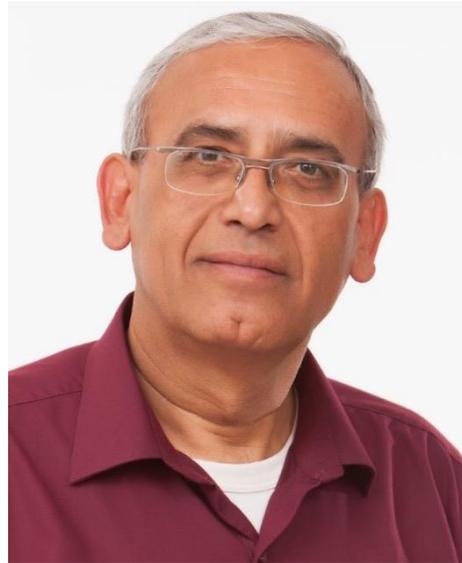


**Christians in Palestine:  
Their Past, Present and Future**

**By**



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## INTRODUCTION

Christians in Palestine represent a long history, culture and heritage that spanned over the past two millennia. Palestine, the birthplace of Christianity has also witnessed the arrival of Islam in the seventh century where many of the inhabitants there embraced it. Moreover, Palestine is unique in its being the place where divine religions were born and spread worldwide. This has led to creating on the part of millions of people a sort of tenacity and affection towards Palestine. Therefore, Christianity in Palestine is an authentic oriental implant and was not originated in the West, and both history and geography of the Christianity started in Palestine. Churches and Christian archaeological sites are omnipresent in the historic area of Palestine, i.e. Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including Jerusalem. The year 1948 was a major turning point by establishing the state of Israel on almost 80% of the historic area of Palestine. As a result, both Palestinian Muslims and Christians were displaced, and the entire cultural and religious heritage that accumulated throughout long eras has been distorted.

The Nakba which literary means “disaster” or “catastrophe” is the expression of the 1948 Palestinian exodus that made more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs flee or were expelled from their homes, during the 1948 war. The impact of the Nakba on the Christians of Palestine was far more detrimental than that on their Muslim brethren due to their much lower percentage of the population and also due to the fact that most of them have fled to the United States, Europe and Latin America rather than to the surrounding Arab countries. Consequently, the first and second generations of those Christian emigrants have become an integral part of their host countries and never thought of returning home given that many of them were not allowed to return in the first place. As a result, the Christian population in Palestine has dropped from approximately 15% before 1948 to 2-3% in the historic area of Palestine. Yet, Palestinian Christians comprise approximately 8% of the entire Palestinian population who add up to 10 million in both the historic area of Palestine and in the Diaspora. In the light of these facts, many Christians have developed a gloomy picture about their future presence in Palestine, to an extent that they came to believe that in no more than two decades, Christians and Christianity will no longer exist in the Holy Land, and that our Churches will turn into museums after an uninterrupted existence for more than two thousand years. Palestinian Christians who believe they belong to the mother of all churches are more concerned ever for their presence, in the Holy Land. Indeed, their history, heritage and culture are under great jeopardy and are prone to perdition. Despite the many incidents and mishaps that took place between Muslims and Christians in the region, the Muslim-Christian relationship in Palestine and away from external factors has been characterized by harmony, reciprocity and mutual respect. However, the massive wave of emigration of Palestinian Christians has been instigated by several factors:

First: The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the consequent volatile political situation.

Secondly: The fact that the overwhelming majority of Palestinian Christians belong to the middle class who happen to less tolerate economic hardship than others.

Thirdly: The recent emergence of Islamic radical and obscurantist movements that are ready to slaughter not only non-Muslims but also Muslims who do not embrace their doctrine or adopt their principles.

Fourthly: The attempt on the part of both Israel and many Islamic movements to shift and transform the political conflict in the Middle East to a religious one i.e. Jewish-Muslim conflict. In such a case Christians in Palestine will find themselves out of the political trench for, in their view, the conflict has become between divine promises and eschatological rewards.

Fifthly: Christians had all along, and to a higher degree than their Muslim brethren, relatives living abroad who sponsored and facilitated their arrival to Europe and the American continents.

Sixthly: Although the West is no longer identified as Christian, Christianity is either visible or invisibly embedded in their culture, which makes it easier for a Christian to integrate than for others who embrace different faiths.

Emigration today poses a real threat to the Christian presence in the Palestinian Territories. A poll conducted in 2006 by the Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center (Sabeel) in Jerusalem on Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel reveals that 4.5% of the total Christian respondents have already applied for emigration at foreign consulates or embassies. This appalling percentage represents double the annual Christian population natural growth rate.

The rate of emigration among Christians in the West Bank far exceeds that of those living in Israel proper. This can be ascribed to the disparity between standards of living on both sides of the green line. While Christians in the West Bank like their Muslim fellow citizens suffer from a broad spectrum of Israeli measures, Christians in Israel live in relatively better conditions. According to the poll mentioned above, 44.7% of the Christian respondents said that the main cause for their intention to emigrate was to work, whereas 42.6% said because of bad economic and political situation, 8.5% to join family and 4.2% to work and study.

When asked about number one challenge for Christians in both the West Bank and Israel, 39% of the West Bank respondents said it was the job opportunities as opposed to only 11% of Christians in Israel. Emigration ranked second highest as number one challenge ( 23%) for West Bankers whereas it scored only 13% for Christians in Israel. Housing projects were number one challenge for 19% of the Christian respondents of the West Bank as opposed to 22% for the Christian population in Israel. The higher percentage of the housing project concern for Christians in Israel

is somehow understandable given the scarcity of land for Arab population in Israel and the many complications an Arab citizen may encounter to get a building permit. Justice and peace was number one challenge for only 7% for the West Bank Christians as opposed to 27% for Christians in Israel. The much higher percentage for Christians in Israel in this regard can be ascribed to the fact that although officially and by law Arabs in Israel are considered full citizens, they on the ground are treated as second or third class citizens. Only 7% of West Bank Christians consider religious extremism as number one challenge whereas 14% of Christians in Israel so consider it. It seems that because the latter live in a politically stable and more deeply-rooted civil and secular society, they become more leery and vulnerable to the looming religious extremism. While 6% of Christians in the West Bank consider education as number one challenge, 13% of Christians in Israel so consider it. This is attributed to the fact that the percentage of university degree holders in the West Bank is far higher than those living in Israel which naturally makes it more of a concern for them than the West Bankers.

However, evacuating the region from Christians will, in the long run, serve the interests of Israel, which can be attributed to the following factors:

1. Israel views Christians of Palestine as a bridge between the Orient and the Occident, and it would be easier for the Israelis to crackdown on Palestinians if Palestine were void of Christians.
2. Although Christianity was revealed way after Judaism, Christians are still viewed as descendants of Assyrians, Aramaics and Chaldeans, whose civilizations preceded the Jewish one. And evicting Palestine from Christians will sever connections between the said civilizations and the region, something that would sustain allegations of the Israelis that the Jewish civilization is authentic and one of the most ancient civilizations in the region.
3. Evicting the Middle East from Christians and creating several Islamic mini-states in the region will boost the Israelis' claim for declaring Israel as a Jewish state.

### **Palestinian Christians' Perception of Themselves and their Historic Role**

It is a fatal mistake to perceive Christians as one bloc with a uniform view or opinion. Indeed, several clergy and lay Christians state that they have more in common than differences. Their attitudes lurch between modernity, liberalism and conservatism or bigotry. They acknowledge their affiliation to their land and the Arab Islamic culture, and also are proud of their distinguished and pioneer role in forging this culture through acculturation with their Muslim brethren. They have all along strived alongside with them against the successive occupation of Palestine, the last of which was the Israeli colonial occupation. In this regard, the Palestinian resistance included several Christian leaders and politicians who were in the avant-garde defending the rights of Palestinians for independence and communicating their just cause to the entire world. Moreover, Palestinian Christians were proud to adopt a “**liberation theology**” that was conducive to the drafting of Kairos

Palestine document “A Moment of Truth” in 2009, and after the 1985 South African Kairos document. The said document laid the common ground for all Christians to adopt a unified stance and to refute Israeli allegations that Palestine is the Promised Land based on what they perceive as a heavenly promise. Palestinian Christians do not and will not ask for external protection out of their strong conviction that they are indigenous citizens of the region and constitute an integral part of the society as a whole. They are Palestinians as their Christian brethren in Syria are Syrians, or those in Lebanon are Lebanese. Israel has an interest in making Palestinian Christians feel alienated which will help create sedition between Christians and Muslims in Palestine on the one hand, and will expedite their emigration on the other hand.

Nevertheless, Palestinian Christians and like their Christian brethren in the region, although to a lesser extent, are worried about their existence. Indeed, the emergence of radical Islamic movements and the impasse in the political process have further aggravated their worry and concern. Massacres that are being committed by radical groups in Syria and Iraq against different ethnic and religious minorities have elicited a great concern and pessimism on their part about their existence and put them under the specter that the arrival of the radicalization wave in Palestine is merely a matter of time. According to some Christian leaders, that although differences in attitudes and opinions among Muslims, moderate Muslims and because of the sweeping wave of radicalization, tend to exercise a sort of self-censorship to avoid criticism on the part of their Muslim peers which negatively reflects on their attitude towards Christians. What aggravates the problem, is the fact that a Muslim is usually neither reprimanded nor convicted if an aggression on a religious ground is committed against a Christian.

All the above factors make Christians feel alienated in their homeland and think of emigrating.

In 2017, a Palestinian pollster conducted a poll on a random sample of 1200 Palestinian adults in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem. The poll that targeted both Christians and Muslims aimed at probing attitudes of Palestinian Christians vis-à-vis several issues on the one hand, and the attitudes of their Muslim counterparts towards the same issues on the other hand. Some responses on both sides were close, but many showed a large discrepancy especially when it came to their feeling of belongingness to the Palestinian people or to the Arab nation. Indeed, Christians have expressed much less affiliation in this regard due, and as mentioned earlier, to their conviction that the conflict has shifted from being political to a religious one. In such a case, Christians would feel alienated and find no foothold in the struggle which negatively affects their sense of belongingness.

When Christians were asked to what degree they were proud to be Palestinian, only 3.1% of them said they were very proud whereas 17.2% said they somewhat proud. However, 9.4% said they were somewhat not proud and 1.6% were not proud at all. Shockingly, 64.1% of the Christian respondents stated they would not consider themselves Palestinian. When Muslims were asked the same question, 64.5% stated they were very proud to be Palestinian whereas 33.4% said they were

somewhat proud. However, 0.9% were somewhat not proud, 0.6% were not proud at all and another 0.6% said they did not consider themselves Palestinian. These grave data reflect frustration, desperation and the plight of Palestinian Christians who feel alienated on all levels. **Palestinian Christians are rejected and looked down upon by the Israelis for their being Arabs, resented by fanatic Muslim fellow citizens and have no control of their own holy places that are under the domination of foreign clergy.**

When Christians were asked to what degree they were proud to be Arabs 23.4% said they were very proud as opposed to 51.8% on the Muslim side. Surprisingly, 57.8% of the Christian respondents stated they were somewhat proud to be Arabs as opposed to 36.7% on the Muslim side. **This reflects the fact that Palestinian Christians feel more safe and secure to be part of the Arab nation than to be just part of the Palestinian people, especially after the emergence of fundamental Islamic groups like ISIS. In other words, this will make them feel that their being part of the Arab nation would make them feel less fragile and vulnerable. However, 4.7% and 3.0% of Christians and Muslims respectively say they are not proud to be Arabs at all and 3.1% and 0.6% of Christians and Muslims respectively stated they did not consider themselves as Arabs. This higher percent of 3.1% for Christians as opposed to that for Muslims (0.6%) is due to the fact that some Christians living in Palestine are from a non-Arab origin i.e. Syriac, Armenian...etc.**

When asked how many times they were discriminated upon because they were Christian, 6.3% said they were never discriminated upon whereas 37.5% of them said they were rarely discriminated upon, 39.1% most often and 3.1% all the time. When Muslims were asked the same question, more than half (55.3%) said they were never discriminated upon whereas 33.7% said rarely, 5.4% most often and 5.4 % all the time. The result of 37.5% and 33.7% for Christians and Muslims respectively is quite baffling. For Christians, this percentage can be understandable given the rising fundamentalism in the entire region. However, the only way to explain the relatively high percentage (33.7%) for Muslims who say they were rarely discriminated upon is the fact that there are many institutions and organizations in the Palestinian territory led by local Christians or internationals that would make a positive discrimination in favor of Christians in terms of employment at the expense of their Muslim counterparts. Indeed, and before the deadly September 11<sup>th</sup> events in the USA and the emergence of ISIS, international organizations had never considered religion at all when it came to employment. It seems that some institutions cunningly and covertly take the religion of an applicant into consideration. Needless to mention the many private schools affiliated to different churches and denominations which subtly prefer to recruit Christian students than Muslim ones which make the latter feel this kind of discrimination.

*Despite the gloomy picture for many of them, Palestinian Christians and like their Christian brethren in the Arab World have avoided committing three fatal mistakes: First, they avoided seclusion from other components of the society, something that could have been detrimental to their existence. Secondly, they have avoided servile subservience to the West, for they all along*

*perceived themselves first and foremost as Arabs and had more in common with their Muslim brethren than that with the West. Thirdly, they have sought integration in their own societies rather than assimilation, for the latter would pose a grave threat to their identity.*

### **Christians in the Discourse of Islamic Movements**

In general, the Islamic discourse towards non-Muslims in Palestine is characterized by intolerance and are viewed by them as one bloc , despite recurrent calls on the part of political and religious officials that both Muslims or Christians form one people with one fate and destiny, and that Christians compose an essential component of the Palestinian social motif. This bigoted Islamic discourse perceives the other as a source of the threat. Palestinian Christians are frequently dubbed as crusaders and many view them as a foreign entity. Many people want them to be citizens with full duties but not with full rights, which makes them seek a haven where they can enjoy full citizenship. What upsets Palestinian Christians most is the provision of the 2002 draft of the Palestinian constitution (amended in 2003) that stipulates that “Islam is the official religion of the state.”

This is a blunt discrimination against Christians and indirectly makes them belong to the “Dhimmi” (i.e. non-Muslim citizens living under Muslim protection) category. Some view Christians as decadents because they drink alcohol and their women as indecent because they do not wear the head cover. Although Christians suffer from the occupation and hardship like their Muslim brethren, many people associate oriental Christians to the West which is considered Christian only by name and is explicitly biased to Israel. This, of course, will aggravate hostility against local Christians. What worsens the situation for Palestinian Christians is the existence of millions of Christian Zionists who fully support Israel. Most recently, Israel and through very few Christian clergies, has attempted to revive the “Aramaic” spirit among Christians, something that has been rejected by almost the entire Christian population in Palestine.

### **Initiatives and Institutions That Deal With Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue**

Besides the aforementioned **Kairos** initiative, there are quite few organizations and centers that deal with interfaith dialogue to foster mutual understanding among the faithful of the three monotheistic religions. Yet, they emphasize first and foremost Christian-Muslim dialogue. Those centers include;

- Palestinian Center for Research and Cultural Dialogue-PCRD  
Beit Sahour  
[info@pcrd.ps](mailto:info@pcrd.ps)  
[www.pcrd.ps](http://www.pcrd.ps)
- Diyar -Bethlehem

- Adam Center-Gaza
- Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center -Sabeel-Jerusalem
- Al-liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land-Bethlehem
- Wi'am Center -Bethlehem

### **The Palestinian Authority (PA) and Christians in Palestine.**

Despite the irritating legislation stated in article (6) of Chapter (1) of the Palestinian Constitution draft which stipulates that Islam shall be the official religion of the state and that other monotheistic religions to be respected, Christians in Palestine still strongly believe that the PA is genuinely concerned for their existence and deeply worried about the accelerating decline in their number. **Yet, their cultural and intellectual presence far exceeds their demographic one.** Indeed, one may encounter Christians in the political, social, economic, diplomatic and civil society domains, where they play a conspicuous and outstanding role.

Upon a decree issued by President Mahmoud Abbas on October 26, 2008 the “**PA Islamic-Christian Council for Jerusalem and the Holy Places** “ came into being. The said council is headed by Dr. Hanna Issa, a Christian and specialist in International Law and member of Fatah Revolutionary Council. The council’s mandate is mainly dedicated to defend and protect Islamic and Christian places in Jerusalem and promote Islamic Christian Dialogue.

On May 24, 2012, President Mahmoud Abbas issued another decree of establishing the “ **Higher Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs**” whose mandate is following up with all matters related to churches affairs, promoting interfaith dialogue, finding solutions to the Christian emigration, exposing Israeli measures against religious institutions and participating in writing new curricula that promote dialogue and tolerance. The committee is headed by the Christian **Hanna Ameera** a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Presidential Committee of Churches Affairs include other Christians like Dr. Ramzi Khoury the head of the National fund, Mr. Ziad Bandak the President’s advisor, Dr. Shukri Bishara the minister of finance, Mrs. Rola Ma’aya’a the minister of tourism and antiquities, Dr. Kholous De’ibis the Palestinian ambassador to Germany, Mr. Issa Qassissieh The Plestinian Ambassador to the Vatican, Dr. Bernard Sabella a member of the Palestine Legislative Council( PLC) and Mrs. Vera Baboun the former mayor of Bethlehem and Mr. Mousa Hadid the mayor of Ramallah. On March 30, 2015 the committee has created the sub-committee for research studies and included Pastor Mitri Raheb, Father Firas Areeda, Dr. Versan Aghabikian, Mr. Sami El-Yousef and Mr. Yousef Dhaher. It is noteworthy to mention that Brigadaire General, Fatah member and citizen of Beit Sahour **Mr. Basem Badra** is the Executive Director of the above-mentioned Presidential committee.

However, other Christians hold the position of either minister or ambassador to many countries. They include Mrs. Abeer Odeh the minister of economy , Mai Keileh the Palestinian ambassador

to Italy, Mr. Marwan Toubasi the Palestinian ambassador to Greece and Mr. Fouad Kukali the Palestinian ambassador to Romania. Needless to mention the intellectual Jerusalemite and the veteran diplomat **Afeef Safieh** who previously held several positions including the Palestinian head of representative offices in Geneva and Holland, the Palestinian commissioner to England, head of PLO office in Washington and Palestinian Ambassador to Moscow.

There is no religious law promulgated by the PA, yet the **Denominations Law** no. (2) for the year 1938 was enacted and promulgated in the Jordanian Gazette no. 594 on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1938. The said law stipulated that non-Muslim denominations existing in Trans-Jordan had the right to establish their own councils yet to investigate cases in accordance with the provisions of the laws that was in force at the time. It also stipulated that the Council of ministers then would appoint the head and members of each denomination council based on the nomination of the spiritual leader of that denomination . Denomination councils were given free hand to deal with personal status issues of the members of each denomination. **This explains why ecclesiastical courts in the West Bank and Jordan enforce the Jordanian law which is mainly based on the Islamic law “ Shari’a” . This is manifested explicitly in devolution of inheritance where a woman is entitled to only one-half of her brother’s share.**

The other law regarding the Orthodox Church is the Jordanian law ( provided that Jordan ruled the West Bank from 1948-1967) no. 27 that was passed in 1958 and promulgated in the Gazette on June 10, 1958 which stipulates that the church must create a joint religious-lay council that may supervise the church budget and other administrative and financial affairs. It also stipulates that the annual balance sheet be publicized and that at least two Arab Bishops be ordained. Unfortunately, consecutive church leaders failed to adhere to this law and until this very moment, neither Jordanian nor Palestinian officials were able to pressure church leaders to put this law in force.

### **Sense Of Alienation On The Part of Christians**

It is noteworthy to mention that the alienation felt by many Christians or that imposed on them by some Muslims can mainly be ascribed to the ignorance of both Muslims and Christians of the Christian history and heritage in Palestine and the entire region. Indeed, school curricula are almost void of such texts, and history texts leap directly from the Roman era to the Islamic one while skipping the early Christian and Byzantine eras. This will naturally make kids on both sides believe that Christianity never has and will never be an authentic part of the Orient.

This concern about the Christian existence was triggered by late President Yasser Arafat who initiated the official observation of Christian holidays and would always invite Christian representatives to escort him to regional and international forums.

According to the most recent statistics provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) after conducting a census in late December 2017, the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem has turned out to be 4,780,978 of whom only 46,850 are Christian. While the overwhelming majority ( 45,712 people) of those Christians live in the West Bank including East Jerusalem, only 1138 people live in the Gaza Strip. They are distributed in the different governorates as follows: Jenin 2699, Tubas and the northern Jordan Valley 54, Tulkarem 21, Nablus 601, Qalqilya 11, Salfit 4, Ramallah 10,225, Jericho and the Jordan Valley 285, East Jerusalem 8558, Bethlehem( including the adjacent towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour where the majority of the population is Christian) 23,165, Hebron 59, Gaza North 20, Gaza City 1082, Deir Al-Balah 8, Khanyounis 16, Rafah 12.

### **Christian Denominations**

Palestinian Christians are mainly of Arab descent, yet there are some who are not like those who belong to the Syriac and Armenian churches who fled genocides perpetrated against them by the Ottoman Turks in 1915. The largest segment of Christians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem belong to the Greek Orthodox church followed by those who belong to the Roman Catholic church and the Melkite Greek Catholic church. The percentage of Christians who belong to the different churches is as follows:

Greek Orthodox 40.7%

Roman Catholic 35.7%

Greek Catholic 9.3%

Anglican 6.3%

Syriac 2.5%

Lutheran 2.5%

Other i.e. Coptic, Armenian....etc 3.0%

According to figures provided by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of Christians in Israel proper totalled up to 170,000 in 2016 which constitutes 2.2% of the total population of seven million Israelis. However, 80% of those Christians are Arabs. The following figures represent the number of Christians in the biggest Christian agglomerations inside Israel including Jerusalem( both the western and eastern parts of the city):

Nazareth 22,300

Haifa 15,100

Jerusalem( West and East) 12,300

Shfa Amro 9,900

The Christian's dwindling number and the fact that Christians celebrate religious holidays more than once because of the difference between the Gregorian calendar and the Julian one, made the Palestinian Authority (PA) hesitate to observe their holidays especially the Easter holiday in particular. This year's holidays of Easter have witnessed a sort of commotion and resentment on the part of Palestinian Christians since the PA has abstained from observing Easter as a national holiday provided that it had been observed at some point in the past. One day, late President Yasser Arafat was requested by Christian leaders and officials to observe Easter as a national holiday . His answer was: " You first ought to agree on one single holiday ". This was a clear message to Christians on his part to unite before addressing the PA in this regard.

In his article entitled: "The Future of Christians in Palestine: From Existence to Presence" Rifat Qassis makes a clear distinction between the existence of Christians and their presence. While their existence has to do with their number, their presence has to do with their activity and role in the society which is obviously far ahead of their existence.

Some figures and data may manifest the substantial Christian presence in Palestine:

- In the field of education, the church along with affiliated institutions run schools that employ over 2500 persons and serve more than 25000 students.
- Christian institutions run several income generating training and vocational centres.
- There are several hospitals, polyclinics, rehabilitation centres and nursing homes run by Christian affiliated institutions.
- On the social level, there are many women centres, youth centres, scout troupes and charitable societies run by Christian institutions on a voluntary basis.
- In the political arena, Christians hold minister positions and are represented in both the Palestine National Council (PNC) and the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC). They also serve as ambassadors to several countries and as mayors of some towns and cities including Ramallah and Bethlehem.
- More than 60% of the Christians are below the age of 40 , and almost 50% of them hold a university degree. Moreover, almost 50% of the Christians occupy high ranking positions at non-governmental organizations, and almost 30% of them work at Christian institutions. More than 30% of the Christians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem are relatively of high-income people.

### **Educational Institutions**

One may find several Christian missionary schools in Israel proper, Gaza Strip, the West bank and Jerusalem. Those schools belong to the different churches existing in the Holy Land where all teach Arabic and a high quality English as a second language. They believe that English is highly essential and necessary for a student to fulfill his twelve-year program of study. However, many of those schools offer a second foreign language teaching besides English including French like colleges des frères and Saint Joseph nuns schools, German like Talitha Kumi and Evangelical Lutheran Schools, Italian like Terra Sancta schools, and even Spanish like the “Virgen del Pilar” i.e. Spanish school in East Jerusalem. While the majority of students are Christian in some of these schools, in some others the case is the other way round i.e. the majority of students are Muslim. The latter case stems from the fact that because of the little number of Christian students as a result of the waning number of Christians in general or because many upper and higher class Muslim families feel it is more prestigious to put their kids in those schools that usually offer a better quality education.

However, **Bethlehem University** is the only Catholic university in the Lasallian tradition is registered in Palestine. It was founded in 1973 ( which became the first university registered in the West Bank then) by the Vatican with some financial assistance on its part and entitled the De La Salle brothers for the administration. The university has approximately 3000 and 250 undergraduate and postgraduate students respectively. Almost 75% of its students are females which could be ascribed to the fact that the Palestinian society is conservative in that it allows their sons receive education abroad and puts restrictions on females. In addition, Bethlehem university and unlike other sister universities do not offer Medicine, Engineering, Pharmacy and Law which makes less attractive to male students. Being a liberal art school, Bethlehem university has only the faculties of Science, Nursing and Health Sciences , Humanities, Business Administration, Education and Hotel Management and Tourism. It offers four Masters programs namely, International relations and Development (MICAD) in cooperation with a network of six international institutions and organizations led by the University of Pavia-Italy through the faculty of Business Administration, Biotechnology program through the faculty of Science and in cooperation with Palestine Polytechnic University of Hebron , Masters in social work through the faculty of Humanities and masters in tourism studies through the faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism.

Bethlehem University is the only university that offers the mandatory course of “Religious Studies” . It is a university requirement course for Christian and Muslim students where they spend half of the course studying Islam and spend the other half studying Christianity or vice versa. The course is usually taught by two instructors each is usually expert in one of these two religions. This course gives the opportunity to both sides to know more of the other’s religion and thus promotes mutual understanding and dialogue. Indeed, it is more for the benefit of Muslim students than for their Christian peers for the latter are exposed to Islam almost everywhere i.e. curricula, media and the

entire culture in general. In addition, the university offers the optional “Friendship” program where both Muslims and Christians participate to promote interfaith dialogue.

### **Handicraft Industry of Olive Wood and Mother of Pearl**

The handicraft industry of olive wood and mother of pearl is indigenous in Christian populated areas in Palestine. Bethlehem in particular ranks first in this industry where the majority of artisans are Christian. Indeed, olive wood industry dates back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD with the arrival of the missionaries to the Holy Land and Franciscan monks began the manufacturing of rosaries from olive kernels. This industry along with that of the mother of pearl has then developed into the production of religious figures marketed to Christian tourists who visit Bethlehem. The mother of pearl industry is disappearing and it is hard to find an artisan these days working with it. This is ascribed to the fact that mother of pearl handicrafts are much more expensive than their olive wood counterparts, and local traders started to import pre-fabricated staples from China at a very competitive price. Nowadays, almost all Christian artisans work in olive wood industry that became part of the Palestinian heritage. However, this industry has been plagued by numerous crises , such as lack of olive wood as a result of blockades by the Israelis on some areas, building the settlements that led to the uprooting of thousands of olive trees as well as the intentional and spiteful uprooting of Palestinians’ olive trees on the part of the settlers.

The outbreak of Al-Aqsa Intifada on September 28, 2000, gave a big blow to the Palestinian traditional industry. By the end of 2002 ( the year where the siege of the Church of Nativity and the Jenin refugee camp massacre took place) , almost 30% of olive wood factories and workshops had closed down. This has negatively reflected on the livelihood of hundreds of especially Christian Bethlehemites who found no other way but to emigrate.

### **Christian-Christian Relations**

In general, Christian - Christian relations have improved in time and started to take new dimensions, although, relations among Christians of the different denominations are characterized by harmony, **and relations among religious leaders are bound to the balance between local and external agendas.** Most often, expatriate religious leaders attempt, and through their posts, to serve the interests of their respective countries. This will naturally create a gap between Churches and their followers. Indeed, the conflict of interest between Churches and their followers varies from a church to another and from a denomination to another. In some towns that are most intensely inhabited by Christians, one will find a large denomination dominating a smaller one. This can ironically be manifested in towns where the mayor has to be Christian according to the status quo, yet an individual from a small denomination cannot become a mayor. However, despite their

relative independency, local churches have to carry out a hierarchy restructuring to cope with global and regional changes.

As mentioned earlier, the Greek Orthodox Church's adoption of the old Julian calendar, both Catholics and Greek Orthodox faithful celebrate Christmas and Easter at different dates. This provokes a sort of discord and disharmony between Christians at a time their unity is desperately needed. The most recent and historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Cyril of Russia has revived hopes for Christian unity and towards sustaining their presence in the Holy Land.

In another event, and almost five hundred years after **Martin Luther** nailed his 95 theses to a church door, Pope Francis and the Rt. Reverend Dr. Bishop Munib A. Younan , the head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and the President of the Lutheran World Federation, met in Lund Cathedral in Sweden and signed a joint declaration of reconciliation on October 31, 2016. During that meeting Pope Francis stated:” With great gratitude we acknowledge that the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the church's life”.

These kinds of rapprochement on the part of different churches will definitely reflect positively on Palestinian Christians who are distributed among the different churches and will be a step forward towards a better amity and harmony.

### **Strife Of Christians To Retrieve Sold Property**

Struggle of Palestinian Christians is a two-dimensional one. While they battle for their independence as Palestinians on the one hand, they strive to retrieve the church property which they believe it is their own on the other hand. Indeed, the Greek Orthodox Church owns some 30% of Jerusalem's walled old city and shares the largest part of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher with other churches. In recent days, many selling deals on the part of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate were disclosed which triggered commotion and disputes between the Patriarchate and its flock on the one hand, and among Christians themselves on the other hand. The deals caused a divide between loyalists and mavericks to Greek Patriarch Theophilos III who admitted some of those deals.

It turned out that the Patriarchate sold lands in the luxurious beachside cities of Jaffa and Caesarea to companies registered in the Caribbean. In other deals, Israeli investors have purchased property in luxurious areas in West Jerusalem. It is expected that when the lease on several tracts runs out, those companies will decide how to deal with the apartments built on those tracts of land. The most recent deal disclosed was what is known to be “Rehavia” deal . Rehavia is a Jerusalem neighbourhood where the lands belonging to the Patriarchate were leased to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in the early 1950s for a period of 99 years, and the JNF wanted to sign another lease with the Patriarchate at an early stage. So far, Patriarch Theophilos III is dismissing the idea of

forming a new synod composed of clergy and local Palestinians to oversee what is going on in the tubes and behind the scenes.

**Recommendations:**

1. To change school curricula and history textbooks in particular and inject in them topics on the Christian presence in Palestine that spanned for six centuries before the arrival of Islam. Curricula should also highlight the essential role that many Christian pioneers played at the intellectual, cultural and political levels.
2. To promote Islamic- Christian dialogue, not only between religious leaders, but also in schools, colleges, universities and civil society organizations so that co-existence become a dominating norm of life.
3. To appeal to formal and non-formal media to promote co-existence by hosting clergy and lay people in talk shows pertaining to co-existence.
4. To nullify article (6) of Chapter (1) of the Palestinian Constitution draft which stipulates that Islam shall be the official religion of the state since this tacitly indicates that Muslims have more leverage than other Palestinians.
5. To promulgate legislations to conform to the religious pluralism in Palestine.
6. To intensify Christian - Christian dialogue in order to create a higher degree of harmony among both spiritual leaders and the faithful themselves and to achieve better development.

7. To create a common ground between both the national and religious discourses to promote national unity among all Palestinians and promote national identity.
8. To enhance connection and communication between the Arab Oriental Church and Western Churches, in an attempt to change the stereotyped image about the Arab Islamic Orient.
9. To inspire Christians to get more involved in formal institutions, civil society and political parties so that they become more influential in the public sphere.
10. To provide moral and financial support to the Christians in Palestine, in order to alleviate waves of emigration on their part.
11. To establish a Christian Council composed of lay people so that Christians have a unified attitude vis-à-vis various civil issues and political issues.
12. To enhance joint efforts between the church and the PA towards promoting and facilitating the services rendered by organizations working in the fields of development and education.
13. To have the church and the PA work hand in hand to find ways to curb the accelerating wave of Christian emigration.
14. To hold workshops and launch lobbying campaigns in an attempt to have their sold church property retrieved. Also, to push hard towards forming a synod composed of lay people and the clergy to supervise and oversee matters of concern especially those related to the church property.