

Palestine:
A Christian Response to Occupation



Compiled for Sadaka by Dr. David Morrison

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Cover - main Image: Palm Sunday service at the Greek Orthodox church in Gaza City. April 12, 2009.

Background image: Mosaic detail from the ruins of a third century church discovered within Meggido maximum security prison Israel.

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Introduction

In December 2009, Palestinian Christians published the Kairos Palestine Document. Its authors describe it as “the Christian Palestinians’ word to the world about what is happening in Palestine”. In it, they request the international community “to stand by the Palestinian people who have faced oppression, displacement, suffering and clear apartheid for more than six decades” and to bring pressure to bear on Israel to end the occupation of Palestinian land.

In November 2010, Sadaka is hosting a tour of Ireland by Palestinian church leaders, H.E. Archbishop Theodosius Hanna of the Greek Orthodox Church, Monsignor Manuel Musallam of the Latin Catholic Church and Mr Constantine Dabbagh, Executive Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) Department of Service for Palestinian Refugees in Gaza. The purpose of the tour is to enable these leaders to bring this message personally to church and political leaders in Ireland.

This booklet presents an outline of the facts and figures about Christians in Palestine, followed by key passages from the Kairos Document.

The Catholic Church held a Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in the Vatican from 10-24 October 2010. The third section of this booklet presents key conclusions of the Synod in respect of Palestine.



A Palestinian farmer horse ploughs his land at Beit Sahour in Bethlehem Governate. The Israeli policy to close most of the smaller roads has forced Palestinian farmers to use ancient farming methods since modern machines such as tractors cannot access the land. March 3, 2006. MaanImages/ Magnus Johansson

“After four decades of Israeli occupation only approximately 13 percent of the Bethlehem governorate’s land is available for Palestinian use, much of it fragmented.” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) May 2009

Christians in Palestine



Palestinian Christian women prepare sweets for Christmas in the West Bank city of Nablus. December 23, 2008. MaanImages/Rami Swidan

Christianity has had an uninterrupted presence in the Holy Land since its birth two millennia ago.

Today, about 51,000 Christian Arabs live in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel – about 38,000 in the West Bank, 9,000 in East Jerusalem and 3,000 in Gaza. A large proportion of them – over 40% – live in the Bethlehem district of the West Bank. Overall, Christians constitute less than 1.4% of the total population of these territories, which is close to 4 million.

About 140,000 Christians live in Israel and they constitute about 2% of the total population, which is approximately 7.3 million.

Like their Muslim brothers, Christian Arabs, who live in the occupied territories, suffer the consequences of Israeli occupation – the confiscation of Arab land to build settlements and settler-only roads, and the Wall, the daily humiliation at military checkpoints as they make their way to jobs, schools, hospitals, or places of worship, the demolition of homes, the severe disruption in their social and economic life,

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The percentage of Christians in mandate Palestine as a whole has been in decline over the past century from more than 10% in 1890 to less than 2% today. Factors which led to this relative decline have been the large influx of Jewish immigration since the late 1880s; the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians that accompanied the formation of the Israel state in 1948; and the further displacements in 1967 when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. The latter two forced large numbers of Palestinians, including Christian Palestinians, to seek refuge outside

mandate Palestine. Since the early 1990s, the main reason for the relative decline of the Christian population in the occupied territories has been emigration. According to a 2008 study, those who choose to emigrate are motivated by, in descending order, (a) the lack of freedom and security they have to endure under Israeli occupation, (b) the deteriorating economic situation, (c) the political instability in the region and (d) the pursuit of education abroad, which is not available at home.

As regards (a), leading church figures in Palestine have written:

“Religious liberty is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusalem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during the religious feasts. Some of our Arab clergy are regularly barred from entering Jerusalem.” (see Kairos document, published in December 2009)



Palestinian Christians walk through the Erez border crossing in the northern Gaza Strip on their way to Bethlehem ahead of Christmas, 24th December 2009. Of the 750 Christians from Gaza who applied for permission to visit Bethlehem for Christmas only 300 were granted permits by Israel. MaanImages/Wissam Nassar

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Palestinian Christians belong to several traditional faith communities, which can be grouped into four broad categories.

The first are the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox churches. These include Greek Orthodox communities, which claim a continuous presence in the Holy Land since the times of the apostles.

The second group is made up of what is generally referred to as the ‘Oriental’ Orthodox churches, such as the Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian Orthodox communities.

A third category consists of those churches belonging to the Catholic family. In addition to the Roman Catholic church, referred to in the Middle East as the ‘Latin’ church, there are ‘Eastern Rite Catholic’ churches, which, though in communion with Rome and recognising the authority of the Pope, have maintained their own distinctive liturgy and traditions.

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Finally, there are various Protestant communities, including not only Anglican and Lutheran churches, present since the nineteenth century, but also independent evangelical churches, including Baptist, Pentecostal, and more.

The main churches present in Palestine are:

(1) Eastern Orthodox

Greek Orthodox Church

(2) Oriental Orthodox

Armenian Church

Syrian Church

Coptic Church

Ethiopian Church

(3) Catholic

Roman (Latin) Catholic Church

(Syriac) Maronite Catholic Church

Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church

Armenian Catholic Church

Syrian Catholic Church

Custodians of the Holy Land

(4) Protestant

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and The Holy Land

Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East



Lutheran Bishops Mark Hanson and the current President of the World Lutheran Federation, Palestinian, Munib Younan and others pray at the separation wall during a Lutheran World Federation gathering. Image ELCJHL

Notes: Christians in Palestine

1. For more information on *Christians in the Holy Land*, see, for example, the report *Palestinian Christians: Facts, Figures and Trends* by the Diyar Consortium, available at www.annadwa.org/en/media/pdf/pal_chr_booklet.pdf.
2. The 2008 survey quoted above, which was conducted by the Diyar Consortium, is available at www.annadwa.org/en/media/pdf/christian_english_research.pdf.
3. The full text of the *Kairos Palestine Document* and can be found on the *Kairos Palestine* website www.kairospalestine.ps.



Palestinian and foreign peace activists take part in a candlelight vigil against the Israeli offensive in Gaza outside the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, on January 5, 2009. MaanImages/Haytham Othman

The Kairos Palestine Document An introduction for the lay reader



“In this historic document, we Palestinian Christians declare that the military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity, and that any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings because true Christian theology is a theology of love and solidarity with the oppressed, a call to justice and equality among peoples.”

Authors of Kairos Palestine

In December 2009, Palestinian Christians published the Kairos Palestine Document, calling upon the international community to bring pressure to bear upon Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian land. In particular, it calls for “a system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel” (p15).

The document follows in the tradition of an earlier Kairos Document, launched by South African Christians in 1985, that addressed the political situation there during the apartheid era.

The Kairos Palestine Document has the blessing of the leaders of all Christian Churches in Palestine:

- His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, Greek Orthodox
- His Beatitude Patriarch Fouad Twal, Latin Church
- His Beatitude Patriarch Torkom Manougian, Armenian Orthodox
- Very Revd Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Custody of the Holy Land
- H.E. Archbishop Dr Anba Abraham, Coptic
- H.E. Archbishop Mar Swerios Malki Murad, Syrian Orthodox
- H.E. Archbishop Paul Nabil Sayah, Maronite
- H.E. Archbishop Abba Mathaios, Ethiopian
- H.E. Archbishop Joseph-Jules Zerey, Greek Catholic
- Bishop Gregor Peter Malki, Syrian Catholic
- Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran
- Bishop Suheil Dawani, Anglican
- Bishop Raphael Minassian, Armenian Catholic

Word to the world

The authors describe the document as “the Christian Palestinians’ word to the world about what is happening in Palestine” and request “the international community to stand by the Palestinian people who have faced oppression, displacement, suffering and clear apartheid for more than six decades” (p3).

The document calls for “ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and all forms of discrimination, as the solution that will lead to a just and lasting peace, with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, with Al-Quds [Jerusalem] as its capital”. And it demands that “all peoples, political leaders and decision-makers put pressure on Israel and take legal measures in order to oblige its government to put an end to its oppression and disregard for the international law” (p3).

The authors express the hope that “this document will provide the turning point to focus the efforts of all peace-loving peoples in the world, especially our Christian sisters and brothers” and the belief that “liberation from occupation is in the interest of all peoples in the region because the problem is not just a political one, but one in which human beings are destroyed” (p3-4).

The reality on the ground

The document describes the predicament of Palestinians today in the following terms:

“... the reality is one of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, deprivation of our freedom and all that results from this situation:

“The separation wall erected on Palestinian territory, a large part of which has been confiscated for this purpose, has turned our towns and villages into prisons, separating them from one another, making them dispersed and divided cantons. Gaza, especially after the cruel war Israel launched against it during December 2008 and January 2009, continues to live in inhuman conditions, under permanent blockade and cut off from the other Palestinian territories.

“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.

“Reality is the daily humiliation to which we are subjected at the military checkpoints, as we make our way to jobs, schools or hospitals.

“Reality is the separation between members of the same family, making family life impossible for thousands of Palestinians, especially where one of the spouses does not have an Israeli identity card.

“Religious liberty is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusalem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during the religious feasts. Some of our Arab clergy are regularly barred from entering Jerusalem.

“Refugees are also part of our reality. Most of them are still living in camps under difficult circumstances. They have been waiting for their right of return, generation after generation. What will be their fate?

“And the prisoners? The thousands of prisoners languishing in Israeli prisons are part of our

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reality. The Israelis move heaven and earth to gain the release of one prisoner, and those thousands of Palestinian prisoners, when will they have their freedom?

“Jerusalem is the heart of our reality. It is, at the same time, symbol of peace and sign of conflict. While the separation wall divides Palestinian neighbourhoods, Jerusalem continues to be emptied of its Palestinian citizens, Christians and Muslims. Their identity cards are confiscated, which means the loss of their right to reside in Jerusalem. Their homes are demolished or expropriated. Jerusalem, city of reconciliation, has become a city of discrimination and exclusion, a source of struggle rather than peace. ...

“In the face of this reality, Israel justifies its actions as self-defence, including occupation, collective punishment and all other forms of reprisals against the Palestinians. In our opinion, this vision is a reversal of reality. Yes, there is Palestinian resistance to the occupation. However, if there were no occupation, there would be no resistance, no fear and no insecurity.” (p5-6)

The document denies that there is biblical justification for the occupation:

“We declare that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimises the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests, and distorting the divine image in the human beings living under both political and theological injustice.” (p9)

Message to international community

The document’s message to the international community is as follows:

“Our word to the international community is to stop the principle of "double standards" and insist on the international resolutions regarding the Palestinian problem with regard to all parties.

“Selective application of international law threatens to leave us vulnerable to a law of the jungle. It legitimizes the claims by certain armed groups and states that the international community only understands the logic of force.

“Therefore, we call for a response to what the civil and religious institutions have proposed, as mentioned earlier: the beginning of a system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel.

“We repeat once again that this is not revenge but rather a serious action in order to reach a just and definitive peace that will put an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and will guarantee security and peace for all.”

This is the first time that Christian Churches in Palestine have called for economic sanctions to be applied to Israel.

Further Reading: The Kairos Palestine Document: an introduction for the lay reader

The full text of the Kairos Palestine Document and other information about it can be found on the Kairos Palestine website www.kairospalestine.ps.

The Catholic Church on Palestine



The current and retired Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal and Michel Sabbah pass through the separation wall surrounding Bethlehem on their way to the Church of the Nativity. December 24, 2006. MaanImages/Anat Zakai

The Catholic Church held a Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in the Vatican from 10-24 October 2010. The synod deliberated under the heading *The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness*.

The exodus of Christians from the region was a major theme of the meeting, which gathered about 200 bishops from Latin and Eastern Rite Catholic churches across the region and from the diaspora. In addition, two imams and Rabbi David Rosen, a Jerusalem-based adviser to the Chief Rabbinate, addressed the synod.

A 10-page statement was issued at the end of the synod (see [\[1\]](#)). This described the physical hardships under which Palestinians have to live in the following terms:

“We have taken account of the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the whole region, especially on the Palestinians who are suffering the consequences of the Israeli occupation: the lack of freedom of movement, the wall of separation and the military checkpoints, the political prisoners, the demolition of homes, the disturbance of socio-economic life and the thousands of refugees.

“We have reflected on the suffering and insecurity in which Israelis live.

“We have meditated on the situation of the holy city of Jerusalem. We are anxious about the unilateral initiatives that threaten its composition and risk to change its demographic balance.

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“With all this in mind, we see that a just and lasting peace is the only salvation for everyone and for the good of the region and its peoples.” (para 3.2)

The Synod made the following appeal to the international community to help bring peace to the region:

“The citizens of the countries of the Middle East call upon the international community, particularly the United Nations conscientiously to work to find a peaceful, just and definitive solution in the region, through the application of the Security Council’s resolutions and taking the necessary legal steps to put an end to the occupation of the different Arab territories.

“The Palestinian people will thus have an independent and sovereign homeland where they can live with dignity and security.

“The State of Israel will be able to enjoy peace and security within their internationally recognized borders. The Holy City of Jerusalem will be able to acquire its proper status, which respects its particular character, its holiness and the religious patrimony of the three religions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

“We hope that the two-State-solution might become a reality and not a dream only.” (para 11)

That is a firm call for political settlements in the Middle East to be based on the implementation of Security Council resolutions.

It is worth noting that Israel is currently in breach of about 30 Security Council resolutions, which require it to, inter alia,

cease and desist settlement building in the Palestinian territory it occupies (resolutions 446, 452 and 465),

reverse the annexation of East Jerusalem (resolutions 252, 267, 271, 298, 476 and 478),

reverse the annexation of the Golan Heights (resolution 497), and

put its nuclear facilities under IAEA supervision (resolution 487) [\[2\]](#)

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In calling for “an independent and sovereign homeland” for Palestinians, the synod was repeating the commitment by Pope John Paul II on his visit to Palestine in May 2000, when he stated:

“The Holy See has always recognized that the Palestinian people have the natural right to a homeland, and the right to be able to live in peace and tranquility with the other peoples of this area. In the international forum, my predecessors and I have repeatedly proclaimed that there would be no end to the sad conflict in the Holy Land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declarations.” [\[3\]](#)

Likewise, in May 2009 in Bethlehem, Pope Benedict XVI said:

“The Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally recognized borders.” [\[4\]](#)

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The synod's final statement rejected the view that there is biblical justification for Jews occupying Arab land:

“Recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable. On the contrary, recourse to religion must lead every person to see the face of God in others and to treat them according to their God-given prerogatives and God's commandments, namely, according to God's bountiful goodness, mercy, justice and love for us.”

Asked about the passage at a Vatican press conference, Greek-Melchite Archbishop, Cyrille Salim Bustros, said:

“The Holy Scriptures cannot be used to justify the return of the Jews to Israel and the displacement of the Palestinians, to justify the occupation by Israel of Palestinian lands. ... We Christians cannot speak of the ‘promised land’ as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people. This promise was nullified by Christ. There is no longer a chosen people – all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people.” [\[5\]](#)

These remarks drew fierce criticism from Israel. For example, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon, responding:

“We express our disappointment that this important synod has become a forum for political attacks on Israel in the best tradition of Arab propaganda. The synod was hijacked by an anti-Israel majority.

“We are especially appalled at the language used by Archbishop Bustros during his press conference.

“We call on the Vatican to distance themselves from Archbishop Bustros's comments, which are a libel against the Jewish people and the State of Israel and should not be construed as the Vatican's official position.” [\[6\]](#)

References: The Catholic Church on Palestine

[\[1\]](#) www.asianews.it/news-en/Synod-for-the-Middle-East:-a-Message-to-the-People-of-God-19805.html

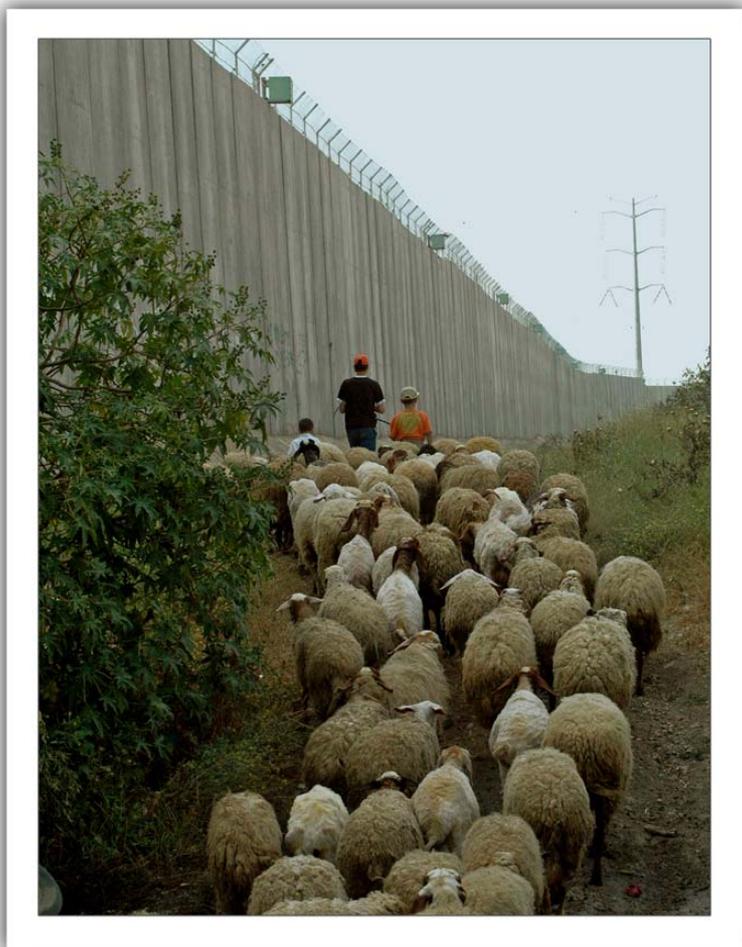
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[\[5\]](#) www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/1025/1224281952401.html

[\[6\]](#) www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=192590



Young Palestinians shepherd their flock near the separation wall that surrounds the West Bank city of Qalqilia May 14, 2007. MaanImages/Khaleel Reash



Israeli Soldiers prevent Palestinian Christian and other peace activists from crossing an Israeli army checkpoint at Bethlehem to attend the Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem. March 28, 2010. MaanImages/Luay Sababa



Sadaka – an Arabic term meaning “friendship” – is an Association established in Ireland in 2009 to promote the cause of Palestine throughout Ireland, raising public awareness and engaging in political dialogue. It aims to persuade those in Government to champion the cause of justice for the Palestinian people.

The board of Sadaka consists of: Marie Crawley (Chair), Noreen Byrne (Secretary), Adnan Shabab (Treasurer), Dr. David Morrison, Philip O’Connor, Dr. Des McGuinness, Alan Lonergan, Dr. Elaine Murtagh, Hilary Minch and Caitlin Ni Chonail.

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