980, losing his right foot. He was also removed by the Israeli occupation in 1982.

In August 1982, the PLO left Beirut after resisting a siege of 88 days by Israeli forces and Lebanese Falangists. It was the end of a military campaign where Palestinian fighters fiercely fought for the survival of the national cause. Several Christians were among those fighters, including what was remembered as the heroic resistance of Al-Dbayeh Refugee Camp, known for hosting mainly Palestinian Christian refugees from Upper Galilee. A decade earlier, Melkite Archbishop of Jerusalem Hilarion Capucci had been detained by Israeli Forces and accused of carrying weapons for the Palestinian

seminarian who ended up getting a PhD in international law from the prestigious Catholic University of Louvain, became one of the first martyrs of the Palestinian diplomatic circles after being assassinated in Brussels. Although he was a native of Zababdeh, Israel did not allow the funeral to take place in his hometown, and his body still rests in Amman. During the same period, a young diplomat, Afif Safieh, a Roman Catholic from Jerusalem, had become one of the close confidants of Yasser Arafat and managed to secure a strong channel with the Holy See. A nephew of Anton Safieh, the caretaker head of the municipal council who saved whatever was possible from the Jerusalem Municipality before it fell to Zionist hands in May 1948, Afif

the first permanent representative of Palestine to the United Nations in New York, a role he fulfilled between 1974 and 1991.

In the occupied homeland, the daily violations of the Israeli occupation precipitated an uprising known as the Intifada. Palestinian popular resistance was rapidly joined by the people on a scale that Israeli forces did not expect. Some of the actions taken by the military rulers included the expulsion and imprisonment of some of the leaders, including nonviolent peace activist Mubarak Awad, a Palestinian evangelical. One of the most well-known faces of that moment was Professor Hanan Ashrawi, originally from an Anglican family. Another



Ibrahim Abu Lughod



Mubarak Awad



Peter Madros



Michel Sabbah



Afif Safieh



Hanan Ashrawi



Mounib Younan



Riah Abu El-Assal

An interesting episode took place during the municipal elections promoted by the Israeli authorities in the occupied territory in the seventies. Convinced that they could isolate the PLO by promoting local leadership, Israel did its best to improve its image through the elections. The results, though, were not what they had expected: Despite the fact that the participation of all PLO factions had been banned by the occupation, figures known to be linked to the PLO massively defeated the candidates preferred by the Israeli Civil Administration. They also paid heavily: The mayor of Beit Jala, Bishara Daoud, was removed from his position, while the mayor of Ramallah, Karim Khalaf,

resistance. President Arafat mentioned Archbishop Capucci in his historic UN address of 1974: "A brave prince of the Church, Bishop Capucci. Lifting his fingers to form the same victory sign used by our freedom-fighters, he said, 'What I have done, I have done that all men may live on this land of peace in peace' (...). To him we send our salutations and greetings." Bishop Capucci was freed through a Vatican intervention after spending years in jail, and he remained a strong supporter of Palestinian freedom until his death in Rome, where he had spent his exile.

In 1981, the first Palestinian representative to Belgium Na'im Khader, a former Roman Catholic

ended up representing Palestine in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the Vatican, Washington, and Moscow, among other special missions. He is remembered as part of a golden generation of Palestinian diplomats, which included Laila Shahid in Paris and later on in Brussels. A descendant of one of the most traditional Muslim families from Jerusalem, Ambassador Shahid, a living encyclopedia of Palestinian history, gave special emphasis to the Christian presence in the Palestinian capital and the European role with the Status Quo Agreements of the Holy Sites. Those were also the days of Ambassador Zuhdi Tarazi, a Christian from Gaza as

Anglican, Archbishop Elia Khoury, was sitting as a member of the PLO Executive Committee and had been nominated by President Yasser Arafat as a member of the delegation to one of the first official dialogues with the United States. Renowned intellectual Edward Said, also from an Anglican family, had been keen to open the first channels with the State Department, alongside his lifelong colleague Professor Ibrahim Abu Lughod.

The Intifada put Palestine back on the front pages, bringing more international pressure on the occupation. After a year of uprising, the PLO declared the State of Palestine (a declaration of independence written by Mahmoud

Darwish and translated by Edward Said), changing the name “PLO” to “Palestine” in the United Nations. Another powerful symbol came from an unexpected place: the Vatican. In a historic decision, Pope John Paul II appointed Fr. Michel Sabbah as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, becoming the first Palestinian to head the Catholic Church in the Holy Land.

The election of Patriarch Sabbah generated new momentum for the churches in Jerusalem. One of his first steps was to create the Saint Yves Society as a legal branch of the Latin Patriarchate to protect human rights. He organized the heads of churches in Jerusalem to break the Israeli siege against the town of Beit Sahour. The town of the biblical shepherds’ field had become a symbol of the Intifada because their inhabitants refused to pay taxes to the Israeli occupation. They suffered in return from severe collective punishment in the form of a draconian siege, an issue mentioned even at the Security Council. The Latin parish priest of Beit Sahour at the time, Fr. Peter Madros, remembers how once he officiated at the wedding of a parishioner wanted by the occupation “with the back doors of the altar open and people watching from the bell tower in order to alert him to escape should the army come for him during the ceremony.”

The early nineties saw the beginning of the Middle East Peace Process, the return of the PLO to Palestine, and the development of institutions for an independent state. Among the main projects was Bethlehem 2000, in order to promote Palestine as a major touristic destination. President Yasser Arafat implemented a strict system of quotas in order to ensure that several municipalities, including Bethlehem and Ramallah, would have Christian mayors and generous representation in the Palestinian parliaments (with various seats reserved for Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Gaza) as well as the appointment of a Christian as minister of tourism.

During the Camp David summit in July 2000, the US administration tried to repackage Israeli positions that were presented to the Palestinian side. This included the Israeli annexation of the Armenian Quarter. This was the moment when President Arafat came out with his famous quote: “Don’t you know that my name is Yasser Arafatian? I’m not selling the Armenians.” On another occasion, he reportedly turned to a Coptic Egyptian-American State Department official, Gamal Hilal, who was translating for President Clinton, and asked him: “Please explain to the president what

The Church of the Nativity under siege by the Israeli army, 2002. Photo courtesy of Fr. Ibrahim Fallas.

my dear friend Pope Shenouda would say if I accept this offer for Jerusalem.” None of the options proposed met even the most basic Palestinian requests or were consistent with international law or UN resolutions. Patriarch Sabbah once again mobilized the heads of churches in Jerusalem to send a letter to the delegates of the summit: “We regard the Christian and Armenian quarters of the Old City as inseparable and contiguous entities that are firmly united by the same faith.”

Bethlehem, a symbol of prosperity during the Oslo Process, became the face of its failure by 2000. International condemnations alone failed to prevent Israel from building the illegal settlement of Har Homa (Jabal Abu Ghneim), separating the holy cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Massive projects of settlement-related infrastructure, including bypass road 60 west of Bethlehem, had been built after the Oslo Agreement was signed; with the second Intifada, the images of the bombardment of Beit Jala and the siege of the Nativity Church became symbols of the end of the Peace Process. During that invasion, several Bethlehemites were killed, including Christine Saadeh, a 12-year-old girl killed “by mistake” when Israeli forces rained over 30 bullets on her family car. Johnny Thalgieh, 17 years old, wanted to become an Orthodox priest. He was killed by an Israeli sniper on his way to the Nativity Church. President Arafat, in a press conference while Israeli tanks were besieging his compound in Ramallah, furiously shouted at the press corps, “Don’t focus on what’s happening here, go see what they did to the Nativity Church!” One of the most powerful symbols of those years was Israel preventing the Palestinian president from attending Christmas Eve mass in the Nativity Church, with the Latin Patriarch keeping the president’s seat empty and decorating it with his traditional *hatta*.

Israel’s annexation Wall in the occupied West Bank, declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004, ended up by fully separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem for the first time in 2,000 years of Christianity. The efforts of the local church, where Patriarch Sabbah had a leading role alongside Lutheran Bishop Mounib Younan, Anglican Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, and Orthodox Bishop Atallah Hanna, could not stop the further grabs of Palestinian land that ended up turning the birthplace of Jesus into an open-air prison. While Pope John Paul II had attempted to support their efforts by declaring that the Holy Land doesn’t need “walls but bridges,” the lack of Western political will ended up consolidating the Israeli plans of de facto annexation of more Palestinian land.

Today there are further challenges for Palestinian Christians to deal with, especially with regards to growing numbers of Christian Zionists, generously represented in the US Government, who support Israeli settlements and defend violations of Palestinian rights as a “divine mandate.” Palestinian responses to this trend include the development of a Palestinian theology of liberation through the efforts of Sabeel as well as the initiatives of Kairos Palestine and the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference, examples of how deeply rooted is the Palestinian struggle for freedom within its Christian component.

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