

Barriers to Peace

Christians as well as Muslims suffer from Palestine's occupation.

By Doug Bandow | July 20, 2011

Tel Aviv—Ben Gurion looks like any other airport. But the land beyond exudes history. Much of the country is liberal and modern. Step onto a Tel Aviv street and you are in a frenetic Mediterranean city. The bygone generations who created this new nation are lost in the mists of time.

Then visit Yad Vashem. Israel cannot be understood apart from the Shoah—the Holocaust. The museum, carved into a Jerusalem hillside, brings alive man's utter inhumanity to man. The Shoah was a dramatic accelerant to Israel's formation, an unimaginable enormity that reinforced the long-standing Zionist movement.

The understandable determination “never again” helps explain the harshness, even ruthlessness of Israel's creation: the terrorism against British colonial rule, the ethnic cleansing of resident Arabs. The cycle of violence that arose in reaction helps explain the harshness, even ruthlessness of Israel's policies today—occupation of Palestinian territories, threats of preventive war against Iran.

This history also helps account for unofficial Israeli hostility—“discriminatory practices,” in State Department-speak—against Christians who come for reasons other than to spend money sightseeing or time embracing Israeli politicians. Try to evangelize and you will discover what it means to be a Jewish State.

Israel's Arab Christians are a people without a country. To the majority of Israelis, Arab Christians are Arabs—citizens, perhaps, but not to be fully trusted. To Muslims, Arab Christians are Christians—a minority in Israel, perhaps, but linked to the West and especially America.

Occupying this uncomfortable position is Melkite Catholic Archbishop Abuna Elias Chacour. A warm, friendly raconteur with an impressive white beard, he promotes peaceful cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis. But he also bears witness to the price of Israel's creation, having been forced as a child from his largely Christian village by victorious Israeli forces.

Archbishop Chacour is frustrated with reflexive support in Washington for Israeli policies. He asks: “Why does friendship with Jews mean enmity with Palestinians?” He urges Americans to engage Israelis and Palestinians alike: “We need a common friend.”

A similar message comes from Archbishop Fouad Twal, head of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. He warns that indigenous Christians, whom he calls “living stones,” are disappearing. Christian pilgrims may eventually find only empty, lifeless tourist sites. In

fact, I was one of just six people attending early services at St. George's Episcopal Cathedral in Jerusalem.

Why the decline of Christianity? Justus Weiner of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs points to rising Islamization in the Middle East and crimes committed against Palestinian Christians, especially in the Gaza Strip under Hamas. "Any institution, even the YMCA, can become a target," he says.

The abuses are real, but they have not been systematic as in Iraq and elsewhere. Palestinian Christians themselves emphasize Israel's policies. While Israel is a democratic oasis in what remains, despite the "Arab Spring," a dictatorial desert, Palestinians suffer under Israeli military rule. At dinner in Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank, frustrated Palestinian Christians spoke of inconvenience, hardship, and discrimination.

One family can no longer farm ancestral land since it is on the other side of Israel's security wall. Several families used to worship in Jerusalem, just 15 minutes away, but now are denied permission to visit even on holy days. Checkpoints can add hours to the most routine trip. I visited an orphanage that often lacks water—never a problem at nearby Israeli settlements. The daily indignities add up under occupation, where everything ultimately is subject to someone else's control.

Indeed, enduring harrassment is a way of life for Palestinians. Dan Koski, a Minnesota policeman who fell in love with a Palestinian woman and moved to the West Bank, says he has come to fear seeing a police car or hearing a helicopter.

While staying in Bethlehem, my group was just a few minutes from the nearest checkpoint on the way to Jerusalem. We normally endured only short waits, though we could never predict whether our bus would be waved through or boarded and searched. Once, however, we sat for an hour without moving, for no apparent reason other than the whim of Israeli Defense Forces personnel.

The Israelis "want us to do what we are told, to accept whatever we are given at the end," explains Sami Awad. Born and educated in the U.S., Awad previously served with the Palestinian Bible Society. Today he is executive director of the Holy Land Trust, which promotes nonviolence. He says, "You need to be pro-justice, pro-both" Israeli and Palestinian. Yet the Israeli government interferes with his work because, he believes, it undermines the theme of violent, murderous Palestinians used to justify the occupation.

Justus Weiner argues that Palestinian Christians are afraid to speak out against persecution by Muslims because of "fear and intimidation." It's a plausible claim, but none of the Christians with whom I spoke backed his charge, on or off the record.

In fact, Palestinian Christians cite support from Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad, who told me a "serious effort" by the PA was required to help the

Christian community survive. An American diplomat agreed that Palestinian officials “get it.”

Moreover, Bethlehem Bible College appears to operate without fear. The school allows the public to visit its library. A wall facing the street sports a huge Christmas mural. Alex Awad (no relation to Sami), who founded the institution with his brother Bishara, argues that Christians and Muslims have lived together in peace for centuries: “Muslim pressure is nothing new.”

The greatest threat to Palestinian Christians is the occupation, Alex Awad says—not just for the practical obstacles it creates but for the lack of economic opportunities it engenders. Young people “can’t find good employment here,” he explains. Indeed, he says if forced to choose between living under Sharia law or Israeli occupation, he would choose the former: “I want the liberation of Palestine as a Palestinian Christian.”

American officials with whom I spoke made similar points: tensions between Christians and Muslims are real but not decisive. Rather, Palestinian Christians suffer as much as Muslims from the occupation. The former, however, have a lower birth rate and greater opportunity to escape abroad, leading to steadily declining numbers.

The occupation also raises concerns in Israel, where human rights groups like B’Tselem criticize violence by Israelis and Palestinians alike. Leading Israeli politicians and American supporters of Israel increasingly worry whether Israel can remain both Jewish and democratic, given the Palestinian Muslims’ long-term demographic edge.

Of course, Palestinians have been ill-served by their leadership. Israel’s security concerns are real, especially after the campaign of suicide bombings that traumatized Israeli society a few years ago. In Jerusalem I chatted with David Hazony, author of *The Ten Commandments*, who lost friends in terrorist bombings. The anguish and fear were profound.

Palestinians I met accept the right of Israel to construct a security barrier—a forbidding fortified wall in some places—on Israeli territory. But the barrier’s irregular route onto Palestinian land, to secure Israeli settlements irrespective of the cost to Palestinian communities, understandably angers West Bank residents.

Even Israeli officials credit Prime Minister Fayyad for a sustained effort to stop terrorist attacks and build a functioning Palestinian state. Fayyad, however, expresses frustration with Israeli policies and speaks of the need for “political deliverables.” Without progress in negotiations, the territories again could explode. One poll after my visit found that 41 percent of Palestinians supported resumption of the Intifada.

The price of the last Intifada was high. Nablus, an epicenter of past hostilities, is at peace now. Bored Israeli soldiers watch passing traffic from fortified checkpoints. But city walls sport tattered posters depicting “martyrs,” young Palestinian men, some holding

weapons, killed by Israeli bullets. There were thousands of unnecessary deaths, with more dead civilians than combatants.

Today the West Bank is recovering. In Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, well-dressed Palestinian youths walk with friends rather than toss stones at Israeli troops. Yet the PA lacks electoral legitimacy and loses credibility every time a new Israeli settlement is erected or an old one is expanded.

Some Israelis claim the settlements, often constructed on confiscated Palestinian land, matter little. A former senior IDF official argues that the Israeli government would do whatever was necessary to implement a peace agreement: “we know how to evacuate and dismantle settlements.” But the more settlers and settlements, the tougher that job will be, especially with the rising influence of religious personnel in the IDF.

Moreover, Palestinians see settlements, privileged enclaves backed by military force, as a process of colonization. In Hebron, messianic settlers surreptitiously established a community, now numbering 600, among 30,000 Palestinians. In support, the IDF closed nearly 2,000 shops; along the main Palestinian market street, every store door is welded shut. Only settlers and internationals are allowed to drive or walk in certain areas. One can't help but think of something akin to Apartheid, despite the obvious differences.

As justification, Hebron settlers point to the massacre of 1929, when Arabs killed 67 Jews. Settler spokesman Noam Arnon says he hopes for a future when all can live in peace. Dani Dayyan, chairman of the Yesha settler council, complains that settlers “are the most stereotyped and most demagogued people in the world.” He professes a willingness to live even under a Palestinian government in the West Bank, so long as it was not “an autocracy.” Palestinians view such claims skeptically, given the aggressive attitudes of many settlers.

No one visiting Israel can fail to recognize the Jewish community's past insecurity and present vulnerability. Stand in the West Bank and you can view Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean; at its narrowest point, Israel is but nine miles wide. This is a land with no strategic depth.

While in Jerusalem I attended my first Orthodox Jewish service. It was more demonstrative than I had expected, akin to worship at my Christian evangelical church. I also enjoyed a Shabbat dinner, reminding me how the influx of Jews had enriched the Holy Land, reviving a tradition dissipated by empire and repression throughout the centuries.

Yet the Holy Land also cannot be understood without visiting the Palestinian territories. There is much fault on the Palestinian side—the former IDF officer I spoke to complains that “the Palestinians don't like to take responsibility and prefer to blame the Israelis.” Nevertheless, four decades of Israeli military rule have ravaged Palestinian society. Neither Israelis nor Americans would be satisfied living under endless occupation, modern helots for powerful rulers next door.

There is no simple solution to a tangled conflict where history hangs so heavily and both sides can point to cycles of injustice and violence. But peace will become possible only when the lives and dignity of Palestinians are respected no less than those of Israelis. And the best way for Americans to demonstrate their friendship with Israelis is to support a fair and durable peace for Palestinians as well.

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