

ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY, & THE END OF PALESTINE

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Detail of Ottoman Syria from the Cedid Atlas Tercümesi, 1803. The Cedid Atlas is the first published atlas in the Muslim world, and only 50 copies were printed at the press, as such it is one of the rarest printed atlases of historical value and of great importance to Middle Eastern history. Source: U.S. Library of Congress's Geography & Map Division, via Wikimedia Commons.

The international community pretty much agrees on the preferred solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: two states for two peoples living side by side. On the ground, Jews and Arabs are less certain. A recent Pew study found that Israeli Jews are not convinced that an independent State of Palestine will ever live at peace beside Israel (43% yes/45% no). Israeli Arabs are only slightly more hopeful (50%/30%), while Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza—the population actually able to build a Palestinian state—are far more negative. According to an April 2016 poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), about half of all Palestinians oppose the two-state model in principle, and roughly 60% believe that the concept is no longer viable. Only 30% want to preserve the Oslo Accords at all.

This philosophical gap between international diplomats and local communities bodes ill for the future of the peace process. Diplomats will keep pushing, and people on the ground will keep resisting. If the situation doesn't change, the concept of Palestine—a secular, democratic Arab state in the West Bank and Gaza—will soon be dead. And if that happens, the population most likely to suffer will be the small and already-beleaguered Palestinian Christian community.

Many articles have been written on the imminent collapse of the two-state paradigm, usually with a focus on the growth of Jewish settlements. Far less has been written about attitudes and conflicts inside the Palestinian territories themselves—conflicts between secularists and Islamists, Muslims and Christians, those who

want to coexist with Israel and those who want to destroy it. Yet it is these conflicts that are most likely to decide whether Palestine lives or dies, and if it lives, how Palestine will treat the Jews and Christians who are living nearby.

Conventional wisdom says that the main obstacle to peace is Israel's preservation of Jewish settlements inside the West Bank. These settlements, we're told, inhibit the establishment of a viable State of Palestine. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran cleric from Bethlehem and author of *Faith in the Face of Empire*, echoes this opinion: "The Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank has made the aim of establishing a Palestinian state a de facto impossibility."

The cancerous evil of settlements is a constant theme in Palestinian Christian rhetoric. A group of distinguished clerics gathered at the Carter Center in April 2016 for a conference called "Pursuing Peace and Strengthening Presence" where they announced, "The continuing expansion of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands increasingly dims the hopes and realistic prospects for a two-state solution and is a major threat to peace."

Another seminal Palestinian Christian document, *Kairos Palestine*, repeats this theme:

Israeli settlements ravage our land in the name of God and in the name of force, controlling our natural resources, including water and agricultural land, thus depriving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and constituting an obstacle to any political solution.

So says conventional wisdom. But anyone with a cursory knowledge of the region's history knows that Jewish-Arab conflict in the Holy Land predated the birth of Israeli settlements by at least fifty years; that Jews accepted the two-states-for-two-peoples formula as early as 1947; that Arabs didn't accept it until the early 1990s; that 95% of the Palestinian population already lives under the control of an indigenous Arab government, the Palestinian Authority (PA); that even using maximum estimates, Jewish settlers make up only 12% of the population under the PA; and that in Israel, by contrast, Arabs make up about 20% of the population.

It is hard to take seriously the claim that settlements prevent peace. And yet Palestinian Christians continue to raise that standard, and only that standard, using it to drive a wedge between their Western co-religionists and the State of Israel. Gatherings like those at the Carter Center and Christ at the Checkpoint, a biennial evangelical conference in Bethlehem, have worked hard to convince Christians in the US and Europe that settlements are the main impediment to peace.

The end of Palestine may be near, but if Palestine dies it won't be because of settlements. One need only glance at recent polling data to see that the biggest obstacles to statehood are disunity in Palestinian society, outrage at Palestinian leaders, and a fundamental aversion to the idea of a Jewish state living next door.

Many Westerners don't know that Palestinians already have a government of their own. Even fewer know that the Palestinians actually



have two governments: the Fatah-controlled PLO in the West Bank and the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Hamas in Gaza. These two governments hate each other, despite the best efforts of third party intermediaries. Everything else aside, Palestine will never rise if these two factions don't reconcile and cooperate; or, better yet, if the PLO can't defeat Hamas and expunge them from the territories completely. But more on that later.

Life under both Palestinian governments is hard. The April 2016 PCPSR survey found that one-half of West Bank Palestinians and two-thirds of Gazans describe their living situation as "bad" or "very bad." About one-fifth of West Bankers and half of Gazans want to emigrate, mostly (70%) because of poor economic and educational opportunities, religious

extremism, or the absence of freedom and security. By contrast, only about 20% want to leave because of the Israeli occupation.

The Palestinian Authority is a mess. No less than 80% of its citizens believe that their government is corrupt. Only 17% believe there is freedom of the press. Public approval for President Mahmoud Abbas has dropped to 36%, and two-thirds demand his resignation. Shockingly, only 45% of Palestinians see the founding of the PA in the 1990s as an accomplishment. More (48%) see it as a burden. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority of Palestinians (76%) feel that the Arab world doesn't care about them at all. Feeling poorly led at home and abandoned abroad, the Palestinians are more and more inclined to commit desperate acts.

The penchant for violence remains strong in Palestinian society. Majorities in both the West Bank and Gaza support the prospect of an armed intifada and believe that it would help advance Palestinian national rights in ways that negotiations cannot. About 60% support random stabbing attacks against Jewish civilians—yes, civilians—in Israel. Most worrisome is the fact that Palestinian millennials, the so-called "Oslo Generation," are the least supportive of the two-state solution, most likely to support an armed intifada, and most supportive of stabbing attacks against Israeli civilians.

The Palestinian tendency toward violence flows from a basic opposition to the existence of a Jewish state in the Middle East. To most Palestinians, the State of Israel (*all* of Israel, not just the pre-1967 version) was created by the West to solve



Europe's Jewish problem and disempower the Arabs at the same time. An overwhelming majority believes that Israel's ultimate goal is to annex their territories and deny their rights or expel them. For this reason, a full 60% say that even after the creation of a State of Palestine and resolution of all outstanding issues they will not recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people. Trained to see Israel as a colonial outpost filled with Europeans, this group finds the idea of "normalizing" relations with the Jews fundamentally repugnant.

For most Palestinians, Jewish settlements in the West Bank are just the tip of the imperial spear. What prevents peace in the Holy Land is not Israel's policies but Israel itself. Palestine needs to be purified, brought back to its *status quo ante*. Only then will the Palestinian people

regain the freedom they once enjoyed.

Palestinian Christians agree with their Muslim brethren about the intrinsic immorality of Israel. The *Kairos Palestine* document affirms that, "The West sought to make amends for what Jews had endured in the countries of Europe, but it made amends on our account and in our land. They tried to correct an injustice and the result was a new injustice."

"It was, after all," writes Mitri Raheb, "the British Empire that planted Israel in the Middle East, and it is the Western world that continues to sustain Israel militarily, financially, and ideologically. This is what I call ... empire."

Raheb rails against the "myth of a Judeo-Christian tradition" and

its "subtle colonial ideology." He argues that the Jewish people of today were invented in the late 19th century and cleverly linked to the Jews of biblical times to strengthen the colonial project. "This," he writes, "is precisely the crux of the problem: the natives of the land have been made strangers in order to make room for an invented people to occupy the land."

On a recent trip to Bethlehem, I heard similar rhetoric from Raheb's colleagues at Christ at the Checkpoint (CATC), a Western-facing billboard for Jesus-infused Palestinian nationalism and ground zero for a small but vocal group of Palestinian evangelicals who are working hard to undermine Christian support for Israel. While plagued by a few radicals, most of the CATC crowd are more docile than other Palestinian activists: they

condemn terrorism, reject anti-Semitism, and call for peace with Israel. They tend to vote on the right side of public opinion surveys and are quite possibly the most Zionist Arabs in the Middle East. It's a fact that often gets them labeled as normalizers by their angry neighbors, which in turn forces them to talk tougher in order to reinforce their ever-precarious street cred.

That said, the CATC conference in March 2016 was an offensive overreach. The theme was "The Gospel in the Face of Religious Extremism," and in tedious sessions like "Christian Zionism as Imperial Theology," the organizers sought to draw comparisons between Islamic terrorists, Jewish settlers, and Christian Zionists. Straw men were aplenty. Attendees heard about hordes of shofar-blowing evangelicals who support settlements in the name of eschatology and endorse Israel's oppression of the indigenous church. But these straw men only served to create a new "other" for justice-minded Christians to hate.

As in previous years, self-criticism was completely absent. The speakers blustered on with seemingly no awareness of Palestinian public opinion, heaping all the blame for their sorrows on Israel and none on themselves or their leaders. Though "speaking truth to power" was a major theme, the organizers invited dignitaries from the PA to attend the conference and cheerfully applauded them.

The mark of any healthy society is its ability to reflect on its own shortcomings and resolve to do better. Unfortunately, CATC reflects a broader lack of self-reflection in Palestinian society that has until now prevented a real vision for the future to



take root. It's a problem that Palestinian Christians must address head-on. And fast.

Palestinian Christians may be outspoken in their nationalism, but they're not stupid. They may shout their bona fides from the housetops, but they do so as self-aware minorities (less than 2%) in an overwhelmingly Muslim society. They see their population rapidly shrinking in relation to their Muslim neighbors. They see the rising popularity of Islamist movements like Hamas and disturbing levels of sympathy (25%) for the Islamic State. They know that Article 4 of the Palestinian Basic Law, the country's proposed constitution, promises that the future State of Palestine will be an Islamic polity governed by the principles of *Shari'a*. Meanwhile, they see what is happening to their Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. They know that they are different, and that when push comes to shove that difference could get them killed.

Christians inside the territories are hostages in their own society. In private conversations, many express fear toward Muslims, positive feelings toward Jews and Israel, and envy for Arabs citizens living inside the Jewish state. Many even hope for the collapse of

the PA so that the West Bank can once again be reintegrated with Israel.

But Christians' fear of Muslim neighbors and a desire for equal status are nothing new. In fact, it was this motivation that caused Syrian and Lebanese Christians to pioneer the Arab nationalist movement a century ago. By emphasizing the Arab rather than Islamic character of their societies, these Christian intellectuals and their Muslim contemporaries succeeded in razing the caliphal model of Middle Eastern governance and laying a new, non-sectarian foundation for political life in the region.

The problem with Arab nationalism was that it was artificial—there was never a pan-Arab nation, only a regional mosaic of ethnicities and cultures that happened to speak Arabic. Hostility against Israel (and its inverse, solidarity with the Palestinians) thus became a key ingredient for unifying the disparate peoples who flocked under the movement's thin ideological banner. To be an Arab nationalist was to hate Israel and its imperial backers. No questions.

But the Arabic language and anti-Zionism were not enough to sustain the movement, and

its inherent weakness was exposed when leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafez al-Assad, and Saddam Hussein had no choice but to brutally suppress Marxist, Islamist, and non-Arab national movements that challenged their legitimacy. It was the only way to keep a lid on things and maintain the façade of Arab unity. And so began a cycle of government crackdowns and popular uprisings that have continued across the Middle East until recent times.

Today Arab nationalism is all but discredited and dead, having been replaced by Islam in the 1970s and 1980s as the more authentic source of cultural identity and political community. The would-be State of Palestine is one of the last places where secular Arab nationalism still survives. But it doesn't go unchallenged. In fact, the Palestinian quarrel over the two-state solution reflects a larger quarrel in the region between those still clinging to Arab nationalism and those turning back to various forms of political Islam, the historic baseline of Middle Eastern political life. The rivalry between old-guard PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas and upstart Hamas CEO Ismail Haniyeh exemplifies this ideological and generational conflict in a microcosm.

Middle Eastern Christians will always prefer Arab nationalism over political Islam, and it isn't hard to see why. Palestinian Christian advocacy stems from the same impulse that motivated early Arab nationalists like Michel Aflaq, George Antonius, and Ibrahim al-Yaziji: the desire to live in a society that protects and treats them as equals.

But the catastrophic failure of the PA to foster a free society and compete with the rising tide

of Islamism only underscores the broader failure of Arab nationalism. Many Palestinians feel that the two-state solution isn't just unworkable, it's undesirable. The possibility that Palestine will be overrun by those seeking to establish an Islamic state overtop the ruins of yet another nationalist regime (think Syria, Iraq, Libya) is a frightening one indeed.

This fear drives some Palestinian Christians to work even harder in the name of secularism. It drives others toward the "one-state solution": a single, binational Jewish and Arab "state of all its citizens" between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. This proposal, which is increasingly popular on the Palestinian street, is symptomatic of a basic (though ironic) trust in Jewish governance over the Islamic alternative. For Jews, the one-state model is almost always a non-starter as it effectively means the end of Israel as a Jewish state.

Salvaging the vision of a secular Palestine living peacefully beside a secular Israel remains the best solution for all parties. But Palestinian Christians who carry that vision must abandon their obsessive focus on Jewish settlements as the cause of all evil and address the outrage and despair that grips the Palestinian street. The appeal of Islam is too strong to let this outrage go unchecked, and only a more compelling vision will win the day.

Secular society offers the best and most authentic future for Palestinian Christians, but that society will only arise when their leaders frame it in positive terms. No longer can they construct Palestinian identity as a negative reaction to Jewish aggression. They must articulate what Palestinian society is *for*,

not what it is *against*. Better yet, they must explain what Palestinian society *is* and what it's all about. What happens after Israel uproots the settlements? What happens when all political issues are settled? The fact that a significant majority of Palestinians still plan to deny Israel's existence means that their leaders have serious work to do—work that has absolutely nothing to do with Jewish settlements.

Palestinian Christians and their secular Muslim colleagues must revive the imaginations of their people and make the case for a proud but peaceful Palestinian nationalism that posits religious freedom and peaceful coexistence as cardinal virtues. The life or death of Palestine depends on their success.

Palestinian Christians face only two alternatives in the long-run: seek asylum elsewhere, possibly in Israel; or learn to survive in an Islamic state. Neither time nor demography are on their side, and now is the moment to make difficult choices that will lead to tangible gains.

Only a strategy that begins from a positive vision of the future will prove worthwhile. We in the West who care about the Palestinian church must encourage its leaders to take the right path. [**P**](#)

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